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Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch

Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, MALAYSIA



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 16TH REGIONAL
SYMPOSIUM OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO
SIMPORA XVI: 2025**

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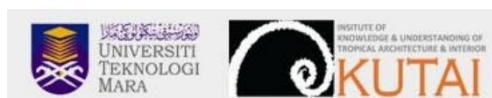
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EXPLORING THE PHILOSOPHY OF AESTHETICS IN MALAY INTERIOR DESIGN THROUGH ORNAMENTATION AND WOODCARVINGS: A CASE STUDY OF ISTANA TENGGU LONG

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Abstract: This paper examines the philosophy of aesthetics in Malay interior architecture with a focus on ornamentation and woodcarving. Far from being mere decoration, Malay carvings are visual languages that encode religious, cultural, and ecological meanings. Grounded in the triadic philosophy of religion (Islam and tawhīd), custom (*adat* and social hierarchy), and nature (tropical wisdom and environmental harmony), Malay ornamentation embody values of refinement, modesty, and continuity. Through floral, geometric, and calligraphic motifs, interior spaces in traditional Malay houses and palaces communicate cosmological ideas while also serving practical functions such as ventilation, lighting, and privacy control. The study applies this philosophical framework to Istana Tengku Long in Besut, Terengganu; a palace renowned for its refined woodcarvings and intricate interior ornamentation. By analysing the motifs, placement, and symbolic functions of carvings within the palace, the paper demonstrates how Malay interior aesthetics function as a holistic system integrating beauty, faith, social order, and environmental adaptation. Findings underscore the relevance of Malay aesthetic philosophy in contemporary heritage conservation and the need to safeguard not only the physical forms of ornamentation but also their symbolic meanings.

Keywords: Malay Philosophy, Woodcarving, Ornamentation, Heritage, Architecture

INTRODUCTION

The term 'aesthetic,' also known as 'aesthetica,' originates from the Greek word 'aesthesis,' which pertains to sensory perception. It is broadly defined as any element associated with beauty or the appreciation of beauty. The concept of aesthetics has evolved significantly from its philosophical origins to contemporary usage. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten first introduced the term in his *Aesthetica* (1750–1758), defining it as “the science of sensory knowledge” (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*), emphasising the perfection of sense perception. Immanuel Kant later refined the notion in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790/2000), framing aesthetics as the faculty of judgment about beauty and the sublime, where the experience of taste is rooted in disinterested pleasure. Building on this, G. W. F. Hegel broadened the scope by conceptualising aesthetics as the philosophy of art itself, a discipline through which art is understood as the manifestation of the Absolute Spirit (Hegel, 1835/1975). Friedrich Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795/2004), connected aesthetics to human freedom, proposing that beauty mediates between sense and reason, fostering

moral and intellectual development. In contemporary scholarship, aesthetics is more broadly defined as “the philosophical study of beauty and taste, closely related to the philosophy of art” (Britannica, n.d.), reflecting both its historical depth and its continued relevance in modern discourse.

The philosophy of aesthetics in Malay culture is a holistic integration of Islam, *adat*, and *alam*, anchored by values such as *budi*, *adab*, *halus*, and *sederhana*. Rooted in Islam, it reflects the principle of *tawhīd* (unity of God), where order, balance, and modesty are expressed in symbolic ornamentation and spatial hierarchy (Al-Attas, 1972). Through *adat*, aesthetics is inseparable from morality and social order, with architectural forms and carvings embodying cultural values of respect, harmony, and refinement (Effendy, 2004). In relation to *alam*, Malay aesthetics arises from ecological wisdom, where architectural forms, motifs, and joinery methods unfold organically from nature in line with the philosophy *tumbuh berpunca, punca penuh rahsia* (Rashid, 2018). Unlike Western aesthetic traditions that often detach beauty from ethics, Malay aesthetics unites spirituality, morality, culture, and environment into a coherent worldview that continues to inform both heritage conservation and contemporary design practices.

