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# Global or Local Professional Practice: Factors to be Considered by Architects in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors influencing Malaysian architects' decision to pursue, or not to pursue, international projects in their practices. Undertaking these projects can be described as 'globalization' or 'localization'. However, considering that there is an increase in international architects practicing in Malaysia, these foreign architects' views are also taken into consideration, especially concerning the factors that motivates them to work in Malaysia. The study is qualitative in nature; involving detailed interviews with 17 practicing architects - both local and foreign. The interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was carried out to find the dominant themes. The results are useful as a guide for future architects, especially in Malaysia; in finding out what preparations are necessary for them to pursue internationalization in their practices. Results indicate that, at the time of the study, globalization is seen mostly as an option - not a necessity yet - to the architect regardless of whether he / she is ready for it. Localization is still seen as sufficient to cater for the local architect's needs. This view is generally accepted despite there being challenges posed by fair competition and meagre architect's fees; forming the two most prominent obstacles to survival in the local profession.

## 1. Introduction

Globalization is the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence and start operating on an international scale. Despite being a concept often discussed in recent literature, the term is used in many different contexts [1,2]. Griffin and Pustay [3] define globalization as "the inexorable integration of markets, nation states, and technological advancements in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations, and countries to reach around the world further, faster, and cheaper than ever before" while Walker describes it as a term associated with the movement of capital, labour, product and ideas across national boundaries [4]. This definition implies a broadening of local and national perspectives on globalization one that views the

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world as interconnected, interrelated, interdependent, and marked by the free transfer of capital, goods, and services across national borders and frontiers [5]. Consequently, globalization is often referred to as internationalization. Ahmed points out that globalization which created the global village concept – has an immense and direct impact on a country’s domain of architecture [6].

The World Trade Organization (WTO), for example, is a global and international organization that deals with the rules of trade between nations. WTO agreements are negotiated and signed by most of the world’s trading nations and ratified by the respective country’s governments and ruling bodies. The WTO ensures that trade flows smoothly and freely between nations [7], and its key objective is to design and set the rules for all international trades [8].

The ‘opposite’ of global, i.e. ‘national’, is viewed by numerous researchers as ‘two sides of the same coin’ and that this sense of identity is polarized [9,10]. Nationalization (or localization), however, is described as the process of giving local character to a product or service or restricting it to a particular place (such as a region or country). (The term “localization” is also used to refer to the process of adapting a product or service to a specific market, although this definition is beyond the scope of this research project.) Because localization does not venture across borders, it is the opposite of globalization.

For the purposes of this project, localization refers to the trading system that existed before globalization: in other words, when business was done locally, and most people lived, worked, and died in the region or place, in which they were born. Localization is still in operation; many local business people have comfortably adapted and localized their businesses instead of venturing across borders. That is to say, although several Malaysian business people have traveled abroad, many have never left the country. The first group is more globalized, whereas the second group is more localized. This distinction also pertains to architecture: many architects have ventured across the borders, whereas others have preferred to remain in Malaysia.

Although a number of architects advocate globalization, others support a more local perspective. Localization as an architectural movement emphasizes a sense of place, site, climate, culture, and identity. As shown in Table 1, a 2014 report by the University of Hong Kong’s Faculty of Architecture (“Globalization and Localization of Architecture and Urban Planning”) compares the pros and cons of localization to globalization [11]. In light of this comparison, it is not surprising that the term glocal (a combination of global and local) surfaced in the early 2000s to reflect both architectural perspectives. Furthermore, several members of the architecture fraternity advocate a global approach to architecture that does not disregard the values of local architecture.

Table 1, which lists the pros and cons of architecture as described in the above-mentioned report published by the University of Hong Kong, is probably context- and site-specific. The issue of globalization versus localization in architecture would, therefore, be approached differently in other countries across the world: for example, Thailand, Australia, or India.

