

Heritage in Space: The Palembang Songket Museum through the Lens of Contemporary Vernacular Architecture

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ABSTRACT. The Palembang Songket Museum occupies a limas house and brings textile heritage, domestic architecture, and museum functions into a single setting. This study examines how architectural form, spatial organisation, material expression, and documented cultural references are articulated in the museum setting. A qualitative single-case study was conducted in 2025 using non-participant observation, photographic documentation, spatial reading, available drawings, and a review of relevant literature and institutional sources. The analysis was organised into three dimensions: aesthetic-spatial characteristics, functional organisation, and sociocultural interpretation. The findings identify a raised-floor typology, layered roof form, timber-and-masonry construction, repeated openings, carved floral and geometric motifs, gold accents, and filtered daylight as prominent architectural characteristics. Functionally, the museum accommodates exhibition, collection-related activities, documentation, education, and small-scale commercial activity within a domestic-scale setting. The analysis also identifies constraints related to circulation, accessibility, environmental control, interpretive media, and collection documentation. Sociocultural interpretations are limited to relationships identified from architectural evidence and published literature; visitor perception and community attachment were not directly measured. The study shows how a vernacular house can provide a culturally specific architectural setting for the presentation of Palembang songket while also creating practical requirements for museum use.

Keywords: palembang songket museum; contemporary vernacular architecture; palembang limas house; songket heritage; museum architecture

ABSTRAK. Museum Songket Palembang menempati sebuah rumah limas dan menghadirkan warisan tekstil, arsitektur hunian, serta fungsi museum dalam satu kesatuan ruang. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana bentuk arsitektur, organisasi ruang, ekspresi material, dan referensi budaya yang terdokumentasi diartikulasikan dalam konteks museum. Studi kasus tunggal dengan pendekatan kualitatif dilakukan pada tahun 2025 menggunakan observasi nonpartisipan, dokumentasi fotografi, pembacaan spasial, gambar-gambar yang tersedia, serta telaah literatur dan sumber institusional yang relevan. Analisis disusun ke dalam tiga dimensi: karakteristik estetika-spasial, organisasi fungsional, dan interpretasi sosiokultural. Temuan penelitian mengidentifikasi tipologi lantai panggung, bentuk atap berlapis, konstruksi kayu dan pasangan bata, bukaan yang berulang, motif ukiran floral dan geometris, aksesoris warna emas, serta pencahayaan alami yang tersaring sebagai karakteristik arsitektur yang menonjol. Secara fungsional, museum mewadahi kegiatan pameran, aktivitas terkait koleksi, dokumentasi, edukasi, dan kegiatan komersial berskala kecil dalam lingkungan berskala hunian. Analisis juga mengidentifikasi sejumlah keterbatasan yang berkaitan dengan sirkulasi, aksesibilitas, pengendalian lingkungan, media interpretatif, dan dokumentasi koleksi. Interpretasi sosiokultural dibatasi pada hubungan yang diidentifikasi berdasarkan bukti arsitektural dan literatur yang telah dipublikasikan; persepsi pengunjung dan keterikatan masyarakat tidak diukur secara langsung. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana sebuah rumah vernakular dapat menyediakan lingkungan arsitektur yang spesifik secara budaya untuk penyajian songket Palembang, sekaligus menimbulkan kebutuhan praktis dalam penggunaannya sebagai museum.

Kata kunci: museum songket palembang; arsitektur vernakular kontemporer; rumah limas palembang; warisan songket; arsitektur museum

INTRODUCTION

Architecture is not merely a physical enclosure; it is also a material record of social values, construction knowledge, technological change, and patterns of use. In museum settings, architecture mediates relationships among collections, curatorial narratives, and visitors. Its form, spatial sequence, materiality, and environmental qualities therefore influence how cultural heritage is presented and interpreted. Museum architecture must consequently accommodate preservation and public use while remaining responsive to the character of the collection.

The International Council of Museums defines museums as permanent, accessible, and inclusive institutions that research, collect, conserve, interpret, and exhibit tangible and intangible heritage for education, reflection, and knowledge sharing (International Council of Museums [ICOM], 2022). Museum architecture consequently has a dual responsibility: it must support preservation and public use while also communicating the cultural context of the collection (Batubara & Maulida, 2024).

