Al-Attas’s Works and Contributions to the Islamic Architecture in Malaysia

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Abstract: Several studies have been conducted on al-Attas’ educational philosophy and other field of knowledge such as traditional Islam, religion and spirituality, but not on his contributions to the Islamic Architecture in Malaysia. This article examines Al-Attas’s contributions to the Islamic Architecture. This study involves applied deductive, inductive and comparative analyses for the most apparent architectural elements which comprise of the Malay, Roman, Greek and Moorish design. He was given a task by Ministry of Education, Malaysia to contextualize the Islamic education and implement it at higher educational level, leading towards the concept and design of International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). This study implies that the Islamic architectural concept of the building exhibits his skill and artistic talent with a solid blend of his knowledge and experience. Further studies are required on his contribution to Sufism that influences his architectural concept.

Keywords: Islamic architecture · Islamic arts · Islamic civilization · Malaysia · Muslim scholar

INTRODUCTION

Milne argues that there is no great architectural heritage in Malaya remotely equivalent to Cambodia’s Angkor Wat. The only buildings catches his eyes were Kuala Lumpur’s ‘Moorish Victorian’ railway station and Parliament Buildings in Kuala Lumpur, which the later is in the modern style. All are in Kuala Lumpur. Nonetheless, this argument can be challenged by several traditional architectural buildings all over Malaya such as the Masjid Kampung Laut, in Kelantan, (a state in East of Malaya) and Minangkabau House in Negeri Sembilan (a state in West Malaysia). Al-Attas’ work of art and architecture can be seen as a response to the lack of artistic flowering in Malaysia especially in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, this article examines one of the artistic buildings in Kuala Lumpur designed by Al-Attas, namely International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Terminology of Islamic Architecture is the principal issue when we examine the contribution of al-Attas to the field in Malaysia. There is debate on the usage of the term “Islamic Architecture”, whether it should be “Muslim Architecture”. Answering this question would be confusing and endless if we are not using the traditional method of early Muslim scholars. Generally they define the term according to the literal and metaphor meaning. Therefore, this study follows the same method. At the very beginning it would be helpful to study the literal meaning of “architecture”. As far as this study concerns, the word “architecture” has no metaphor meaning.

The word “Architecture” is borrowed from Greek through Latin “architectura” [1]. Oxford English Reference Dictionary states that the word “architecture” is a noun and brings four meanings; First, the art or science of designing and constructing building. Second, the style of a building as regards design and construction. Third, buildings or other structures collectively and fourth, (computing) the conceptual structure and logical organization of a computer or computer-based system [2]. Obviously, all these meanings cover art, science, design, construction, style, building and structures.

However, the term designates more than that according to Khasavneh [3] while commenting on the Hutchinson Educational Encyclopaedia as follows: