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## THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL MALAY DECORATIONS & WOOD CARVING: A CASE STUDY OF THE ISTANA KENANGAN, KUALA KANGSAR, PERAK.

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### Abstract

Wood carving in Malaysia started as early 14<sup>th</sup> century. But most of the earlier works do not exist today because of the wood properties itself that are not durable due to weather, moisture and fire. Conservation of traditional timber buildings and documentation is needed as a step to preserving this inheritance. The Istana Kenangan (Memory Palace) in Kuala Kangsar, Perak is built mainly out of timber and enveloped by kelarai walls (Traditional bamboo wall). The significance of the building is not just as a typical traditional building but it is also a part of the Perak state history during the reign of the Sultan Iskandar Shah Sultanate (1918-1938). The aim and objectives of this study is to identify the components of the palace that has a traditional decorations and wood carving motifs in order to establish the inventory of patterns on Istana Kenangan. The inventory of the patterns and motifs on Istana Kenangan is supported with measured drawings on the plans, elevations and decorative components detail drawing. The 'case study method' is applied in this research. At the end of this research the uniqueness of this building is revealed and the significance of this palace is realized to be more important to conserve traditional architecture especially for the Perak regional style. The inventory produced can ensure this inheritance will remain for future generation and further studies.

**Keywords:** Traditional Decorations, Documentation, Inventory, Conservation

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### INTRODUCTION

The early record of Malay architecture only can be found in old literature such as *Sulatus Selatin* and *Hikayat Misa Melayu* that illustrate the palace as a house for the Sultan that was built and decorated from wood. (Abdul Halim Nasir 1986) Here is where the documentation of the inheritance is important in conservation works. This to ensure the next generations can know and study in detail. The documentation work for historic buildings is important to ensure the next generation can study and encourage the awareness of appreciating their heritage. The characters of traditional wood carving today are influenced from Hinduism that existed from first century until 14<sup>th</sup> century until it evolved into pure Malay identity. Malay wood carving again, was adapted from strong influence of Islamic characters in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Islamic belief made big changes in traditional architecture especially in woodcarving elements. All animal characters were no longer used and were simplified. What we can see today is the product of a long evolution that has been at work since the first century. (Abdul Halim Nasir 1986) As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, woodcarving has been a significant craft in vernacular architecture practiced by Malay craftsmen in Peninsular Malaysia (Ismail & Ahmad, 2001; Fee, 1998). The Istana Kenangan (Memorial Palace), is built mainly out of wood but there are in some parts are use other material such as bamboo and metal plate as a decoration. It is also known as "Istana Lembah" and occasionally as "Istana Tepas". Located south-east of Istana Iskandariah, it was planned and built in 1926, after the great flood. It is an art of partially removing wood from a board or a plank following specific motifs and orders. By imitating a carved masterpiece, a woodcarver gradually modifies the motifs and produces his own manifestation onto the timber piece. This pattern becomes the trademark, both for the carver and for his architecture or craft. (Ismail Ahmad, 2004). Walls consist of woven bamboo (tepas) is dominant character in Perak state architecture. Tepas walls are widely used in house construction in Perak state. The research is about to produce the inventory of decoration elements in Istana Kenangan, Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

### Background of the Palace

The Istana Kenangan (Memorial Palace), is built mainly out of wood. It is also known as Istana Lembah and occasionally as Istana Tepas. Located south-east of Istana Iskandariah, it was planned and built in 1926, after the great flood.



Plate 1.1: Istana Kenagan Kuala Kangsar

The carpenter who built the palace was Haji Suffian who, with his two sons ZainalAbidin and Ismail, came from SeberangPerai. (Raja Nazrin,2006:34) The architecture of the palace is based on the shape of a sword. The walls are made of woven sliced bamboo in a diamond shaped pattern (kelarai) and the roofs are in the shape of "five ridges of a traditional Malay house and the ridge of a row of bananas" (perabunglimadanperabungpisangesikat). The design and the craftsmanship adopted in the palace construction reflects the fine art of Perak Malay handicraft.

When the palace was completed in 1931, Sultan Iskandar Shah (1918-1938) the 30th Sultan moved to this palace because the official palace at the time, Istana Negara, was to be demolished and the new palace to be build was to be on its site at Changkat Negara, Bukit Chandan. The new palace is the present Istana Iskandariah.



Plate 1.2: Istana Iskandariah, Kuala Kangsar (source: District Office of Kuala Kangsar)

The construction of Istana Iskandariah was completed in 1933 and Sultan Iskandar Shah moved into it while other members of the family went to stay in the Istana Lembah which later became known as the Istana Kenangan.



Plate 1.3: Sultan Iskandar Shah (1918-1938). (source: M.A. Fawzi Basri,1986)

Istana Kenangan was originally known as Istana Lembah (Valley Palace) and Istana Tepas (Plaited Bamboo Palace). Its name Istana Kenangan was given to the palace after its renovation in the 1960's. The then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, was involved in the restoration of the palace and its maintenance as a heritage building.

The palace later was converted into the MuziumDiraja (Royal Museum), which was officially opened by Sultan AzlanMuhibbuddin Shah (r. 1984 – Present) in 1986. Exhibition on display include the throne used during the 1985 installation of Sultan AzlanMuhibbuddin Shah, The regalia and photographs of the Perak royal family, and documents and artifacts relating to earlier sultans. (Raja Nazrin,2006:34)Istana Kenangan was opened again in July 2008 after many years of restoration work. It has now become the Royal Museum of Perak.

### **Influences in Malay Decorations and Architecture**

The Malay people have lived in Peninsular Malaysia which has been known to be influenced by Hinduism until the Islam era in the 14<sup>th</sup> century which brought a big influence to their culture and arts. Islam forbids any animal or living character representation in its art and culture and created every artwork including architecture and decoration that not just emphasized on function, but made living more creative whilst emphasizing Islamic religious symbolism. This makes the Malay art obviously different with ancient Greek, Egypt and Roman art and architecture.(JumaatMohd. Noor,1992)

Malay traditional wood carvings are rich with beautiful motif. The natural property of wood which have grain patterns contributes to its aesthetic value. The selection of timber species strongly depend on the function and application of the work piece such as outdoor or indoor use. It also depends on the price of the species that finally will reflect the status of the owner (for example penghulu house or palace). It also reflects the owner's financial and social status.