**Table 1**  
 Pros and cons of globalization and localization [12]

	Pros	Cons
Localization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting regional identity</li> <li>• Promoting a reputation for cultural authenticity, encouraging tourism</li> <li>• Encouraging traditional craftsmanship</li> <li>• Solving regional needs</li> <li>• Minimizing building costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stagnation in the technological advancement of construction methods</li> <li>• Lack of standardization across regions</li> <li>• Inefficiency in the face of swift urban development</li> <li>• Regional segregation</li> </ul>

Globalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technological advancement of construction methods can improve the living environment</li> <li>• Makes quick development possible</li> <li>• Contributes to a successful international image to reassure potential investors from global markets that their needs will be met (for example, world-class offices and luxury shopping malls)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of cultural traditions and identity</li> <li>• Regional interests and needs may be overshadowed by the economic benefit gained</li> <li>• Urban sites are used to project a positive city image rather than improving local inhabitants' daily lives</li> </ul>
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Table 2 [13] shows the 2012 analysis of the architectural services contribution to the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of Malaysia, which was a mere 1/800 (0.125%). (GDP is the total value of everything produced in a specific country.) The architecture industry in Malaysia's contribution is very small compared to that in the UK, which is 4.8 billion pounds per year, according to Jackson [14]. Without the input from professional architects, new buildings (which contribute to the economy) cannot be realized.

As shown in Table 2, the Statistics of 2015–2016 of International Trade in Services by Component in Malaysia published by MITI shows that the construction industry in Malaysia imports more than it exports, which means that the country relies on international consultants (i.e., architects and engineers) to design and construct its buildings. (This imbalance in international trade should be investigated in future projects.) The crucial role of local architects in contributing to the industry's contribution to Malaysia's GDP should, therefore, not be underestimated.

It is also pointed out that although experts agree, in theory, that free trade should be beneficial to all involved, its implementation has been anything but beneficial for developing countries. This article explores whether developing countries, such as Malaysia, stand to gain, or lose from this exposure to open competition in light of the inequity in the market, especially toward local businesses that struggle to sustain themselves and compete fairly.

**Table 2**

Statistics of international trade in services by component 2015-2016 [15]

JADUAL 2: PERDAGANGAN PERKHIDMATAN ANTARABANGSA MENGIKUT KOMPONEN, 2015-2016		RM Juta/Million					
TABLE 2: STATISTICS OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN SERVICES BY COMPONENT, 2015-2016		Eksport	Import	Bersih	Eksport	Import	Bersih
		Exports	Imports	Net	Exports	Imports	Net
JUMLAH/ TOTAL		136,095	156,727	-20,632	146,313	165,403	-19,090
1.	Perkhidmatan pembuatan bagi input fizikal dimiliki pihak lain Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	8,402	211	8,191	9,440	252	9,188
2.	Perkhidmatan penyenggaraan dan pembaikan t.t.t.l./ Maintenance and repair services n.i.e.	1,460	1,477	-17	1,502	1,691	-189
3.	Pengangkutan/ Transport	16,365	40,930	-24,565	16,792	40,305	-23,513
3.1.	Penumpang/ Passenger	5,963	3,471	2,492	6,192	3,224	2,968
3.2.	Muatan/ Freight	4,138	35,572	-31,434	4,133	35,417	-31,284
3.3.	Lain-lain/ Others	6,264	1,887	4,377	6,467	1,664	4,802
4.	Perjalanan/ Travel	68,675	41,734	26,941	74,975	43,449	31,526

4.1. Perniagaan/ Business	9,915	7,384	2,531	10,561	7,361	3,200
4.2. Peribadi/ Personal	58,760	34,350	24,410	64,414	36,088	28,326
5. Pembinaan/ Construction	4,038	10,549	-6,511	4,086	12,219	-8,133
6. Perkhidmatan insurans dan pencen/ Insurance and pension services	1,463	9,222	-7,759	1,399	8,368	-7,969
7. Perkhidmatan kewangan/ Financial services	1,332	1,681	-349	2,038	2,194	-156

Globalization allows Malaysian architects to venture into international markets while simultaneously allowing foreign architects to practice in Malaysia. It is important to note that both local and foreign architects have a choice in the matter. Against this background, this article aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. Determine the factors that influence Malaysian architects' decision to remain exclusively in a local market.
- ii. Determine the factors that influence Malaysian architects' decision to venture into international markets.
- iii. Determine the factors the influence international architects' decision to venture into the Malaysian market.