In the Malay world, architecture is not merely a utilitarian act of shelter-making; it is an articulation of worldview, belief, and identity. Within this cultural framework, aesthetics is understood as both beauty (*indah*) and propriety (*adab*), where form is always tied to ethical, religious, and social meanings (Effendy, 1997). The interiors of Malay houses and palaces exemplify this philosophy through their elaborate ornamentation and woodcarving. Far from superficial embellishment, these carvings encode values of Islamic spirituality, Malay custom, and environmental adaptation. Scholars have long noted that the Malay palace (*istana*) is a central architectural form where aesthetics, politics, and cosmology converge (Nasir & Wan Hashim, 1997). Palaces are not simply residences of rulers but cosmological centres: places where the authority of the *sultan* or *raja* is materially manifested in space and where ornamentation functions as a symbolic language of power and refinement. Within palace interiors, carved doorways, window panels, and ventilation grilles (*tetupai*, *jeriji*) operate simultaneously as aesthetic devices and as instruments of cultural communication.

This paper aims to explore these philosophical dimensions through the lens of ornamentation and woodcarving in Malay interior architecture, using Istana Tengku Long in Terengganu as a case study. Constructed in the late nineteenth century, the palace is celebrated for its elaborate woodcarvings, particularly in its doors, windows, and partition panels (Nasir & Wan Hashim, 1997). By examining the motifs, placements, and functions of these carvings, the study argues that Malay interior aesthetics represent a synthesis of beauty, faith, social order, and environmental adaptation.

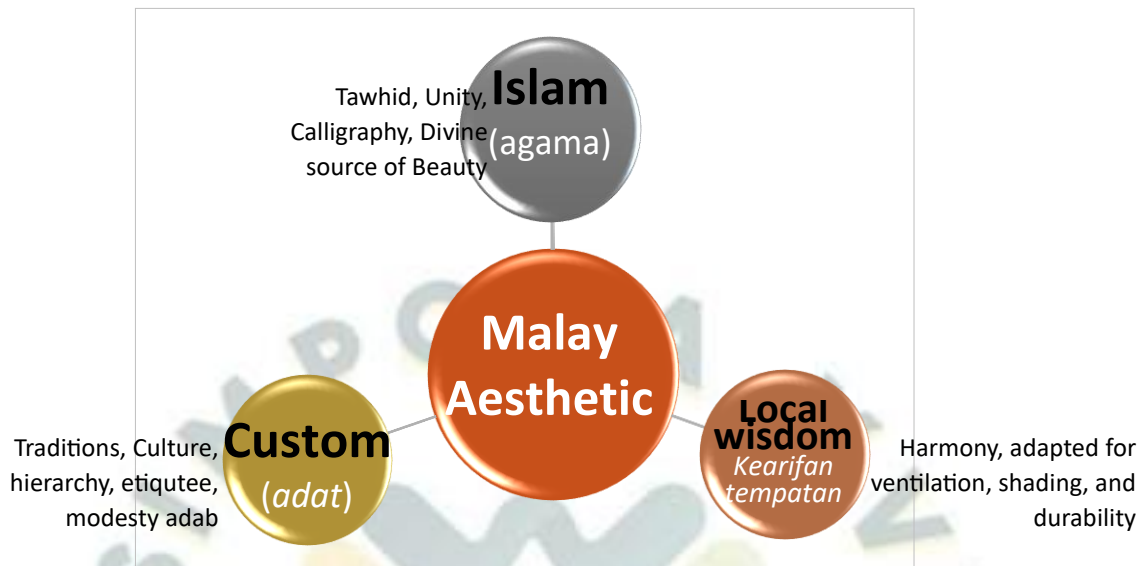
The paper is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews the philosophical foundations of Malay aesthetics, emphasising the triadic framework of religion, custom, and nature. Section 3 discusses the typologies and symbolic roles of ornamentation in Malay interiors. Section 4 presents the case study of Istana Tengku Long, analysing its interior carvings and philosophical meanings. Section 5 summarized the data analysis and Section 6 concludes with reflections on the relevance of Malay aesthetic philosophy for both scholarship and conservation practice.

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF MALAY AESTHETICS

Malay aesthetics in architecture, particularly in interior ornamentation and woodcarving, cannot be separated from the broader worldview (*pandangan alam*) of the Malay world. This worldview is shaped by three interdependent foundations: religion (Islam and the principle of *tawhīd*), custom

(*adat* and social order), and nature (tropical wisdom and environmental harmony). Together, these form a holistic philosophy where beauty is always tied to meaning, ethics, and function.

