

# **Resurgence of Cinema as Cultural Laboratory in Malaysia: Design Exploration on Cinema Architecture to Manifest Film Culture in the Community**

**Deepankursingh GOWD<sup>1</sup>, Mohd Zairul bin Mohd Noor<sup>2\*</sup> &  
Jeffrey Lawrence D'Silva<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Architecture, Faculty of Design & Architecture,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43000, Serdang, Selangor

<sup>2</sup>Cyber Generation Lab, Institute for Social Science Studies,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43000, Serdang, Selangor

\*Corresponding Author

Email: m\_zairul@upm.edu.my

**To Link this Article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i11/19152> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i11/19152

**Published Date:** 03 November, 2023

## **Abstract**

Malaysia is always known for its plethora of cultures, traditions, and identity. Similarly, so does its cinema industry which has been existing for almost a century. The cinema theatre was a place and space where people of all ages meet and engage for entertainment. As the audience keeps growing, cinema halls are moving in shopping malls where more modern and bigger halls are being built to amuse people in both shopping and entertainment and the cinema theatre are closing down. These theatres were once an integral part of the urban fabric of the community and country. So, the architecture of the cinema provides a character, identity, and culture where which it acts a catalyst to socially sustainable society. To address this, architecture and cinema are used as two integral elements of sustainability principles on the social dimension consisting of equity and social identity, aesthetic, and comfort. A literature review was carried out using various databases to explore solutions to the questions posed in the study. The study presents a conceptual framework for a new cinema architecture which aims to reintroduce the cinema theatre as a cultural laboratory for the present and future generations and give a new perspective to the way of how the cinema theatres outside the shopping malls is. In summary, the study presents research on a new approach to cinema architecture and interaction with the urban fabric and community. The study demonstrates on how cinema theatre outside of shopping malls and the sustainability and criteria of cultural

entertainment with the design of cinema theatre and operational guidelines and mechanisms to use in cinema architecture in the urban development and community.

**Keywords:** Cinema Theatre, Social Sustainability, Urban Fabric, Culture

### **Introduction**

Cinema has always been a part of people's lives. It is a medium that can engage, educate, entertain, and influence audiences. It also provides cultural representation and inspiration to people. Roger Ebert, film critic, says cinema is one of the most powerful forms of art in the world. It changes the way we think, we feel and the way we see the world. (Ebert,2012). Cinema has introduced a realm of fantasies, realism, drama, social and sometimes controversies to the society.

With newly found form of entertainment, cinema theatres were created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to bring people into this new and unknown space of moving image and transport them across the world into different times and places. (Aramide Tinudu, 2018). The first cinema halls known as Nickelodeons, where patron and audience members would pay a nickel to attend a show and 'Odeon' is the Greek word for theatre. In the mid 1930's, the evolution in the architecture of the cinema theatre was influenced by the culture and class of the community where the rich and the poor seated on different levels to show the difference. Movie palaces were rapidly being built across the United States and United Kingdom. These palaces were opulent, extravagant and luxurious while the working class were forced to attend lower grade cinema halls with minorities or attend after the showing for upper class people on late nights. (Aramide Tinudu, 2018). By the end of the 1930's, a new trend of cinema came into place – Drive-In cinemas – because of the great depression many traditional theatres closed and the only form of entertainment during this tough period for families were drive-in cinemas which were far cheaper than traditional cinemas. (Shaw-Smith, 2009). The architecture of drive-in cinemas was basically an open field in a fan shape accommodating up to 400 cars. (Segrave, 2006). Subsequently, in the 1960s a new cinema culture was formed because it became more convenient for people to go see a movie. People would virtually be in a theatre as the cars transform into a private theatre box. People were free to talk, bring children and come with the whole family and contemplate a movie at their own comfort. (Shaw-smith, 2009).

One of the main purposes of the emergence of drive-in cinema was to show movies as an exhibition to people living in rural or located far from traditional cinemas. However, with rapid urbanization and increase in land values, the drive-in cinemas were diminished. (Segrave,2006). Consequently, multiplexes were built which accommodated more people and more screenings at different times of the day. This attracted more audience members at a fair ticket price. The growth of multiplex cinema was largely motivated by the profits made at a large scale. Multiplex cinema followed an Art Deco architecture with neon lighting to entice movie-goers to go watch films. The Art deco movement and multiplex cinema have created an identity of cinema multiplexes through the architecture.



