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## EVALUATING THE POTENTIALS OF MOSQUE AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION PLACE IN MALAYSIAN URBAN CONTEXT

\*<sup>1</sup> Nangkula Utaberta, <sup>2</sup> Leong Yin Chen, <sup>3</sup> M.M. Tahir

<sup>1</sup> Department of Architecture, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Built Environment,  
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture (FRSB), Universiti  
Putra Malaysia (UPM)

Jabatan Seni Bina dan Alam Bina, Fakulti Kejuruteraan dan Senibina,  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

\*Correspondence e-mail: nangkula@uthm.edu.my

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### ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to identify the potentials of mosque as tourist attraction place in Malaysia. This study uses case study and empirical study as methodology choosing two mosques from outside the world and in Malaysia as a sample that are tourist attraction spots. In this study, discussion whether mosque should become a tourist attraction place and the factors that make a mosque popular among the tourists was discussed by giving some good examples of selected mosque. It is expected that this study can make the public as well as the officials aware of the tourism potentials of the mosque in Malaysia. This paper also presented the potentials and considerations of selected mosques in managing its tourism function as reference for further development of Islamic Architecture (in this case Mosques) in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *Mosque, Islamic Tourism, Urban Context.*

### INTRODUCTION

Islam is the world's fastest growing and one of the major religions. According to the 2015 Pew research Center, the Muslims will grow more than twice as fast as the overall world population between 2010 and 2050 and, in the second half of this century, will likely surpass Christians as the world's largest religious group. Graph 1, demonstrates the percentage of estimated change in population size, 2010-2050.

Malaysia, which have the predominantly Muslims populations are one the countries that dominate Muslim tourism. Malaysia benefited from the shift in the Muslim tourist flows because this country tends to more easily satisfy the Muslims specific needs in customs and religious practice (Dabrowska, 2004). Its influence extends to the domain of tourism where it can help to determine demand for travel among Muslims and the direction of their domestic and international tourist flows. Throughout the Muslim world many mosques have become one of the attraction for the tourists to visit the country. Mosques are known for their beautiful

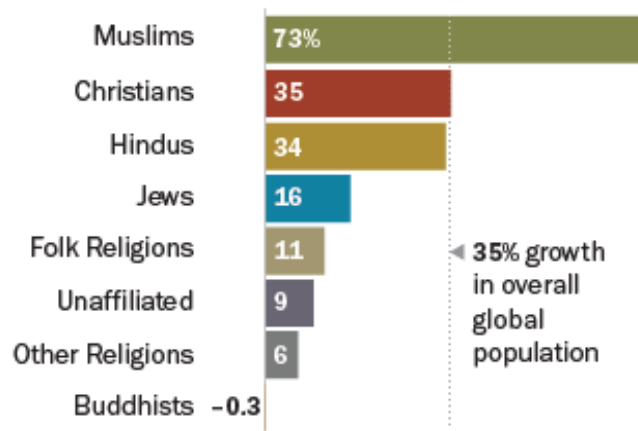
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and often ground breaking architecture. Many tourists not only travel for their beliefs or spiritual values but also for recreational, educational and cultural purposes. Famous Islamic mosque architecture (e.g. Taj Mahal and the Ottoman Palaces in Turkey) are among the most appealing attractions in the Muslim world (Timothy and Iverson, 2006). From this, to define the potentials of mosques in Malaysia to become a tourist spot that attract a large number of tourists from all over the world.

### Islam Growing Fastest

*Muslims are the only major religious group projected to increase faster than the world's population as a whole.*

#### Estimated change in population size, 2010-2050



Source: The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Graph 1: Demonstrates the percentage of estimated change in population size, 2010-2050

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### MOSQUE AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION PLACE: ISSUES AND JUSTIFICATIONS

In the Muslim world, Islamic tourism ideas have been widely discussed (Al-Hamarneh, 2004). The ideas of Islamic tourism have been suggested and categorized into three main concepts which are: (1) Economic, (2) Cultural, and (3) Religious-conservative concepts (Al-Hamarneh, 2004).