Table 1: Philosophical Framework of Malay Aesthetics



2.1 Religion: Tawhīd as the Core of Aesthetic Unity

The arrival of Islam in the Malay world introduced not only a new faith but also a new aesthetic sensibility. As Al-Faruqi (1982) argues, tawhīd demands that all artistic forms reflect the unity of God. Thus, art avoids mimetic representations of living beings and instead relies on abstraction, repetition, and rhythm. Nasr (1987) further stresses that Islamic ornamentation communicates the eternal and transcendent through geometry, arabesques, and stylised vegetal motifs.

In Malay interior architecture, this is manifested in floral scrolls (*awan larat*) and vegetal tendrils (*sulur kacang*), which extend infinitely without clear beginnings or ends visual metaphors of God's infinite nature. Similarly, repetitive geometric panels in doors, windows, and ventilation screens articulate divine order and cosmic harmony. The integration of Qur'anic calligraphy, though less common than in mosques, appears in palatial contexts as symbolic inscriptions, offering protection and sanctity to interior spaces (Rashid, 2007). Thus, ornamentation within interiors serve as visual theology: a constant reminder that beauty is a reflection of divine unity.

2.2 Custom: Adat, Hierarchy, and the Aesthetic of Adab

Malay aesthetics is also guided by *adat*, the body of customs and traditions that govern social order. Gullick (1958) describes *adat* as central to Malay political culture, where hierarchy is embodied in architectural layout. Milner (1982) expands this by framing the *kerajaan* system as one in which the ruler occupies the cosmological centre of society.

Interior ornamentation reflects this hierarchy and etiquette (*adab*). Carved door panels and thresholds signify moments of transition from public to private, from outer to inner, from profane to sacred. Window grilles (*jeriji*) and partition panels mediate between visibility and seclusion, reflecting the Malay value of modesty and controlled openness.

Tenas Effendy (1997) emphasises that adab is at the heart of Malay aesthetics: beauty is always tied to propriety, humility, and refinement. The delicacy (*halus*) of carvings slender tendrils, balanced proportions, harmonious compositions mirror the moral and ethical refinement expected of Malay society. In palace interiors, this refinement elevates the space into a realm of ritualised authority, where aesthetics affirms the dignity and sanctity of royal life.

2.3 Nature: Tropical Wisdom and Symbolic Ecology

The third foundation of Malay aesthetics lies in its deep connection with nature and the tropical environment. Unlike imported monumental stone traditions, Malay palaces and houses are primarily constructed of timber, bamboo, and palm materials, adapted for ventilation, shading, and durability (Nasir, H., 1997). Ornamentation in interiors often take the form of perforated carvings that serve climatic functions: ventilating air, filtering light, and reducing heat (Rashid, 2007). These carved panels embody the integration of function and beauty, where environmental wisdom is inseparable from ornamentation.

Symbolically, motifs are drawn directly from the natural world. The fern (*paku pakis*) represents resilience, the *tanjung* blossom (*bunga tanjung*) symbolises purity and refinement, while the endless tendrils of the bean vine (*sulur kacang*) suggest fertility and continuity (Waterson, 1990 Rashid, 2007). In this way, nature is not only imitated but also elevated into abstraction, reflecting both ecological adaptation and philosophical meaning.

2.4 Synthesis: Religion–Custom–Nature in Malay Interiors

When combined, these three foundations form a distinctive aesthetic synthesis. Ornamentations and woodcarvings in Malay interiors are simultaneously:

- Theological (reminders of God's unity),
- Social (markers of hierarchy and etiquette), and
- Ecological (adaptations to the tropical climate).

This holistic framework ensures that Malay interior aesthetics are never superficial but deeply embedded in cosmology, morality, and environment. It also sets the stage for understanding the case of Istana Tengku Long, where these philosophical dimensions are embodied in tangible forms of ornamentation.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design that combines literature-based analysis with a heritage case study. The research does not aim to produce statistical generalisations but rather to develop an interpretive understanding of the philosophical and cultural meanings embedded in Malay interior ornamentation, with Istana Tengku Long serving as the primary example.