Indonesia has diverse weaving traditions, and South Sumatra is widely associated with Palembang songket. The textile is distinguished by supplementary metallic threads, complex geometric and floral compositions, and motifs that carry historical, social, and pedagogical meanings (Musodiqoh & Kusno, 2025; Nopriani & Misnawati, 2024; Sahadat et al., 2022).

Local scholarship relates the development of Palembang songket to the long history of maritime exchange in the Sriwijaya cultural sphere. Silk and metallic threads introduced through regional trade were adapted by Malay weaving communities into locally meaningful patterns and ceremonial objects (Trisiah, 2017). Although this historical account requires continued archaeological and textile research, it remains an important framework for understanding songket as a product of both local knowledge and intercultural exchange.



Figure 1. Palembang Songket Museum

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The research is guided by three questions: (1) what architectural characteristics of form, material, ornament, rhythm, and light can be identified in the Palembang Songket Museum; (2) how is the available domestic-scale space organised to accommodate collection, exhibition, education, documentation, and commercial activities; and (3) what relationships between the building, songket, and Palembang cultural references can be identified from architectural evidence and published literature? The questions are intentionally framed as architectural and documentary inquiries because visitor perception and community attachment were not directly measured.

The study contributes a focused architectural reading of a small museum housed in a Palembang limas house. Museum MACAN is used only as a contextual comparator for spatial and architectural organisation, rather than as a benchmark for institutional quality. The comparison is deliberately limited because the two museums differ substantially in scale, collection, governance, audience, and technical capacity.

The museum is located on Ki Gede Ing Suro Street, 32 Ilir, Ilir Barat II District, Palembang, South Sumatra. It occupies a limas house, a characteristic Palembang dwelling distinguished by a raised floor, layered roof massing, sequential interior levels, and carved timber elements. Using Lima's house as the museum setting embeds the textile collection within a recognisable local spatial and material tradition.

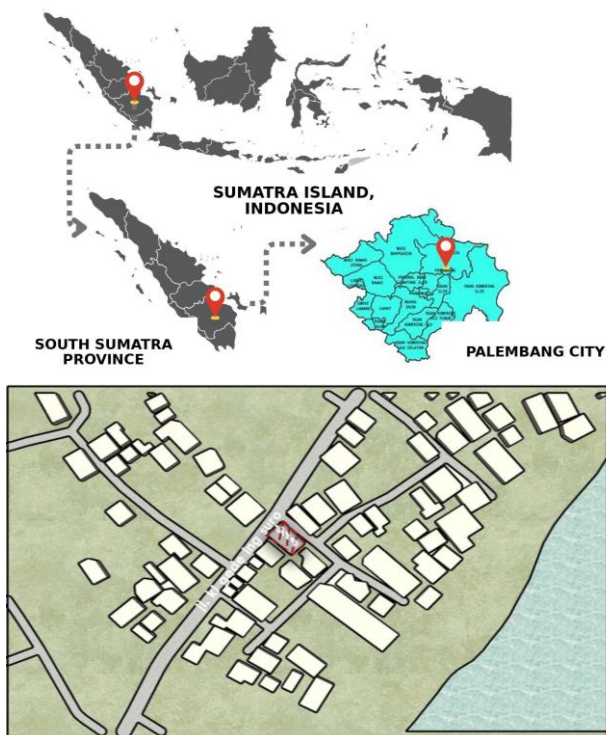


Figure 2. Location of the Palembang Songket Museum
Source: Authors, 2025.



Figure 3. Facade of the Palembang Songket Museum
Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The building combines timber and masonry construction. Observations indicate masonry at parts of the lower wall and later additions, timber wall panels and carved components in the principal rooms, and clay roof tiles across the layered roof forms. This hybrid material condition reflects the adaptation commonly found in Palembang stilt houses, where inherited spatial principles are maintained while components are repaired or replaced to accommodate contemporary use (Wazir & Anwar, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative single-case study to document and interpret the Palembang Songket Museum as an adapted vernacular building used for museum activities. The case-study approach was selected because the study concerns the relationship between architectural form, spatial organisation, material characteristics, and documented cultural context in an existing setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Groat & Wang, 2013). The study does not claim to measure visitor experience, community attachment, or conservation performance.

