

The Making of the Artefacts and Architectural Remains as Props for the Performance of "*Bermulanya Di Sini....Kedah Tua*"

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ABSTRACT

"Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua" demonstrates a historical data interpretation of the Kedah Tua early society at Sungai Batu within the artistic context of stage performance demonstrating series of dance and stage act. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the props making process for the stage performance from a designer-maker point of view, by demonstrating the philosophy of body movements and the connection to object designs in space. Furthermore, the props making encompasses the imitation and construction of two scaled building artefacts which are the ancient iron smelting furnace and the circular ritual monument that significantly embodies the early civilisation of Kedah Tua society between the 2nd and 6th CE. The research-design team has successfully constructed the ancient buildings' props using wire structured paper maché technique and Styrofoam sheets assembling in various scaled sizes. In order to accommodate the performance need on the stage, the modular concept have been introduced in the design of the props by embedding the elements of object's practicality, portability and, easy assembling and disassembling.

Keywords: *performance props, construction, iron smelting furnace, circular ritual monument*

INTRODUCTION

"...All architecture functions as a potential stimulus for movement, real or imagined. A building is an incitement to action, a stage for movement and interaction. It is one partner in a dialogue with the body". (Bloomer and Moore 1977: 59)

This chapter explains the making process of two building artefacts as performance props. The making of the ancient iron smelting furnace and the circular ritual monument was to embody the significance of Kedah Tua early society's involvement in the trade and iron industry as well as their spiritual adherence between the 2nd and 6th CE. Predominantly, the making of this artefact that is also known as the "architecture elements" into the stage performance props, is to embody the articulations of the architectonic site harmony to the human body movements' signification (the activity of working, dancing, etc.). Contextually, the architectural elements are structured components and details of structural parts of a designed architectural space, that mellifluously forms the style of dwellings and its functions of varying degrees. In addition, the spatial arrangement and the modification of the dwelling space often integrates cultural significances and the social practice extensively by human activities. For example, an iron smelting territory in Sungai Batu emanates and project the blacksmith as local trade and social practice and, this cycle also affects, as Weinstock (2010) stresses, the forms and materials of buildings and houses, and of its associated land, produced by activities that were highly specific to that context; as forms and bodily activity have an intricate relationship through developed dwelling structures and social practices – a building structure of its architectonic presence has the potential to influence or stimulate individuals' body movements though activities (Bloomer and Moore 1977). This significance is portrayed in the performance storyline.

The relevancy of such contexts was formulated to steer the idea of redesigning, rescaling and constructing the said artefacts into performance props design by integrating into the concept of object modularity where, the technical criteria such as easy assemble and collapsible, object movability or portability on a stage or a set and practicality were considered. Technically, the designed props can easily be dismantled into several standardised building blocks, which can be reassemble and rearranged at different space settings and configurations. In addition, the design of the two props was simplified from the original structural detail and the dimensions were scaled down to 80% from the actual artefacts size due to limited performance stage size and easy storage consideration.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ANCIENT BUILDINGS INTO PERFORMANCE PROPS

There were three phases associated in the making of the artefacts-performance-props. The first phase was site observation; whereby this procedure involves series of on-site photography at the Sungai Batu archaeological site and visual research from printed literary sources. This is the important phase for the designer to understand the researched subjects and objects distinctly in terms of history, the original design structure and their sizes, and other technical attributions. Such characteristics were immanent in steering the redesigning process and subsequently aiding in the reconstruction of the artefacts as the performance props. The challenging part was to reimagine the original design and structure of the artefacts as most structural parts of the derelict circular ritual monument and the iron smelting furnace has been deteriorated over the last century (see Photos 1 and 2). The collected visuals from various sources have had ameliorated the designer in visualising the remnants of the artefacts.



Photo 1 The artefact of the circular ritual monument at Sungai Batu Kedah.
Source: Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia (CGAR USM).



Photo 2 The observational procedure observing the artefacts at the Sungai Batu Kedah archaeological site and the replication of the iron smelting furnace and its operational feature.
Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

