



# Nusantara Architecture as an Architectural Theory from the Global South: The Case of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

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**Abstract.** Since the collapse of modern theory, namely when the architectural phenomenon was symbolized by the bombing of Pruitt-Igoe, architectural theory triggered postmodernism in architecture. Charles Jencks is one of the figures who popularized the term postmodern in architecture, particularly in the context of architectural tradition. For almost six decades, the concept has been a reference not only in the northern hemisphere but also in the southern hemisphere. Similarly, the theory of colonial or classical European architecture persists due to its resilience in preserving cultural heritage in the southern hemisphere. This study explores the significant principles of Nusantara Architecture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand as a theory equivalent to modern architecture and the postmodern architectural paradigm. Data were collected through content analysis and observation. The research findings show that the criteria of local wisdom and local architecture tend to align with the characteristics of Nusantara architecture. This study has implications for the application of Nusantara architectural principles in various countries across Southeast Asia and for the representation of Nusantara architecture on the international stage. From the perspective of design methodology, Nusantara architecture provides a more universal framework for modernizing Indonesian architecture, thereby allowing practitioners greater creative freedom in their architectural practice.

**Keywords:** Nusantara Architecture, Local Wisdom, ASEAN Architect, Architect Law.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Postmodernism and Historicism

Since the architectural paradigm shift of the mid-20th century, many architects have advocated designs that accommodate historical principles. As a continuation of Modern architecture, Postmodern Architecture not only abolished its principles but also complemented and addressed its shortcomings. One important concept is the reuse of historical elements and local principles. Semi-historicism began in America, on a large scale, around the 1960s with the work of Mayor Philip Johnson and the more kitschy variants of Yamasaki, Ed Stone, and Wallace Harrison [1]. In 1958, Yamasaki and Stone created a glittering version of Islamic ‘latticework and frills’, and in 1962, they

created a nearly surreal ‘Gothic’ version. Many architects dismissed Mies for decoration, as it never really materialized, because his historicism was weak and timid, lacking convincing application and rigorous structuralism.

Over its development, historic architecture has transformed due to the impact of major cultures that have entered Indonesia. This has led to architectural transformations, which Santoso classifies into two categories: autochthonous transformations and transformations involving external influences [2]. The presence of the digital era means that changes must be addressed well and humanely, so that the relationship between local and universal can still be explained as local and universal [3].

Nusantara Architecture as an architectural theory becomes highly significant because it provides a foundational basis for studies within the scope of Eastern architectural theory. Previous research has reinforced the dichotomy between Western architectural theory and Eastern architectural theory [4]. In line with the current discourse on the “Voice of the Global South,” this strengthens the relevance of Nusantara Architecture as a theoretical foundation for the ASEAN region. With the Unit of Analysis positioned at the ASEAN level, the resulting concept can serve as a design reference grounded in architectural theory that represents the diverse countries within ASEAN.

A comparative study of the structural forms of the traditional Balla house in Central Sulawesi and the Ba’anjung house in South Kalimantan reveals both differences and similarities in architectural composition shaped by local culture and maritime interactions. This research highlights the concept of cultural hybridity as a foundational element of Nusantara architectural identity [5]. Cross-country research employing comparative analysis of the traditional houses of Kutai Kartanegara, the Lamin Dayak Kenyah house, and the Malay architecture of Perak, Malaysia reveals both shared characteristics and distinctive features in their structural systems, ornamentation, and spatial orientation. These elements reflect each region’s cultural adaptations and environmental responses [6]. An exploratory study of Indonesian vernacular architecture comparing cultural and regional influences across various parts of Indonesia reveals the strong relationship between sociocultural factors and the formation of local architectural expressions [7]. The novelty and originality of this research lie in the parameters related to architectural licensing regulations, namely local wisdom, local culture, local architecture, and traditional buildings. In addition, the study contributes to the formulation of the Nusantara Architecture concept derived from case studies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