3.2 Data Sources

Primary data were obtained through site observations conducted during field visits, focusing on the spatial arrangement, placement of ornamentation, and material conditions of the palace carvings. Detailed photographic documentation was carried out to record door panels, window grilles, partition

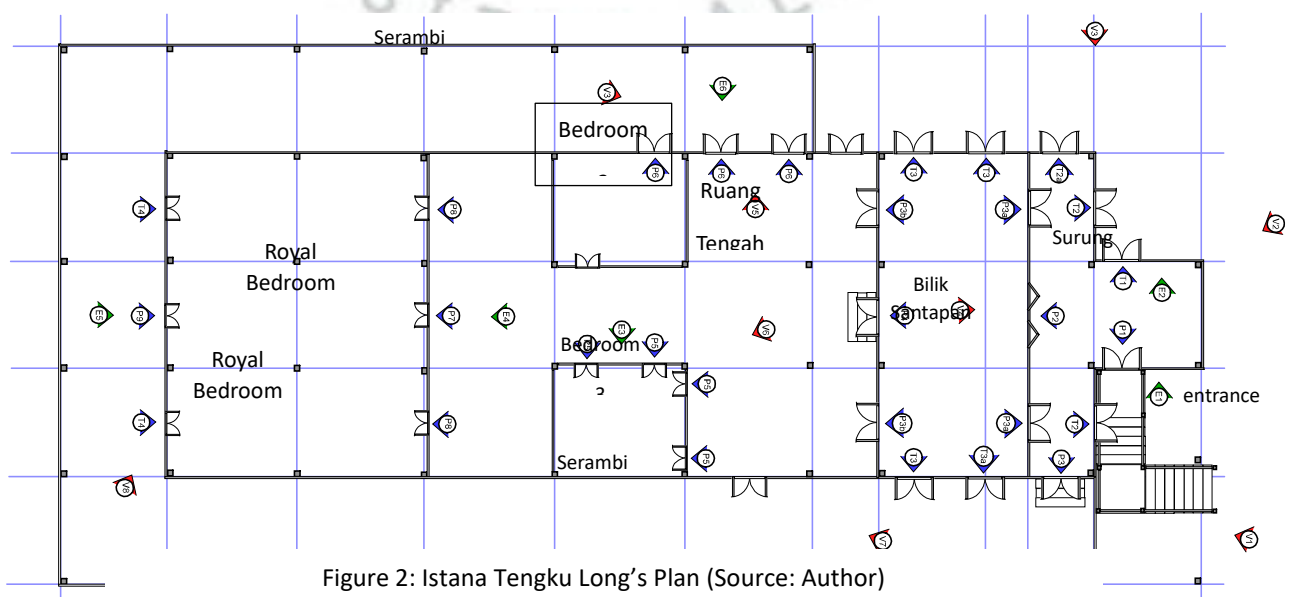
screens, and ceiling carvings for subsequent visual analysis. In addition, architectural drawings and measured plans including existing digital surveys, were consulted to reconstruct spatial relationships and understand the distribution of decorative elements throughout the building.

Secondary data supported the field investigation through the review of textual sources on Malay culture and philosophy (e.g., Al-Attas, 1972; Effendy, 1997), Islamic aesthetics (e.g., Nasr, 1987; Al-Faruqi, 1982), and traditional Malay architecture (Nasir & Wan Hashim, 1997). Comparative studies on Southeast Asian vernacular and palace architecture (e.g., Waterson, 1990) were analysed to contextualize Istana Tengku Long within broader regional traditions. Furthermore, conservation reports (e.g., Rashid, 2007) were reviewed to understand the preservation challenges associated with timber structures and historical palaces in Terengganu and other parts of Malaysia. Together, these methods provided a comprehensive framework for interpreting the palace's architectural form, spatial hierarchy, and the cultural symbolism embedded in its ornamental design.

CASE STUDY: ISTANA TENGGU LONG,

4.1 Historical Background

Istana Tengku Long, located in Kampung Raja, Besut, Terengganu, was constructed in the late nineteenth century as the royal residence of Tengku Long Abdul Rahman, the local ruler of Besut. Built entirely of timber, the palace exemplifies Terengganu's distinguished tradition of carpentry and woodcarving (Nasir & Wan Hashim, 1997). This palace was built in 1904 by Cik Hat who is one of the famous craftsmen from the state of Pahang and was assisted by several other craftsmen. Like other Malay palaces of its era, it was elevated on stilts, with a spacious verandah (*serambi*), a grand audience hall (*Balairung seri* or *Surung*), and private inner chambers.

