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## Architectural Identity Design of Shophouses in George Town Heritage City: Significance and Definition

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### ABSTRACTS

In George Town Heritage City, there is a perception that the styles of the shophouses were influenced by the western and eastern cultures but how far regarding the definition and origin of the name “shophouses” and significance of the interior architectural identity design are yet to receive in-depth research in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper appraises the definition of shophouses in the region with an emphasis on the significance of the interior architectural identity design. This has become necessary because the shophouse is one of the key components that enhanced the city to be enlisted in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2008. To achieve the main aim, observation, case studies, and secondary sources were combined in the study. Findings show that the significance of the interior architectural identity design regarding the definition of shophouses has been silent in the literature and was addressed as part of the paper’s implications. Also, the emerged findings will be relevant to stakeholders because the definition revealed the significance of interior architectural identity design as one of the architectural components that influence and govern shophouses design.

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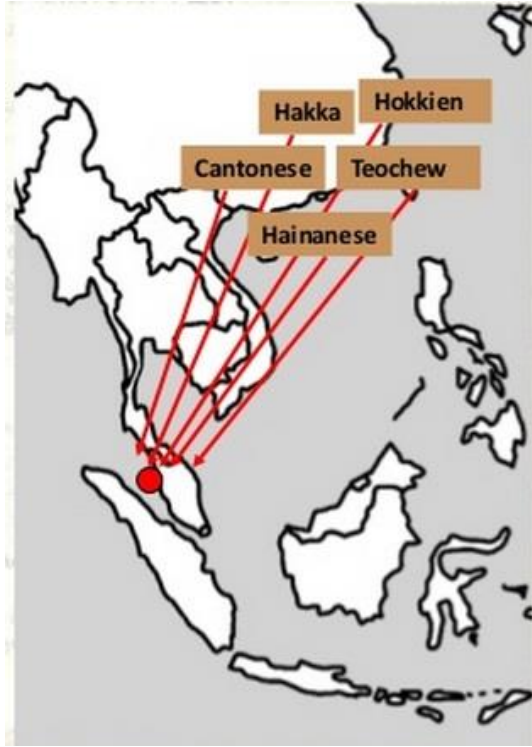
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

George Town City in Malaysia has a multicultural population and was a former British business port. Among the leading communities in the city are the Chinese, Malay, and Indian since its colonial era to date. [Musa and Feng \(2016\)](#) and [Municipal Council of Penang Island \(MPPP\) \(2008\)](#) reported that in July 2008, George Town City was enlisted as one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHSs) status. This is in acknowledgement of having an exceptional architectural and cultural townscape deprived of equal anywhere in East and Southeast Asia. One of the attributes of George Town is the ability to demonstrate incomparable range of shophouses and with more than 5,000 shophouses within the WHS, as the highest concentration of pre-war shophouses in Southeast Asia ([Tan & Fujita, 2014](#)). For more than two centuries, these shophouses have enhanced diversity from the western to the eastern cultural and social background development at different phases ([Abdulqader, Ibrahim, & Bahauddin, 2016](#)). These shophouses were blended with local art and architectural design styles with an emphasis on the geographical location of the dwellers. This has enhanced community participation tourism in the city and in principle, sustaining the intangible cultural heritage displaced ([Tan, Tan, Kok, & Choon, 2018](#)). Thus, various studies have been conducted regarding George Town shophouses but how far regarding the definition and origin of the name “shophouses” and significance of the interior architectural identity design are yet to receive in-depth research in Malaysia.

The multicultural population in George Town influenced the interior design space and components of the shophouses regarding cultural symbols and lifestyle of the people living in the shophouses. The shophouse is one of the unique heritage buildings in the WHS because of its novel interior architectural identity design and has six main architectural styles. The classification has a link with the period it was developed ([Zwain & Bahauddin, 2017](#)). The authors affirmed that most Chinese immigrants that settled in Straits Settlements were from Southern China as presented in Figure 1. Evidence from the existing literature shows that several scholars such as [Foo and Krishnapillai \(2019\)](#), [See and Goh \(2019\)](#), [Abdulqader et al. \(2016\)](#), and [Tan and Fujita \(2014\)](#) have research regarding shophouses in George Town City but no in-depth study about the definition and origin of the name “shophouses” and significance of the interior architectural identity design. [Foo and Krishnapillai \(2019\)](#) appraised the effect of George Town World Heritage Site (GTWHS) inscription on its intangible living heritage and found that approval from UNESCO has increased the social and economic activities in the shophouses; [See and Goh \(2019\)](#) assessed the impact of some variables, such as social influence, experience quality, perceived price and authenticity, and preceding knowledge on tourists intent to spent holiday in heritage hotels at GTWHS and found that the variables where significant positively; [Abdulqader et al. \(2016\)](#) explored the concept of the attractive interior design of the shophouse with emphasis on interior space; and [Tan and Fujita \(2014\)](#) studied the composition of the shophouses building materials and

found that there was no comprehensive record and the key materials exhibited Chinese, Indian, and British but applied available local materials mostly. The existing literature indicates a gap.