## **1.2 The ASEAN Architect Framework and the Architects Law**

The Architects Law stipulates that architects have a scope of services, namely the preservation of buildings and their environment, and to practice as an architect, they are required to have a license [8]. The licensing competency test includes an understanding of the conditions and rules of spatial planning and local architecture of the location where the design is located. The Government Regulation states that local spatial planning and architectural rules include: a) building and environmental plans; b) local wisdom; c) regional planning regulations, detailed spatial planning plans, and zoning; d) Local Architecture; e) Local Culture; f) Traditional Buildings [9]. In the era of

the ASEAN Economic Community, architects can design buildings across borders within the scope of the ASEAN Agreement on Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) on Architectural Services. Therefore, with an understanding of the principles of Nusantara architecture that encompass ASEAN countries, the research findings are highly relevant for practitioners at the international level.

This research is highly significant in relation to architectural licensing regulations that emphasize competency in understanding local architecture and local culture. International collaboration among ASEAN-level architects requires a comprehensive understanding of the country in which they practice. Architects consistently apply fundamental principles in design. These principles, also referred to as “foundations,” are essential. In the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian Dictionary), a principle is defined as a foundation (a truth that forms the basis for thinking, acting, and so forth), a core, or a fundamental basis [10]. Thus, the researcher needs to identify the following research question: How are the principles of local architecture and local culture manifested in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand? These three countries fall within the broader scope of Nusantara Architecture, a geographical realm that is historically older than the categorical framework proposed by Prijotomo. He classified Nusantara Architecture exclusively within the context of Indonesia [11]. Nusantara Architectural Theory has emerged as a contemporary and significant discourse, regarded as being on par with other architectural theories such as Modern Architecture Theory and Classical Architecture Theory. Accordingly, the aim of this research is to explore the principles of Nusantara architecture through case studies of buildings in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The next step is to formulate these principles at the unit of analysis level into a coherent concept of Nusantara architecture.

## 2 Literature Review

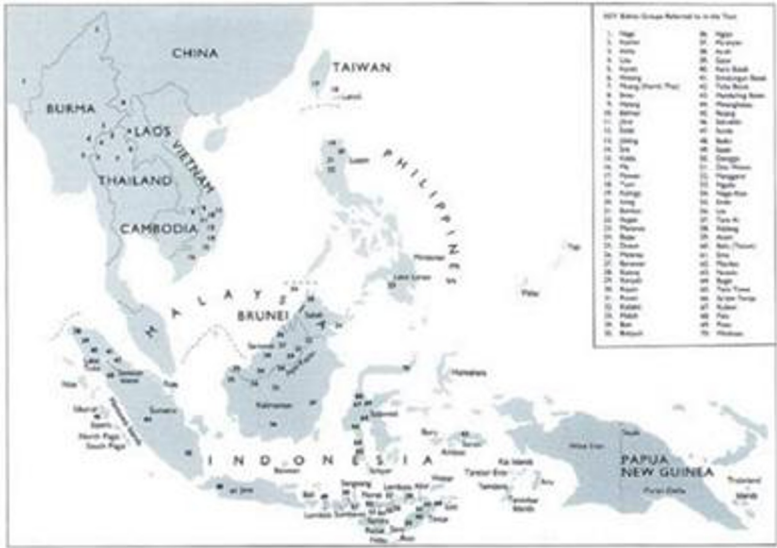
### 2.1 Postmodernism and Local Wisdom

Charles Jencks was a leading architectural theorist and critic who popularized the Postmodern architectural paradigm. The concept of iconic architecture stems from the philosophy of historicism, which embodies the meaning of every form embodied in concrete form by architects [12]. The meaning in the postmodern paradigm of the deconstruction group does not stop and must be fragmented by the interpreter's space and time, and is ‘becoming’ [13]. Human history is inseparable from space, thought, action, and time as a single moment. Essentially, human existence on Earth is part of the universe [14]. Every human being in a nation has traditional architecture that spreads throughout the archipelago, forming different cultural areas [15]. Traditional architecture is a manifestation of culture and part of local wisdom, based on customs and beliefs. Local wisdom can be seen as the crystallization of problem-solving when viewed

through the lens of culture and civilization [16]. Nusantara architecture should revive the seeds of local wisdom that have found their way into the postmodernist paradigm. Local wisdom, also known as indigenous and community knowledge, needs to be preserved and developed because it has existed since the first to the sixth centuries. Since