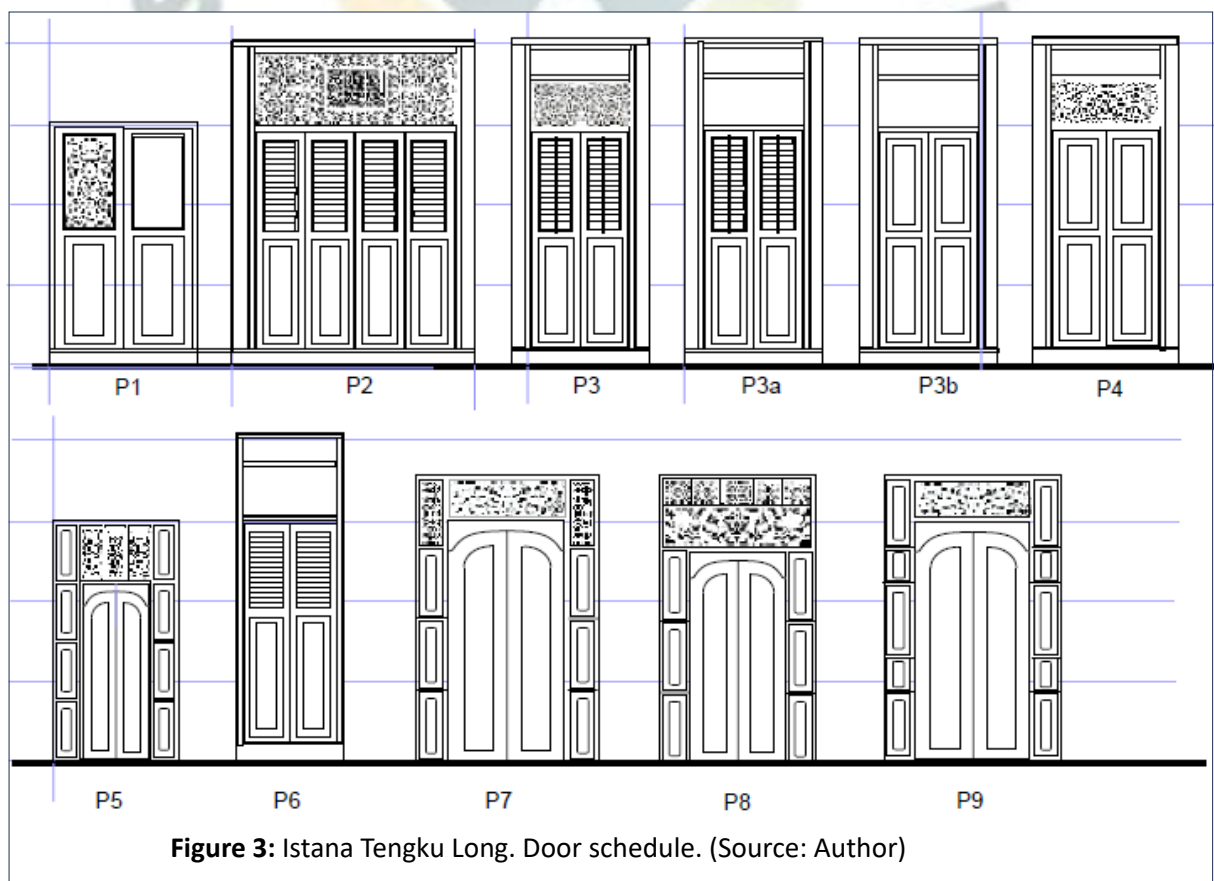


While no longer serving as a royal dwelling, the palace is recognised as a heritage structure, celebrated for its intricate ornamentation and symbolic carvings. It provides a valuable case study in understanding how Malay interior aesthetics function at the intersection of religion, custom, and environment.