However wood is not the first material for carving work founded in Malaysia. Through recorded history people in peninsular Malaysia carved on stone since Buddhism and Hinduism came to influence the culture of the local

people. In Perak state of Malaysia, statues and others prayer equipments have been found that are believed to be from the fifth to sixth century period. (A. HalimNasir, 1977) Which started from the ‘*Dong Song Drum*’ in the Bronze era (1500 – 300 BC) to stone carvings in LembahBujang.

The traditional masterpieces from 500 years ago are made from a fragile material from nature that is not long lasting and cannot be preserved for the next generation.(JumaatMohd Noor, 1992). Timber is among the main material in Malay art works. It is the main material to build houses and other buildings like mosques and palaces. These buildings are decorated with fine wood carving. There is no exact era or time period to show when the Traditional wood carving started in the Malay civilization. The earliest Malay Manuscript that can be used as evidence is the *SejarahMelayu* (Malay History) by Tun Sri Lanang, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. In his book he wrote about the Sultan Masor Shah of Malacca palace and how beautiful it was built, which later on caught fire and was destroyed.

“ adapunbesarnyaistanaitutujuhbelasruang; padaseruangtigadepaluasnya. Besartiangsepemeluk, tujuhangkatkemuncaknya. Padaantaraitudiberinyabertingkap, danpadatingkap-tingkapdiberinyaberbumbung dab bergajahmenyusu. Sekaliannyabersayap layang-layangberukirdanbersengkuap di perbuatnyabelalangbersegi; sekaliannyabergunung-ganangandanberjurai-juraibelaka.Adapuntingkapistanaitusekaliannya di cat sertadibubuhiairemasdankemuncaknyaberkacamerah.Apabilakenasinarmatahari, menyala-nyalarupanya, sepertimanikam. Sementaradinding-dindingituberkambi, maka di tampalidengancermencina yang besar-besar.Apabilakenapanasmataharimenyala-nyalarupanya.Kilau-kilauan, tiadanyatabahnadipandang orang.Adapunrasukistanaitusehastalebarnyasejengkalitigajaritebalnya.Akan biraiistanadua hasta lebarnyasehastatebalnya; diukirjenangpintuitudanempatpuluhbanyakpintunya.Sekaliannyadicatdandibubuh air emas.Terlaluindah-indahperbuatannyaistanaitu. Dan istanaitulahdinamaimahligai, atapnyatembagadantimahdisirip.”

This huge and luxury the Malacca Sultanate has been rebuilt according to this manuscript by Malacca Museum Board as Malacca sultanate Museum to show the public how unique the Malay palace architecture and Sultanate of Mansur Shah era from 1456 to 1477

([http://www.perzim.gov.my/istana\\_kesultanan.htm](http://www.perzim.gov.my/istana_kesultanan.htm), 2008).



Plate 1.4: Malacca Sultanate Muzium (MuziumBudaya) located near St. Paul Hill, Melaka. (source: PERZIM, 2008)



Another old Malay literature called '*MisaMelayu*' also describes the Sultan IskandarDzu'lkarnain palace. In circa 1750's the writer, Raja Chulan has wrote:

..... *Istana yang indahpermai, dipagariolehempatpenjurutembok yang kukohsebagaikubu, sepanjang 240 kaki sebelah-sebelah, dan di tiap-tiappenjuruterdirimenara yang tersergamdenganmeriam-meriamnyasekali, telahsiapdibina di Chempaka Sari. Dan di dalamtembokistanaitu pula terdiritigabuahistanalagi yang lengkapdengansegalarupaperhiasannya. ....* (Raja Chulan,1968:12)

In this literature the writer elaborated how wonderful the Palace of Perak that built with four sides of protective wall. The wall was built along 240 feet each. There is a minaret at every angles complete with canons in Chempaka Sari. Inside the palace area are built three of full decorated blocks. In both literatures wrote about the design of the sultan palaces that describes their power and richness.

### Symbolism in Malay Traditional Timber House

In the Malay social structure and cultural life, good behavior and respect to other people especially to the older and higher social status like *Penghulu* (village head) and Sultan is very important. Wood carving patterns and motifs which is symbolizes to represent certain meaning. Strong Islamic beliefs and humble feeling to God (Allah) also brings influence to the motifs in wood carving and its application in Malay Houses or Palaces.

Islam erased the Hindu-Buddhist influence in Malay life since the 14 century. Islam forbids man make crafts from having natural representations and the human face. Because of that abstract and geometrical motifs are employed. (Muhammad Afandi Yahya,1995:9)

Among the good example of this fact is *awanlarat* (meandering clouds: Traditional wood carving motif) which is widely used in most traditional and contemporary Malay buildings. '*Awanlarat*' is a motif of wood carving that uses waving, twisting, and flowing like patterns to represent the moving clouds in the sky. Normally, this type of wood carving motif is combined to become a complete pattern (HalimNasir, 1986). *Awanlarat* motifs are always carved to bend at its end to show respect and humble feeling to God. *Awanlarat* can be identified by it continuous motif which is started at the center of the panel or work piece (Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993:). The starting point in *awanlarat* is called *punca* (Mohd Sabrizaa Abd Rashid, 2008).

