

The Creative Thinking of Master Craftsman Latif Long as the Foundation for the Formation of Malay Architectural Design

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the core aspects of producing creative work, with a particular focus on creative thinking. It highlights the lack of structured creative thinking models in Malaysian architectural practice, especially those grounded in cultural heritage. It investigates the creative process of Master Craftsman Latif Long to propose a framework applicable to heritage-based architectural education and practice. This issue stems from architects' limited creativity and inadequate understanding of contextual needs. One contributing factor to this problem is the absence of a framework to guide creative thinking, particularly in design. This research employed qualitative methods including interviews with traditional woodcarvers and document analysis. The findings were coded using NVivo and analyzed within the context of Malay aesthetics, Zen philosophy and the Wallas creative model. The study reveals four key components: background knowledge, aesthetic values, workflow and dissemination. While grounded in woodcarving, the findings offer transferable insights to architecture, providing a culturally rooted framework to inform design thinking. This contributes to ongoing efforts to develop a Malaysian architectural identity and enrich creative pedagogy.

Keywords: architectural identity; creative thinking framework; heritage-based design; Malaysian architecture

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia's post-independence journey of nation-building, architecture has played a vital role in shaping national identity. The colonial era introduced Western architectural styles to Tanah Melayu, pushing traditional Malay architecture to the periphery, often limited to

rural regions (Vlatseas, 1998). By the mid-20th century, modernist and International Style architecture began dominating the urban landscape, prompting critical concerns about the cultural authenticity and identity of the built environment. Recognizing the need to assert a national

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identity through architecture, various efforts were initiated from the 1950s onwards, including the discourse on “Towards a Malayan Architecture” and national engagements such as the 1981 Seminar on National Architectural Identity. These initiatives emphasized integrating Malay artistic values and cultural heritage into contemporary architectural practices. Yet, despite good intentions, these adaptations often led to superficial outcomes described as “balloon” or “cut and paste” architecture replicating decorative elements without contextual depth. This points to a wider issue is the lack of creative frameworks in architectural education that are grounded in local cultural knowledge. The disconnection between tradition and innovation contributes to design outputs lacking cultural meaning. This study explores the creative thinking framework of master woodcarver Latif Long as a culturally rooted model that can inform architectural pedagogy. His refined, process-oriented approach is examined to identify transferable elements to architectural design thinking.

In the effort to define a Malaysian architectural identity, numerous initiatives and discourses have emerged over the decades. However, various persistent issues continue to hinder the development of architecture that truly reflects the nation’s cultural and creative essence. These issues can be categorized into four main aspects as outlined below.

Superficial Adaptations: ‘Balloon Architecture’ and ‘Cut-and-Paste’ Motifs

Despite decades of discourse on establishing a Malaysian architectural identity, contemporary practice continues to suffer from superficial adaptations of traditional elements often referred to as “*balloon architecture*” or “*cut-and-paste*” motifs, as noted by Kosman, K.A. (2007). He observed that the use of decorative motifs disconnected from their original meaning and function led to such labels, reflecting designs that lack contextual depth and creative integration. Similarly, Rasdi, M.T. and Sabil, A.B. (2018) highlighted the prevalence of these superficial imitations in contemporary Malaysian architecture. Such practices indicate a persistent absence of cultural depth and structured creative thinking in the design process.

Dominance of Imported Paradigms & Absence of Local Frameworks

The issue is compounded by the dominance of imported architectural paradigms and the absence of frameworks rooted in local epistemology. Sarah Mohd Hilmee and Kamarul Afizi Kosman (2023) found that most architectural practices in Malaysia remain heavily influenced by foreign models, with limited reliance on culturally rooted frameworks. Similarly, Surat, M.S. (2012) emphasized that heritage-based approaches are often marginalized due to the popularity of imported styles.

Neglect of Cultural Knowledge in Education

Current architectural education emphasizes form and technology often neglecting intangible cultural knowledge and traditional cognitive processes. There exists a significant gap between heritage-based design principles and their integration into architectural thinking and pedagogy. Veronica Ng et al. (2022) pointed out that cultural awareness and creative thinking related to tradition are largely absent from structured curricula in Malaysian architecture schools. Likewise, Sarah Mohd Hilmee and Kamarul Afizi Kosman (2023) further emphasized the lack of integration of intangible heritage into formal architectural coursework.