Fieldwork was undertaken in 2025. Data were collected through non-participant observation, photographic documentation, written field notes, available plans and elevations, and spatial sequencing of the museum. Documentary and literature sources were used to verify architectural, historical, museum-related, and songket-related claims. The analysis also considered published information concerning Museum MACAN and the Jakarta Textile Museum solely for contextual comparison.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, visual evidence was organised through a structured architectural content analysis covering form, rhythm, material, ornament, colour, opening patterns, and daylight. Each feature was described before interpretation, and symbolic meanings were retained only when supported by published literature; otherwise, they are explicitly identified as the author's interpretation. Second, spatial organisation was mapped against observable museum activities, including exhibition, collection-related activity, education, documentation, circulation, and commercial use. Third, architectural observations were compared with documentary and published evidence to distinguish directly observed conditions from contextual interpretation. This triangulation strengthens the consistency of architectural descriptions across photographs, drawings, field notes, and documentary sources, but does not establish visitor or community response. The principal limitations are the absence of visitor interviews, measured environmental data, a complete collections

inventory, and detailed institutional records. Consequently, statements about perception, attachment, or conservation performance are not presented as measured outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study uses contemporary vernacular architecture as an analytical lens rather than as a claim about design intention. Vernacular architecture is understood as architecture shaped by local environmental conditions, materials, construction knowledge, social practices, and cultural conventions (Rapoport, 1969; Oliver, 1997). Contemporary vernacular approaches retain or reinterpret selected local characteristics in response to present requirements rather than simply reproducing historical forms. In this case, the indicators are limited to observable relationships among limas-house form, spatial hierarchy, material use, ornament, openings, and present museum functions.

Contemporary or neo-vernacular architecture reinterprets inherited spatial systems, construction logic, materials, and symbols for present uses rather than reproducing traditional forms (Vitru & Arfianti, 2024). In Palembang, the limas-house grammar-raised construction, layered roofs, stepped hierarchy, and carved timber-provides a culturally legible basis for adaptation (Hidayat & Sardjono, 2025).

The analysis examines rhythm, harmony, material, ornament, colour, and light as a coherent spatial composition. Symbolic claims are used only when supported by literature; otherwise, visual relationships between architecture and songket are presented as interpretive readings.

Repeatedly carved timber panels create a strong visual rhythm across walls, furniture, openings, and the facade. The recurrence of related floral compositions links separate rooms and produces an architectural narrative that accompanies the collection. Filtered daylight passing through openings and ornamental elements adds changing shadow patterns, increasing the visual depth of the timber surfaces.

Table 1. Repetition of carved motifs across architectural elements

No.	Image	Description
1		Gold-accented floral carving at the interior entrance
2		Floral carving on display furniture
3		Floral carving on the exhibition-room wall
4		Floral carving on the exterior wall
5		Floral carving on the stair railing

Source: Authors' analysis, 2025.

The observed palette is dominated by natural timber brown, brick red, white masonry, and selected gold accents. The combination establishes continuity between older timber components and later masonry interventions. Gold highlights visually correspond to the metallic threads associated with Palembang songket, while the restrained use of the colour prevents the interior from becoming uniformly decorative.



Figure 4. Material and colour palette of the museum exterior

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

Palembang woodcarving is characterised by floral and geometric patterns, low- and medium-relief work, and pierced carving applied to walls, cabinets, frames, and domestic furnishings. Its forms developed through the interaction of local craft practice, environmental resources, and Hindu-Islamic cultural histories. As documented in South Sumatra Museum collections, these carvings are not only decorative artefacts but also records of technical skill, aesthetic preference, and cultural memory (Mubarat & Ilhaq, 2021).



Figure 5. Carved motif on the museum facade
Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The museum can be described as exhibiting selected characteristics associated with a contemporary or neo-vernacular approach because recognisable limas-house elements remain visible while the building accommodates museum activities. This description refers to observable architectural characteristics, not to an asserted design intention. The raised construction, layered roof form, sequential spatial hierarchy, timber components, and carved elements provide continuity with the local house type, while adapted circulation, display, and commercial areas indicate adjustment to present use. The local concept of *bengkilas* is considered here only as a spatial reading of differentiated and sequential zones; its relationship to museum use should not be interpreted as evidence of user experience without further study.

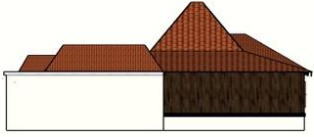
No.	Image	View
1		Front elevation
2		Right-side elevation
3		Left-side elevation
4		Rear elevation

Figure 6. Elevations of the Palembang Songket Museum
Source: Authors' drawings, 2025.