### Type of 'Silat' In Traditional Wood Carving

Shape of motifs and patterns in Malay wood carving is importance. For the *bungatimbul* (embossed) and shaped *tebuktembus* (cut through) carvings the technique of cutting or stroke is called *silat*. *Silat* emphasizes the carving motifs in three dimensional shapes. There are five types of *silat*, which are '*Silatbelahrotan*', '*silat dada tuma*', '*silatserong*', '*silat leper*' and '*silatminangkabau*'. (Hassan Mohd. Ghazali, 1992:122)

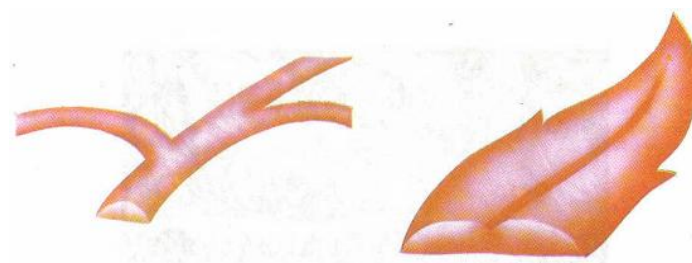


Figure 1.1: *Silatbelahrotan*: curved edges (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993)

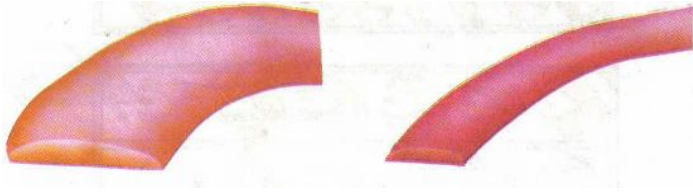


Figure 1.2 :*Silat Leper*: flatten curve shape (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993)

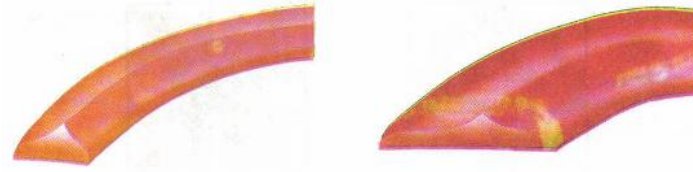


Figure 1.3: *Silatminangkabau* have a sharp pitch (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993)

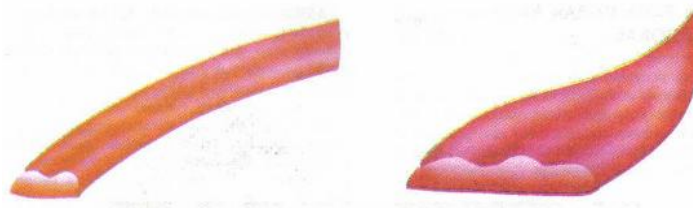


Figure 1.4: *Silat dada tuma* have concave on the middle (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993)



Figure 1.5: *SilatSerong* have sharp pitch on one side and low curve cutting on the other side. (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993)

The photograph below is an example of cut through carving on Istana Kenangan floor fascia panel. The top part of the fascia is a carving with *silat* and the low part of the fascia is a carving without *silat* technique.



Plate 1.5: Istana Kenangan floor fascia

### Weaving Wall (Tupas/Tepas) in Traditional House

Traditional weaving art in Malay culture started a long time ago. It was invented without influence from outsiders. It started with rope, roots and rattan as its first basic material in Malay weaving crafts. Several designs can be created from *pandanus* species of plant (pandan and mengkuang). The design is comes from its functions for example the farmers and fishermen, the weaving activities can be basket, hat, tudungsaji, mat, fan and other utility equipments. Weaving crafts contain pattern called Kelarai.

([http://memorikedah.net/page\\_pengenalan.php?p=1&idstopic=5&mtopic=1](http://memorikedah.net/page_pengenalan.php?p=1&idstopic=5&mtopic=1), 2008).



Plate 1.6: *Pandan* tree (left) and *mengkuang* tree (right) (source: Hassan Mohd. Ghazali, 1992:63)

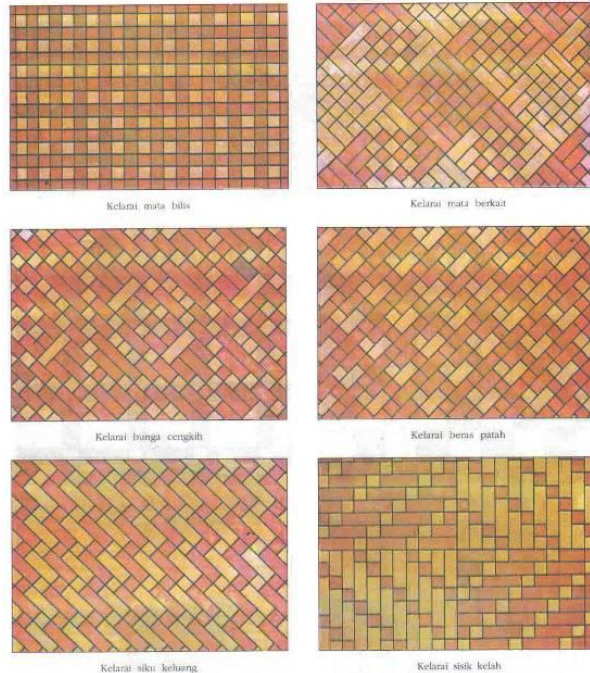


Figure 1.6: Motifs in *kelarai* weaves (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali,1993)





Figure 1.6: Motifs of *kelarai* weave (source: Hassan Mohd Ghazali, 1993) (continue)

*Ketupat* is a one of Malay traditional food made from weaved young coconut leaves filled with rice. There are several shapes of *ketupat* weaves called *hulupengayuh*, *pasar*, *pasarpahang*, *bawangmerah*, *bawangputih*, *buahkeras* and *serinegeri* (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1992).

*Kelarai* wall panels are also made as interior dividers and exterior walls for traditional Malay houses which are most popular in the west coast region of peninsular Malaysia especially in the Perak state. The *kelarai* wall is normally made from split bamboo, *bertam* (*engeissonatritis*), *Rumbia* and *pelupuh* due to their durabilities. These materials are ripped and planed before they are preserved by being dipped in mud. Some of it is painted in various colours. The Istana Kenangan of Kuala Kangsar is the most famous example of a *kelarai* wall building. The other examples of these type of buildings which still remain are Masjid Kuala Dal, Kuala Kangsar, Perak; and house number 20 off Jalan Kota Lama, Sayung, Perak. (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1992).

## METHODOLOGY

### On-site Building Measurements

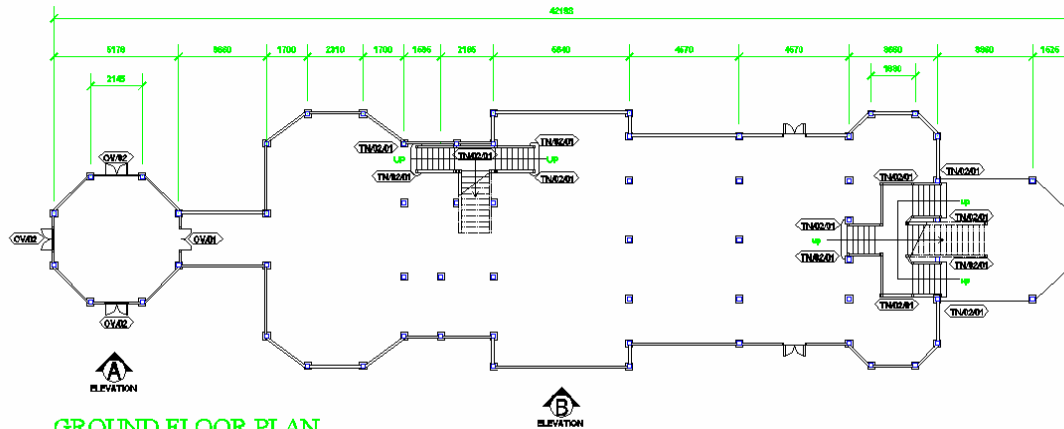
Physical measurement on site and production of scale drawings is required in this method of study. Autocad software is used to produce drawings that include floor plans, elevations and detail drawings of every building element that have decoration and carving motives.

The palace is measured to get the accurate scale drawings. Since this study is about patterns and carvings on the palace, the measured drawings are important to indicate the decorations and wood carvings located throughout the plan and elevation. The profiles on the building are measured and recorded through photos and working drawings.

Certain parts of the building that cannot be reached, for example the roof, are measured using the comparison method from photographs. The comparison is made between a measured object and an unmeasured object to identify the ratio of size.

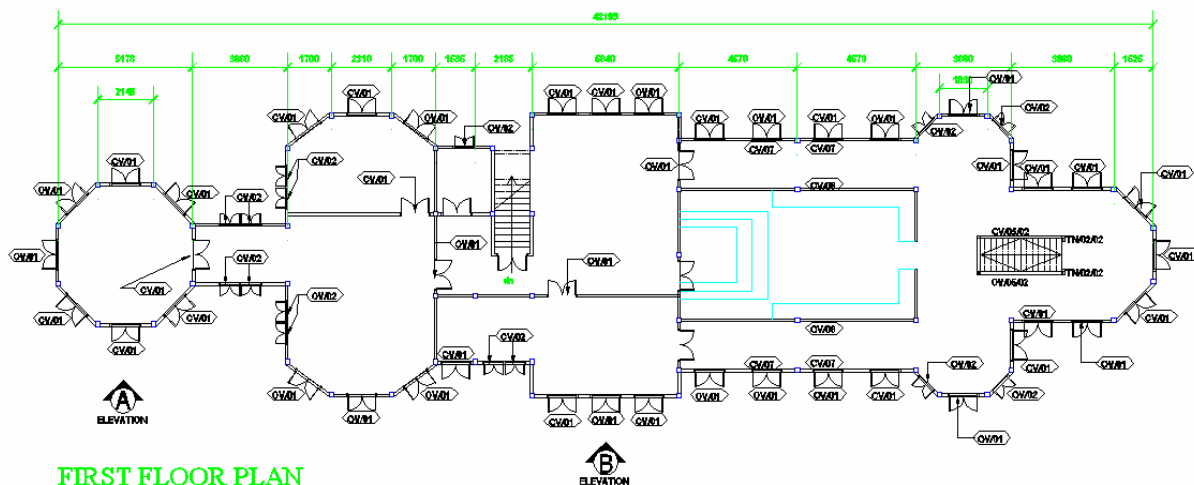
## Plans and Elevations of Istana Kenangan

From the observation on site, the Istana Kenangan position is in west-south direction with the entrance facing the west side. The overall west-south length of the palace is 42.2 meters of column to column measurement. The overall width of the palace is 10.4 meters of column to column measurement. The total height not include the *tunjuklangit*(pointed pitch) is approximately 12 meters from the ground level. The plans and elevations of the Istana Kenangan are produced to show the placement of wood carvings and pattern on the exterior and in the interior of the palace. The drawing numbers indicate the carvings and patterns located.