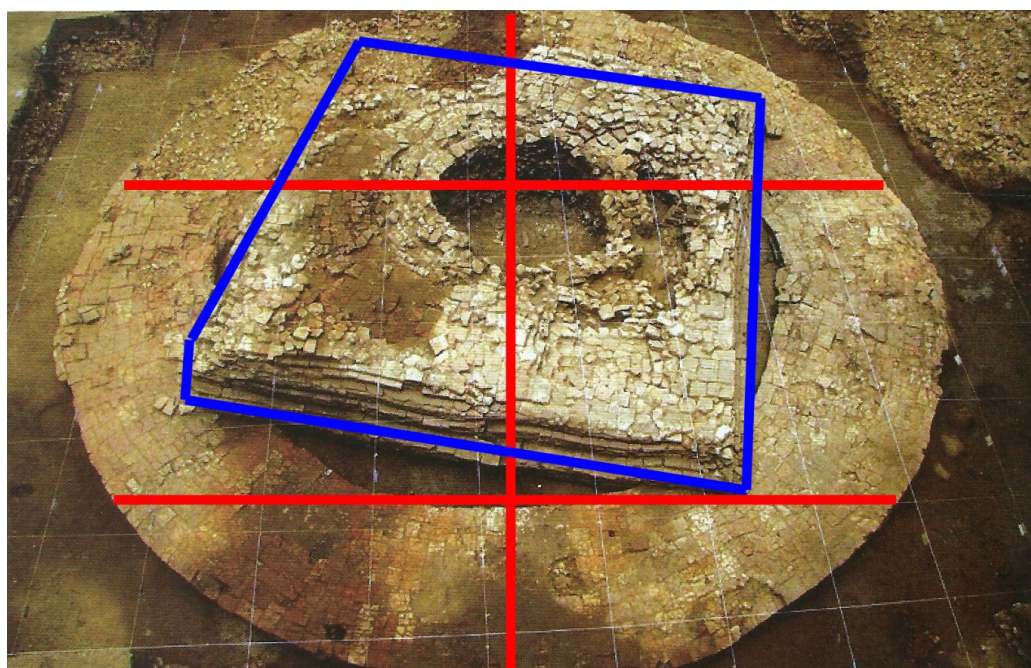


Photo 3 The image tracing and outline guidance for rescaling and artefact reconstruction guidance purposes:
The artefact of the circular ritual monument.
Source: CGAR USM.

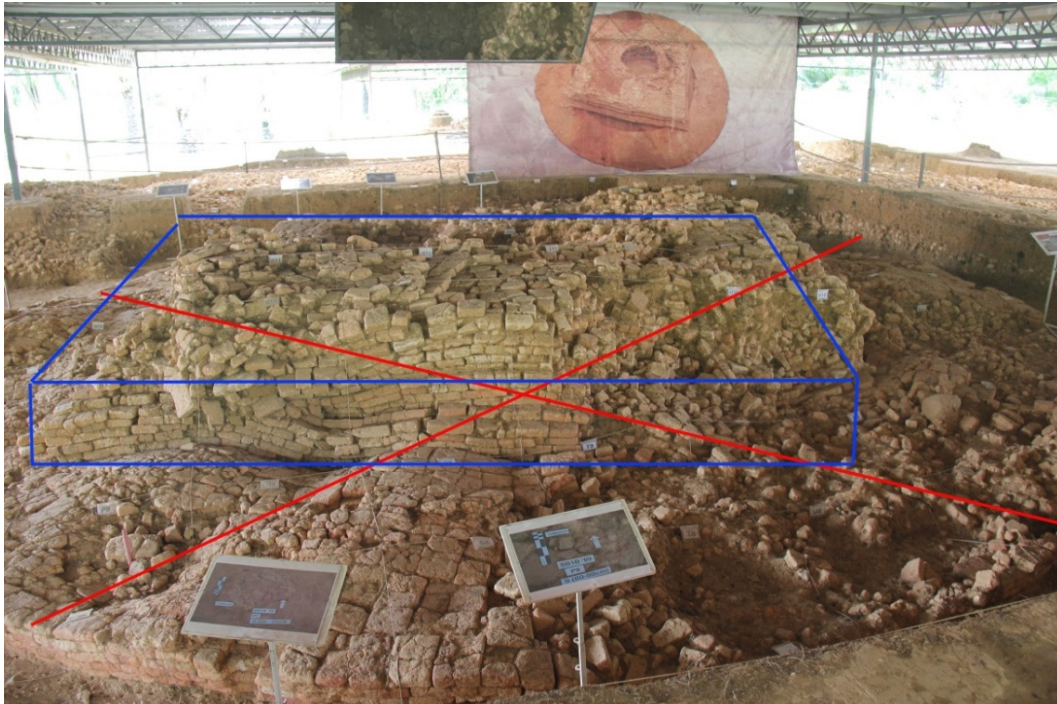


Photo 4 The image tracing and outline guidance for rescaling and artefact reconstruction guidance purposes:
The artefact of the circular ritual monument at different angle.
Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia

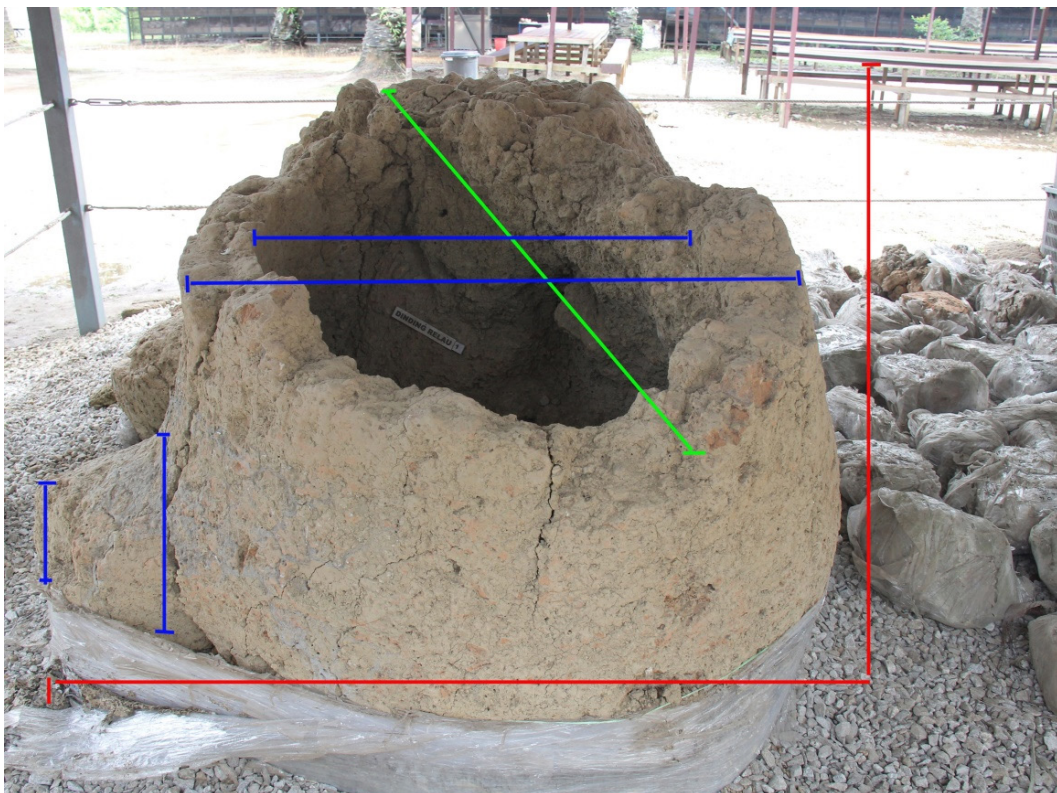


Photo 5 The image tracing and outline guidance for rescaling and artefact reconstruction guidance purposes:
The artefact of the iron smelting furnace.
Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Secondly, the ideation and scaling phase. In this phase, the images of the circular ritual monument and the iron smelting furnace from different angles were digitally traced and outlined for rescaling and artefact construction guidance. Through the observational assessment, we found some significant characteristic of the artefacts that are still standing. For instance, we suspected that the original design of the square object at the centre of the circular ring was arranged in thick contour planar based on the visual evidence of the position of the layered bricks. During the computer-aided process, outlines were drawn onto the image (see Photos 3, 4, and 5) as guidance of different object segregation and rescaling purposes – (1) the squared contour object and (2) the circular ring. Both objects were rescaled into 80% smaller, and the squared contour object was redesigned into three tiers planar contour. This same procedure is also applied to the construction of the iron smelting furnace. Moreover, the construction of the furnace was based on the working replica replicated by the archaeological team and specialist at Sungai Batu, Kedah.

Thirdly, the construction of the artefact models as the performance props. A circular ritual monument props overall measured at 1,220 × 1,220 × 1,290 mm were constructed using various dimensions' structure, 13 mm thick Styrofoam sheets. However, several brown paper towels, newspapers, and brown acrylic paint were used to demonstrate natural surface and colouring pigment onto the entire surface of the iron smelting furnace props. By incorporating the paper maché technique, it further replicated the original clay patched texture on the furnace wall. Generally, paper maché is a common craft technique of applying several thin coatings of paper and glue or flour starch as a hardener applied to the surface of a structure or armature. The craft making process encompasses creating structural base forms. The iron smelting furnace's oblong base was structured using thin wire strings (see Photo 6). It was important during this process to develop sturdy wire foundation for it later to hold layers of wet glued paper pasted all over the oblong base structure.

Then, a mixture of newspaper and brown paper towel strips was torn at random proportions before pasting them onto the oblong base structure. A formulation of one part water and two parts polyvinyl acetate (P.V.A.) white glue (Photo 7) was mixed to applied onto the torn paper layers as bonding agent.

The paper strips were dipped into the P.V.A. white glue mixture (Photo 8) and placed them onto the base structure. Then, the paper strips were layered and overlapped continuously in different directions until the desired form achieved. The layered papers were left to dry completely before adding another layer. This process took 24 hours to complete, due to its 1,220 × 1,220 mm dimensions form.

Finally, when the form is dried, it is coloured with brown acrylic paint on to its entire surface (Photo 9) and left to dry and finish. Photos 10 and 11 show the finished artworks used in the play.



Photo 6 The wire strings foundation sample of paper maché technique.

Photographed by Mohd Najib Abdullah Sani.



Photo 7 The P.V.A. white glue.
Photographed by Mohd Najib Abdullah Sani.



Photo 8 The paper dipping process of the P.V.A. white glue mix.
Photographed by Mohd Najib Abdullah Sani.



Photo 9 The sample of the layered glued paper on to the structured base.
Photographed by Mohd Najib Abdullah Sani.



Photo 10 The stylised and rescaled version of the circular ritual monument.
Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.



Photo 11 The stylised and rescaled version of the ancient iron smelting furnace.
Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Overall, four target features were adopted and applied to the performance props design based on the modular design concept which are practical, portable and, easy assemble and disassemble. This project has demonstrated that it is viable to apply the three-dimensional design approach and archaeological context to sustain cultural knowledge and local history in broader perspective.

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