4.2 Interior Ornamentations of Istana Tengku Long

Carved Door Panels (*Kepala Pintu*, *Pagar Musang*)

The main entrance of Istana Tengku Long is adorned with carved door panels (*kepala pintu*) featuring *awan larat* scrolls and vegetal tendrils. These motifs mark the transition from the outside world into the royal interior, symbolising a movement from the profane to the sacred. The threshold carvings embody adat protocols, reminding visitors of the sanctity of the palace and the authority of its ruler (Effendy, 1980). The *kepala pintu* (doorhead lintel) symbolizes the threshold between outside and inside, serving as both a protective barrier and a mark of respectful entry. Its carved motifs carry spiritual significance (repelling harm, invoking blessings), while also expressing the social status and cultural identity of the owner. Philosophically, designs like *tumbuh berpunca*, *awan larat*, and *pucuk rebung* reflect ideas of origin, continuity, growth, and infinity, aligning with Islamic values of tawhid and Malay concepts of *adat* and *budi*. Thus, the *kepala pintu* is not merely decoration but a guardian, identity marker, and embodiment of Malay aesthetic philosophy (Abd Rashid, 2007)



Window Grilles (Kekisi, Jeriji, Tetupai)

Along the palace walls, windows are fitted with carved wooden grilles. These serve functional and symbolic purposes: regulating airflow and light in the humid tropical climate while embodying the concept of hijab (modesty). The perforated motifs—often in floral and geometric forms—allow occupants to see outside without being fully visible to outsiders, balancing openness with privacy (Lim, 1987; Kamal, 2004).

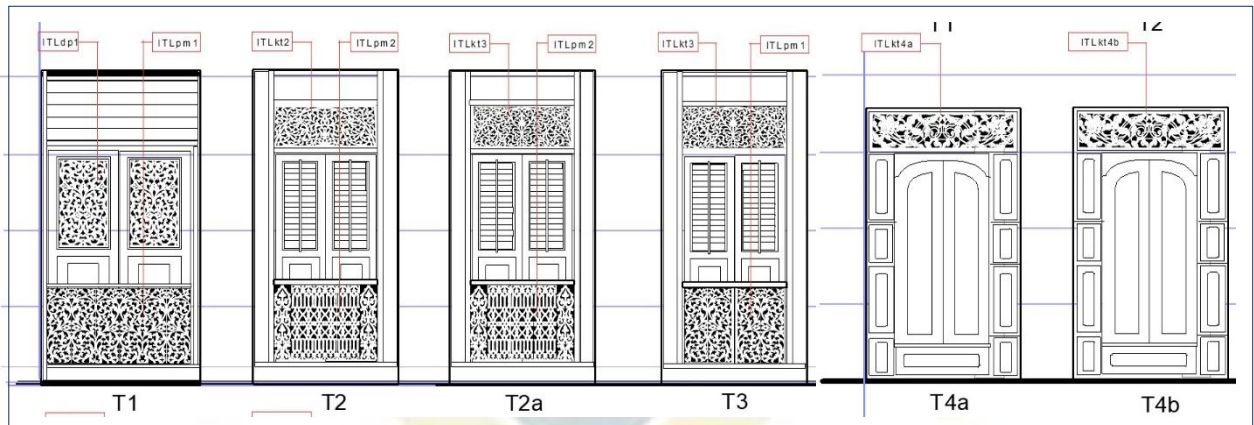


Figure 4: Istana Tengku Long. Window schedule. (Source: Author)

Partition Panels (Floral Motifs)

Inside the palace, partitions separate the audience hall (*Surung*) from the more private chambers. These partitions are decorated with delicate floral motifs such as *sulur kacang* and *bunga tanjung*. Symbolically, they demarcate hierarchies—between public, semi-public, and private spaces—while also celebrating continuity, fertility, and refinement (Effendy, 1997; Ismail, 2002).

