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05

ASIAN TRADE AND CULTURAL VILLAGE: BUILDING UNITY THROUGH HERITAGE, TRADE, AND CULTURE

Md Tausif Evan, Nayeem Asif*, Zuraini Denan
Department of Architecture, Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, IIUM

ABSTRACT

As Asia takes centre stage in global economic development, preserving a shared cultural identity in the built environment becomes essential. Modernism should not erase the distinctive architectural language and heritage that bind the region together. This project demonstrates Asian architecture through the integration of shared components from ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries. Key elements include water, local vegetation, open spaces, and courtyards, combined with contemporary facilities such as exhibition halls, an auditorium, and craft showcase spaces. The chosen site, currently abandoned, is transformed into an active urban place that strengthens its surrounding context. Findings show that embedding shared architectural components creates an authentic Asian atmosphere while meeting functional needs. The study recommends architecture as both a physical and cultural construct, where tangible elements and intangible activities together define identity. This project exemplifies how architectural intervention can foster Asian identity and celebrate shared values across the region.

Keywords: Cultural Village, ASEAN and SAARC, Asian identity, Contextual architecture.
Corresponding author: nayeem@iium.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

Asia's long history of cultural exchange, from the Silk Road to today's ASEAN and SAARC corridors, has shaped its rich identity. In Kuala Lumpur, this diversity is visible in food streets and religious buildings but lacks a central cultural hub. The Asian Trade and Culture Village addresses this by creating walkable clusters inspired by regional food, crafts, and architecture, showing the importance of preserving cultural identity in today's built-environment (Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Samarinda & Solissa, 2025). Designed with passive cooling and locally sourced materials, it provides an engaging space where trade, tradition, and unity come together, following sustainable approaches proven effective in tropical contexts (Kolani, Wang, Zhou, Nouyep Tchitchui, & Okolo, 2023).

Figure 1: Artist impression of the proposed Asian Trade and Cultural Village at Ampang, Kuala Lumpur

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite Asia's rich cultural heritage and growing economic influence, contemporary public architecture across the region often fails to capture its depth, identity, and social cohesion. Many convention centres especially in cities like Kuala Lumpur adopt Western formalism and rigidity, remaining disconnected from everyday Asian life (Sun, 2023). As a result, cultural wealth is dispersed across community halls, temporary tents, and national pavilions instead of being celebrated cohesively and permanently. The core issue lies not in the scarcity of cultural resources but in the absence of architectural spaces that meaningfully interweave trade, craft, cuisine, and tourism into holistic environments. There is an urgent need for architectural frameworks that foster pride, strengthen community ties, and reflect Asia's shared identity through the built environment (Jieqiong & Malek, 2025; Scriver et al., 2019).

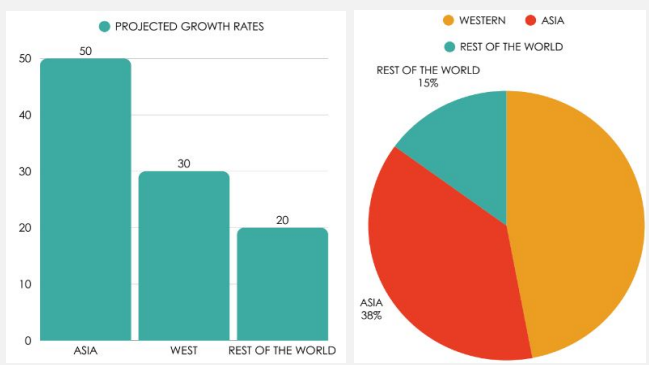

Figure 2: Share of global GDP: Asia vs The West and Projected growth rate [Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2024]

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of this project is to design an architectural village that honours the common trade, culture, and way of life in Asia. It imagines a cultural landscape of immersive areas that mirror the atmosphere, materials, and architecture of various Asian regions. The project fosters intercultural understanding, economic cooperation, and architectural storytelling by grouping ASEAN and SAARC cultures into thematic zones. In order to promote social cohesiveness and a sense of belonging, the project makes use of interactive plazas, craft-centered pavilions, culinary and educational areas, and passive cooling systems. By encouraging involvement and curiosity, it seeks to develop into a dynamic forum for cultural diplomacy and exchange.

Objective 01

To propose a spatial strategy that combines architecture, trade, and community.

Objective 02

To design inclusive, accessible, and interactive cultural zones.

Objective 03

To reflect cultural authenticity through architectural form, material, and public space and to translate regional traits into spatial identity.

Figure 3: Thesis objectives to achieve the stated aim.

