

## Preserving and Conserving Malay Royal Towns Identity in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Malay Royal towns in Malaysia are the best evolution examples of Malay towns dating from the 16th century which have a strong related history of old Malay Kingdom that are worthy of preservation. This paper aims to discover the significance of the royal towns so as to ensure its preservation. This research managed to identify the townscape characteristics that shaped the identity of Malay Royal towns in Malaysia. Based on the historical and physical evidences that are still exist, five (5) royal towns that gazetted will be selected as study area namely; Anak Bukit (Alor Setar), Klang, Sri Menanti, Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bharu. This study utilized a series of qualitative approaches that included literature reviews of scholarly articles, historical map overlay, semi-structured interviews and site observations. The findings from this research expose that Malay Royal towns have a great significant in the development of Malay towns in Malaysia. These towns also reveal a few of townscape characteristics that are associate as an urban heritage, rich with identity, cultural and architectural significance. The paper concludes that a conventional conservation approach it seems insufficient to preserve and maintain the whole ideas of a Malay Royal town identity. A new comprehensive method of preservation and conservation will be generate in order to sustain the identity of the Malay Royal towns that represents the local and national identity.

**Keywords:** Conservation Plan; Identity; Malay Royal Town.



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### 1. Introduction

Malay Royal towns in Malaysia have a great influence from the past and shown an important part in shaping of the town setting and identity. The Malay Royal towns are scattered around Peninsular Malaysia starting from the North to the South, which is Arau (Perlis), Anak Bukit (Kedah), Kuala Kangsar (Perak), Klang (Selangor), Sri Menanti (Negeri Sembilan), Muar (Johor), Pekan (Pahang), Kuala Terengganu (Terengganu) and Kota Bharu (Kelantan). These towns have a high impact of historic and cultural values but nowadays extensive urbanisation and rapid development occurring in most of royal towns have significantly eroded the identity, sense of place and characteristics of the Malay Royal Towns. Nevertheless, these royal towns will be diminishing throughout time without any proper actions taken to protect them. Malaysia heritage department under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture has actively listed at least 201 units of heritage buildings, monuments and archaeological sites in 12 states around Malaysia. Some of the buildings and sites were used to be in worse condition, and most of them were classified as the vernacular Chinese shop houses (Idid, 1995). The Malay Royal town that presences in Malaysian urban areas less known by public and also it also unclear to legitimize the meaning and identity of Malay Royal towns. Therefore, Malaysia heritage department have started to recognised and gazette more buildings that have associated with the Malay Royal town character as a heritage buildings. The buildings and site that have be selected namely were royal palace complex, religions building, fortification system, traditional settlement areas and marketplace that located in the Malay Royal towns.

The aim of this paper is to discover the characteristics and identity that make Malay Royal towns culturally significant and to ensure preservation the genius loci of the place. The preservation aims is to cover the significant buildings, monuments and sites that have associated with the character of Malay Royal towns. This process will allow for the preservation of historic and cultural significance that involving the tangible and intangible elements. Therefore in this study, two (2) objectives have been set which the first is to identify the element and characteristics of the urban townscape through using the historic map overlay, semi-structured interviews and site observations. The finding on this objectives are categorized according to their physical and cultural significance in the Malay royal

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towns. The second objectives is to understand the elements of urban townscape that shape the urban form of Malay Royal towns and a new comprehensive method of preservation and conservation will be generate. As the study focuses on a few Malay royal towns, an overall image and identity of the Malay Royal town characteristics can be establish and generalized.

## 2. Methodology

In order to identify the elements and characteristics of Malay Royal towns, historic map overlay, semi-structured interviews and site observations was selected as a method in data collection. The data were then analysed in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the findings. Site visits were conducted at Anak Bukit (Alor Setar), Klang, Sri Menanti, Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bahru to help clarify the difference between a Royal town's morphology versus that of other early Malay towns. During the site visit, the existing characteristics of Malay royal towns were mapped. This includes the physical and non-physicals character, any adjacent context and the urban context of the town. All this information will help provide a deeper understanding of the key characteristics of the Malay Royal towns. In addition to site visits, semi-structured interviews were also utilized to provide and verify data. The data from the interviews helped develop a broader understanding of the physical and social characteristics in Malay Royal towns. The respondents was Malaysia Historian and also the Chairman of Malaysian Historical Society, Officer at National Museum, Officer at Department of National Heritage and a few local people with has a knowledge on the history of the particular study area. Then the information that has been gathered from the interviews were later screened, transcribed and analysed. Besides that, to clarify the relationship between cultural significance and heritage conservation, a literature review of scholarly articles is undertaken. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the preservation and conservation of heritage sites, including ICOMOS Charters and the Malaysian Heritage Act 2005. By adapting certain guidelines, the contents can be set out by adapted, upgraded and implemented on the Malay Royal town guidelines.