The economic concept for Islamic tourism considers the Muslim countries as being part of the emerging tourist markets of the future with major economic potential for growth (Ma, Crestan, 2007). When mosques become a tourist attraction place, it will bring in large amount of foreign exchange earnings and tourism is an important instrument of economic

development. Tourism provides opportunities for employment and development of backward area as it is a source for the development of hotel industry and also transportation (Reegan, 2012).

The cultural concept for Islamic tourism is the inclusion of Islamic religious-cultural sites in tourism programs to protect this culture and to not ignore cultural heritage during the process of cultural globalization (Ma, Crestan, 2007). As an economic concept, this approach encourages a re-orientation towards more Islamic historical, religious, and cultural sites instead of depending on “western-cultural” loaded tour destinations (Ma, Crestan, 2007).

Finally, the religious-conservative concept for Islamic tourism attempts to merge elements of the extremely conservative Islamic lifestyle with the modern tourism industry, which could indeed present new tourism options, spaces, and spheres (Ma, Crestan, 2007). Tourism contributes much for improvement of social, political understanding and cultural exchange (Reegan, 2012). Tourism can foster integration with the local community and lifestyle (Reegan, 2012). World tourism contributes a lot for the development of international peace and amity while the domestic tourism brings national integration (Reegan, 2012). When mosque become a tourist attraction place, visitors will come from all around the world and foster the integration among the local community and the tourist. Tourists can experience different kind of lifestyles and exchange knowledge among each other. Hence, mosque tourism can bring up the popularity of the country too.

In the United States, most of the mosques welcome the non-Muslims as a sign of openness to the rest of the community as well as to encourage conversions to Islam. (Bagby, Perl, Froehle, 2001; Takim, Liyakatali, 2004; BBC, 2005). Mosque is one of the place to help the spread of Islam. Mosque as a tourist attraction place can help tourists to gain more understanding about Islam and encourages conversions to Islam.

However, many Muslims are still highly worried about the negative influences of tourism (Timothy and Iverson, 2006). Tourist attraction places will typically bring negative social impacts like drugs, alcohol consumption, gambling, immodest dress and so on which are all forbidden by Islamic law (Sindiga 2018; Timothy and Iverson, 2006). Tourists are often perceived to be ignorant of local moral standards and often take photographs of local people, which is offensive to many Muslims (Timothy and Iverson, 2006).

#### POTENTIAL OF MOSQUE BEING AN ATTRACTION AMONG TOURISTS

As the number of students increases, the role of mosque gets more distinct, and mosques gradually took on more functions. Rather than just being a learning center, mosques have turned into a new type of institution; combining itself with a khan or an inn to accommodate students from out of town. The mosque then becomes a school and a hostel for poor students who came from abroad. Besides that, the mosque also provided other types of assistances for the students. The students re often exempted from paying fees and monetary allowances were instead given to them regularly. Some of the students are given minimal assistance for food and accommodation. Every mosque has expended into spaces such as library, kitchen, washroom, and some common learning space (Rasdi & Utaberta, 2010; Rasdi, 1998; Zaimche, 2002).

The ruler also plays an important role in promoting mosques as an education institute. They prepared libraries for students, deposited books which were related to religion, science,

intellect, and language. They also appointed librarian to take care of the management of the libraries. Large number of teachers are hired and paid by these rulers (Zaimeche, 2002). Islamic architecture gradually changes due to the new features introduced at each period of time and therefore resulted in different experiences. These features were taken from interests of the public as well as rulers in order to further establish their positions, religious and climatological factors, etc. (Pir Nia, Mohammad Karim, 2008).

Many mosques have become tourist attractions throughout the Muslim world and the mosques are normally known for their gorgeous and often ground breaking architecture. There are some features of tourist attractor for religious tourism places like mosques. One of the common feature will be its holiness (Stacey, 2014 and Josan, 2009). The term “holy place” is applied to a specific place where there is a divine association with it. The place is holy because at a particular time, it was the place of a divine revelation. Generally, regardless of the religion, the holy places constitute a powerful point of tourist attraction, combining the achievement of certain spiritual satisfactions with the discovery of new places, habits etc. Annually, millions of people head that way, and the rules set for the people in order to respect their holiness, are thoroughly applied” (Josan, 2009)

Another feature of tourist attractor for a mosque is its religious edifices (Josan, 2009). Mosques are structures built by men in which one can worship God. Other than the designation, the religious edifices represent a special tourist attraction by the architecture, work of art under the form of paintings and sculptures it possesses (Josan, 2009). Aesthetic value of a mosque is normally portrayed by the highest degree of motifs and ornamentation. The aesthetic and beauty of a mosque’s interior can fulfil the certainty, variety, significance and love/connection needs for human beings: that is to be inside a beautiful ambience (Othman, Zainal-Abidin, 2011).