2000, world organizations have emerged in various forms, such as in Thailand, Uganda, and South Africa. Thailand, as a country with very rapid development in the study of folk architecture, has been a key factor.

### 2.2 Architecture within the Nusantara Architectural Framework



**Fig. 1.** South-East Asia Showing Distribution of Ethnic Groups as a marker in the process of determining the distribution of analysis units.

Traditional houses are a manifestation of cultural, social, and economic aspects [17]. Pangarsa emphasized that the architectural landscape of the archipelago, which covers the entire archipelago from Sabang to Merauke (see Fig.1), is closely intertwined with nature and culture [18]. Nusantara architecture embodies this culture and has become a contemporary building philosophy, with the concept of renewing Nusantara architecture [19]. The value of Javanese architecture cannot be separated from three aspects, namely function, construction, and aesthetics [20]. Javanese architecture is part of the Nusantara architecture, characterized by its large population. This makes Javanese architectural principles play a significant role in shaping Nusantara architectural concepts. Residential architecture serves not only as a place to rest but also as a place to contemplate the future and revisit the past. The principles of Nusantara Architecture relate to: 1) building orientation and spatial organization, 2) roof design, 3) openings and ventilation, 4) shading and transparent walls, 5) greenery and outdoor spatial arrangement, and 6) building materials [21].

### 3 Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Qualitative Rationalism

This research used a qualitative rationalism paradigm. Thinking rationally by building empirical thinking, intellectual understanding, and the ability to argue logically [22]. Data were collected through content analysis, interviews, observations, and observations [23]. Data were narrowed down based on archipelagic architecture within the archipelago architecture category, which has undergone an authentic transformation. Four concepts were analyzed using content analysis methods to obtain parameters for analyzing architectural objects in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Three countries represent the Global South. For international representation at the ASEAN level, specifically for ASEAN Architect (AA) practitioners, the concepts of these three countries were chosen. These three countries exemplify ASEAN countries in Nusantara Architecture, which corresponds to modern and postmodern architectural paradigms.

The research approach is focused on the criteria of architectural concepts, typology, and natural adaptation (refer to Table 01), including concepts of environmental adaptation, adequate ventilation, and low window height. Local wisdom encompasses knowledge, practices, and value systems derived from the interactions between humans, nature, and the social environment, passed down through generations. Local architecture refers to building techniques that are unique to a specific region, characterized by the use of local resources, local technologies, and culturally rooted forms. Meanwhile, architecture shaped by local culture includes a comprehensive system of values and symbolic expressions that develop within a particular society and historical period. Traditional buildings represent inherited architectural characteristics transmitted across generations, typically maintaining original structural, material, and functional elements while adapting to regional traditions.

**Table 1.** Comparison of differences in the four criteria in the Architect Law.

Architecture Concept	Typology	Natural Adaptation
Local Wisdom	Local adaptive strategies, natural comfort solutions, privacy, and visual balance in window height.	local ecological values
Local Architecture	Typical Malay forms and passive ventilation techniques, along with window height, reflect the characteristics of local dwellings.	Contextual Design Strategy
Local Culture	Status and Custom Symbols, Social and Climate Needs, Window Height as a Reflection of Politeness, and Spatial Planning.	Reflection of Human-Nature Harmony
Traditional Building	Characteristics of Old Malay Houses, Mandatory Elements of Tropical Buildings, Window Height as a Common Element of Traditional Malay Houses	Basic Functions of Traditional Houses

