Green Open Spaces as Civilizational Constructs in Malay-Islamic Architecture: Integrating Environmental Ethics and Human Capacity Toward Sustainable Urbanism

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Abstract

This paper explores Green Open Space (GOS) as a civilizational construct within the paradigm of Malay-Islamic architecture. Going beyond ecological and aesthetic interpretations, it positions GOS as a manifestation of spiritual, ethical, and environmental unity rooted in the principles of tawhid (divine oneness), amanah (stewardship), and mizan (balance). Drawing from a qualitative hermeneutic methodology, this research synthesizes Islamic environmental ethics, traditional Malay settlement morphology, and contemporary urban sustainability discourse. Findings reveal that traditional Malay spatial logic—centered around mosques, water bodies, and vegetation—reflects a cosmological order that integrates faith, community, and ecology. In contrast, modern urbanism often prioritizes efficiency and profit over moral and environmental integrity. The study proposes a civilizational sustainability framework that unites Islamic human capacity, environmental stewardship, and spatial ethics. It concludes that integrating GOS within urban and halal industrial design can transform cities into moral ecosystems guided by divine harmony and sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: *Green Open Space; Malay-Islamic Architecture; Civilizational Sustainability; Environmental Ethics; Tawhid–Amanah–Mizan Framework*

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Introduction

The concept of Green Open Space (GOS) has transcended its conventional interpretation as a mere physical and ecological construct to encompass profound cultural, spiritual, and civilizational dimensions. Within the context of Malay-Islamic civilization, the relationship between humans and nature is not only ecological but also theological, reflecting the Islamic worldview (tasawwur Islami) that emphasizes the principles of tawhid (the unity of creation under divine order), amanah (human stewardship and accountability), and mizan (cosmic balance). These ontological and ethical values are historically manifested in the spatial organization of traditional Malay settlements, where the integration of natural elements such as water, vegetation, and open communal areas embodies the equilibrium between built and natural environments. Consequently, green open spaces in Malay culture function as both ecological assets and moral symbols of environmental stewardship.

In the era of globalization, however, accelerated urbanization, industrial development, and the emergence of halal economic hubs have significantly transformed the socio-spatial landscape of Malay societies. While these processes contribute to economic modernization, they simultaneously pose challenges to the preservation of local ecological ethics and civilizational identity. For example, research in the Malay context shows that urban green spaces are not merely amenities but critical to human health, social cohesion, and the formation of an "Islamic Green City" paradigm. Meanwhile, from the perspective of Islamic environmental ethics more broadly, human stewardship (*amanah*) and the maintenance of balance (*mizan*) provide normative foundations for environmental design and policy [3].

The decline in ecological sensitivity and the fragmentation of traditional settlement patterns indicate a growing disconnect between contemporary urban planning paradigms and the foundational values of Malay-Islamic environmental thought [1]. Hence, perceiving green open spaces merely through a utilitarian or aesthetic lens is insufficient; they must be reinterpreted as civilizational constructs that encapsulate the spiritual and ethical relationship between humans and the environment.

This research seeks to critically examine how the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of Malay-Islamic civilization can inform the reintegration of environmental ethics within contemporary green open space planning. It posits that the revitalization of Islamic human capacity—defined as the holistic development of intellectual, moral, and ecological consciousness—is central to achieving sustainable urban development in the global era. Through a synthesis of environmental philosophy, cultural heritage studies, and Islamic urbanism, this study argues that the revival of Malay-Islamic environmental wisdom offers an alternative paradigm for aligning economic globalization, halal ecosystem development, and ecological sustainability. Ultimately, such integration reinforces community identity, cultivates ethical urban citizenship, and restores harmony between human advancement and divine ecological order.

Literature Review

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and literature-based methodology. It adopts a civilizational hermeneutic framework, emphasizing interpretation across philosophy, theology, and architecture. Three analytic stages were followed: (1) extraction of ethical principles from Islamic sources, (2) comparative synthesis with Malay spatial traditions, and (3) conceptual modeling of civilizational sustainability. This non-empirical approach allows

integration between symbolic meaning, architectural morphology, and environmental ethics, providing a normative lens for reinterpreting urban sustainability.