It is essential to obtain the perspectives and establish the motivations of foreign architects because their participation in globalization affects local architects. Therefore, the insight gained from the third objective allowed researchers to acquire a more complete and in-depth understanding of the international business cycle in the industry. The article also explores the viewpoints of professional architects on the advantages and disadvantages of entering the international marketplace.

This research is in the area of international business and focuses on the service sector of architecture, which falls under the construction industry. Owing to time constraints, only 17 architects were able to participate in the interviews, which limits the scope of the findings.

## 2. Methodology

This research focuses on three groups of architects: Malaysian architects who venture into international projects, those who decide to work in Malaysia, and foreign architects who practice in Malaysia. The research, which aims to establish the factors that influence these architects' decisions, is exploratory as these are still unknown. Therefore, a qualitative research approach that focuses on interviews was selected for this project.

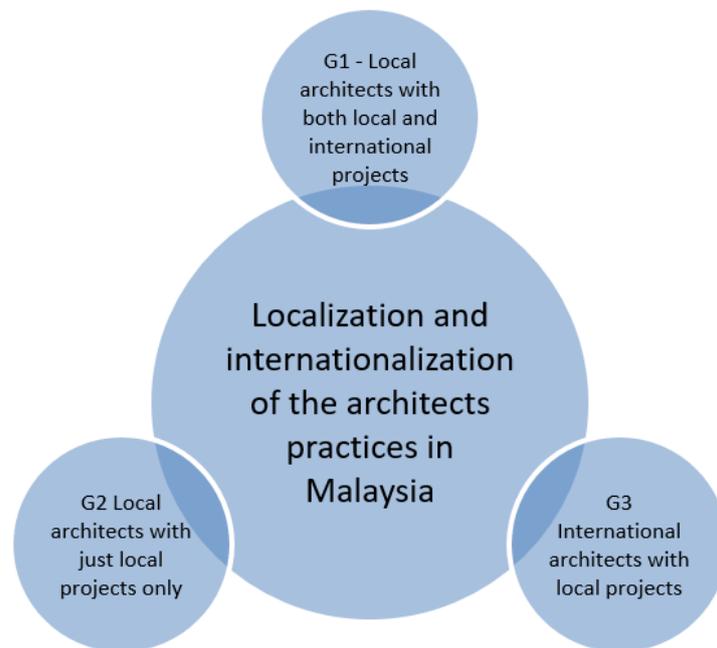
As Table 3 shows, a total of 17 architects participated in the interviews during June and July 2019. Because their overall responses are very similar, the researcher is confident that these views reflect those of the majority of architects. In this regard, Boyce et al. [13] points out that although sample size determination is an essential step in a statistical study, it should not be the primary concern: the researcher should, above all, aim to design a high-quality study.

Table 3 gives the profiles of the architects who participated in the study. As far as possible, the researcher used a stratified random sampling technique. Of the 17 respondents, only three were female, as women seemed reluctant to participate in the interviews. Architects from China, Malaysia, India, USA, Japan, Syria, Yemen, and the UK formed part of the inquiry. Participants' ages ranged between 30 and 60 years.

The respondents over all three groups were based in either Kuala Lumpur or Penang—the two most developed cities in Malaysia. Five of the local respondents actively pursued both local and international projects (Group 1), five local architects chose to engage with local projects (Group 2), and seven foreign respondents carried out business in Malaysia (Group 3) as shown in Figure 1.