Absence of Contextual Creative Thinking Model

The core problem addressed by this study is the absence of a culturally contextual creative thinking model that can guide architectural designers in Malaysia. While the value of traditional craft is acknowledged, its translation into design thinking remains under-theorized and underutilized. Sarah Mohd Hilmee and Kamarul Afizi Kosman (2023) explicitly identified the need for such frameworks, noting that efforts to integrate local culture into creative design thinking remain insufficient and inconsistent. Similarly, Hook (2019) highlights the complexity of translating Indigenous cultural knowledge into architectural design, stressing the need for a sensitive and theoretically grounded approach.

Master Craftsman Latif Long's practice characterized by intuitive reflection, symbolic continuity and process oriented creation offers a promising foundation to fill this gap. Hence, this study investigates how Latif Long's creative process can inform a transferable thinking framework suitable for Malaysian architectural education and practice. This would ultimately contribute to the formation of a creative generation and architecture with a strong identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is guided by three theoretical constructs: Malay aesthetics, Zen aesthetics, and Wallas' model of creative process. Rather than serving as cultural references, these frameworks function as analytical tools to understand the creative cognition and design reasoning of Master Craftsman Latif Long. Malay aesthetics offers culturally grounded insight into traditional values such as harmony, symbolism and spiritual craftsmanship. Zen principles, while Japanese in origin, provide a comparative lens on intuitive practice and spatial sensitivity. Wallas' model, commonly applied in creativity research, structures the creative process into four phases which are preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification which informed the design of interview questions and the thematic coding using NVivo. Collectively, these constructs enabled a coherent analysis of Latif Long's creative process from philosophical, cognitive and cultural dimensions.

Malay aesthetics introduced by Zakaria Ali (1989) reflect Malay creativity and thought encompass six key principles 1. kesatuan (unity), 2. kepelbagaian (variety), 3. kesederhanaan (moderation), 4. keserasian (harmony), 5. keseimbangan (balance) and 6. kehalusan (refinement) which are embedded in traditional craftsmanship and design philosophy. These values shape the perception of beauty, function, and cultural meaning in Malay creative traditions. They provide the cultural depth required to contextualize Latif Long's philosophy, especially in understanding design decisions that reflect Malay identity and values.

Zen aesthetics introduced by Hisamatsu (1971) for evaluating aesthetics namely (1) *kanso* (simplicity), (2) *seijaku* (stillness), (3) *shibumi* (understated beauty), (4) *yūgen* (mysterious depth), (5) *wabi* (rustic elegance), (6) *sabi* (patina of age) and (7) *daisuzoku* (freedom). These principles align with the intuitive design processes and spatial sensibilities found in Malay creative practices. The inclusion of Zen is not intended as a cultural substitution but rather as a philosophical scaffold to interpret the latent dimensions of Latif Long's iterative and reflective creative process.

Wallas' model was created by Graham Wallas (1926) is one of the most widely used in assessing the creative process of individuals encompassing preparation, incubation, illumination and verification is widely recognized in creativity studies. It serves as a cognitive frame to structure interview questions and NVivo coding. For instance, questions like "What happens before you start carving?" or "How do ideas evolve during your process?" were mapped to Wallas phases. Codes such as 'simmering,' 'intuitive shift,' and 'final touches' were aligned accordingly.

These three constructs were critical in shaping the study's methodological design. They informed interview protocols and guided the creation of thematic nodes in NVivo. This alignment ensured coherence between theory, data collection and analysis. In the context of architectural identity, the review of these frameworks fills an important gap. While Malaysia has long discussed national identity in architecture (e.g., Seminar Identiti Seni Bina Kebangsaan 1981), much of this discourse has centered around form rather than underlying creative thought. Current literature lacks models connecting traditional creativity to architectural pedagogy. This study aims to bridge that gap.

The Applicability of Theories in Developing Creative Thinking Framework

The integration of Malay aesthetics, Zen aesthetics and Wallas' creative model as theoretical foundations is appropriate for developing a creative thinking framework particularly within the context of Malaysian cultural production and design. This synthesis is supported by previous research in Malaysian art, folklore and educational design which collectively demonstrate the effectiveness of combining Wallas' model with local aesthetic principles in shaping creative cognition.