Research Methodology

The conceptual model developed in this study synthesizes the foundational Islamic principles of tawhid, amanah, and mizan into a civilizational sustainability framework. Tawhid affirms unity between the Creator, humanity, and the environment; Amanah establishes moral responsibility to safeguard nature; and Mizan promotes balance between material progress and ecological preservation. When integrated into GOS design, these principles foster spaces that are both ecologically functional and spiritually meaningful. The model positions GOS as a core architectural element in realizing a balanced urban ecosystem—a 'moral landscape' that nurtures both faith and sustainability.

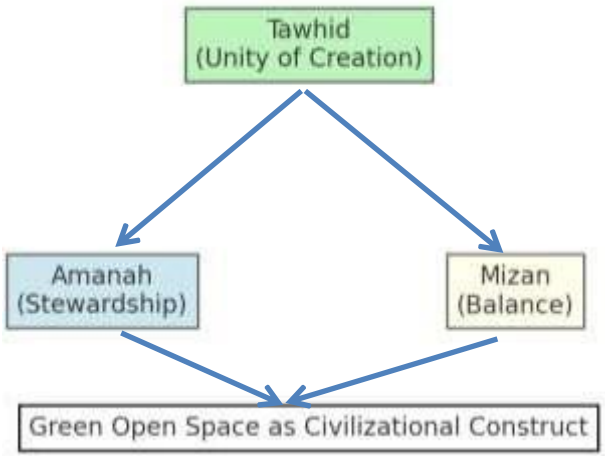


Figure 1. Civilizational Sustainability Framework (Tawhid-Amanah-Mizan Integration in GOS

Results

Reinterpreting Green Open Spaces as Civilizational Constructs The findings reveal that Green Open Spaces (GOS), when examined through the lens of Malay-Islamic civilization, extend beyond ecological functionality to serve as civilizational artifacts. Historically, Malay settlements were designed not merely for habitation but for harmony — balancing human needs with spiritual and natural orders. The placement of communal spaces near mosques, rivers, and vegetation symbolized unity between social life, faith, and the environment. This integration demonstrates that GOS can be understood as a spatial expression of tawhid — the interconnectedness of all creation under divine order. In contemporary contexts, such a perspective offers a counterbalance to the prevailing technocratic urban paradigms that prioritize profit, infrastructure, and efficiency over moral and ecological integrity. Viewing GOS as a civilizational construct repositions it as a medium for moral education, cultural continuity, and environmental consciousness, not merely as urban decoration. 2. The Ethical Dimensions of Malay-Islamic Environmental Thought Analysis of the Islamic environmental framework highlights three central ethical principles—tawhid, amanah, and mizan—which can serve as guiding values for sustainable spatial planning.

1. Tawhid (Unity) calls for holistic integration between environmental systems, community wellbeing, and spiritual awareness.
2. Amanah (Trust and Stewardship) implies a moral obligation to protect and manage resources responsibly.
3. Mizan (Balance) emphasizes equilibrium between material progress and ecological sustainability. These principles collectively advocate a moral ecology where environmental design is both an act of worship (ibadah) and a manifestation of human accountability to God. Incorporating these values into urban policy could transform planning practice from an economic exercise into a form of ethical governance that promotes environmental justice, community welfare, and spiritual harmony.

4.1 Islamic Human Capacity and Urban Sustainability

The study's core findings is that Islamic human capacity—a concept encompassing intellectual, ethical, and ecological consciousness—acts as the foundation for sustaining both civilization and environment. Unlike modern sustainability models that rely on technological innovation alone, the Malay-Islamic paradigm emphasizes the transformation of human character (tazkiyah al-nafs) as a prerequisite for ecological balance. This implies that sustainability cannot be achieved solely through design standards or green technology; it requires nurturing values such as humility, responsibility, and gratitude toward creation. By developing human capacity rooted in Islamic ethics, cities can evolve into living systems that reflect the moral order of the universe—where progress aligns with purpose, and growth aligns with gratitude.