*“Like churches in Christian faith, Mosques play the same part in Muslim life. For example, one of the most attractive mosques, Mesquita (the mosque-cathedral) of Cordoba has a less spectacular exterior, but the interior displays a fairy tale-like beauty. It has 865 columns and arches in the shape of horseshoe which support a second row of arches. In the wall opposite of the entrance, oriented towards Mecca, is the Saint of Saints, an octagonal alcove for prayers. A beautiful work of art is the Bibi-Khanym Mosque (the Mosque of the Mother-inLaw) in Samarkand (Uzbekistan), raised by Timur Lenk in the memory of his wife's mother. The mosque houses a hall of prayers whose 400 cupolas were supported by marble columns. The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, built in the 8th century houses under its cupola the head of St. John the Baptist, worshipped by both by Christians and Muslims (the prophet Yahua). The Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem means “the Farthest Mosque” from Mecca where the prophet Muhammad travelled. Sanaa – the capital of Yemen – is a also a site of religious rituals, here being 100 mosques today, of which the most known is Al-Habir (the Great Mosque). The courtyard of the Badshahi Mosque (Lahore), raised in the 18th century can house 60.000 people. Intended as a replica to Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the Blue Mosque is the only one of the kind to have six minarets instead of four, and its interior is covered with faience, most of it in blue.”* (Josan, 2009)

These are among the factors that make a mosque popular among tourists.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY

## CASE 1: BLUE MOSQUE

One of the most important countries in the world for international tourism is Turkey according to the data from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTI, 2011). In Istanbul, there are approximately 444 mosques and Sultan Ahmet Mosque (Figure 1) is one of the most visited places by tourists. (Egresi, Bayram, Kara, Kesik, 2012).



*Figure 1: Exterior look of Blue mosque in Istanbul, Turkey.*

The Sultan Ahmet Mosque is also commonly known as the Blue Mosque today. The mosque gets its nickname because of the tens of thousands of iznik blue tiles adorning the interior wall. The mosque is built between 1606 and 1616 by Sultan Ahmed I.

This beautiful mosque is open to all, Muslim and non-muslim, Turk and foreigner, young and old. In the mosque, there are separate area for non-Muslim visitors so that distraction of worshippers is minimized.

Because of the huge crowds and the fact that the Sultan Ahmet is a fully working mosque, it closes itself to non-worshippers for 45 minutes before the call to prayer, 30 minutes afterwards, and all morning on Friday (until 14:30/2:30pm), which is the Muslim holy day. Non-Muslim visitors must enter the mosque by the entrance door designated for tourist. At the Blue Mosque's entrance for tourists, visitors will first be requested to take off their shoes and put them into plastic bags provided for the purpose. As tourists went on towards the door leading to the mosque's main prayer room, officials will look to see whoever is inappropriately dressed.

A plastic mannequin in the walkway, dressed in a robe and a headscarf, served as a model of how visitors should dress upon entering. Tourist should wear modest, conservative clothing which exposes a minimum of flesh. No shorts or sleeveless shirts for either men or women. The mosque may provide robes to wear too if needed.

#### CASE 2: JUMEIRAH MOSQUE

Jumeirah Mosque (Figure 2) is a dominant landmark of Dubai city, United Arab Emirates (UAE) which was designed and built in the medieval Fatimid tradition with modern materials; the stone structure is a tribute to contemporary Islamic architecture. It is one of the three mosques in the UAE that allows non-Muslim to visit.



*Figure 2: Exterior look of Jumeirah Mosque located in Dubai city, UAE.*

This mosque provides a rare opportunity to bridge the gap between hosts and guests by offering visitors a glimpse of UAE nationals' religion, customs and way of life via a mosque visit. (Kuo, 2015). Giving an opportunity to the non-Muslim tourists to understand the local religion, culture and tradition.