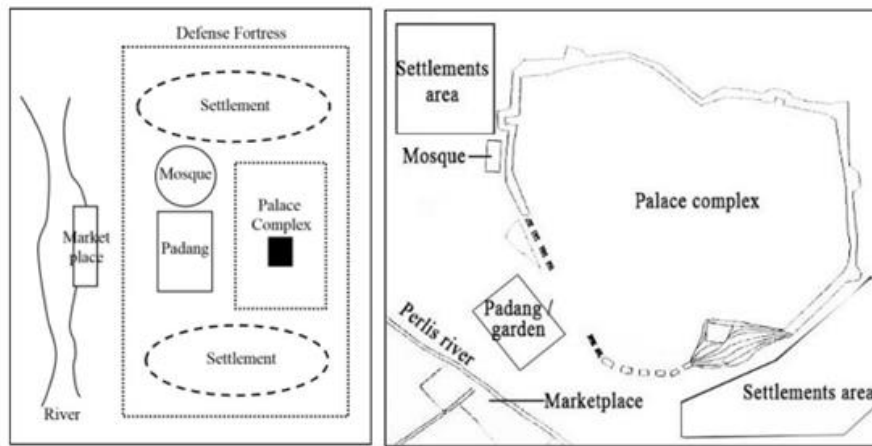
## 3. The Character of Malay Royal Town

Malay royal town has been describe as a town that has a strong relationship between the community, defense fortress and the king fort 'istana berkota' where by the royal administrative district are located (Shukri, 2018a). Malay royal town also been define as a Malay historic town where the royal and administrative building are located (Harun and Jalil, 2012a) Other scholar also defined that Malay Royal town as a historic town that has good quality of cultural, historical significance with a finest connection between the community and the urban growth of the area (Muslim *et al.*, 2013). Harun and Jalil (2012b) also classified Kuala Terengganu, Kota Bahru, Alor Setar, Pekan, Muar, Klang, Johor Lama, Kuala Dungun and Kuala Selangor as "*Bandar Kuala*" or Estuary Towns. On the other hand, Samsudin (2018) defines Malaysian Royal towns as having a king's palace, traditional Malay settlements and fortification systems. In the latest iteration, Shukri (2018a) stated that Malay Royal towns as having eight (8) prominent physical character namely, royal palace complex, fortress, mosque, public open space, marketplace, settlement, gateway, and river and jetty.

An in-depth understanding of the physical form of a town, is important to relate the study that have been done by Lynch on defining the character of a town which is including five (5) main categories of the elements that shape the image of the city which is paths, edges, district, nodes and landmarks (Kevin, 1960). Like others historic cities and towns, Malay Royal towns were primarily dictated by the paths that run within the towns. Path can be understood as the most significant elements within the town's development, as they help in supporting human movement along the streets, walkways, canals and rivers (Harun *et al.*, 2015). The paths of the Malay Royal towns can be categorized into two groups. Firstly is the primary paths whereby leading to and away from the town. This includes rivers, canals and off roads that link one town to another. Secondly is secondary or internal paths which is usually smaller and allow of the movement within the area of the town.

Besides paths, district play a role in defining the planning of the Malay Royal towns. Usually the district can be found in a centralized form, which is the town is divided into 3 primary districts. The palace complex and mosque would form an administrative core, with the settlements becoming a residential district and the last is marketplace and jetty forming commercial districts. The third element are the nodes which is the places of congregation and are a focal point for the social activities of the town. These are most obviously the open space (padang), marketplace and jetty. Meanwhile, landmarks are points of reference that are used to orient oneself. This was the mosque and the palace complex as the tallest buildings in the higher ground in the town. Natural elements like mountains and hill were also used to define the landmarks. Finally, edges are defined as line breaks and barriers that define the region of the town. These are not as obvious in Malay Royal towns such as the palace gateway, fortress and the riverbank. Figure 1 shows the Malay Royal town model that base on the historical map overlay that had been conducted in the research.