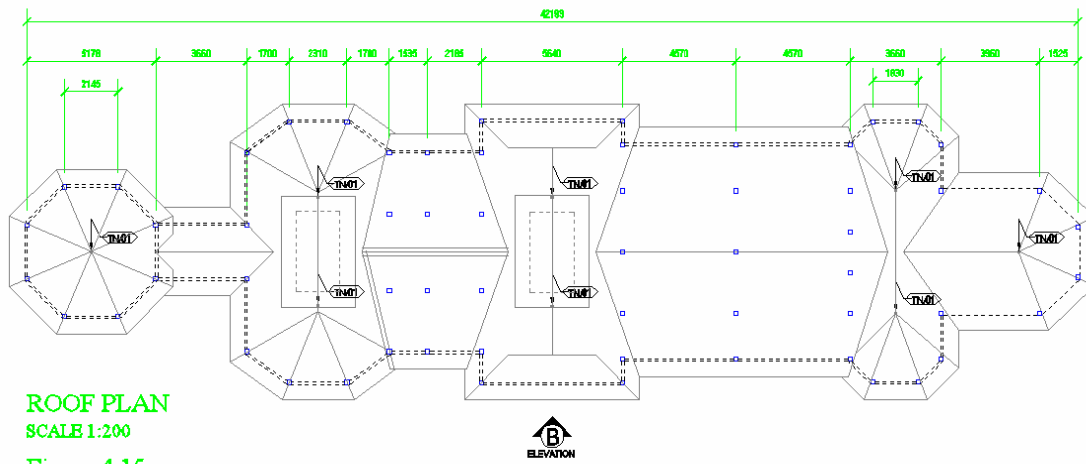


GROUND FLOOR PLAN  
SCALE 1:200

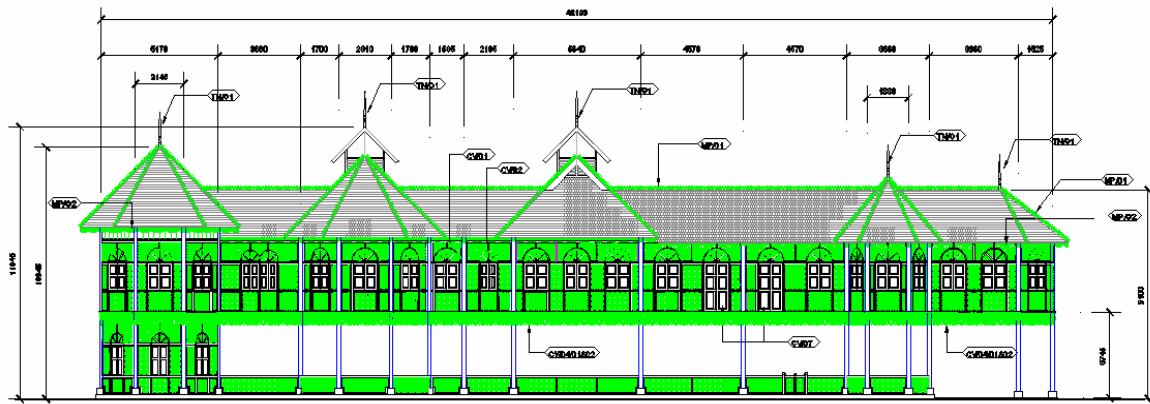
Figure 4.13



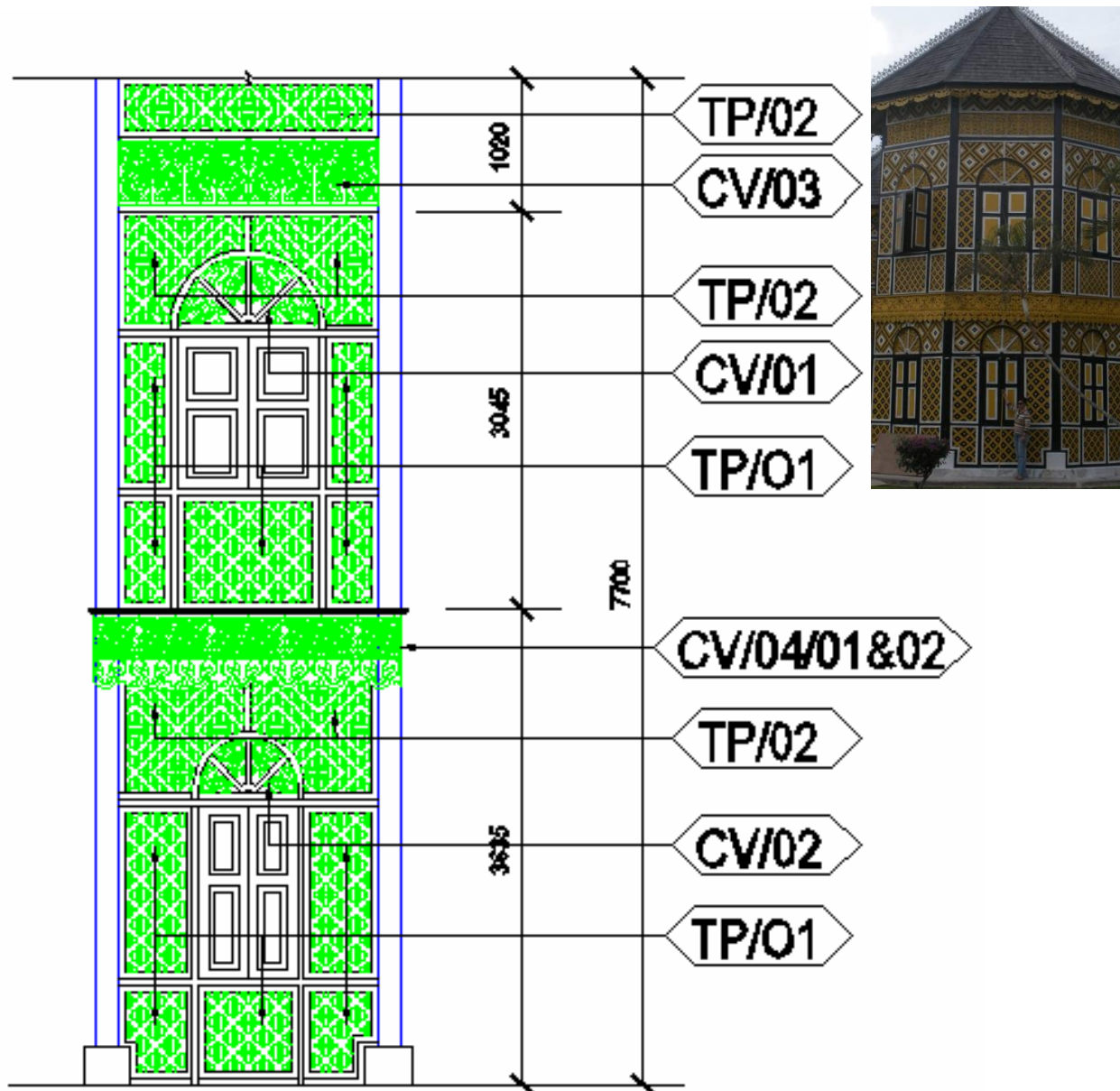
FIRST FLOOR PLAN  
SCALE 1:200  
Figure 4.14