**Fig. 1. The period of Chinese immigrants to Straits Settlements.**  
Source (penangshophouse.com.my).

Thus, this paper attempts to appraise the definition of shophouses in the region with emphasis on the significance of the interior architectural identity design. This has become necessary because the shophouse is one of the key components that enhanced the city to be enlisted in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2008. This is one of the justifications for this paper and will be achieved via the following objectives below:

- i. To appraise the definition of shophouses in George Town Heritage Town (GTHC).

- ii. To examine the significance of architectural identity design of shophouses in GTHC.

The paper concentrated on the main issue – what is the significance of architectural identity design regarding the definition of shophouses in GTHC? Therefore, this paper is divided into five sections. First is the introduction section that comprises the study’s background and stated objectives. Second is the summary of the main findings of previous studies. This includes the architectural identity design of shophouses in GTHC. The third is the methodology section. This includes a combination of two approaches for data collection and analysed accordingly. Following next is the findings from the observation and case studies and followed with the discussion section. The last but not the least is the conclusion section.

## 2. ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY DESIGN OF SHOPHOUSES

This section reviewed the literature relevant to shophouses architectural identity design. Architectural identity is classified into interior and exterior, but the focus of this paper is on the interior space components. Zhang (2016) opined that the courtyard garden is one of the main identities and attributes of traditional shophouses. In many Chinese shophouses, the internal courtyard ensures that the indoor thermal comfort without relying on air-conditioning (Kubota, Zakaria, Abe, & Toe, 2017). Also, the wooden partition and staircase are examples of the architectural identity design of the shophouses, both are made from carved frames and timber (Tan, 2015). The significance of fountain and

plants at the courtyard as attributes of architectural identity design of shophouses cannot be over-emphasised. Shan (2016) found that as closer courtyard space between man and nature, flowers and trees are vital. In summary, the interior design components of shophouses are the internal partitions, fountains, traditional courtyard, and the variations of eclectic straits courtyard shophouses, staircases, plants at courtyard area, spatial layout organisation and function, ceiling, doors, and flooring. These components play a significant role in the definition of the term “shophouse”.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a mixed approach to data collection. This include case studies, observation, and secondary sources. Architectural documentation data and visualising materials were employed in line with Creswell (2013). The case studies focused on the six main heritage shophouses built between 1790s - 1960s. Evidence from the preliminary investigation showed that the components of the shophouses interior architectural identity design were suitable for this study and well selected and analysed. The review from existing literature, although scanty, was conducted to collated data for a better understanding of the significance of the components as they relate to the definition of shophouses.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Even with the long existence of shophouses in WHS, scholars have either been impassive in the evaluation of the significance of the architectural identity design with an emphasis on the

definition of shophouses. This may have reduced awareness regarding preservation and sustainability of the heritage buildings and possibly enhances alterations and modifications. This is a major concern to key stakeholders in the shophouses sector. An attempt has been made to address these issues and reported in themes in this section. The themes are the definition of shophouses in George Town, the significance of shophouses architecture components, and the influence of design and architecture in the shophouses.

#### 4.1. Definition of Shophouses in George Town, Penang

Evidence from secondary sources shows that shophouses that are known in Malay as “Rumah Kedai” were constructed between the 17th to early 20th century along the Straits Settlements. These heritage houses are novel in their architectural design styles. Findings agree with Zwain and Bahauddin (2017), Chen (2007), and Ismail (2005). They found that shophouses are unique architectures found in George Town and Malacca. From observation, majority of the shophouses ground and first floors are used for business activities while the upper floor is used for residential purposes. Because of the construction mechanism, the shophouse is called row house. This indicates two or more storeys in a building total height. Findings from observation agree with Zwain and Bahauddin (2020) and found that the shophouse dwellers engage the ground and upper floors for residential









purposes. Apart from being called a row house, which is one of the components and uniqueness of the shophouses in GTHC, several shophouses are lengthy with a maximum of about 68 metres and narrow with a width of about 4 to 5 metres. Findings from observation show that shophouse in GTHC could be a dwelling location and may be called a terrace house. Findings deviate slightly from Knapp (2013) and found that the term shophouses in many Southeast Asia's nations refer to multiple storeys shophouses with the ground floor earmarked for business events whilst the outstanding floors serve as dwelling location.