Malay Aesthetics

Mumtaz Mokhtar (2018), in *Art and Craft in the Era of the Creative Industry in Malaysia*, emphasizes that Malay aesthetics, when integrated with traditional craft, form a strong foundation for creative frameworks within Malaysia's cultural sector. Her work highlights the relevance of Malay aesthetic values in cultivating creative identity and design innovation rooted in local tradition.

Wallas' Creative Process

Studies by Prabandari et al. (2024) and Maharani et al. (2017) successfully applied Wallas' four stages of creativity namely preparation, incubation, illumination and verification, to model creative thinking among students. Their findings demonstrate the model's flexibility and applicability across various disciplines including art and education. Similarly, Shaari et al. (2022) employed Wallas' framework to interpret folklore inspired drawings reinforcing the potential of Western creativity models in analyzing Southeast Asian creative processes. This cross-application supports the relevance of Wallas' model in constructing a structured creative thinking framework for Malaysian contexts.

Zen Aesthetics (Indirect Support)

The Asian Aesthetic Art and Individual Practices course (UiTM College of Creative Arts, 2018) introduces students to Zen and Malay aesthetic philosophies through comparative and integrative approaches encouraging reflection on wabi-sabi principles within local creative practices. Similarly, the Malaysia Cultural Insights Report (British Council, 2021) highlights that Malaysia's creative education increasingly embraces multicultural aesthetics, where Zen and Malay influences are often intertwined in art and design curricula. Complementing this, Wu Peifeng and Nadia Mohd Nasir (2025) examined Zen aesthetics in modern leisure resort design, providing insight into how Zen principles can inform contemporary Southeast Asian spatial and design philosophies. Collectively, these works illustrate an emerging foundation for integrating Zen philosophy as a comparative and reflective framework within Malaysian art and design education.

Together, these three frameworks complement one another by merging cultural depth, philosophical reflection and methodological structure, thereby shaping a holistic approach to creative thinking within Malaysian architectural and design contexts.

Table 1 below clarifies how each referenced work contributes to the theoretical or methodological foundation of the present research. The studies were selected for their alignment with key constructs that include Malay aesthetics, Zen principles, Wallas stages and their relevance to creative framework construction.

Table 1

Literature Supporting Creative Thinking Frameworks in Traditional and Cultural Arts

No	Type of Art	Author(s)	Theoretical Lens Applied	Key Insight Relevant to This Study
1	Craft & cultural heritage	Mokhtar (2018)	Malay Aesthetics	Demonstrates how traditional Malay values inform craft-based identity and aesthetic decisions.
2	Student creativity	Prabandari et al. (2024)	Wallas' Creative Process	Confirms effectiveness of Wallas' stages in structuring creative thought among learners.
3	Problem-solving	Maharani et al. (2017)	Wallas' Creative Process	Applies Wallas model to trace cognitive phases in art-based problem solving.
4	Drawing & folklore integration	Shaari et al. (2022)	Malay Aesthetics + Wallas	Shows how cultural themes and structured creativity can co-exist in contemporary visual work.
5	Ceramic carving	Tan & Lee (2021)	Zen Aesthetics	Zen minimalism and silence applied in craft production and tool shaping.
6	Islamic-Malay architectural design	Ahmad & Hassan (2015)	Malay Aesthetics	Validates traditional philosophy's integration into built environment identity.
7	Modern Japanese calligraphy	Saito (2016)	Zen Aesthetics	Interprets Japanese aesthetics as non-verbal thinking in spatial design, useful for comparison.
8	Folkloric carving	Jalil et al. (2024)	Malay Aesthetics	Connects motif development to cultural memory and creative intuition.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative narrative approach to explore the creative thinking framework of Master Craftsman Latif Long and its relevance to heritage based architectural design. A narrative design is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the subject's lived experiences, artistic processes and the cultural knowledge embedded in his work. As Creswell (2003) notes, methodology must align with the research goals and provide valid interpretations of contextual phenomena.