PROJECT STATEMENT

An Asian Trade and Culture Convention Centre should be fundamentally Distinct from that of the image of modern Western Architecture because of the long heritage and cultural richness of Asian nations. So, this project attempts to discover the common aspects of Asian Architecture to apply into the proposed Convention Centre.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative and design-based methodology that combines research and practice. A literature review is conducted to understand Asian architecture and approaches to creating culturally rooted urban spaces. Precedent studies of KLCC, MITEC, PICC, and international cultural villages provide insights into existing models. Site observations at Jalan Ampang examined accessibility and surrounding cultural assets, while user behaviour surveys captured perspectives from diverse communities in Kuala Lumpur. Finally, design simulations, including form studies and 3D models, were used to explore spatial qualities and test placemaking strategies.

THE SITE

The site on Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, was chosen for its accessibility, visibility, and symbolic value for regional cooperation. Located near diplomatic enclaves, major roads, transit, and cultural institutions, it is ideal for trade shows and international events. Its zoning, pedestrian access, and potential for plazas, water features, and exhibition areas support the thesis aim of uniting Asians through shared culture and economic ties.

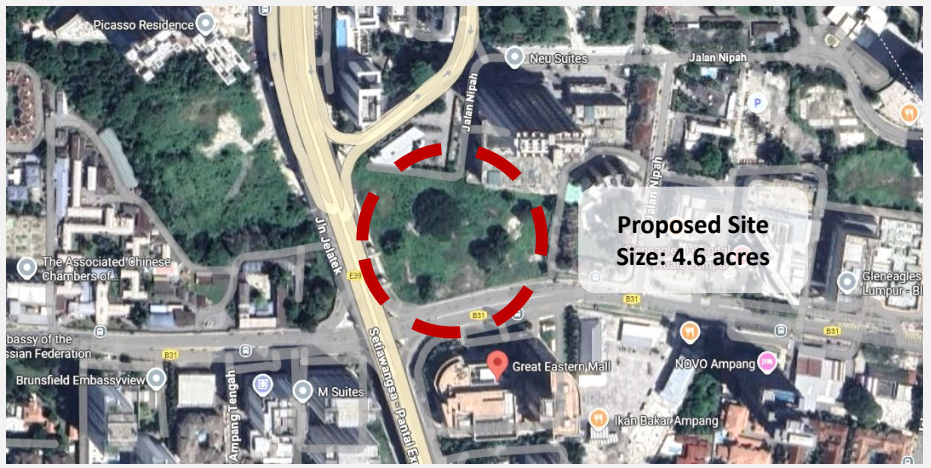

Figure 4: The proposed site at Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur.

The project site is located at Lot No. 20013, 270 Jalan Ampang, Kampung Berembang, 55000 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur. It covers an area of 4.6 acres, equivalent to 18,616.17 square meters (200,382.77 square feet). The land is designated as Kawasan Lapang Awam 1 (public open space) and is currently used as a parking area with surrounding green space, with no existing buildings on the site.

Figure 5: Justification for site selection.

Figure 6: The aerial view of overall looks of surrounding site Jalan Ampang.

DESIGN BRIEF

The proposed project emerges from the pressing issues faced by Asia in terms of unity, economic disparities, cultural disconnect, trade barriers, and missed opportunities. Fragmented efforts among nations have weakened Asia's global leadership, while unequal growth rates and limited integration in trade and culture have reduced cooperation and underutilised the region's potential. To address these challenges, the project envisions an architectural hub that symbolises collaboration, promotes shared growth, and provides platforms for cultural and economic exchange.

The spatial formulation reflects these needs and common aspects of Asian architecture suc has stilt structures, water features, cluster planning, courtyards, and culturally rooted materiality. Trade halls, conference rooms, and offices support governments, businesses, and investors in fostering collaboration. Workshop and training areas enable SMEs to share knowledge, build capacity, and incubate ideas, tackling economic imbalances. Exhibition halls, art galleries, theatres, and cultural pavilions bridge cultural gaps, while logistics hubs and networking lounges ensure integrated trade operations. The Grand Central Hall and iconic structures act as symbolic anchors, celebrating Asia's heritage and deliberately avoiding the Western formalism of rigid symmetry and monumental dominance. Lessons from precedents like KLCC and MITEC guided circulation efficiency, public engagement, and program hierarchy, transforming regional challenges into a multifunctional hub that integrates trade, culture, and innovation.

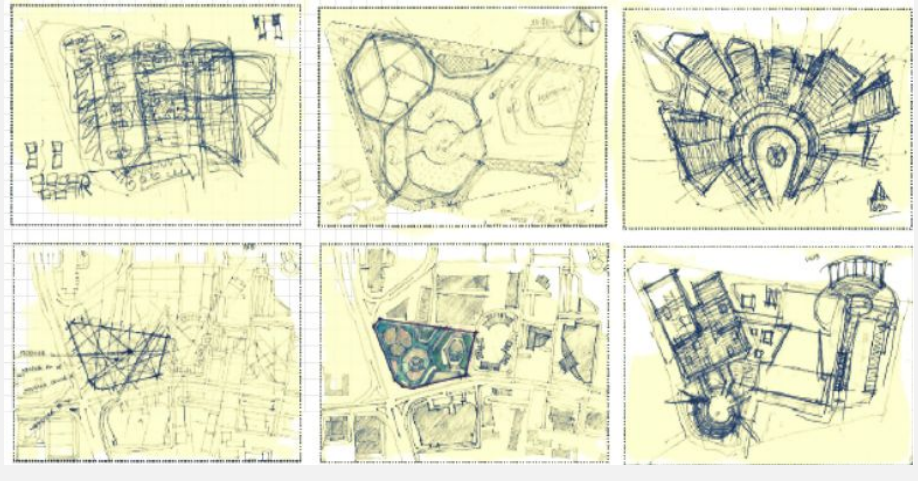

Figure 7: Early conceptual sketch during design development.