ROOF PLAN  
SCALE 1:200  
Figure 4.15



NORTH ELEVATION  
SCALE 1:200  
Figure 4.16

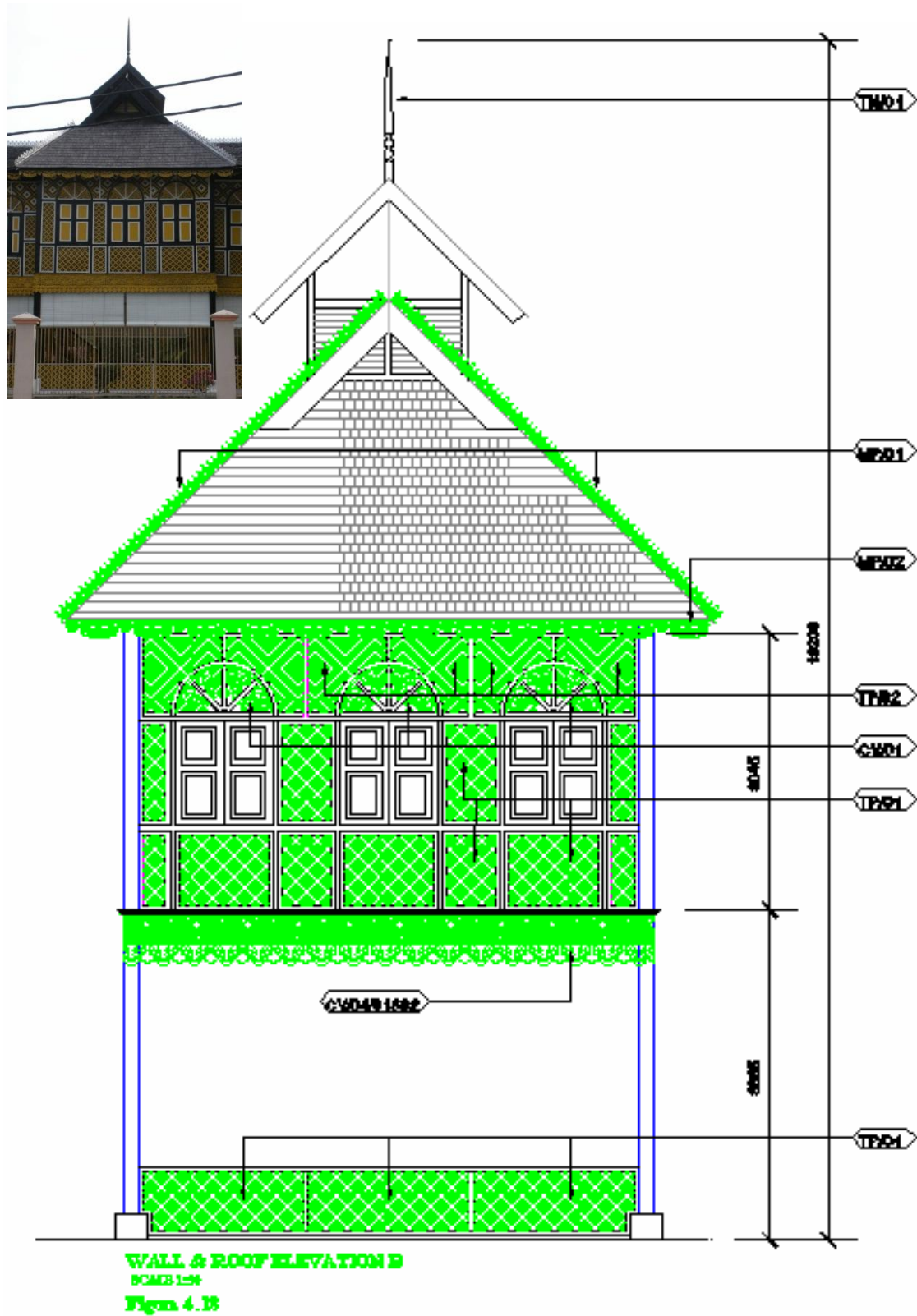


## WALL ELEVATION A

SCALE 1:50

Figure 4.17





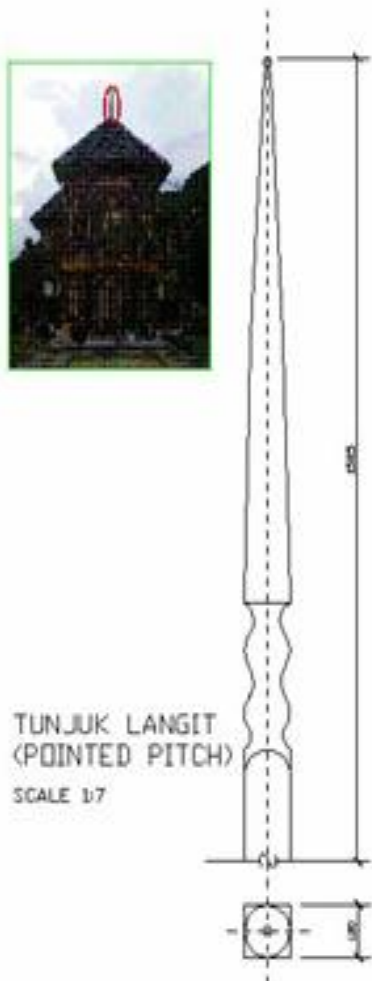
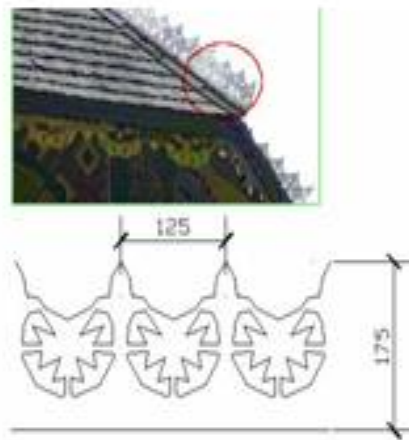


Figure 4.20: Drawing TR01



RABUNG ATAP (PITCH CROWN)  
SCALE 1:3

Figure 4.21: Drawing MP01

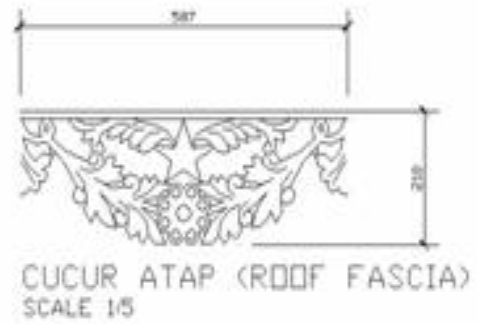
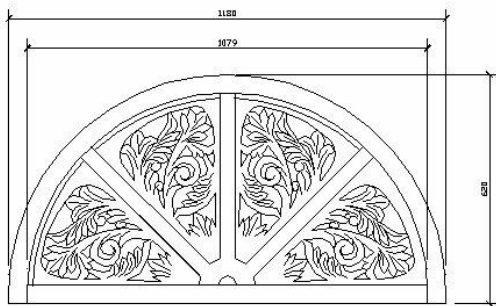
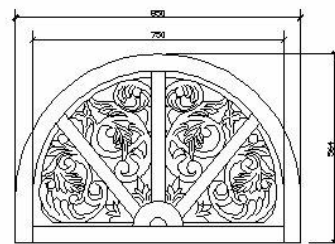
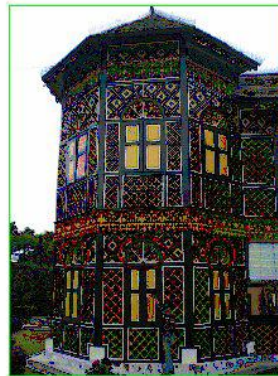