Rhythm is evident in the repeated windows, timber posts, railing elements, and carved panels on the facade and interior. The repetition establishes visual order and continuity across architectural elements. The resemblance to the repeated structure of woven textiles is retained as an interpretive analogy rather than a claim about design intention, because no interview or design statement was available to establish that the building was deliberately conceived through such an analogy.

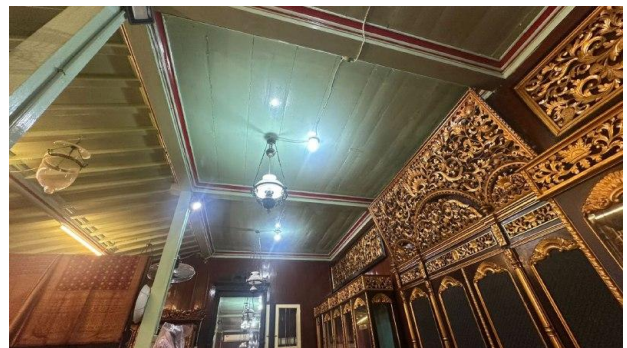


Figure 7. Interior gallery and carved wall panels
Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

Harmony emerges from the coordination of timber, masonry, roof tiles, natural brown surfaces, white walls, brick-red roofs, and gold detailing. The building does not conceal the coexistence of old and new materials; instead, their juxtaposition makes adaptation legible. Inside, the timber background and limited gold accents provide a visually compatible setting for the woven collection.

Many ornaments employ floral and geometric forms comparable to motifs found in Palembang songket. Floral compositions associated in the literature with jasmine, lotus, and bamboo-shoot forms appear on wall panels, ceilings, openings, and display furniture (Hidayat & Sardjono, 2025; Sahadat et al., 2022). Their use extends the textile narrative into the architectural enclosure.

This continuity is most evident where carved wall panels frame displayed cloth. Similarities in repetition, density, and line produce a visual relationship between object and enclosure, allowing architecture to function as an interpretive background rather than a neutral container.

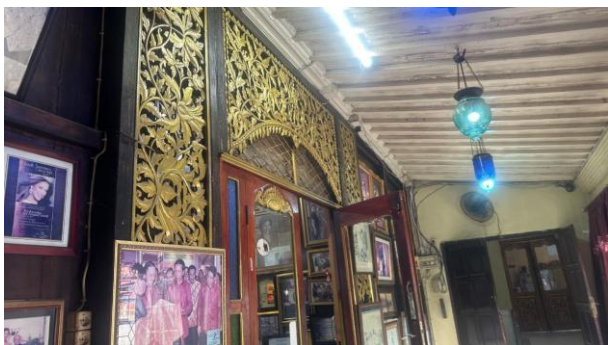


Figure 8. Relationship between carved panels and textile displays

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

Geometric ordering can be read as an expression of discipline and continuity, while gold accents evoke the material prestige historically associated with songket. These readings should not be treated as universal visitor responses; they are interpretations supported by the recurring visual association among ornament, metallic thread, ceremonial use, and the museum's curatorial setting.

Daylight enters through patterned windows and openings, producing changing shadows on walls

and floors. The observed effect contributes to the interior's visual character. At the same time, textiles are light-sensitive materials, so uncontrolled daylight should be treated as a potential conservation concern. The present study did not measure illuminance, ultraviolet exposure, temperature, or relative humidity; therefore, the severity of the risk cannot be quantified. Any conservation intervention should begin with monitoring and assessment by qualified collection-care personnel.

The comparison with Museum MACAN clarifies two distinct relationships between architectural expression and exhibition requirements. The Palembang Songket Museum retains a domestic scale, visible timber, ornamentation, and a close visual relationship between the enclosure and the collection. Museum MACAN uses purpose-built, modular gallery spaces in which architectural expression is comparatively restrained. Neither approach is universally superior: their suitability depends on collection type, curatorial programme, institutional scale, and available technical resources.

Museum MACAN, established in Jakarta in 2017, is dedicated to modern and contemporary art from Indonesia and abroad. Its purpose-built facility includes exhibition, education, and conservation spaces and is designed to support changing curatorial programs (Museum MACAN, n.d.). The comparison is therefore between institutions of different scales, governance structures, collection types, and technical capacities.