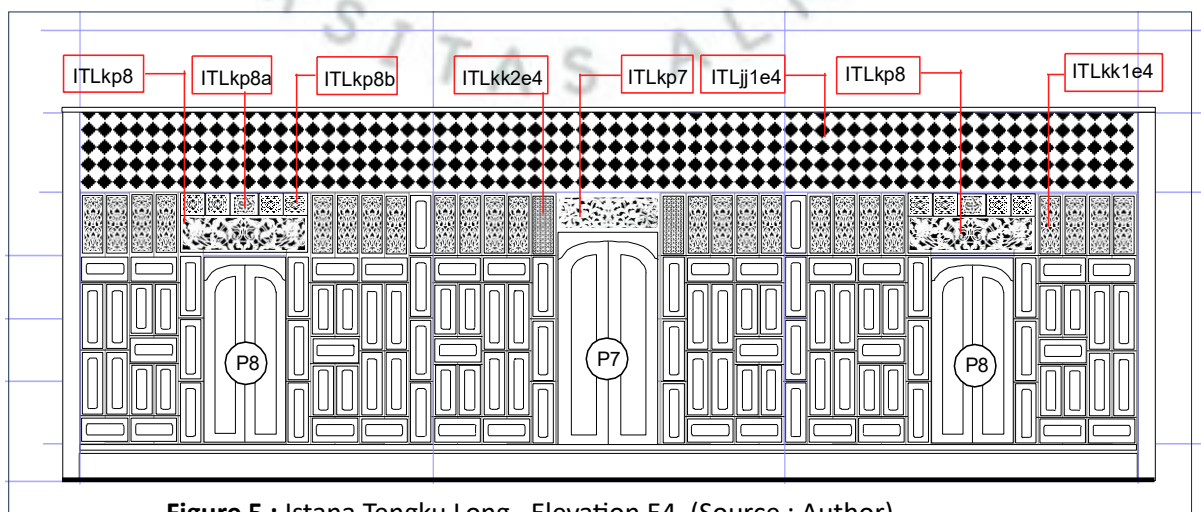


Figure 5 : Istana Tengku Long . Elevation E4. (Source : Author)

Table 2: Cross Mapping Data between Decorative Elements and Spatial Organisation of ITL.

	Elemen Estatik																												CATATAN				
	Bumbung								LA atas		LA tengah		LA bawah		Pintu				Tingkap				Dalam		Bawah		Luar						
	TL	SN	SB	KC	AA	KP	SA	LB	JJ	SA	KE	JJ	SA	KE	JJ	SA	KE	KP	TP	DP	GP	KT	TT	DT	TJ	PM	SL	SK		GB	PG	GB	
RUANG-RUANG																																	
Ruang Hadapan / Anjung																																	
Pintu Utama (P1)																			✓		✓											ITLdp1	
Tingkap																							✓		✓		✓					ITLkt2, ITLpm2	
Dinding										✓				✓																		ITLkk1	
Ruang Tamu																																	
Pintu (P2)																			✓		✓											ITLkp2	
Pintu (P3)																			✓		✓											ITLkp3	
Pintu (P3a)																			✓		✓											ITLkp3a	
Pintu (P3b)																			✓		✓											ITLkp3a	
Pintu (P4)																			✓		✓											ITLkp4	
Tingkap (2)																							✓		✓		✓					ITLkt2, ITLpm2	
Tingkap (2a)																							✓		✓		✓					ITLkt3, ITLpm2	
Tingkap (3)																							✓		✓		✓					ITLkt3, ITLpm1	
Dinding (E3)										✓				✓																		ITLkk1el3, ITLkk2el3	
Ruang Dalam																																	
Pintu (P5)																			✓	✓	✓	✓										ITLkp5	
Pintu (P6)																			✓		✓											ITLkp6	
Pintu (P7)																			✓	✓	✓	✓										ITLkp7	
Pintu (P8)																			✓	✓	✓	✓										ITLkp8	
Pintu (P9)																			✓	✓	✓	✓											
Tingkap																																	
Dinding										✓				✓																			
Ruang Belakang																																	
Pintu																																	
Tingkap (4a)																							✓	✓	✓							ITLkt4a	
Tingkap (4b)																							✓	✓	✓							ITLkt4b	
Dinding										✓	✓																						
Bumbung																																	
Tunjuk Langit																																	

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

The architectural detailing of the house demonstrates a consistent application of traditional Malay timber craftsmanship, particularly evident in the treatment of doors, windows, and wall panels. The absence of decorative roof elements shifts visual emphasis to the façade and openings, where intricate woodwork is more pronounced. The front façade features doors with *lubang angin* panels, except for the main porch door, which is distinguished by carved leaves, signifying its importance. Uniform use of *kepala pintu* and *papan kembang* panels reflects structural and aesthetic coherence. The windows incorporate *sisip angin* adjustable louvres with carved *kepala tingkap*, except for one instance (T1) that employs a simpler design. The rear and porch areas highlight a blend of ventilation and ornamentation through *kekisi tebuk tembus* lattices and *sisip angin* vents, ensuring both airflow and decorative appeal. Overall, the façade and openings exhibit a refined balance between function, ventilation, and craftsmanship, reinforcing the traditional identity of the house.