Figure 4.22: Drawing MP02



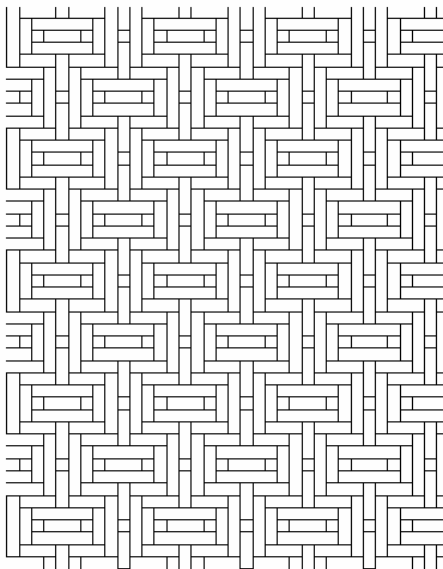
AMBANG TINGKAP & KEPALA PINTU (FANLIGHT A)  
SCALE 1:10

Figure 4.23: Drawing CV/01



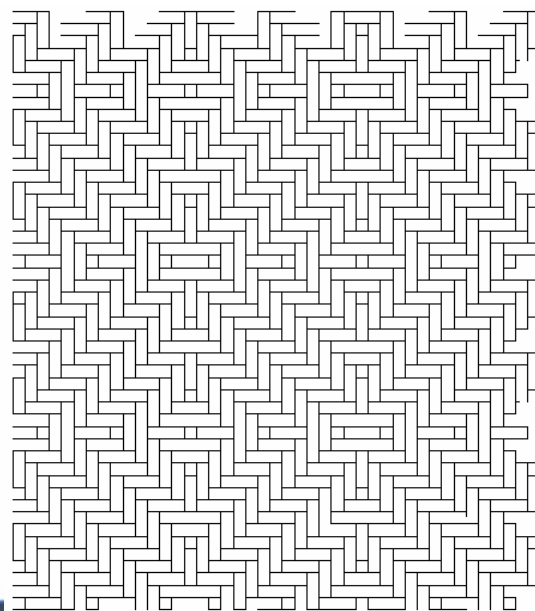
AMBANG TINGKAP (FANLIGHT B)  
SCALE 1:10