#### **4.2. The Significance of Shophouses Architecture in George Town Heritage City**

Evidence from the literature and observation from the case studies adopted shows that shophouses architecture is pertinent and plays a key role in GTHC. Findings agree with Zwain and Bahauddin (2017) and Penang Heritage Trust (1990). The authors identified Early Penang Style (1790s - 1850s), Southern Chinese Eclectic Style (1840s - 1900s), Early Straits Eclectic Style (1890s - 1910s), Late Straits Eclectic Style (1910s - 1940s), Art Deco Style (1930s - 1960s), and Early Modernism Style (1950s - 1970s) as the main classification of shophouses historical styles in George Town. Penang Heritage Trust is one of the key non-governmental organisations that plays important role in preservation and conservation of heritage buildings within the GTHC. From late 17th century to late 19th century, the different styles display a unique architectural attribute

that represents the history of GTHC as presented in Figure 2. Zwain and Bahauddin (2017) claimed that the most attractive shophouses in GTHC would be the one built sometimes between 1840s - 1930s and that is "Eclectic Style". This claim should be subject to further exploratory study. The shophouses are a combination of architecture and design which could be seen from the front side of the building (Façade). In the interior space (floor area), the coloured ceramic floor tiles are usually visible and sometimes extend to the five-footway. The usage of this type of tiles cut across the Straits Chinese and Malay but majority of the material is imported from Britain. Findings agree with Ahmad (1994) and found that Malays use this type of tiles to decorate main stairs. The significance of these architectural styles to the GTHC cannot be over-emphasised because of the heritage value, especially the interior components that express the identity of the people that dwell there for over two centuries. Findings agree with Chansen (2014) and found architectural attributes and art patterns across the shophouses in GTHC. One of the outputs of traditional shophouses sustainability in GTHC is enhancing development towards greener revolution and preservation. This has become germane to mitigate the negative effect of climate change that is being experienced across global cities. Also, the presence of shophouses in the city has increased the commercial status of the dwellers. Findings agree with Foo and Krishnapillai (2019) and found that the approval of GTHC by UNESCO has increased the social and economic activities in the shophouses.

Early "Penang" Style 1790s-1850s	"Southern Chinese" Eclectic Style 1840s-1900s	Early "Straits" Eclectic Style 1890s-1910s	Late "Straits" Eclectic Style 1910s-1940s	Art Deco Style 1930s-1960s	Early Modernism Style 1950s-1970s
<b>Physical Appearance</b> - 1 storey - simple facade - colour in fashion: light indigo blue, ocre, white	<b>Physical Appearance</b> - 1-2 storey - simple facade - colour in fashion: light indigo blue, ocre, white	<b>Physical Appearance</b> - 2-3 storey - decorative facade mixture of Malay, Chinese & European ornaments - colour in fashion: light indigo blue, ocre, white	<b>Physical Appearance</b> - 2-3 storey - decorative facade mixture of Malay, Chinese & European ornaments - colour in fashion: light indigo blue, ocre, white, opel green	<b>Physical Appearance</b> - 2-3 storey - decorative facade geometrical designs - colour in fashion: grey of Shanghai plaster walls	<b>Physical Appearance</b> - 2-3 storey - simple and clean facade designs - colour in fashion: white
<b>Building Materials</b> - Timber - Clay bricks - Lime	<b>Building Materials</b> - Timber - Clay bricks - Lime	<b>Building Materials</b> - Timber - Clay bricks - Lime	<b>Building Materials</b> - Timber - Clay bricks - Lime	<b>Building Materials</b> - Shanghai plaster - clay bricks - reinforced concrete - glass	<b>Building Materials</b> - clay bricks - reinforced concrete glass
					
1790s	1840s	1890s	1910s	1930s	1950s
Early "Penang" Style (1790s-1850s)	"Southern Chinese" Eclectic Style (1840s - 1900s)	Early "Straits" Eclectic Style (1890s - 1910)	Late "Straits" Eclectic Style (1910s - 1940s)	Art Deco Style (1930s - 1960s)	Early Modernism Style (1950s - 1970s)