Table 3 : Relationship between Malay Aesthetic Philosophy and Ornamentation of ITL

Malay Aesthetic Philosophy	Principles / Values	Ornamentation in Istana Tengku Long	Meaning / Function
Religion (Islamic Spirituality)	<i>Tauhid</i> , unity, divine source of beauty, avoidance of figural forms	Quranic calligraphy, geometric panels, arabesque motifs	Reflects divine presence, blessing, protection; aligns art with Islam
Adat & Adab (Order & Ethics)	Etiquette, propriety, privacy, harmony	Carvings arranged hierarchically: lavish in <i>Balairung Seri</i> , simple in <i>Rumah Ibu. Between Master Bedroom and Bedroom</i> .	Reinforces social conduct, privacy, and moral order
Nature (Local Wisdom)	Harmony with environment, fertility, resilience	Floral & fauna motifs (<i>pucuk rebung</i> , <i>awan larat</i> , <i>bunga tanjung</i>), Carving with <i>tebuk tembus</i> allowed good cross ventilation throughout spaces.	Symbolises growth, continuity, humility, and resilience of life
Hierarchy (Social Order)	Respect, authority, royal legitimacy	Ornamental richness in ceremonial indicates the m spaces, restrained motifs in private quarters	Demonstrates hierarchy of power and status; visualises royal authority
Budi (Refinement of Mind & Character)	Balance of intellect, emotion, and ethics	Fine craftsmanship, subtle motifs, non-excessive ornamentation	Aesthetic refinement; beauty tied to virtue, humility, and wisdom
Wasatiyyah (Moderation & Balance)	Harmony, proportion, avoidance of excess	Ornamentation never overwhelms structure; integrated with function (e.g., <i>tebar layar</i> ventilation panels). Only certain spot or placement of carving. Not all over the place indicates the modesty and harmony in decoration	Balance between beauty and utility, expressing moderation and harmony

CONCLUSION

Istana Tengku Long, constructed in 1914 at Kampung Raja, Besut, Terengganu, stands as one of the finest representations of Malay palatial architecture in the early 20th century. Beyond its grandeur and craftsmanship, the palace manifests profound Islamic principles that shaped its spatial planning, ornamentation, and symbolic meaning. The architecture illustrates how Islam was not only a religion but also a civilizational framework that guided Malay governance, aesthetics, and social order. The philosophy of aesthetics in Malay interior architecture is neither superficial nor ornamental in the narrow sense. Instead, it represents a holistic synthesis of religion, custom, and nature. Through the language of ornamentation and woodcarving, Malay interiors express a worldview in which beauty (*indah*) is inseparable from propriety (*adab*), spirituality, and ecological wisdom. The case study of Istana Tengku Long illustrates this philosophy in practice. Its carved door panels, window grilles, partition screens, and ceiling motifs function simultaneously as visual theology, social markers, and climatic devices. The floral scrolls (*awan larat*), bean tendrils (*sulur kacang*), and fragrant blossoms (*bunga tanjung*) are not mere decorations but metaphors of divine infinity, social hierarchy, and

continuity of life. Their placement within the palace reflects both *adat* protocols and Islamic cosmology, while their perforated designs testify to environmental adaptation in the tropical climate. Yet, the study also reveals pressing challenges. The decline of skilled woodcarvers, the degradation of traditional materials, and the reduction of motifs to flat decorative symbols threaten to erode both the craft and the philosophy embedded within it. While conservation efforts, museum preservation, and digital documentation offer some solutions, they must be guided by an awareness that what is at stake is not only the physical survival of carvings but also their philosophical depth. For contemporary design and heritage conservation, the lesson is clear: to sustain Malay ornamentation, one must preserve both form and meaning. Reviving the values of *tawhīd*, *adat*, and ecological harmony can ensure that ornamentation remain relevant in modern contexts—not as static relics, but as living aesthetics that continue to shape space, ethics, and identity.

In this sense, Malay interior architecture, exemplified by Istana Tengku Long, is a testament to the enduring truth that beauty, when guided by philosophy, becomes more than decoration: it becomes wisdom embedded in its architecture.

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