Considered to be one of the most attractive mosques in Dubai, the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding organizes visits to the Jumeirah Mosque for non-Muslims, aimed at promoting cultural understanding and first-hand experience as an insight to the Islamic religion. The cultural understanding is part of its policy which is "Open Doors, Open Minds". The mosque was designed to bring in different nationalities together.

The tour, which is as much fact-finding as sight-seeing, lasts 1½ hours and there's a Q&A

session at the end. These are conducted on every Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday at 10am. The tourists and residents who gather outside the ornate Jumeirah Mosque will be given a tour of the Mosque and therefore a better understanding of Islam.

Same like other mosques, ladies need to be covered with long skirts or trousers, long sleeves, hats or scarves for the head. For the gentlemen, they need to wear trousers, T-shirt or shirt and not just a vest. Visitors need to take off their shoes before entering the mosque (Figure 4).



Figure 4, Signs informing people of the dress code are posted outside Al Farooq Omar Ibn Al Khattab Mosque in Jumeirah in Dubai. Sarah Dea / The National.

## CASE STUDY WITHIN MALAYSIA

### CASE 1: PUTRA MOSQUE

Putra Mosque (Figure 5) or most commonly known as the Pink Mosque is the main mosque of Putrajaya located west of Putra Square. It is constructed in 1997 and have been said to have a capacity 15,000 worshippers. The minaret stands 116-meters tall and claimed to be the tallest minaret in Southeast Asia. The mosque is arguably the city's most distinctive landmark and one of the most modern mosques in the world. This astonishing glowing pink color Mosque is also a major tourist attraction in Putrajaya for Muslims and non-Muslims.



Figure 5, exterior view of Putra Mosque seems like floating on the lake.

For this mosque, female visitors are required to put on pink robes as they enter (Figure 6). When entering the prayer hall, women visitors will need to cover their heads with the scarves provided.



Figure 6, female visitors in pink robes.



## CASE 2: TUANKU MIZAN ZAINAL ABIDIN MOSQUE

The Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque also commonly known as Iron Mosque completed in year 2009 (Figure 7). It is located in Putrajaya and said to have a capacity of 20,000 worshippers. The façade of the mosque is made from 4,300 m<sup>2</sup> of stainless steel spiral mesh that protects worshippers against drafts at the same time allowing the cooling wind penetrates across the building as a pleasant flow. A natural air-conditioning system is also featured in the mosque. The mosque is a masterpiece when it comes to being unique with a balanced approach of traditional and modern design. It is designated as a tourist attraction place and the management have been urged not to restrict access to only Muslim visitors. This mosque opens its doors to both Muslims and non-Muslims.



Figure 7, night view of Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque.

## DISCUSSION

Not to deny that Putra Mosque's is most distinctive landmark in Putrajaya with a beautiful scenic view of the lake. The outlook of the mosque is unique and unusual consists of architectural styles of Malaysia, Persian and Arab-Islamic with combination of traditional intricate design motifs that employing local and foreign craftsmanship.

The second principal mosque in Putrajaya after the Putra Mosque is the Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque. Compare to the Putra Mosque, the exterior look of this mosque is well balance of modernism and tradition design that cover by stainless steel iron. From the exterior to the interior look of the Malaysia's mosques, it is compatible with the Mosques outside the world.

Since the mosques are open to the Muslims and non-Muslims. There are existing potentials of the mosque to become a tourist attraction place in Malaysia. However, to attract the tourist from local and foreigner, Malaysia still needs to put in more effort in this field. The government and the media play an important role to promote the mosque as tourist attraction place and brings up to the international level.

## CONCLUSION

As Islam is the world's fastest growing and one of the major religions (Pew Research Center, 2015), more mosques will be built to accommodate the increasingly large number of worshippers and at the same time establishing itself as a new tourism destination globally.

As for Malaysia, which is a country which is predominantly Muslims and that tourism is the second largest income generating sector of Malaysia, this development is good for the country. Tourism industry affects positively on the Malaysian economy by increasing foreign exchange earnings, and also employment opportunities.

Mosques in Malaysia will play an important role to encourage tourism; local and international. Hence, the public and the officials should be aware of the huge potentials of mosque as a main tourist attraction place in Malaysia and subsequently put more effort on investing in developing more mosques.

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