At Museum MACAN, rhythm is generated by structural lines, wall planes, openings, and repeated modular elements rather than by carved decoration. Horizontal and vertical geometries establish order while preserving large areas of visual quiet. This supports flexible installation and directs attention toward artworks rather than toward a fixed architectural narrative.



Figure 9. Interior gallery at Museum MACAN, Jakarta
Source: Atourin, 2019.

Large glazed panels and orthogonal structural lines create an exterior and interior rhythm that is comparatively abstract. Within the galleries, flat white surfaces and modular partitions allow spaces to be reconfigured for different exhibition formats. The limited use of permanent ornament is itself a curatorial strategy. Repetition occurs through proportion, alignment, and geometry, producing a neutral visual field that can accommodate paintings, sculpture, installation, and time-based media.



Figure 10. Installation environment at Museum MACAN
Source: Kompas, 2024.

Published studies emphasise the importance of layout, colour, and lighting in shaping visitor attention at Museum MACAN (Oktaviani & Rifai, 2023). Directional artificial lighting and controlled background surfaces enable individual works to be emphasised, while access to daylight is moderated according to gallery requirements. The result is a professional and adaptable exhibition environment rather than a domestic heritage atmosphere.

The near-absence of applied ornament at Museum MACAN can therefore be understood as an aesthetic decision rather than a deficiency. Plain walls, broad glass surfaces, and simple geometric lines form a flexible “background architecture.” In this setting, architectural restraint allows changing exhibitions to become the primary source of colour, texture, and narrative. The contrast reinforces the Palembang museum’s distinct strategy, in which the architectural enclosure and collection jointly communicate a stable local identity.



Figure 11. Neutral gallery surfaces at Museum MACAN
Source: ResearchGate, 2020.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

The functional analysis follows the museum roles identified by ICOM (2022): collection, conservation, research, interpretation, exhibition, education, and public engagement. Within its domestic-scale setting, the Palembang Songket Museum combines collection storage, galleries, documentation displays, a traditional-house experience, and a small retail area. Personal collections and awards associated with cultural practitioner Zainal Arifin also form part of the narrative.



Figure 12. Museum floor plan
Source: Authors, 2025.



Figure 13. Interior circulation through the museum collection

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The conservation function centres on Palembang songket, historical objects, photographs, and records. The use of a family Limas house gives the collection an authentic domestic context, but it also creates conservation challenges related to storage, documentation, daylight, humidity, and circulation. Scholarship on songket heritage stresses the importance of legal protection and systematic documentation, while recent museum outreach has demonstrated the potential of digital records and augmented-reality interpretation (Aryanti & Herman, 2025; Puspasari et al., 2025).



Figure 14. Documentation and awards display

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

As an educational setting, the museum introduces visitors to variations in motifs, material processes, ceremonial uses, and the relationship between songket and Palembang identity. The direct proximity of textiles, carving, furniture, and house form enables object-based learning. Interpretation could be strengthened through bilingual labels, a verified collection catalogue, demonstrations by craftspeople, and accessible digital media.



Figure 15. Songket exhibition area

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The retail gallery serves social and economic functions by connecting heritage interpretation with living production. Sales can support craft continuity and provide visibility for textile makers, although commercial display should remain clearly distinguished from accessioned museum objects. Awards and certificates document the owner's contribution to cultural preservation and add a biographical dimension to the institutional narrative.



Figure 16. Retail and commercial area

Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The Jakarta Textile Museum provides a useful functional comparison because it represents a broader public institution with collections from multiple Indonesian regions. Its historical collection and institutional scope support wider educational programming and textile interpretation (Haris, 2010). The comparison indicates that the Palembang museum's principal strength lies not in scale or technical infrastructure, but in the close relationship among a specific textile tradition, a family collection, and a vernacular house.



Figure 17. Gallery at the Jakarta Textile Museum
Source: Yusei Vivit, 2025.



Figure 18. Exhibition room in the Palembang Songket Museum
Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The Palembang Songket Museum consequently offers an intimate and locally specific experience. The building, objects, and family narrative are mutually reinforcing, providing a setting that would be difficult to reproduce in a generic gallery. At the same time, limited circulation width, interpretive technology, accessibility provision, environmental

control, and collection management may restrict its long-term performance. These limitations identify practical priorities for development without diminishing the value of the existing heritage setting.