THE CONCEPT

The design is inspired by the philosophy "Bersatu Teguh, Bercerai Roboh" (United We Stand, Divided We Fall), echoing the message of Surah Hujurat 49:13 which reminds humanity that we are created into nations and tribes to know one another, not to be divided (Saheeh International, 2011). This spirit of unity is translated into architectural form through interlocking volumes that symbolise completeness, while weaving-inspired façade patterns from Songket, Kantha, and Luntaya traditions reflect the binding of cultures into one fabric. The central form, drawn from the tree and root system, illustrates diverse origins growing into a shared trunk, supported by the kampung cluster concept that celebrates communal living.

Figure 8: The design concept and Qur'anic inspiration

DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

The project develops its architectural language through a balance of conceptual vision and contemporary user needs. Four cultural zones—Nusantara Warisan, Mekong Budaya, Dataran Himalaya, and Pulau Rasa anchor the site, each celebrating the distinct heritage of its region. Floating-market plazas, water-integrated event halls, and stilted structures enhance spatial experience while supporting passive cooling. Courtyards, regionally sourced materials, and cluster planning reinforce cultural identity and sense of place, reflecting Asian traditions rather than Western monumentalism.

Sustainability is embedded as both technical and cultural principle. Passive cooling is achieved through water bodies and architectonic shading, creating naturally comfortable environments. Indigenous building forms and materials ensure cultural resonance while promoting low-impact construction. Walkable discovery paths with storytelling markers narrate Asia's shared heritage. Rainwater harvesting and distributed solar arrays reinforce ecological resilience. Precedents such as KLCC informed efficient circulation and public engagement, while MITEC lessons ensured flexibility and functional clarity, integrating experiential spaces without imposing Western rigid formality.

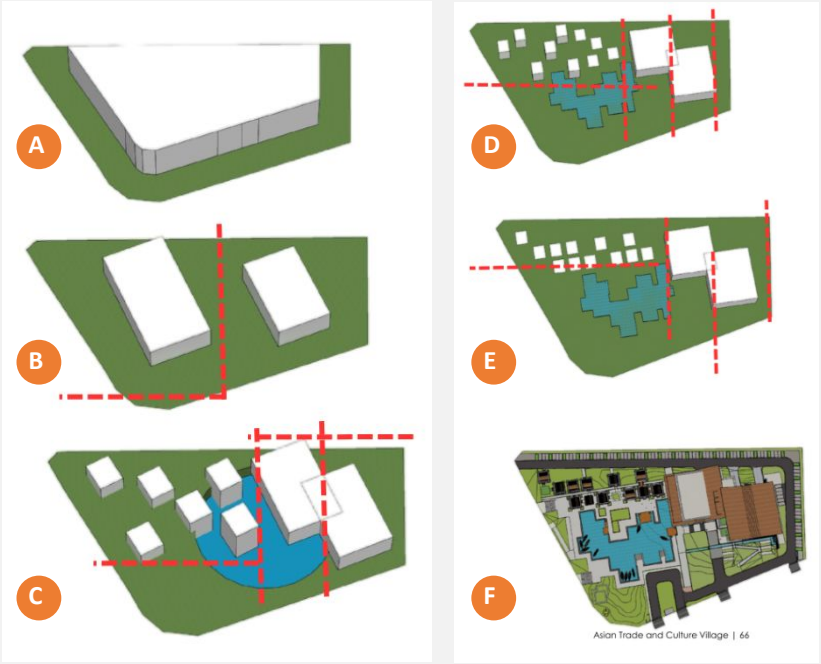

Figure 9: Design development and placemaking through adaptive building morphology

The design process (Figure 9) begins with the consideration of the maximum building volume capacity **(A)** to ensure the site is fully optimised. The program is then organised into two main blocks for two distinct functions **(B)**, establishing clarity in spatial hierarchy. To enrich the form, Block 1 is divided into two intersecting parts, while Block 2 is broken down into smaller clusters around a circular water body **(C)**. This approach evolves further as Block 1 maintains its intersected alignment, while Block 2 clusters are scattered beside the water feature **(D)**. The composition is refined when Block 2 clusters are aligned with Block 1 along a central axis **(E)**, creating order and cohesion. Finally, a road layout integrated with landscaped elements is merged seamlessly with the overall design **(F)**, reinforcing both accessibility and harmony with the natural environment.

