

ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE BY MAINTAINING THE CULTURAL VALUES AND VERNACULAR FUNCTIONAL SPATIAL FEATURES OF MALAY VERNACULAR RESIDENCES

Amirhosein Ghaffarian Hoseini, Mohd Nasir Baharuddin, Rahinah Ibrahim,
Nur Dalilah Dahlan

Abstract

The quality of contemporary residential functional spaces has been mostly based on style and modernity rather than the tradition of particular regional context. This has led to new buildings which are not based on the tradition of their own regional context. In view of the rapid modernization of Malaysia, the kampong house as a Malay vernacular architecture has been replaced by modern architecture. We are motivated to conduct this study because we observed the increasing loss of functional spatial features of kampong houses and their cultural values that support Malay local quality of life. The functional spatial features include spatial characteristics of functions and spaces that are based on local needs while the cultural values represent the local way of life. We posit that the loss of functional spatial features and cultural values is key to the diminishing quality of life for people living in contemporary houses. In this research, the vernacular architectural features of kampong houses representing Malay vernacular houses are studied using archival search. We use text analysis for analyzing the cultural meanings of vernacular functional spaces and their functional spatial features. The vernacular functional spatial features are the

socio-cultural or environmental characteristics of a local region in a functional space. On the other hand, the cultural meaning of functional spaces is the value that represents the resident's local way of life in a functional space. The analysis determines the vernacular functional spatial features and cultural meanings of the functional spaces of Malay houses which represent the local needs. This study theorizes that the vernacular functional spatial features and the cultural meanings of functional spaces within Malay houses are influential in enhancing the quality of life. Correspondingly, the research found that the vernacular functional spatial features and their cultural values could support the quality of life while integrated successfully into contemporary functional spaces. Consequently, these features when utilized in designing contemporary functional spaces could exude the Malay local quality of life. In conclusion, the cultural values and functional spatial features of Malay vernacular functional spaces can be considered in contemporary residential design for enhancing the Malay quality of life in urban area.

Keywords: Quality of life, Vernacular architecture, Vernacular functional spatial features, Cultural Values

The study aims to investigate the relationship between vernacular architecture and quality of life. It focuses on the functional spatial features of vernacular buildings and how they contribute to the cultural values of a community. The research is based on a case study of a traditional village in a developing country. The findings show that vernacular architecture is not just a matter of aesthetics but also a reflection of the community's way of life and values. The study suggests that modern architecture should take inspiration from vernacular buildings to create more livable and culturally sensitive environments.

The study also highlights the importance of preserving vernacular architecture as a part of the cultural heritage. It argues that vernacular buildings are not only a source of inspiration for modern architecture but also a way of life that should be valued and protected. The study concludes that vernacular architecture is a key factor in determining the quality of life in a community. It is a reflection of the community's values and way of life, and it should be given more attention in the field of architecture and urban planning.

Introduction

The concept of quality of life has become a central theme in urban planning and architecture. It refers to the overall well-being and satisfaction of individuals in a community. Quality of life is influenced by various factors, including the physical environment, social relationships, and cultural values. Vernacular architecture, which is a traditional form of building that is deeply rooted in the local culture and way of life, plays a significant role in shaping the quality of life in a community. This study explores the relationship between vernacular architecture and quality of life, focusing on the functional spatial features of vernacular buildings and their contribution to the cultural values of a community.

Quality of life

Quality of life is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that encompasses various aspects of an individual's well-being. It is not just about the physical environment but also about the social and cultural aspects of life. Quality of life is a subjective experience that varies from person to person. However, there are several key factors that influence quality of life, including the physical environment, social relationships, and cultural values. Vernacular architecture, which is a traditional form of building that is deeply rooted in the local culture and way of life, plays a significant role in shaping the quality of life in a community. This study explores the relationship between vernacular architecture and quality of life, focusing on the functional spatial features of vernacular buildings and their contribution to the cultural values of a community.