4.2 The Role of Halal Hubs in Civilizational Sustainability

The rise of halal hubs within Southeast Asian cities presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, they strengthen economic networks and global visibility of Muslim industries; on the other, they risk fostering materialism and environmental degradation if detached from ethical governance. Integrating GOS within halal industrial and commercial zones can serve as a spatial reminder of ethical limits, promoting sustainability through design that embodies halalan tayyiban principles—purity, balance, and accountability. This approach redefines the concept of halal from a narrow economic or regulatory label into a comprehensive civilizational system, where environment, economy, and spirituality coexist harmoniously.

4.3 Toward a Civilizational Paradigm of Sustainable Urbanism Synthesizing

These findings, the study proposes a civilizational paradigm of sustainable urbanism anchored in Malay-Islamic values. This paradigm views the city not merely as a technological entity, but as a living moral organism that reflects human relationships with the Creator, community, and environment. Green Open Spaces thus become pivotal arenas for cultivating adab al-bi'ah (environmental ethics), fostering social inclusivity, and embodying maqasid al-shariah—the preservation of life, intellect, environment, and collective welfare. In this light, urban sustainability transcends its material boundaries to become an act of cultural and spiritual preservation.

Conclusion 5.1 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the concept of Green Open Space (GOS), when interpreted through the lens of Malay-Islamic civilization, holds a meaning far deeper than its conventional ecological or urban function. It embodies the unity of spiritual, ethical, and

environmental dimensions that define the relationship between humans, nature, and the Divine. The historical wisdom of Malay settlement design—anchored in the principles of tawhid, amanah, and mizan—illustrates an enduring civilizational understanding of balance and stewardship that modern urban paradigms often overlook. In the era of globalization, the challenge lies not only in preserving natural landscapes but also in reviving ethical consciousness and civilizational values that once guided the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature. This research emphasizes that Islamic human capacity, encompassing intellectual, moral, and ecological awareness, is the cornerstone of sustainable development. By revitalizing this capacity, cities can evolve into ethical ecosystems that reflect both material progress and spiritual integrity. Furthermore, the integration of GOS within contemporary urban and halal hub developments offers a tangible opportunity to realign economic growth with ecological and moral responsibility. When informed by Islamic environmental ethics and Malay cultural wisdom, urban design can transcend its physical purpose to become an expression of civilizational sustainability—a synthesis of faith, identity, and ecological stewardship. Ultimately, sustainable urbanism in the Malay-Islamic context must be understood not as a technical project but as a moral and spiritual enterprise rooted in divine harmony.

5.2 Recommendation

Based on the findings, several key recommendations are proposed to guide future research, policy, and practice: Integrative Policy Frameworks: Governments and planning authorities should incorporate Islamic environmental ethics into urban policy, emphasizing balance (mizan), trust (amanah), and unity (tawhid) as guiding principles for sustainable land use and green infrastructure. Cultural-Ecological Design Models: Urban designers and architects are encouraged to develop context-sensitive green space models inspired by Malay spatial traditions — integrating water, vegetation, and communal spaces as reflections of civilizational identity. Human Capacity Development: Educational institutions should embed Islamic environmental education and sustainability ethics within urban studies curricula, cultivating a generation of planners and professionals grounded in both scientific and spiritual wisdom. Halal Hub Sustainability Standards: The development of halal industrial and commercial zones should be guided by environmental and moral indicators, ensuring that growth aligns with the principles of halalan tayyiban and long-term ecological balance. Future Research Directions: Further empirical studies are needed to operationalize the proposed civilizational paradigm—examining how Islamic human capacity can be measured, nurtured, and applied in real-world urban contexts across Southeast Asia.

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