Table 2. Functional and architectural comparison of the two museums

No	Comparison Aspect	Palembang Songket Museum	Museum Macan
1	Main function	Conservation and exhibition of Palembang songket and related cultural objects.	Indonesian and international modern and contemporary art; education and rotating programs.
2	Collection type	Songket textiles, domestic artifacts, photographs, awards, and family records.	Painting, sculpture, installation, and time-based contemporary art.
3	Spatial layout	Sequential domestic-scale galleries in an adapted limas house.	Flexible purpose-built galleries, education rooms, and support spaces.
4	Architectural approach	Contemporary vernacular adaptation using limas-house form, layered roofs, timber carving, and textile motifs.	Neutral, modular museum architecture with controlled exhibition environments.

Source: Authors' analysis, 2025

SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS

The Palembang Songket Museum can be read as a setting where local architecture, textile objects, family history, and public presentation are brought together. The evidence supports an architectural relationship among these components, but it does not establish how visitors or the wider community experience that relationship. Accordingly, the

sociocultural analysis is limited to documented cultural references and observable relationships between the building and the displayed heritage.



Figure 19. Exterior of the Palembang Songket Museum
Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The layered roof, raised structure, room proportions, timber ornamentation, ventilation openings, and material palette correspond to characteristics of Palembang domestic architecture. Their presence provides a recognisable local architectural context for the songket collection. Whether these characteristics generate cultural recognition or a sense of continuity among visitors requires separate user-based research and is therefore not claimed as a measured finding here.



Figure 20. Palembang songket craft and display
Source: Authors' documentation, 2025.

The museum presents songket together with architectural and domestic references associated with Palembang heritage. The combination is consistent with literature describing songket as an element of local cultural identity and continuing craft practice (Hidayat & Sardjono, 2025; Nopriani & Misnawati, 2024). Within the evidence available to this study, the stronger conclusion is that the

museum provides a setting in which tangible textile objects and architectural references are displayed together; the extent to which this constitutes "living heritage" should be examined through research involving practitioners, managers, and visitors.



Figure 21. Architectural perspective of the Palembang Songket Museum
Source: Authors' drawing, 2025.

The comparison with Museum MACAN further reveals how institutional context shapes sociocultural meaning. The Palembang Museum emerges from a local textile tradition and a domestic heritage environment; its architecture emphasises continuity, belonging, and intergenerational transmission. Museum MACAN operates in a metropolitan and internationally connected art context, using exhibitions, education programs, and digital communication to engage diverse publics (Ginting et al., 2024; Museum MACAN, n.d.; Prameswari & Rahmi, 2024).



Figure 22. Exhibition gallery at Museum MACAN
Source: Jakarta Tourism, 2023.

Museum MACAN's neutral and flexible architecture supports changing works and global curatorial discourse. The institution communicates openness and experimentation through a programmatic rather than an ornamental identity. By comparison,

the Palembang museum relies on a relatively stable relationship among house form, carved surfaces, songket motifs, and family history.

The two museums, therefore, represent complementary cultural roles. One demonstrates how a local tradition can remain legible through an adapted vernacular setting; the other connects Indonesian audiences with modern and contemporary art across national boundaries. Their differences show that museum architecture should be evaluated in relation to collection, mission, scale, and community rather than through a single formal standard.

CONCLUSION

The Palembang Songket Museum exemplifies museum functions housed within a Palembang limas house. The study identifies raised construction, layered roofs, timber-and-masonry construction, repeated openings, carved floral and geometric motifs, gold accents, and filtered daylight as prominent architectural characteristics. These features provide a culturally specific setting for the display of songket, while the domestic-scale spatial organisation also creates practical requirements for circulation, accessibility, environmental management, interpretation, and collection documentation. The findings support a limited conclusion: vernacular architectural characteristics can remain legible when an existing limas house is adapted for museum use, but the present evidence does not establish visitor response, community attachment, or conservation performance. The case is consistent with contemporary vernacular approaches that emphasise selective retention and adaptation of local spatial and material characteristics rather than literal reproduction of traditional form. Future work should combine architectural documentation with visitor studies, collection-care assessment, and research on management capacity. Practical improvements should be prioritised according to available resources, beginning with basic collection documentation, routine environmental monitoring, clearer interpretation, and staff capacity development before more technically demanding interventions.

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