Figure 4.24: Drawing CV/02



TEPAS TYPE A  
SCALE 1:5

Figure 4.25: Drawing TP/01



TEPAS TYPE B  
SCALE 1:5

Figure 4.26: Drawing TP/02



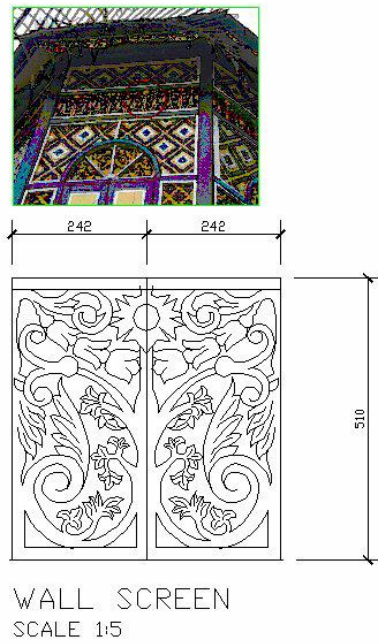


Figure 4.27: Drawing CV/03

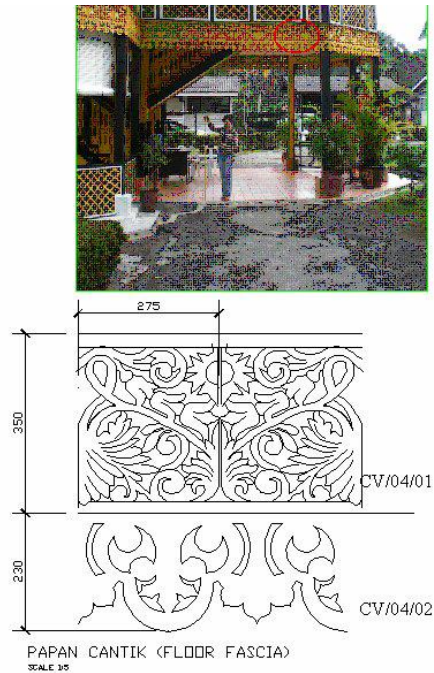


Figure 4.28: Drawing CV/04/01 & CV/04/02

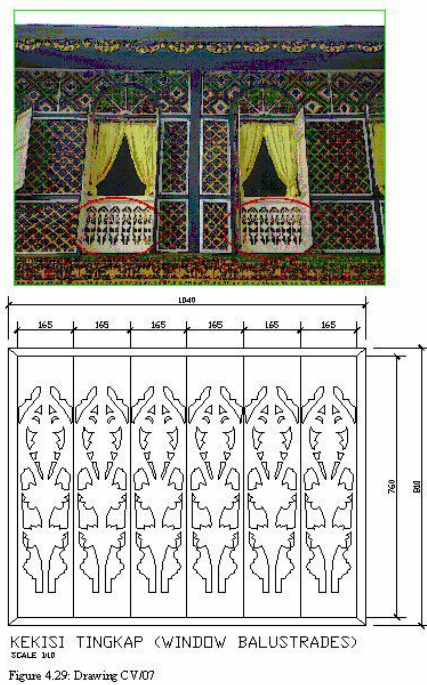


Figure 4.29: Drawing CV/07

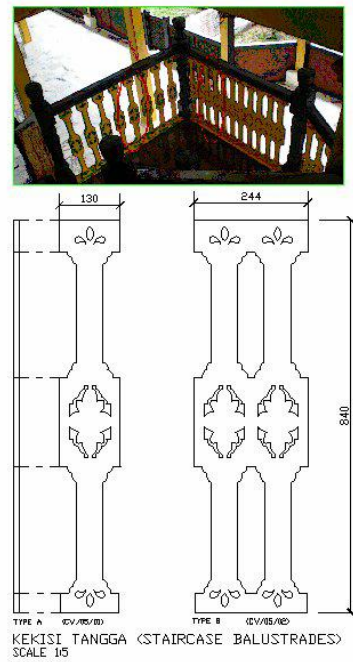


Figure 4.30: Drawing CV/05/01 & CV/05/02



## Wood Carving and Decoration Inventory

This inventory table shows the placement and its quantity of the carvings and patterns in Istana Kenangan. Every carving and pattern is indicated with drawing number to identify the locations on plan and elevation drawings. This table is complete with the specification and finishing as additional information.

Locations		Elements	Parts with Pattern	Quantity	Drawing Number	Materials & Fnishing
Exterior	Roof		<i>Tunjuk Langit</i> (Pointed pitch)	8	TN/01	Solid wood turning profile in natural finish
			Pitch Crown	NA	MP/01	Metal plate in natural finish
			Roof Fascia	NA	MP/02	Embossed metal plate in yellow paint
	Wall		Fanlight type a	41	CV/01	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
			Fanlight type b	22	CV/02	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
			<i>Tepas</i> type a	NA	TP/01	Bertam weaving in glossy paint finish
			<i>Tepas</i> type b	NA	TP/02	Bertam weaving in glossy paint finish
			Wall screen	NA	CV/03	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
			Floor Fascia (top part)	NA	CV/04/01	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
			Floor Fascia (low part)	NA	CV/04/02	Cut through carving in yellow paint
Interior	Ground Floor	Staircase	Balustrade panel type a	70	CV/05/01	Cut through carving in yellow paint
			Balustrade panel type b	66	CV/05/02	Cut through carving in yellow paint
			Balustrade pole type a	20	TN/02/01	Solid wood turning profile in black paint finish
			Stairs carving motive	84	CV/06	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
		Door	Fanlight type b	1	TP/02	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
	First Floor	Railing	Balustrade panel type b	32	CV/05/02	Cut through carving in yellow paint
			Balustrade pole type b	6	TN/02/02	Solid wood turning profile in black paint finish
		Window	Screen panel	24	CV/07	Cut through carving in yellow paint
		Door	Screen panel	NA	CV/07	Cut through carving in yellow paint
			Fanlight type a	7	CV/01	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint
		Divider	Wood Carving Panel	NA	CV/08	Cut through with single side silat carving in yellow paint

Figure 4.17: Istana Kenangan inventory of carvings and decorations.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research that I have done, I found that Istana Kenangan is a unique architectural heritage because of its main purpose of why it was built. According to the history, Istana Kenangan is a temporary palace for the Sultan Iskandar Shah while the new permanent palace is under construction. The permanent palace is Istana Iskandariah and serves as the administrative block and Sultan Azlan Shah Gallery (formerly known as Istana Hulu) building today actually is a palace that served as the Sultan's Residence before. Both palaces are made from concrete. It shows the concrete construction technology was brought to Perak during that time. Istana Kenangan was not the latest technology when it was built in year 1926. Perhaps it means that Istana Kenangan was made from cheaper materials and only acted as a temporary palace. There is a big difference in the size of the Istana Kenangan and Istana Iskandariah. Istana Kenangan is much smaller compared with Istana Iskandariah. Istana Iskandariah still

remains as a state palace until today. But Istana Kenangan was used as a state palace for three years only and then became a royal family house for a certain period of time before turned into the Royal Museum today. The conclusion which I can make here is that Istana Kenangan is not the highest achievement of timber buildings that sultan could afford to build, but the Istana Kenangan that we see today is built from the second class budget as a temporary building. We can't say this building can be used as a benchmark to estimate the state financial level in that era because at the same time the actual palace was under construction with more luxury and grandness.

However we still can say that Istana Kenangan has its own unique characteristics that not only in the workmanship but also the materials that were used for this palace, compared to buildings of the same age of timber building in the Perak state. This puts Istana Kenangan on the higher standard with other rich houses or buildings at that time.

The roof tiles is from *Belian* timber which is a very high quality of tropical timber because of its durable property. Most of the traditional buildings that were built in the same era were used *atap* (palm leaves) or zinc for its roofing. The roof for Istana Kenangan is decorated with metal plates such as *perabungatap* (pitch crown) and *cucuratap* (fascia) of the roof. The roof fascia is made from decorated metal plates with embossed pattern and painted in yellow color.

The finishing of Istana Kenangan exterior part is in reference to the Perak flag colors. Most of the traditional buildings in Perak state are from timber or bamboo natural color with oil or wax applied. Istana Kenangan is painted with glossy opaque finish except for the timber floor. *Tepas* wall for this palace is made from the *Bertam* tree which is more durable and difficult to find compare with bamboo material that usually is used to make houses. The colors and materials used in Istana Kenangan made an obvious difference compared to other traditional houses in the Perak state.

Because of this uniqueness, Istana Kenangan is the only building in Perak state as it is. It is also a part of Perak state history. The conservation and restoration works should be conducted from time to time for this building. The originality of the building should remain for the next generation to study and understand this heritage. Changing this building is like changing the history records, it is not fair for our next generation to see and observe. This is what conservation ethics is all about.

Timber is a material from nature and is biodegradable due to exposure to weather and decay agents. This makes timber buildings not long lasting like concrete buildings. It also can be destroyed by fire. The ability to shrink and swell due to moisture content make the jointing of timber structure fails after certain period of time. Special attention from experts is needed to make sure this heritage can stand forever. In the same time further research and documentation is needed for this building. The information from the previous and further research will help to develop the understanding and appreciation of national heritage among the new generations.

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