SITE PLAN

Figure 10: The site plan showing the placement of the urban plaza adjacent to the main road for easy accessibility.

FLOOR PLANS

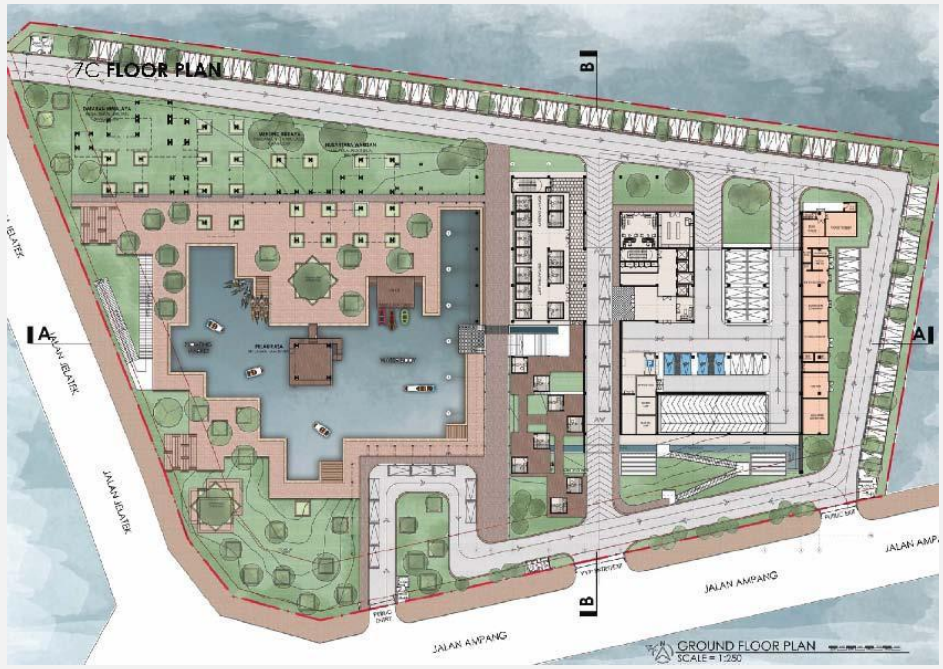

Figure 11: Ground Floor Plan focusing on vehicular access for visitors and VIPs.

For the ground floor plan (Figure 11), priority was given to maximising urban connections so that people around the site could benefit from the project. The nearby LRT attracts a large number of daily commuters who walk toward adjacent apartments, passing in front of the existing Great Eastern Shopping Mall.

To capture this pedestrian flow, the design proposes an urban plaza with a water body and walkways, seamlessly connected to surrounding roads and pathways commonly used by pedestrians moving between the MRT station and residential buildings. The plaza also incorporates an annex building that portrays the culture and heritage of Asia. On the eastern side of the ground floor, vehicular traffic is prioritised for drop-off and pick-up areas, VIP access, and service entrances.

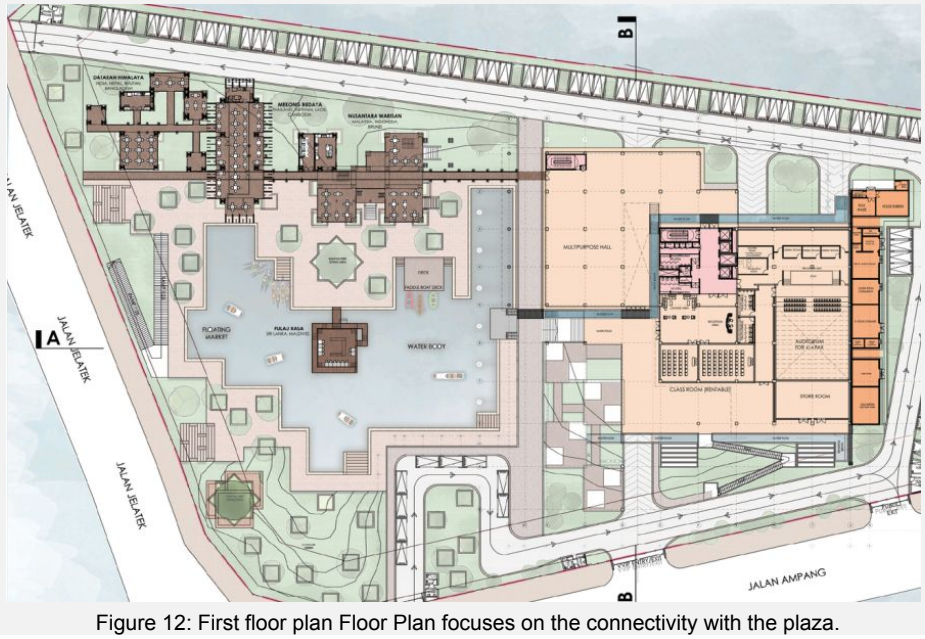

Figure 12: First floor plan Floor Plan focuses on the connectivity with the plaza.