**Fig. 2. The Six Main Heritage Shophouses Styles**

Source: <http://penangshophouse.blogspot.com/2010/03/introduction-to-shophouse.html>

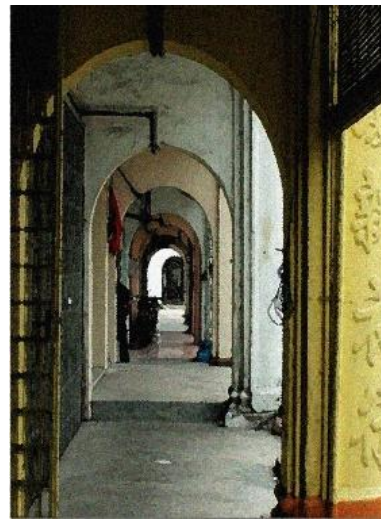
### 4.3. The Influence of Design and Architecture in The Shophouses

Findings show that the early Penang architectural style of the six traditional main heritage shophouses in George Town represents the people living there with symbols of design. These symbols influence the outcome of most of the shophouses architecture, especially in the interior as presented in Figures 3a and 3b. Evidence from observation shows that many of these shophouses are above 100 years old and inscribed with Chinese write-up. This indicates that the shophouses are mainly occupied by the Chinese that migrated from China with their design and mixed with other western and Malay outfits for better outcomes. Findings agree with [Abdulqader et al. \(2016\)](#) and affirmed that the architectural design on the

shophouses has enhanced diversity from the western to the eastern cultural and social background development at different phases and blended with local art and architectural design styles. Between 1840s - 1920s, shophouses came with eclectic style and found in Straits Settlements of Penang and Melaka districts. This type of shophouse architectural design was influenced by the Chinese settlement and their intermarriage to local Malay women. This is one of the factors that influenced the Straits eclectic style shophouses of the Straits Chinese, also called Peranakan Chinese or Baba-Nyonya. The Straits Chinese or Peranakan Chinese community was not only observed in Malaysia, but also in Indonesia, Singapore, Myanmar and Thailand. Figure 3b is among the influence of architectural design that has been

displayed in the shophouse. This is the five-foot walkway in front of the shophouse. There are many other components of the architectural design that has influenced the shophouse, such as the internal partitions, fountains, traditional courtyard, among others. Findings agree with [Zwain and Bahauddin \(2017\)](#) and identified the above-mentioned components are key

elements that can influence the architectural design of shophouse. From observation, shophouses constructed from 1930 onwards received a level of western influence. One of the reasons is the inflow of Europeans into GTHC.



**Fig. 3. (a) Courtyard of shophouses (b) Five-footway outside of Shophouse**  
 Source: <https://www.localecologist.org/2010/08/penang-shophouse-internal-courtyard.html>

## 5. CONCLUSION

Architectural identity design does influence shophouses styles. Despite the old age of GTHC shophouses, the perception that the shophouses styles are influenced by the architectural design components and its significance is yet to receive in-depth research. Therefore, this paper appraises the definition of shophouses with emphasis on the significance of the interior architectural identity design. Findings show that the definition of shophouses comes from different periods and is influenced by Chinese and European immigrants, as well as local Malay ethnicity influences.

This in turn has created a new combination, fondly known as the Straits Chinese or Peranakan Chinese. The paper shows that the interior architectural identity design components influence the shophouses styles in GTHC through the vernacular authentic Chinese. Also, the interior architectural identity design components are key in defining shophouse in GTHC. The styles being expresses within and outside the shophouse are part of their beliefs and culture of the dwellers and residents over the decades. These styles have been sustained and preserved by generations after generations, but modernisation and

globalisation have affected some of the recent maintenance and replacement of building materials. This speaks volumes on the traditional practice including material and architecture character. The George Town World Heritage Incorporation (GTWHI) has been so helpful in this direction with supervision and ensuring that GTHC maintains the standard that earned her as one of the WHSs. This organisation (GTWHI) is determined and dedicated to preserving George Town as a Heritage City with a high level of novelty and uniqueness so that UNESCO and tourists will continue to recognise the city as one of the most preferred heritage cities. One of the

probable reasons is the heritage shophouses within the GTWHS. This is made possible because of the distinctive architectural design components displayed internally and externally, combined with the place identity of the residents over the years on the shophouses. The architectural and cultural mixture in GTHC influences the shophouses and was made possible because of the motivation modified from the migrated Chinese to Penang with the Malay ethnicity and blended with the migrated Europeans.

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