### 3.2 Qualitative Rationalism

Rationalism recognizes three realities: sensual empiricism, logical or theoretical empiricism, and ethical empiricism. Positivism, on the other hand, only recognizes sensual empiricism. Harre asserts that positivism is based on the principle that reliable knowledge in any field of phenomena reduces to knowledge of specific instances of patterns of sensation [24]. The content analysis method was used to explore the differences between the four criteria that prospective architects must understand to obtain a license (see Table 1). Content analysis is a method for gaining meaning based on the depth of reference quality [25].

This study investigates the architectural concepts embedded in local buildings across several countries in Southeast Asia. Due to limitations of time and resources, the researcher selected countries in close proximity to Indonesia that share architectural affinities within the broader domain of Malay architecture. Thailand was included because previous studies and snowball sampling during data collection indicated that Southern Thailand, particularly Pattani, has cultural and ancestral ties to communities in Perak, Malaysia. The Malay houses in Perak, Malaysia were directly observed by the researcher. From a typological perspective, the selected objects used as units of analysis exhibit notable similarities.

Data collection was conducted qualitatively through observation, interviews, direct field inspection, and the gathering of secondary data. Observational data were obtained from examinations of historical buildings in the Perak region of Malaysia. Interview data were sourced from community leaders and practitioners involved in the preservation of Malay architecture. The researcher employed snowball sampling, after which the collected data were transcribed, categorized, thematically grouped, coded, and interpreted. The units of analysis across the three countries were compared using the substantive criteria of (1) local wisdom, (2) local culture, (3) local architecture, and (4) traditional buildings. Data analysis was carried out continuously through an iterative dialogue between empirical narratives, descriptive accounts, and interview transcripts. Following data validation, data reduction was performed and subsequently linked to relevant theoretical frameworks to ensure transferability.

The data analysis focuses on the principles found in mosque and residential objects within the spectrum of Nusantara architecture. The researcher employed open coding and meaning-based reflective analysis to distill cultural concepts and architectural significance. The reduced themes were then refined into thematic crystallization, which subsequently formed the basis for the recommended findings on the Nusantara Architecture concept derived from case studies across the three countries.

This study acknowledges several limitations, particularly the constraints in conducting direct data collection in Pattani, Thailand. In addition, potential biases may arise from interview data and secondary sources. Reflexivity was applied throughout the analysis to ensure analytical objectivity, while considerations of transferability and conclusion-drawing underscore the inherent subjectivity of the researcher.

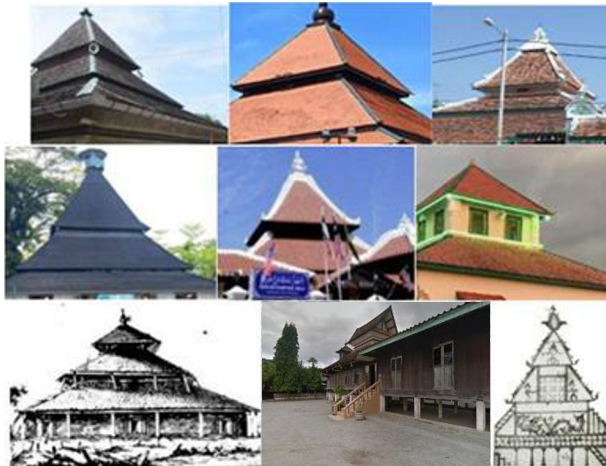
Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards, ensuring confidentiality and the responsible use of all collected data.