Data Collection

Two main methods of data collection were employed: (i) in-depth interviews and (ii) document analysis. Given that the primary subject, Latif Long is deceased direct observation was not possible. However, triangulation was achieved by sourcing data from multiple respondents with first hand experience and through archival materials, manuscripts and artefacts. Eight traditional woodcarvers were selected via snowball sampling based on three criteria:

- i. Familiarity with Latif Long for more than 10 years
- ii. Direct professional engagement (collaboration or mentorship)
- iii. Active involvement in woodcarving for over a decade.

Interview questions were semi-structured, open-ended and guided by the theoretical constructs of Malay aesthetics, Zen aesthetics and Wallas' four-stage creative process. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 12 software. Thematic coding nodes were developed in alignment with Wallas' phases (preparation, incubation, illumination, verification) and principles from both Malay and Zen aesthetic philosophies.

Theoretical Alignment with Methodology

To ensure methodological coherence, each theoretical construct directly informed the research instrument design:

First, Malay Aesthetics guided the interpretation of motifs, symbolic values and cultural philosophies in respondents' narratives.

Second, Zen Aesthetics was used to explore intuitive, reflective aspects of creativity especially in relation to process and spatial sensitivity.

Third, Wallas' Model structured the timeline of creative phases and helped identify cognitive patterns in the creative process.

This alignment enabled a deeper analytical lens beyond surface-level themes, ensuring that coding captured not just what respondents said but how their insights mapped onto cognitive and cultural dimensions of creativity.

Data Analysis Process

The NVivo-assisted analysis involved two cycles. First, initial coding aligned with pre established nodes based on the theoretical constructs such as unity, *yūgen* and incubation. Second, axial coding refined the categories into four emerging pillars of Latif Long's creative thinking namely background knowledge, aesthetic principles, workflow and dissemination.

This process ensured theoretical saturation and consistency. To strengthen rigour, triangulation was enhanced by cross-validating interview themes with document analysis (e.g., unpublished manuscripts, exhibition records and artefacts).

By embedding theory into both data collection and analysis, the study ensured that Latif Long's creative philosophy is not merely described but meaningfully interpreted within a transferable framework suitable for architectural thinking.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from interview transcripts and document analysis on the creative thinking framework of Master Craftsman Latif Long. The study identifies four core pillars namely as i. Background Knowledge, ii. Aesthetic Principles, iii. Workflow and iv. Knowledge Dissemination. In contrast to a purely descriptive presentation, these results are analyzed through the lenses of Wallas' four-stage creative process, Malay and Zen aesthetics and further contextualized within architectural education and design thinking.

Background Knowledge

Latif Long's creative process is deeply rooted in intergenerational knowledge. As a seventh generation woodcarver, his craftsmanship embodies rich cultural memory and tacit knowledge. This aligns with the "Preparation" phase of Wallas' model where accumulated knowledge and lived experience lay the groundwork for creativity.

Architectural Application: This suggests the relevance of embedding heritage narratives and cultural literacy into architectural studio pedagogy, encouraging students to draw from their socio-cultural contexts during the design process.

Aesthetic Principles

Latif Long's works demonstrate a hybrid aesthetic, informed by traditional Malay aesthetics (balance, symbolism, unity) and Zen aesthetics (simplicity, *seijaku*, *yūgen*). These principles guide the visual and symbolic dimensions of his carvings and reflect inner contemplation. This called Creative Process and his use of intuition and reflective judgment resonates with the "Incubation" and "Illumination" phases in Wallas' framework.

Architectural Relevance: These aesthetic principles can inform architectural design practices, especially in heritage based projects influencing spatial compositions, facade designs and symbolic motifs.

Workflow

The sequential stages in Latif Long's workflow closely align with Wallas' creative model. First, the preparation stage involved engaging with materials and understanding client intentions. Next, the incubation stage allowed creative pauses to facilitate subconscious processing. Subsequently, the illumination stage was characterized by the spontaneous emergence of design solutions. Finally, the verification stage focused on the reflective refinement and presentation of the final works.

From an architectural perspective, this four stage approach is transferable to architectural design studios through user-centered and iterative design processes, reinforcing a reflective cycle in student workflows.

Knowledge Dissemination

Latif Long disseminated his creative philosophy through exhibitions, exclusive pieces, training, publications and community engagement. This approach highlights the transmission of intangible cultural knowledge beyond tangible artefacts.