Figure-1. Model of Malay Royal town



Source: (Shukri, 2018b)

Malay royal towns has its own character in term of historical, cultural, physical and social character that form these towns into a historic masterpiece through the setting of urban form and patterns (Nasir and Kota-kota Melayu, 1990). It is critical to identified and protect of these Malay royal towns, as they are proof to the strength and greatness of the Royal Institution systems in Malaysia (Mohidin et al., 2012). However, in order to protect a Malay Royal town character and identity, it is important to identify the tangible characteristics of Malay Royal towns through the comparative studies of existing Malay Royal towns in Malaysia. There are several physical characteristics influencing the Malay Royal town settings. Table 1 summarizes the physical characteristics of the selected Malay royal towns that still exist in Malaysia.

Table-1. Comparison of physical characteristics between Kota Setar, Klang, Seri Menanti, Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bharu.

Physical Characte-ristics	Alor Setar	Klang	Seri Menanti	Kuala Terengganu	Kota Bharu
Royal Palace Complex	Istana Pelamin	Istana Alam Shah	Seri Menanti Complex	Istana Maziah	Istana Balai Besar
Fortress	Kuala Bahang Fortress	Raja Mahdi Fortress	Natural Hill and Palace Fortress	Bukit Puteri Fortress	Along Kelantan River
Mosque	Zahir Mosque	Sultan Sulaiman Mosque	Tanjung Sembeling Mosque	Zainal Abidin Mosque	Muham madia Mosque
Public Open Space	Medan Bandar	Padang Sultan Sulaiman	Padang Diraja Seri Menanti	Padang Maziah	Padang Merdeka
Market-place	Pekan Rabu	Pasar Besar	Pasar Seri Menanti	Pasar Payang	Pasar Siti Khadijah
River & jetty	Kedah River	Klang River	Sri Menanti River	Terengganu River	Kelantan River
Settle-ment	Kampung Melayu & Cina	Kampung Sungai Udang	Kampung Buyau	Kampung Keling	Buluh Kubu
Gateway	Istana Kota Tengah Gateway	Raja Mahdi Gateway	Seri Menanti Gateway	Istana Maziah Gateway	Istana Balai Inner Gateway

The royal towns differ slightly from one another, each attuned to the vernacular of the area. They also have their own historic and cultural influences that forms minor, unique characteristics that differentiate each individual royal town. This is presented in minor or major changes in building fabrics, evolving the area into a valuable urban masterpiece (Vernières, 2012). It is the key, to preserve these Malay Royal towns and prevent the loss of the country's historic townscape that portrays the uniqueness of a city (Idid, 1995).

### 3. Urban Structure in Malay Royal Town

Urban structure in Malay Royal towns basically dominant with the building such as palace complex and mosque but in Klang, Sri Menanti and Kuala Terengganu royal town, natural features which is hill is the most dominant aspect of the royal town's identity. The setting of the royal town cans be recognised from far due to hilly terrain that appears as a background and give an unique identity and image to the town (see Figure 2).