## 4 Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Principal of Architecture of Old Mosques in Nusantara

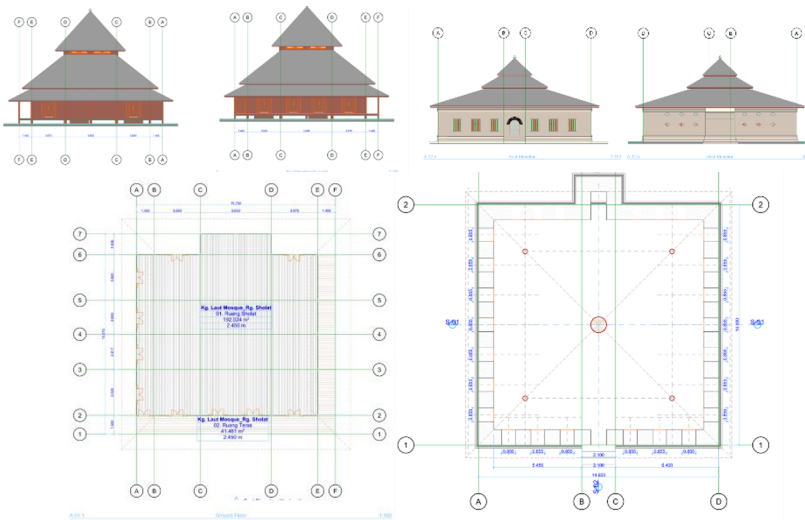
The form and meaning of ancient mosque architecture in Indonesia refer to the principles of Nusantara architecture [26]. As works of Islamic architecture, ancient mosques likely to be iconic architecture within the category of Islamic heritage buildings. Ancient mosque buildings relate to other mosques in the archipelago. The Demak Mosque, a pioneering mosque, boasts a spatial cosmology and structural system similar to the Jami Tua Mosque in Palopo and the Kampung Laut Mosque in Kelantan, Malaysia.

The public is aware of the cosmological aspects of development. Researchers cite the division of cosmology into macrocosm and microcosm [27]. The great universe encompasses its tools, signs, and symbols. In the context of local wisdom, the cosmic substance of Nusantara Mosque architecture represents the spiritual layers of religion, such as sharia, tariqah, haqiqat, and makrifat. The determination of building height is also based on transportation needs, with the building's height module following the elephant's height module. This is evident in the Kampung Laut Mosque, Kelantan, Malaysia (Refer to figures 2 and 3).



**Fig. 2.** The sloped roof forms found in the architecture of Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia highlight the importance of roof space and layered roof construction. The use of natural materials such as clay tiles and wooden shingles creates cross-ventilation gaps at the junctions between the upper and lower roof layers, while the buildings also incorporate a considerable number of windows to enhance airflow and daylighting.

Nusantara architecture in the mosque architecture group has spatial values that are interconnected due to the moral message that the existence of buildings serves to remind humans of death. This is clearly seen in the Al-Hilal Katangka Gowa Mosque and the JerraE Sidrap Mosque. Aspects of local wisdom values in the prayer activities to ward off disaster carried out by community leaders to the surrounding community. The social aspect encompasses local wisdom, particularly in relation to social and religious activities. The mosque brings together people of high social status (relatives of the kingdom) with ordinary people. The mosque courtyard serves as a social interaction space, featuring a sitting area in the drum area and a Quran study room for children, highlighting its cultural meeting aspect. When religious figures from the mosque meet with the community to pray, there is a reciprocal interaction between folk traditions and religious aspects.



**Fig. 3.** he spatial organization and openings of the Kampung Laut Mosque in Kelantan (Malaysia) and the Jami Tua Palopo Mosque (Indonesia) reflect the principles of Nusantara Architecture. These include sloped roof forms, the presence of an attic or roof space, cross-ventilation from all directions, and the use of natural materials such as wood and stone (source: Author).

Mosques connect cross-cultural communities, such as Bugis, Javanese, and Chinese (see Fig. 3). The diverse local cultures served as a reference in mosque construction. Local culture refers to the value systems that developed during a particular period. In the context of local culture, the mosque maintains a pragmatic relationship with its architect (Pong Man Te). It also establishes a syntactic relationship with its surrounding environment, particularly its location in Sangalla, Tana Toraja. Local wisdom and cultural values are clearly reflected in the Jami Palopo Mosque.