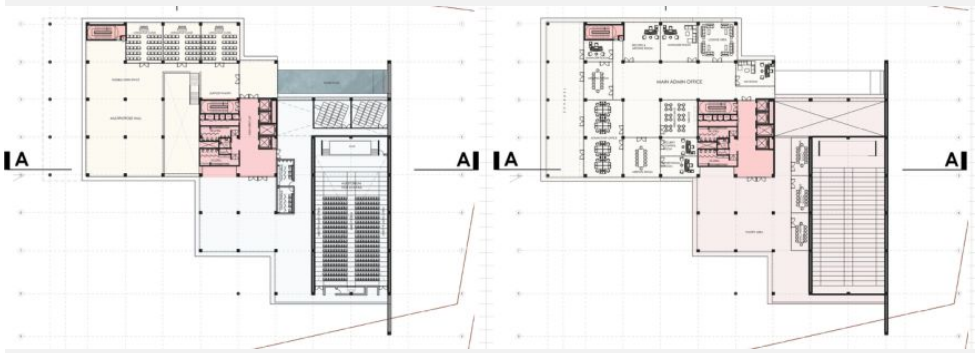

Figure 13: 2nd and 3rd floor plan showing the auditorium seating and training spaces.

The general drop-off and pick-up zone is located between the main buildings and the urban plaza, while the VIP entrance provides direct access into the main building complex, with its own drop-off point closely linked to the lift core, ensuring discreet access to functional spaces without passing through the plaza. Meanwhile, the service entrance is positioned on the far east side, connecting efficiently to the main building's service areas. On the first floor (Figure 12), the auditorium entrance is complemented by access to seminar rooms, classrooms, and a cultural heritage kiosk. From this exhibition space, a bridge across the water body leads to the annex building, which houses regional Asian dining and café areas.

Above the second floor (Figure 13), the complex accommodates the main auditorium, management offices, and additional classrooms for training programmes, establishing a coherent spatial arrangement that balances cultural identity, user convenience, and functional performance.

The sectional perspective (Figure 14) shows the functional spaces of the auditorium, exhibition hall and their vertical connections. A central circulation core connects the entire complex for efficient movement and spatial clarity.

Figure 14: Sectional perspective through the main building complex.

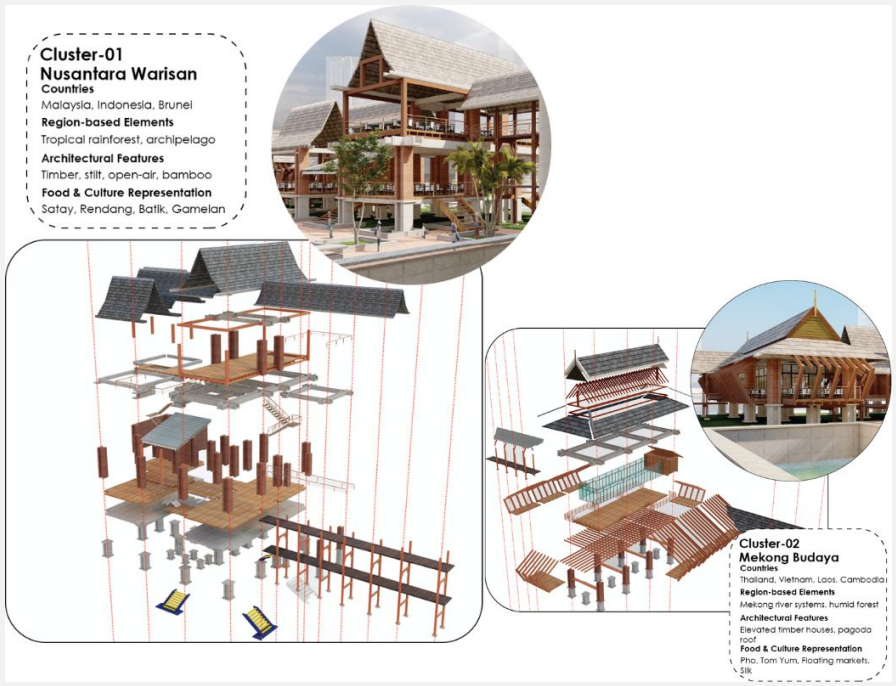

Figure 15: Exploded view of the cluster buildings which represents the countries of *Nusantara* (Malay Archipelago).