In the

years of the 1980's, multiplexes moved to shopping malls where developers were using cinema theatres to seduce people to visit the malls. Moreover, the technologies used were more modern and the shopping malls could house more screens than ever with more parking facilities. This attracted more people along not only for the cinemas, but people came for other leisure facilities which made the malls more lucrative (Christof Papousek, 2019). However, the modern architectural style became homogenous and dull with no exterior or interior articulation like the standalone multiplexes which had an architectural and cultural identity, hence the film and cinema culture. Nowadays all the cinemas are the same.

Film historian Thomas Schatz argues that multiplexes have expanded the range of movies available to audiences, providing more opportunities for independent and foreign films to find an audience (Schatz, 1996) but these multiplexes do not express the feeling of a cinema theatre. They have become auditorium halls only showing films on a screen. Scholar Robert Rosenstone argues the young generations are not growing up with an appreciation of film culture as a coherent entity, they see films as individual works rather than as part of a larger culture. (Rosentone, 2009).

The rise of digital media coincides with the demise of cinema culture. The availability of online platforms and streaming services has given people more choices than ever for watching movies and other types of media. As a result, many individuals no longer place as much importance on the traditional movie theatre experience when watching a movie. Film critic Richard Brody wrote the long-term shift towards home viewing has worn the movie experience and with it the audience's sense of the importance of movies. (Brody, 2016). After the COVID-19 pandemic, people are flocking towards cinemas but as a means of escapism from the harsh everyday life, hence the importance of film culture is diminishing. Additionally, online streaming services have taken over the film culture and cinema going culture over the world. A 2017 study in the Journal of Health Psychology found that "watching television, including binge-watching, was positively associated with higher levels of sedentary behaviour affecting the social sustainability on the society.

To attract audiences and bring back the film culture and cinema-going culture, innovative approaches such as boutique cinemas which serves another class of cinema. It is the modern cinema palaces; adorned with luxurious seating, latest technology, and restaurant-like refreshments. However, from my observation, only the interior articulation of the cinema is trying to speak of film culture while the exterior is either the entrance in a shopping mall or a retrofitted shop house. Film critic Peter Bradshaw argues that boutique cinema can lead to a sense of exclusivity and elitism. He writes, "The boutique cinema boom has created a culture of self-congratulation among certain film-lovers, who treat themselves to the 'finer' things in life, and whose tastes have been pandered to by the growth in expensive boutique cinemas."

In conclusion, the demise of film culture is increasing due the homogeneity of cinema theatres and streaming services. This is having a repercussion not only on the film culture but also on the social sustainability of the society and the architecture through which identity and culture is seen and experienced and enticed. Cinema theatres used to be culture laboratory for a country. Currently there are few studies being conducted on how film culture can be resurged through architecture – the future of cinema theatre and culture could lie in the evolution of its architecture.

### **Methodology**

The study conducted a thorough literature review using several databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Elsevier. Keywords such as cinema theatre, social sustainability, urban fabric, culture were used in the searching process.

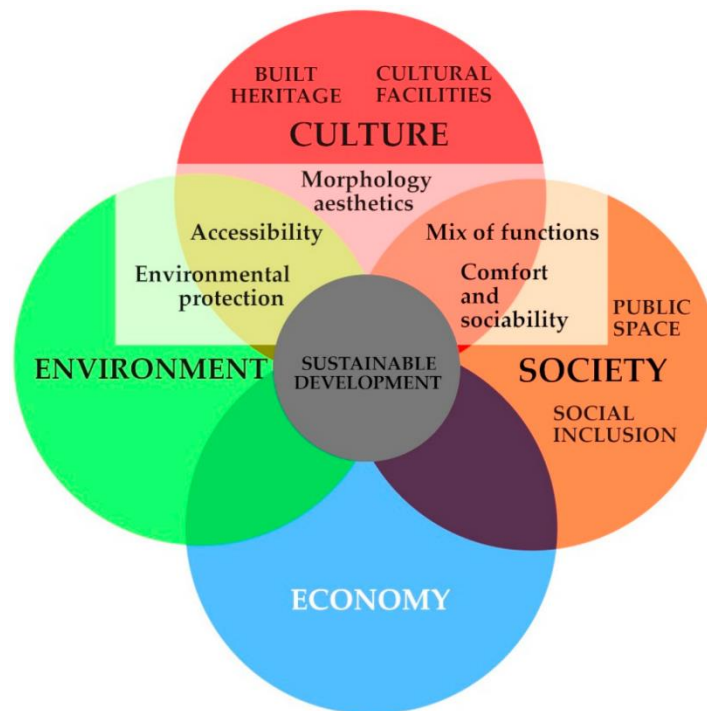
### **Findings and Discussion**

The intricate relationship between cinema and the city, which can be also defined as the relationship between the urban fabric and the cinematic space has been established since the early 1930s when the first cinema theatre was built. While the architecture of cinema theatres evolved, the urban space around also evolved with and made cinema theatres as the center of social sustainability, identity, entertainment and culture. This had a repercussion on the people, whereby they could relate to the culture and identity created.