In the context of local architecture, the building techniques are very unique, especially in the wood connection system and the use of natural stone walls. In the context of traditional architecture, the Jami Mosque represents Luwu architecture. The To

Riaja, also known as the Toraja, are an ethnic group that is part of the Luwu nation. The To Riaja, or people who live on the hills [28]. Traditional Toraja architecture is applied to buildings in the Luwu region through architectural techniques by Pong Man Te. Pong Man Te implemented a mix of Asian cultures in the early 17th century. The central pillar of the mosque represents a symbolic aspect, reflecting local culture. The central pillar of the mosque represents 12 sub-tribes.

## 4.2 Principles of Nusantara Architecture in Residential Buildings

Residential architecture in Sulawesi and Sumatra tends to have typological similarities to Malay residential architecture in Perak, Malaysia. The tropical climate of the houses results in sloping roofs. A prominent architectural difference is the absence of a porch in front of the door, due to the use of elephants for land transportation. Cultural aspects of transportation influence the typology of the houses and the placement of doors. This is not found in stilt house architecture in Indonesia, particularly in South Sulawesi.



**Fig. 4.** The typology of buildings with sloped roofs in Indonesian local architecture highlights the importance of roof space and layered roof structures. These roofs often rise upward in a distinctive vertical expression. The use of natural materials such as straw, bamboo, clay tiles, and wooden shingles creates cross-ventilation gaps at the junctions between the upper and lower roof levels. In addition, both grounded (landed) and stilted (raised) building forms are commonly found (Source: Roxana).

The local wisdom of the study encompasses the knowledge, practices, and values embodied in architecture and its context. Humans interact with nature and other humans in religious and spiritual ceremonies. The Joglo house in Java holds a ‘ngedegake omah’ (house-building) ceremony, a local tradition involving prayer and a procession to seek salvation. Knowledge and mythology ward off evil spirits through symbolic objects, such as the ‘bango tulak’ are used to ward off danger.

The choice of wood as a building material is an expression of local culture and is related to the safety of the home's occupants. The choice of material is found not only in one region but also across various regions. Meanwhile, wood itself is a symbol of local architecture. All houses still use wood materials for construction, sourced from the surrounding environment (see fig. 4). Jackfruit, Labon, teak, and sengon wood are still used but are becoming increasingly rare. Jackfruit wood is a local architectural material in Malino Gowa to build Balla Jambua. To this day, Balla Lompoa is a traditional building because it still maintains the characteristics passed down from generation to generation.



**Fig. 5.** The typology of buildings with sloped roofs in the local architecture of Malaysia and Thailand highlights the importance of roof space and layered roof configurations, with roof structures often extending upward in a prominent vertical form. The use of natural materials such as straw, bamboo, clay tiles, and wooden shingles creates cross-ventilation gaps at the junctions between the upper and lower roof layers. This typological pattern is also reflected in the presence of both grounded (landed) and raised (stilted) building forms. (Source: Puengsunthorn, Alauddin, and Author).

The typology of Nusantara architecture always conveys a message. Toraja architectural forms are analogous to boats. Village layouts are based on the *aluk todolo* cosmology, which bears similarities to early Austronesian culture. The Lami people, thought to have boats, are believed to be those of the earliest tribes in the archipelago, including the Toraja [18]. The Minangkabau Gadang House, with its roof curved upwards, creates an astonishing, cheerful, and happy impression but can also trap an overly festive atmosphere [11]. The design technique is the repetition of buildings. The principle of repetition is not only found in the roof but also in the walls of the building.

Likewise, Tambi is a building with a prismatic roof shape. Tambi and Uma Lengge give the impression of simplicity. Although Bugis houses do not have roofs like the traditional house, they do have *timpalaja* as a symbol of simplicity. Bugis house architecture bears similarities to traditional architecture in Pattani, Thailand (See fig. 5).