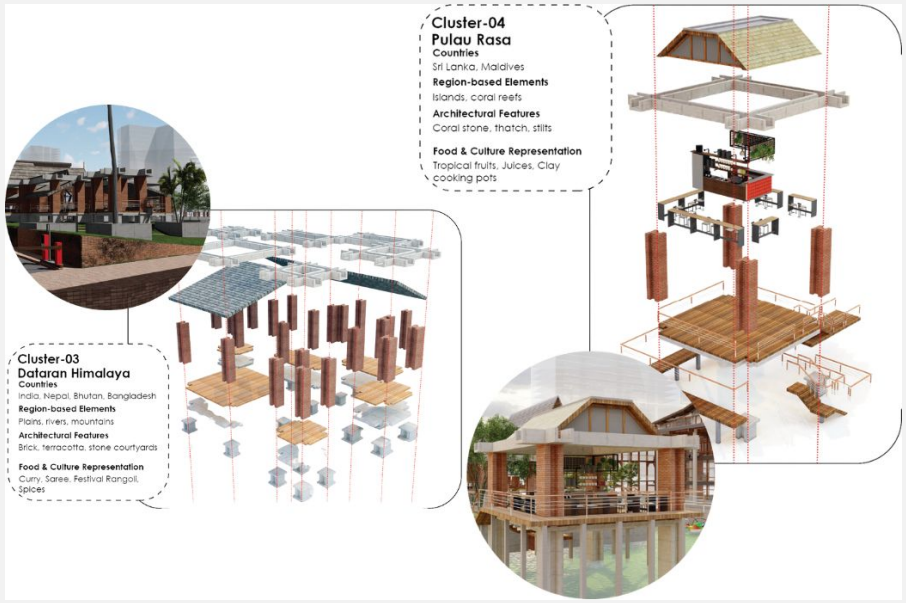

Figure 16: Exploded view of the cluster buildings representing the South Asian countries.

Figure 15 and Figure 16 illustrate the annex clusters representing Nusantara and the South Asian countries through their spatial arrangements, materiality and overall ambience. For example, the cluster 1 represents Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei by incorporating spaces like *anjung* (porch) and *serambi* (veranda) with the structures built on stilt and covered with pitch roof. Meanwhile, Cluster 4 represents the island nations of South Asia, like Sri Langka and Maldives and the structures are built on the waterbody, connected by pedestrian bridge and accessible by recreational boats. Each of the cluster will house cafes that offers the traditional dishes of the representative countries for the urban population who may visit the facility for recreation and entertainment.

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN STRATEGIES

This project includes passive water-cooling systems inside the multipurpose hall to deal with Malaysia's hot and humid tropical climate. There is a constant flow of water across the floor, which acts as a natural thermal buffer. This design is based on traditional Asian architecture's water courtyards, where moving water helps cool the air around it by evaporating and radiating heat (Chidiadi & Taki, 2025). When air moves over the water's surface, it cools down before rising into the building's occupied areas. This makes a naturally ventilated and comfortable microclimate without relying too much on mechanical air conditioning systems.

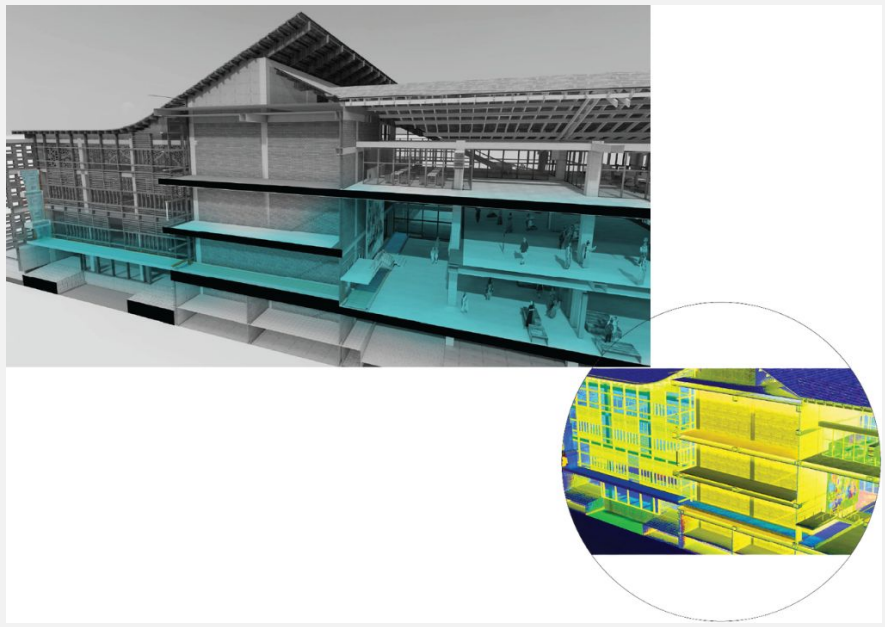

Figure 17: Sectional perspective which is showing blue color which is representing cool area during water flow time.