**Table 3**  
 Groupings and respondents list for the research [16]

Description	G	Code	Ethnicity / Nationality	Age	Sex	Location of Practice
Malaysian architects with international projects (global)	Group 1	R1	Malay	54	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R2	Malay	50s	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R3	Chinese	38	Male	Penang
		R4	Chinese	34	Male	Penang
		R5	Chinese	39	Male	Penang
Malaysian architects with local projects (local)	Group 2	R6	Chinese	44	Male	Penang
		R7	Indian	52	Female	Penang
		R8	Malay	55	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R9	Malay	46	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R10	Malay	53	Female	Penang
Foreign architects with local projects (global)	Group 3	R11	British	77	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R12	American	45	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R13	German	48	Female	Kuala Lumpur
		R14	Syrian	36	Male	Penang
		R15	Chinese American	45	Male	Kuala Lumpur
		R16	Yemeni	50	Male	Penang
		R17	Japanese	45	Male	Kuala Lumpur



**Fig. 1.** Framework of the research showing interrelations of the three groups to the overall topic of research [16]

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Qualitative Research Analysis: Thematics

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis as “a research technique, with which conclusions can be drawn on the basis of any kind of data by means of systematic and objective analysis of its constituent elements” [17]. The aim of content analysis is, therefore, to establish the broad dimensions of the responses in order to achieve the objectives of the study. In thematic analysis, as shown in Table 4, the researcher identifies a theme that reflects a pattern or shared meaning organized around a core concept or idea, or a central organizing concept [14].

**Table 4**  
Thematic Analysis

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Below is a discussion on the themes derived from data collected through interviews with architects in Group 1 (those with local and global projects) and in Group 2 (those who rely on local business opportunities). Local architects with local and global projects.

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**THEME 1: GLOBALIZATION IS INEVITABLE**

**ANSWERS      DISCUSSION**

R1, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10      Six of the respondents from these two groups are of the opinion that globalization is inevitable and that Malaysia cannot prevent foreigners from entering the local market. They are worried that the job opportunities are few, and many practices seem to be downsizing. Although they are uncomfortable with the idea of foreign architects working in Malaysia, they try to view globalization in a positive light.

**THEME 2: THE GOVERNMENT HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO CONTROL, REWARD, AND SUPPORT ARCHITECTS**

R1, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10      Respondents indicated that the government has an important role in determining how Malaysia can benefit from the internationalization of its architectural services. Furthermore, a few of the respondents from these two groups believe that the government should protect its architects and architecture. Exporting architectural services can be expensive, and the government should facilitate this by providing support and incentives.

**THEME 3: ARCHITECT FEES SHOULD BE ENFORCED**

R1, R2, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10      Eight out of ten respondents in these two groups believe that the government should ensure that all architects pay their architectural fees, which is a legal requirement, to level the playing field among local and foreign architects.

**THEME 4: BETTER INCLUSION IN COMPETITIONS**

R1, R2, R4, R6, R8, R9, R10      Seven of the Malaysian respondents indicated that project commissions should be made more transparent, fair, and open to provide more opportunities for all architects. They agree that professional juries should decide on who is awarded the final project. Furthermore, although standard operating procedures are not followed in Malaysia with regard to architecture project commissions, the respondents agree that it should be encouraged. In addition, professional design competitions are seen as healthy ways of assigning projects to deserving practices and architects.

**THEME 5: FOREIGN SPECIALIST INPUT IS INVALUABLE**

R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8      Malaysia still needs input from foreign architects, especially for special projects or technological aspects, to keep abreast of advancements in design, and construction. Participants argue that Malaysian and foreign architects need to collaborate in large local projects to benefit all the parties

**THEME 6: THE LOCAL ECONOMY STILL PROVIDES SUFFICIENT JOB OPPORTUNITIES**

R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7      The number of local construction opportunities is enough to sustain local architects and practices. However, as a developing country, Malaysia has room for development, but these opportunities depend on the economy and how the government manages the country. Six of the local architects agree that, currently, there are sufficient opportunities for Malaysian architects, and they do not need to venture into the global market.

**THEME 7: PRACTICE SIZE AND CAPACITY AFFECT GLOBAL DECISIONS**

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R6, R7, R8, R9, R10 Because some local practices are small, and they have limited capacity and resources, they cannot commit to international projects. Furthermore, smaller practices are rarely awarded larger projects—whether these are local or international.

**THEME 8: MANY BENEFITS FOR VENTURING GLOBAL**

R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R8 Seven of the respondents in this group are of the opinion that local architects venture into the global market for exposure and experience, more attractive fees, and to motivate staff to explore new ideas. International projects have several benefits and advantages, including adding to the firm's experience and portfolio. Architects and firms should, therefore, make use of these opportunities.