**Figure-2.** The illustration of the old view of Sri Menanti town (left) and the current view of Maziah Palace (right).



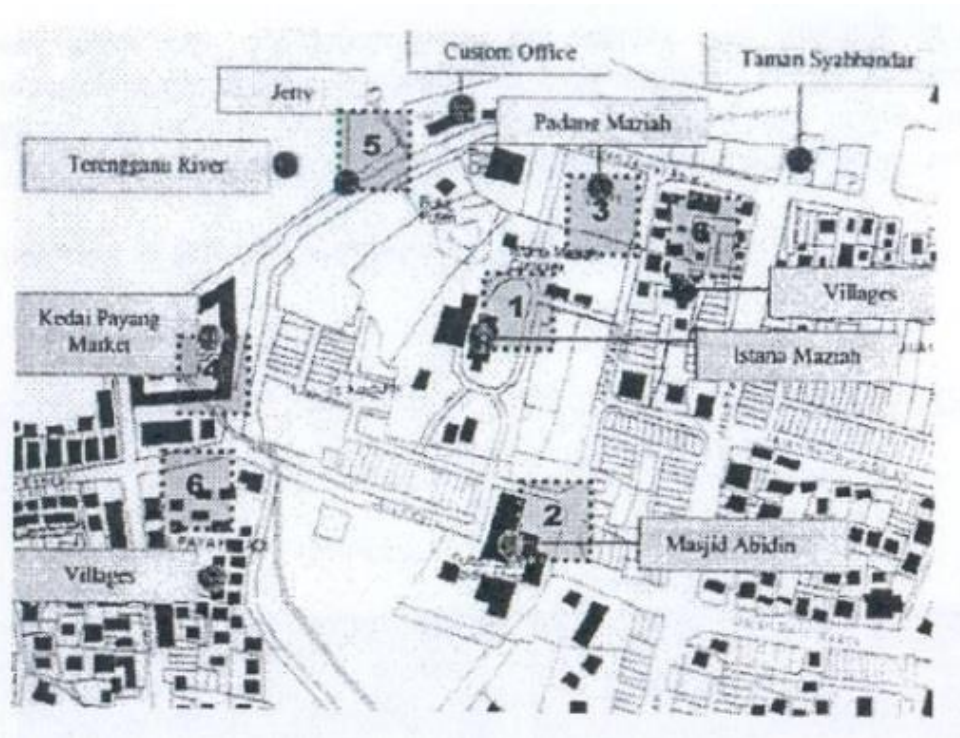
The Malay Royal town settings basically form from a single centre district that centralized between the padang, mosque and palace complex. It is supported by the residential area and administrative building at the back. Similar to other traditional Malay towns, the urban setting is structured by the palace complex and surrounding by the paths that circulate the royal town. Back in those days, the roads were integral to allow for the circulation and distribution of resources from the surrounding environment to merchants and traders (Kathirithamby-Wells and Reid, 1993). Nowadays, these paths are now vehicular roads and provide a direct connection from the surrounding city into the historic core. Despite being updated to tar or asphalt roads, the roads still represent the organic growth of the town, following the curves of the river and the contour of the earth (Nilufer, 2004). The roads are usually lined with some form of greenery or trees. This can be extended back to when the town would depend heavily on agriculture for food or economy. As an example, coconut was one of the alternative food crops in Sri Menanti Royal towns back days (Gullick, 2003). In addition, it is common to find coconut and other palm trees forming a physical barrier between the busy street and the housing areas in Sri Menanti (Walker, 1991).

The surrounding townscape is enhanced and compliments the royal town it holds. As an example, the royal town of Sri Menanti and Kuala Terengganu has a gateway that provide a sense of welcoming like the entrance archway, which symbolizing the great local royal institution (see Figure 3).

**Figure-3.** a) Gateway of Sri Menanti town; b) Gateway of Maziah Palace; c) The Old Balai Besar gateway in Kota Bahru



All the signages and some of the important buildings also are designed to reflect the culture of the local people. Similarly, the Istana Maziah in Kuala Terengganu has a large gateway over the entrance to the palace that welcomes visitors to the palace complex. Painted the same sandstone colour as the palace, it complements the palace with its French influence and the stark white of the Zainal Abidin Mosque. Meanwhile in Kota Setar, Kedah river, palace complex and mosque structured the urban setting of the Royal town. The Pelamin palace and Zahir mosque located at centre of the royal town and surrounded by Kedah river and settlements. Figure 4 below shows the models of Malay Royal towns based on the historical map overlay in the Kuala Terengganu.

**Figure-4.** The physical elements of Malay Royal town in Kuala Terengganu

Source: (Ariffin, 2007)

Based on the site observation and historic map overlay, it is obvious that the key character in the urban structure of the Malay Royal towns in Malaysia are the palace complex, mosque and the river as the paths and transportations systems meanwhile padang, settlements, marketplace, gateway and fortress were the supporting character that make the identity of the Malay Royal town more clear to legitimize. With the combination of all the character, the identity and a uniqueness of the Malay Royal towns in Malaysia can be generate and legitimate.

#### 4. Architectural Features in Malay Royal Town

Architectural features also shown some significant in characterising the image and identity of Malay Royal towns in Malaysia. Through observations that were conducted during the site visit, it was discovered that the architectural styles for each Royal towns differed from one another. Architectural features in Sri Menanti royal town was identified influenced by the Minangkabau architecture and only have minor influences from the British architecture style (Harun *et al.*, 2015). Most of the building in Malay Royal towns have an influences from the British architecture style except a few palace complex such as Istana Pelamin in Kota Setar, Sri Menanti complex and Istana Balai Besar in Kota Bharu (see Figure 5).

**Figure-5.** The Old Palace of Sri Menanti in Negeri Sembilan (left) and Pelamin Complex in Kedah (right).

Due to the constraint of natural disaster, filthy condition and overcrowding in Malay Peninsula, the Malay Sultanate decided to rebuild the Malay Royal towns base on the British regulations and methods. For examples in 1884, Frank Swettenhem British resident of Selangor, had introduced Building Regulations and town planning methods and was imposed in all new building constructions. In 19th century, the British had adopted architectural style, a mixture of the British and Moghul Architectural. This architectural style is commonly used in administrative and public buildings. According to Gullick (2000), before the Second World War, the British had started to make its impact in Malaya's architecture. In most British colonial countries, the Public Works Department (PWD) was entrusted to design and built the public buildings such as court buildings, government offices, station buildings and schools. According to Heritage of Malaysia Trust (1990), the architectural style of Malay Royal towns has been classified according to the building styles. It consists of influences by the European, Chinese, Malay and Indian sources that were a mixture of various styles modified to the Malaysian environment. These style included the Indian Kingdoms (7<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries), Malay Vernacular (pre-15<sup>th</sup> Century to present), Straits Eclectic (15<sup>th</sup> Century to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century), Chinese Baroque (19<sup>th</sup> Century to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), Chitya Indian Vernacular (15<sup>th</sup> Century to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century), Colonial (17<sup>th</sup> Century to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century) and Modern (1950s – 1990s).

Most of the palace complex and settlements in royal towns originally were built with mainly timber using traditional construction skills. Istana Sri Menanti, the palace was built by two famous wood carvers, *Tukang Kahar* and *Tukang Taib*, using only materials from the local woods, and has become the iconic building of the monarchical system of the Malay Royal institution in Sri Menanti. The craftsmanship of the buildings are further enhanced with the adaptation of natural elements (flora and fauna) into the design of the wood carvings that adorn the buildings. These motifs are believed to represent various beliefs (Nasir, 1986). The most common ones represent flowers, some are used to represent stories and beliefs, and some are religious (Islamic motifs) (see Figure 6).

**Figure-6.** The 'Awan Larat' wood carving motif, symbolizing harmony and geometrical pattern symbolizing the Islamic culture.



Similarly, Istana Pelamin in Kota Setar, Istana Balai Besar in Kota Bharu and Istana Kenangan in Kuala Kangsar are made of timber and adorned with woven bamboo in a diamond pattern (Rahman, 2010). In addition, due to the limitations of technology and materials, it was a lot harder to build tall structures in the past. This means that taller structures were reserved for buildings of a higher importance. Palaces were usually the biggest among the buildings in the town. Secondly the mosque will be the second bigger building based on the scale and shown it important to the local community. However, as it is with the vernacular architecture, the sense of human scale is maintained throughout. As mentioned by Alias (2015), most of the people in the town follow Islam as their main religion. Therefore, the old mosques are considered to be among the dominant traditional buildings that might influence the development of the Malay Royal towns.

Finally, another type of building that influenced the characteristics of the town was the traditional Malay houses. From the observation, it revealed that the traditional houses were built in different styles according to the state and location of the royal towns. According to Abd (2015), there are more than a hundred traditional houses that are over one hundred years old in every royal towns. Some of the houses are protected and preserved by the Museum but most are not, due to the problem of private ownership, which prevents the government or any other agencies from taking further action to preserve and protect these houses. Hence, this study reveals that architecture features play an important role and function in forming the character and identity of Malay Royal towns in Malaysia. The preservation and conservation of the architectural features is important in shaping the urban fabric and setting in the Malay Royal towns.

## 5. Cultural Significance

Human activity is part of the identity of the Malay Royal towns that helped generate a thematic point of concentration (Shamsuddin, 2011). Through the observation, most outdoor activities are conducted within the royal town area, specifically at the padang that located in between the mosque and palace complex. Usually a large open field 'padang' is adequate to support all the social activities that happen in the Malay Royal town. However, the number of people that participate in these activities has been decreasing slowly in the present years. However, in relation to the local social background, the local people still strongly uphold the local culture. This culture strongly influence their daily activities (Saludin, 2007).

Another strong social culture that locals have is that of "warung kopi". These serve as social hubs and mini nodes that gather all the people around the place. These social hubs manifest influences in both cultural and physical aspects. These activities have an impact on the character of the townscape during this time, occurring at mini nodes in the town centre, and these sites also serve as an important space for supporting social gatherings among the local people (see Figure 7).