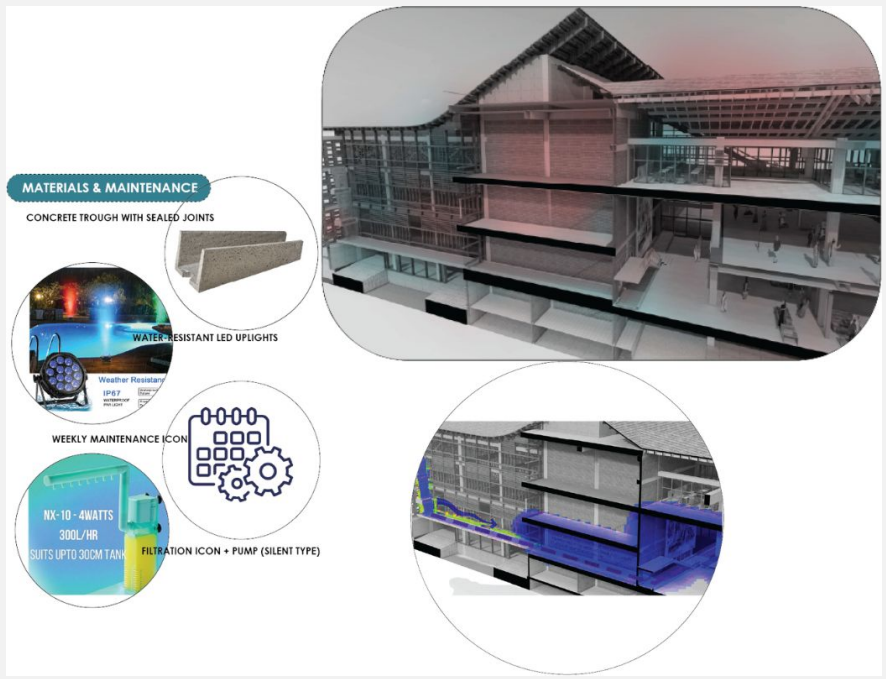

Figure 18: Sectional perspective when the waterfall remain close. The temperature goes high more than 3-4 degree Celsius. And when waterfall started the temp goes down.

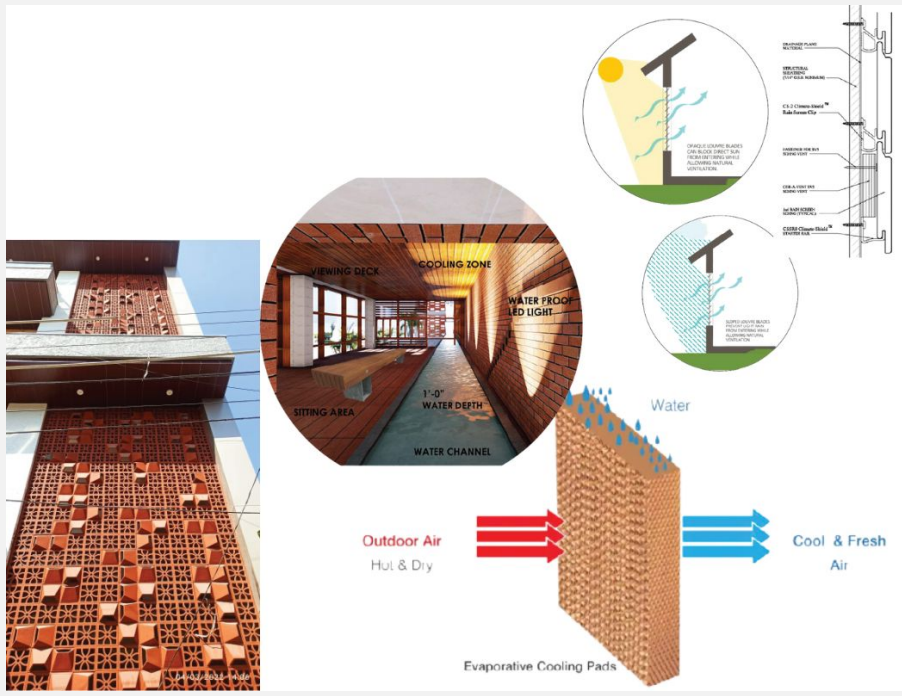

Figure 19: Bricks, shading device and evaporative cooling pads.
Source: Author

Using brick *jali walls* (Figure 19) in a Kobogo-inspired pattern, placed carefully on facades that are exposed to prevailing winds, works well with this system. These screen walls with holes let hot air out and cool air in, which makes a pressure difference that makes cross ventilation happen. The bricks are porous, so they not only filter sunlight to cut down on glare and solar gain, but they also help with evaporative cooling by holding moisture and letting breezes pass through wet surfaces (Mohamed et al., 2021). These two systems, water flow and brick jali, work together to make public spaces cooler, use less energy, and be more comfortable to be in while also honouring the materials and crafts of the area.