Southern Thailand has a long history of the development of architecture and cities [29]. Pattani has values and identity that make Pattani the Most Important Old City in Southern Thailand [30]. As an aspect of local wisdom, Southern Thailand represents a hub of human interaction and trade, located along the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman coast. Cultural diversity, similar to that of other parts of the archipelago, was shaped by the influx of people into the region.

The Thai Buddhist Chong Pendron and the Thai Muslim Chong Pendron in Pattani are examples of local architecture and traditional buildings. The local architectural aspects show that the Chong Pendron has windows that are adaptive to the climate, especially due to the high rainfall. Meanwhile, for ventilation, there are vents at the top of the walls adjacent to the roof. Traditional architecture is passed down from generation to generation. In the design process, the number of rooms in Buddhist houses can be used as a concept. The Chan Buddhist houses in Songkhla Province exhibit typical local house characteristics, namely special houses, three-bedroom houses, two-bedroom houses, and one-bedroom houses. Buddhist houses are considered a form of housing that represents Thailand in the Southern Region (See Fig. 4). On the other hand, traditional Malay houses in Malaysia are under threat and undergoing continuous transformation [31].



**Fig. 6.** The typology of buildings with sloped roofs in Malaysian local architecture underscores the importance of roof space and layered roof structures, with the roof form often extending upward in a pronounced vertical expression. The use of natural materials such as straw, bamboo, clay tiles, and wooden shingles creates cross-ventilation gaps at the intersections between the upper and lower roof layers. This typological pattern is further reflected in the presence of both grounded (landed) and raised (stilted) building forms. (Source: Author).

Nusantara architecture in Malaysia (See Fig. 6) features ventilation and natural light, along with a well-designed courtyard layout [32]. The design is intended to prevent humidity and promote natural ventilation through effective air circulation. Local wisdom in Negeri Sembilan houses emphasizes the values of Islamic brotherhood, harmonious living, closeness with neighbors, and a sense of family.

## 5 Conclusion

The findings indicate that the principles of local architecture include shading strategies through the use of wide and expansive roof forms, passive cooling achieved through natural ventilation, moisture control, the application of natural colors on exterior walls, careful consideration of building orientation, the selection of natural materials, the implementation of cross-ventilation, the use of sloped roofs, extended eaves, vegetation, and well-planned outdoor spatial layouts. Commonly used materials include wood, natural stone, and lime brick.

A principle related to local wisdom is the arrangement of window heights such that occupants seated on the floor can still see outside the building. Across all three countries, architectural practices consistently reflect climatic considerations, thereby representing the core principles of Nusantara Architecture. This research carries significant implications for the application of Nusantara architectural principles in various countries within the broader Nusantara sphere as defined during the Majapahit era, as well as for the international representation of Nusantara architecture. From the perspective of architectural practice, the study provides implications for design strategies employed by ASEAN architects in international practice. The principles identified in this research contribute to the development of a Nusantara Architecture concept that modernizes Indonesian architecture. This enables practitioners to exercise greater creative freedom in transforming design forms through the philosophical foundations of local architecture across different countries. The principles of local architecture that have been formulated into the Nusantara Architecture concept include climatic adaptation, symbolism, door and window configurations, the necessity of roof slopes, geographical influences, community knowledge, symmetrical architectural composition, culturally and socially meaningful expressions, and structural and construction logic grounded in the *genius loci* of local communities.

As an implication of this research, the architectural diversity of the Nusantara—as an expression of the ethnic plurality within the Nusantara region—must be taken into consideration in sustainable planning efforts. This can be applied in the Global South. Researchers describe Southeast Asia as a region with semantic relationships. In the context of Indonesian law, implementing local culture is crucial for practitioners. Therefore, students, professionals, and policymakers need to understand diversity to adapt to the characteristics of Nusantara architecture.

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