Movie theatres are one of the many types of buildings with cultural significance which add to a community's character, quality of life and raise a sense of pride for residents in Vancouver communities. Neighbourhood movie theatres have been an essential component of the movie-going experience for the citizens of Vancouver since the 1930s (GVRD, 1995). The design that made movie palaces so alluring was avoided in favour of efficiency for the theatre in the shopping centre. The necessary banner was outside announcing the movies. There were waiting areas, a food stand, and restrooms in the lobby. The auditorium was a simple box with chairs in front and a screen at one end. (Gomery, 1992)

Cultural Importance of standalone cinemas may be considered cultural landmarks that hold a special place in the community. For example, a cinema that has been operating for several decades may be a cherished part of the neighborhood's history and identity, and patrons may feel a sense of loyalty and attachment to the cinema as a result. Programming Flexibility: Standalone cinemas may have more flexibility in terms of programming, as they are not constrained by the demands of multiple screens and showtimes. This can allow them to showcase a wider range of films, including independent and foreign films, and to host special events such as retrospectives and Q&A sessions with filmmakers.

Another focus of the study consists of the sustainability of cinema architecture. Application of sustainability concepts in architecture is presented as sustainable architecture, or architecture, or ecological architecture, or green architecture or environmental architecture which all have the same meaning and are compatible with environment. As Tadao Ando says "I'll build buildings that are sustainable in nature." In other words, the task of sustainable architecture is constructing buildings that are tolerated in nature; In addition, it will preservation the identity and object matching with the layers of mental images of historical and future. So the main issue of sustainable architecture is how it can be achieved consistently to the development without nature, without human, without inequality, injustice, and for all human generations. These new approaches in urban planning and development policies are also essential. (Mozhdeh Lotfaliadeh, 2013)



To summarize, modern cinema multiplexes are leaving behind the most important aspect of cinema culture; that is the essence of providing the audience, the community and society the feeling of an urban fabric of cinematic culture and space to which the local people and even international visitors can identify. Moreover, little is being done on the sustainable side. Shopping malls are being built because “cinema” attracts people to visit and have a social life. There is a disregard of both culture and sustainability which keeps increasing due to innovations.

### Conceptual Framework

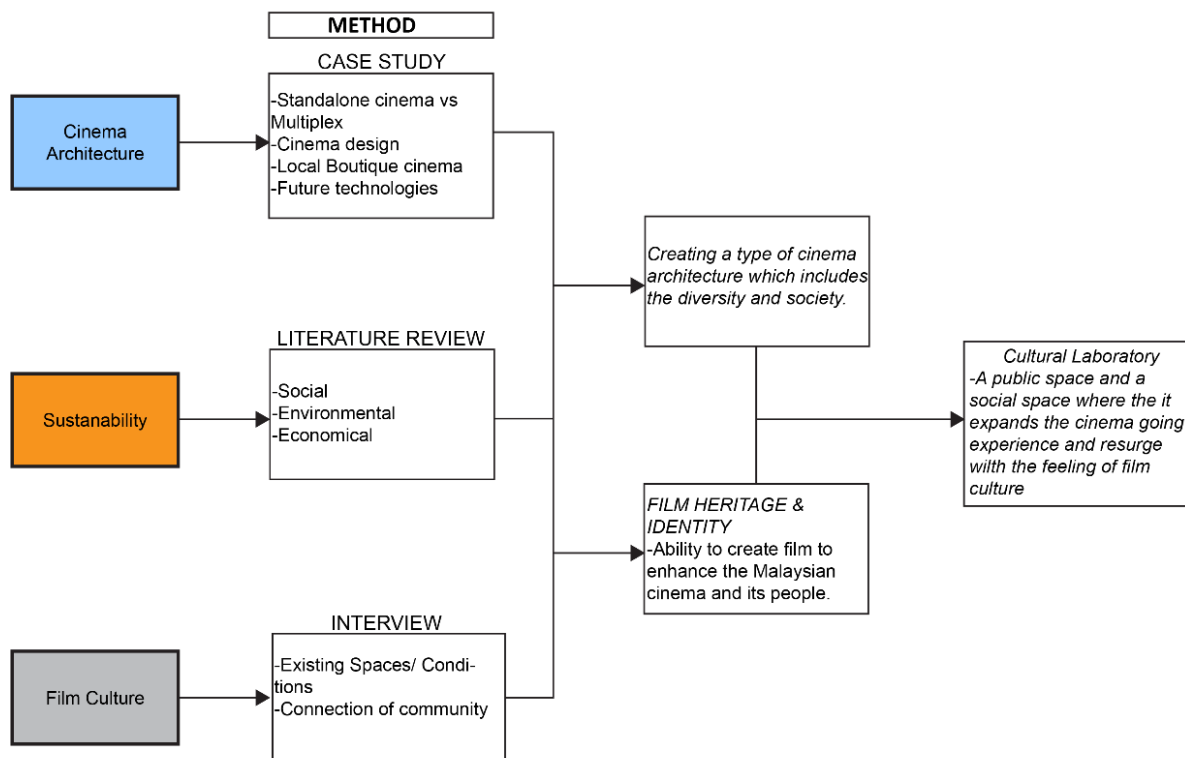
In the present line of theatres in Malaysia, all the standalone cinemas which gave identity to the cinema industry and the society are closing down and multiplex in shopping malls are cropping up everywhere. These multiplex cinemas are more concerned about the profits and competition amongst difference brands. The social sustainability regarding both the film culture and architecture has been disregarded.