The educational implications of this finding suggest that architecture education can benefit from experiential learning through master-apprentice models, site immersion and public engagement as meaningful alternatives to conventional studio-based teaching.

Conceptual Integration Model

The conceptual model in figure 1 below illustrates how Latif Long's Creative Thinking Framework is constructed from four interconnected pillars: Background Knowledge, Aesthetic Principles, Workflow and Knowledge Dissemination. These pillars represent the foundational elements that shaped his creative process as a master craftsman. Each pillar is aligned with relevant theoretical underpinnings.

First, Background Knowledge corresponds with the Preparation phase in Wallas' Stages of Creativity, where tacit cultural knowledge and lived experiences inform idea generation.

Second, Aesthetic Principles are influenced by both Malay and Zen aesthetics, integrating cultural symbolism, balance, simplicity and intuitive expression.

Third, Workflow reflects the cyclical and reflective nature of Wallas' model namely incubation, illumination and verification embedded in Latif Long's making process.

Finally, Knowledge Dissemination represents how creative values and skills are transmitted through practice, mentorship and public engagement.

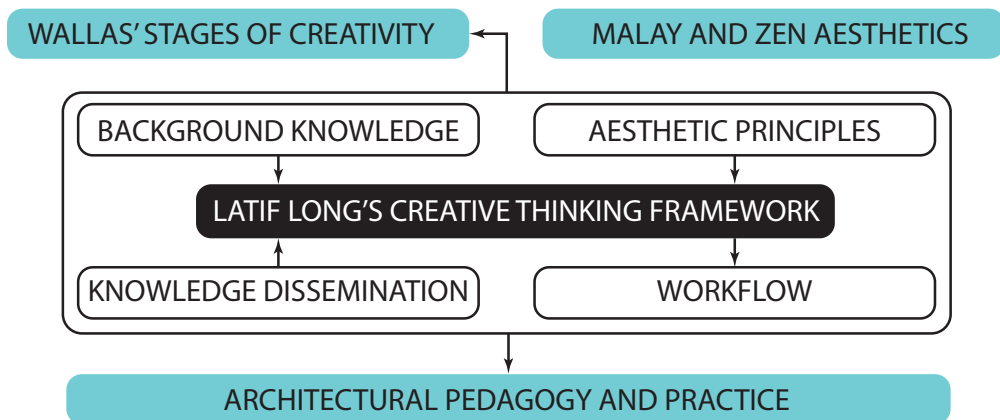


Figure 1. The development of Latif Long's creative thinking framework

Together, these four components form a cohesive framework that is not only descriptive of Latif Long's approach but also translatable to architectural pedagogy and practice. The model proposes that traditional, culturally rooted creative thinking can inform architectural design education by embedding reflective processes, cultural aesthetics and experiential knowledge into studio-based learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the creative thinking framework of Master Craftsman Latif Long provides a culturally grounded and theoretically robust model for architectural education. By integrating Malay and Zen aesthetics with Wallas' stages of creativity, the framework illustrates how traditional knowledge systems can be adapted to contemporary architectural design. The four core pillars which are background knowledge, aesthetic principles, workflow and knowledge dissemination offer a structured and reflective approach to creativity that bridges traditional craft with design pedagogy. Embedding this framework into architectural curricula can strengthen cultural identity, enhance design innovation and foster deeper engagement with heritage values.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This research contributes significantly to both theory and policy by developing a creative thinking framework rooted in local cultural practices. It enriches the theoretical discourse on design thinking by integrating cognitive models with indigenous aesthetics and offering a novel approach to creative process analysis. The study also aligns with the objectives of Malaysia's National Creative Industry Policy (DIKN) by offering a model that supports the growth of creative industries through structured, culturally relevant methodologies. In doing so, it lays a foundation for further academic and institutional exploration into culturally informed design thinking.

PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Practically, the framework can be applied in architectural design education and professional practice as a structured guide for integrating traditional knowledge, aesthetic principles and reflective creative processes into contemporary architectural design. It provides educators with a pedagogical reference for teaching creative thinking and supports practitioners in developing culturally informed design solutions. The framework also encourages experiential learning, mentorship and community engagement among architecture students. More importantly, it provides a practical foundation for the formation of Malay architectural design while supporting ongoing efforts to develop a Malaysian architectural identity and enrich creative pedagogy.

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