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Below is a discussion on the themes derived from data collected through interviews with the architects in Group 3 (foreign architects who work locally).

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**THEME 9: BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES IN MALAYSIA**

Agree (R13, R14, R16, R17, R12) Malaysia offers several opportunities for architects, especially for foreign architects who come from developed countries where the market is saturated.

**THEME 10: PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS**

R12, R16, R11, R13, R15 Five of the seven participants indicated that the cultural diversity in Malaysia appeals to them. Furthermore, it is a safe, peaceful, and pleasant country to live in. Others have good friends or a spouse in Malaysia. Some of the pull factors are, therefore, personal and not professional.

**THEME 11: THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT IS INEFFICIENT**

R12, R13, R14, R15, R17 Some of the foreign architects who participated in this study believe that the Malaysian government and the professional body for architects are not efficient. They do not believe that the government can effectively facilitate architectural services here. One respondent, for example, prefers the environment in Singapore.

**THEME 12: LOCAL IS GOOD, BUT NOT GREAT**

R11–R17 All the foreign architects are of the opinion that Malaysian architects are excellent but have not yet reached international standards. The foreign architects have high regard for the local architects' capabilities and believe that they are on par with them (the foreign architects).

**THEME 13: GLOBALIZATION DEPENDS ON CAPACITY**

R11, R12, R13, R14, R16 Globalization might seem inevitable, but Malaysian architects should not feel pressured to venture internationally; the decision ultimately depends on an individual's or a practice's principles and capacity to do so. There are numerous opportunities—both locally and globally—and architects can practice from anywhere in this borderless world.

**THEME 14: LOCAL ARCHITECTS MUST PERFORM TO ACHIEVE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS**

R13, R14, R15, R12, R17 Foreign architects agree that Malaysian professionals should continue to improvise and upgrade their practices in order to meet the expectations of international clients. Malaysian architects should keep abreast of the latest trends and technologies and not be complacent; if they do not continue improving, they will not beat foreign architects in international competitions.

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## 4. Conclusions

The interviews made it clear that although local architects would leap at the opportunity to take on international projects, several factors prevent them from doing so. These include the following:

- i. There is a scarcity in international opportunities (which means that they will have to improve their marketing strategies).
- ii. Small practices with few trained and motivated staff simply do not have the capacity to take on international projects.
- iii. International projects are more complex owing to the differences in systems, currencies, by-laws, culture, and language, and, depending on the client and contract, the logistics can be expensive.
- iv. Local architects are more comfortable with local projects, for which there are still a number of opportunities. From these responses, it can therefore be concluded that small practices commit to projects on the basis of the firm's capacity.

Those local architects who take on international projects do so for the following reasons:

- i. To learn from, advocate, and follow the latest advancements in construction technology.
- ii. To obtain exposure and gain experience within different settings.
- iii. Because the fees are usually more attractive.
- iv. To promote a culture of continuous improvement and learning among personnel and team members.
- v. To be prepared when the local economy is at a downturn and there are not enough local projects to sustain the practice. It is important to note that architects in Group 2 work at larger firms compared with the first group, and their capacity allows them to commit to international projects.

The seven foreign architects who were interviewed for this project were motivated to work in Malaysia for the following reasons:

- i. To be near their spouses, family, or friends.
- ii. To enjoy Malaysia's cultural diversity, safety, and peace, believing that the country offers them architectural opportunities.
- iii. To participate in globalization, although they admit that it is not necessary to do so and that the decision to globalize depends on the individual and the capacity of a practice.
- iv. Because their countries are either overdeveloped with a saturated market or unsafe due to political instability and unrest.

These results would be of value to the professional board, because findings such as these are necessary in order to motivate the government on ways to improve the industry and design and implement policies that will benefit all parties involved.

However, this research is very much limited to the time constraints, it would have been a more enriching and invaluable results if more data is achieved from more experienced architects both local and international. It is hoped that the younger generation can take it up from here and plus the effects of artificial intelligence to design would even make the research more challenging.

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