Therefore in this chapter, a conceptual framework for cinema architecture design will be proposed based on user-centered design and the principles of sustainable design. From explored studies and theories, the research suggest a cultural laboratory for film culture in a more sustainable approach in both its architecture and social. The idea of a having a Cultural laboratory is to cater not just for the present situations but also for the future generations who will experience the cinema culture and film culture. This concept of a Cultural Laboratory in the cinema industry could create a paradigm shift in the established cinema industry. This could attract not only local natives but also international visitors to learn more of the film culture of Malaysia.

Hence, three components have been identified to create the new paradigm, which are

- Cinema Architecture
- Sustainability

- Film Culture



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework for Cultural Laboratory. Source: Deep (2023)

In conclusion, this chapter has presented a conceptual framework of design to improve the film culture in Malaysia through the cinema architecture to bring back the identity and culture amongst the public and the urban fabric. Additionally, this study need more research and testing to apply the design to create a new paradigm.

**Limitation of Research**

There are very little case studies which may or may not be adequate for this issue. The number of articles and publications about socially engaging cinema culture in the community is very limited and there are no existing established institute to improve on or to research upon. Among the factors contributing to such a scenario are limited mainstream coverage as mainstream media often focuses on popular and commercially successful films, which may not necessarily delve into the socially engaging aspects of cinema, socially engaging cinema culture may be a niche interest that appeals to a specific segment of the population, and many people may not be aware of the potential for cinema to engage and inspire social change within a community.

**Recommendations**

Future research can be done on sustainable cinema theatres where the spaces can be re-used or re-adapted to turn into new functions in the cine-scape realm. It can also save the cost of set design for films or theatre. Besides, more studies can be done to enhance energy

efficiency of cinema theaters, effective waste management strategies in cinema theaters, examining the use of sustainable materials and design principles in cinema theater construction and renovation, and exploring the integration of green technologies in cinema theaters.

### **Conclusion**

The study shows that the cinema culture is slowly but surely diminishing due to new multiplexes being built and luxurious boutique cinema trying to emulate what cinema theatres used to be in the past. However, the evolution of cinema is in its architecture. Having a paradigm shift in the cinema culture might re-introduce the culture and tradition of cinema-going to the local urban fabric under the influence of sustainable cinema architecture. Research on spaces that will help to engage the local public and filmmakers will facilitate the upliftment of the cultural proximity and hence the identity.

### **References**

- Increasing Awareness of Diversity through Community Engagement and Films Othelia Eun-Kyoung Lee and Mary Ann Priester Journal of Social Work Education (2015)
- Multiethnic Audiences Interpretation of National Identity in Malaysia through Alternative Film of Nasi Lemak 2.0, Mohd Hanafi Bin Jumrah [https://www.academia.edu/44055266/Multiethnic\\_Audiences\\_Interpretation\\_of\\_National\\_Identity\\_in\\_Malaysia\\_through\\_Alternative\\_Film\\_of\\_Nasi\\_Lemak\\_2\\_0](https://www.academia.edu/44055266/Multiethnic_Audiences_Interpretation_of_National_Identity_in_Malaysia_through_Alternative_Film_of_Nasi_Lemak_2_0)
- The role of public support for the film industry – an analysis of movie production incentives in Europe. Agnieszka Orankiewicz