**Figure-7.** The 'warung kopi' located adjacent to the road that form the mininodes in Kota Bharu.



Mosques also give a major impact on cultural significance that influence on the people and surrounding. Mosques are major nodes during Muslim praying time: Fajr, Dhuhr, Asr, Maghrib and Isha. Because of this, the

mosque is always located in a central position for ease of access to all character of the royal town. They represent a place of peace and retreat, while supporting group gatherings for prayer or discussion. Historically, as mentioned by Abd (2015), the mosques were used as meeting areas, and this was evident during the British colonisation, as the colonial powers burned a number of mosques in royal towns to prevent meetings among the local people. Therefore, the study show that mosques were one of the important nodes that help in characterising the Malay Royal towns in

Malaysia. Human perception plays a major role in understanding the sense of place (Kevin, 1960; Norberg and Schulz, 1980) which has led to Norberg-Schulz’s exploration of the spirit of place, the *genius loci* (Rozaly et al., 2018).

## 6. Preservation and Conservation Recommendations

The findings gathered from this study too are deemed to guide comprehensive guidelines for the preservation and conservation of the Malay royal towns from demolished or extinct. This to empower architectural and urban design specialists in identifying the effective guidelines in designing and its relation to preserve the identity of the Malay Royal town due to the fact that there are no comprehensive framework and strategic model for designing the Malay Royal town in Malaysia. The framework will provides the architect, urban designer and authorities with certain criteria and methods in royal town development, which will lead to the promotion of identity uniqueness of Malay Royal town in Malaysia. Table 2 summarizes the preservation and conservation guideline of Malay Royal towns in Malaysia.

Table-2. Preservation and Conservation Guideline

Significant Elements	Guideline
Principles and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The conservation effort should not only apply to any singular architectural work but also be applicable to the urban and rural setting from which the architectural work draws context</li> <li>• All conserved sites should be maintained on a permanent basis</li> <li>• All sites should be put to some form of socially acceptable and useful purpose</li> <li>• All conservation plans should be design on a case-by-case basis, considering the minute vernacular influences</li> <li>• All conservation plans should be preceded by multidisciplinary studies to address all relevant factors.</li> <li>• Any conservation plan should be supported by the residents of the area</li> </ul>
Urban Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urban patterns, as defined by lots and streets, should always be respected</li> <li>• The existing relationship between buildings and green areas and open spaces are to be maintained</li> <li>• The scale of new buildings should respect the hierarchy set by its predecessors</li> <li>• The site should be in a condition that allows for proper appreciation of the setting</li> <li>• The area should have carefully installed/improved public service facilities to ensure comfort of future visitors</li> <li>• Traffic and parking should be controlled to prevent any damage to the historic fabric or it’s environment</li> </ul>
Architectural Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The formal appearance (interior and exterior) should be preserved</li> <li>• Coherence in style among traditionally established building types are to be maintained</li> <li>• Any proposed intervention should follow any traditional means and be reversible.</li> <li>• A thorough and accurate diagnosis of the conditions that lead to the decay of the materials should be prepared before any works</li> <li>• In the event the integrity of the building is at risk, a minimum intervention in the fabric of the building is to be practiced</li> <li>• Any repair/replacement work should be completed as close to the original as possible. This is especially for timber structures. The same species of wood is to be used in all works.</li> <li>• Any removed members are to be catalogued and samples are to be saved.</li> <li>• Any responses are to be functional and within social, environmental constraints</li> </ul>
Cultural Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any functions the area has adopted over time should be</li> </ul>

	<p>maintained within feasibility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The relationship between the town and its surrounding setting should be respected</li> <li>• The residents of the area should be encouraged to participate in the conservation plan</li> <li>• Any new functions and activities should be compatible with the historic setting</li> <li>• A general participation programme is to be made available to the public to promote public support</li> </ul>
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## 7. Conclusion

Malay Royal towns in Malaysia are the best evolution examples of Malay towns and have the strong characteristics, identity and historic significance but it still unclear and continuously been threatened from tremendous changes due to rapid industrialisation, economic development and urbanisation that are worthy of preservation. The combination of traditional buildings, settings and cultural activities are from which they derive their character and image. The urban form and setting of these royal towns has played the important significant role in the history and morphology of royal towns in Malaysia. The special characteristics which are essential include the historic features of the old buildings, structures, form, setting, surrounding environment and people activities. The diversity in character of the Malay Royal towns together with its architectural features, urban structures and cultural variety make the towns unique and worthy of preservation. The study also concludes that preservation and conservation of physical and cultural elements is an essential part of the urban conservation strategies of a Malay royal towns in Malaysia. Therefore, it is important that a set of guidelines are required to regulate the documentation and maintenance of these cultural heritage. The findings gathered from this research too is deemed to guide a comprehensive planning for the conservation of the royal Malay town from extinct. The preservation and conservation of these historic sites will add variety to the urban image and identity while is to prevent the diminishing of Malay Royal towns (Adam, 2016).

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