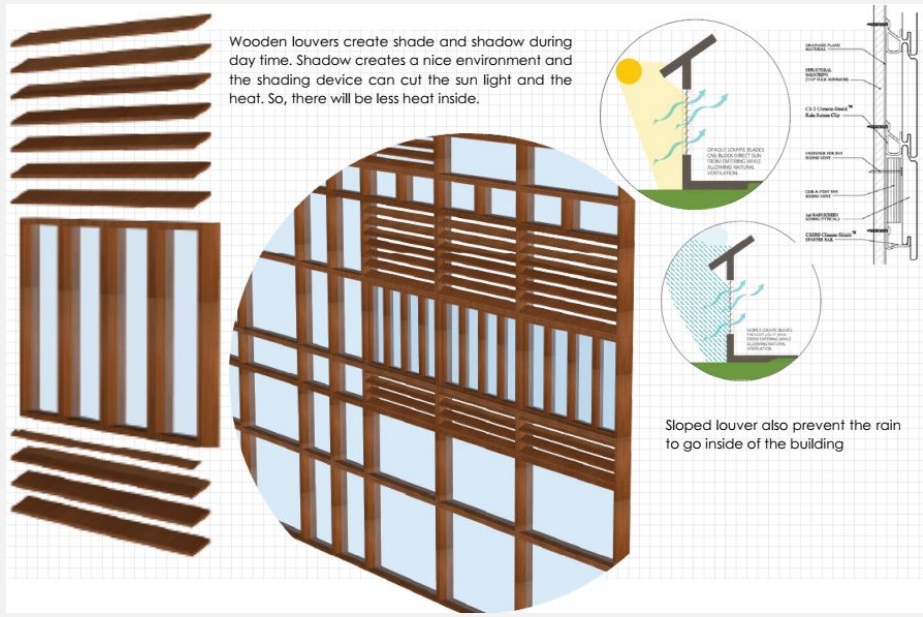

Figure 20: Wooden louvre panels for enhancing façade aesthetics and providing shade from the sun to reduce cooling load.

This integrated approach (Figure 21) to achieve maximum sustainability not only addresses climatic responsiveness but also enriches the spatial and sensory experience, reinforcing the project's cultural narrative through the use of traditional passive strategies reimagined in a contemporary architectural language.

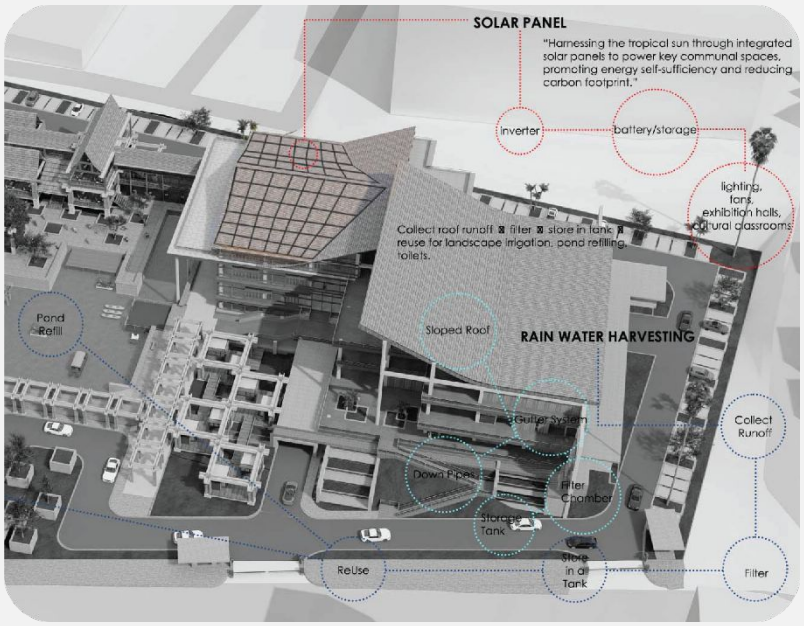

Figure 21: Shows the solar panel, rain water harvesting area as a fundamental requirement for achieving sustainable design.

CONCLUSION

The project began with the proposition that contemporary urban spaces in Kuala Lumpur often lack a unifying cultural identity, and that architecture can unite Asia's diverse traditions into a shared environment of learning, exchange, and community.

Through the Asian Trade and Culture Village, this aim is achieved by a decentralised, walkable master plan shaped by courtyards, floating markets, and interactive spaces that respond to users and the urban context. The four cultural clusters function as living environments where food, crafts, performances, and social learning activate everyday cultural exchange. The Grand Central Hall and iconic structures deliberately avoid Western formalism by prioritising human scale, cultural motifs, and interactive experience.

A true Asian architectural identity emerges not through superficial motifs but through weaving shared heritage and lived traditions. Sustainability—passive cooling, water integration, and locally sourced materials—is integral, reflecting historical environmental harmony. By embedding these practices in contemporary design, the project positions Asian architecture as both a vessel of identity and a model of resilience.

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