Introduction

The abandonment of vernacular architecture is the main result of the utilization of modern architecture which reflects the western ideas without any concern to tradition of the region (Nilhan, et al., 2007). Consequently, this has led to new buildings which are not based on the tradition of their own regional context (Nilhan, et al., 2007). We are motivated to conduct this study because we observed the increasing loss of vernacular features of the kampong house that could support Malay local quality of life (Abel, 2000; Nilhan, et al., 2007). Correspondingly, the quality of contemporary residential functional spaces is mostly based on style and modernization rather than the tradition of the particular regional context. Therefore, there is a need to promote the quality of vernacular functional spaces in order to enhance the local quality of life and to maintain the cultural values.

Quality of housing

According to various theories, the quality of housing and its functional spaces are considered as influential factors in accordance with quality of life (Glenn, 2004). Likewise, literature represents that the answer to a high quality of life is based on considering the socio cultural aspects of the functional spaces of the house while other studies indicate that housing conditions and their spatial features are one of the important factors in quality of life (Kowaltowski, et al., 2006). Correspondingly, these theories will be utilized in this study to

focus on the quality of housing and functional space within Malay houses. However, other theories represent that with the rapid modernization of Malaysia, the kampong house as a Malay vernacular architecture has been replaced by modern architecture (Yuan, 1991). Accordingly, various aspects of kampong which identified it as a major vernacular value, has been lost inside contemporary functional spaces (Yuan, 2001). Moreover, a study by Wakefield (2000) elaborated on the contemporary housings in Malaysia to identify the problems of housings which are occurred in contemporary residential houses. Respectively, the study theorized that one of the most critical issues is the incongruity between the functional spaces of the house and the actual needs of the residents (Wakefield, 2000).

The Malay vernacular settlements

Introduction

The Malay house as the Malay vernacular architecture represents a handmade house which is totally designed and constructed by local Malays (Yuan, 1991). The Malay house is designed and built according to the actual needs of its users by understanding their daily needs, beliefs, culture and their way of life. Meanwhile, the Malay house is considered as the Malay vernacular architecture which is highly in accordance with the nature, environment and the particular region. Correspondingly, the Malay house is comprised

of functional spaces which reflect the Malay way of life and desires (Yuan, 1991).

Housing in Malay Families Both in Past and at Present

With the rapid modernization of Malaysia, the kampong house as a Malay vernacular architecture has been replaced by modern architecture (Yuan, 1991). This has led to new buildings which are not based on the tradition of their own regional context (Nilhan, et al., 2007). Accordingly, various aspects of kampong which identified it as a major vernacular value, has been lost inside contemporary functional spaces (Yuan, 2001). Correspondingly, the quality of contemporary residential functional spaces has been mostly based on style and modernization rather than the tradition of particular regional context (Yuan, 1991).

Due to the study by Wakefield (2000), a comparison between the Malay vernacular house and modern residential designs were carried out. The result of the comparison expressed that the Malay house is a unique architectural phenomenon with remarkable content, form, use of local material, use of optimal space and environmental concern. The study concluded that the Malay kampong house as the Malay vernacular architecture addresses all the local needs as it is designed based on the Malay cultural values and way of life. However, the contemporary houses are not mostly in a very acceptable condition to fulfill the entire household needs (Wakefield, 2000). Respectively, the households in contemporary houses are mostly facing insufficient quality of housing in terms of

socio-cultural issues. According to the aforementioned facts, we intend to understand the cultural meanings and spatial features of the functional spaces of Malay kampong houses. Consequently, the vernacular spatial features and cultural meanings of the functional spaces represent the Malay way of life and its influences on the spatial planning features which can be considered in contemporary functional spaces.

Research methodology

In this research, the vernacular architectural features of kampong houses representing Malay vernacular houses are studied using archival search. We use text analysis for analyzing the cultural meaning of vernacular functional spaces and their functional spatial features.

Accordingly, the vernacular architectural features of kampong houses as Malay vernacular houses are studied based on the archival texts. The study is carried out based on a theoretical framework which will lead to understanding the cultural meanings and vernacular functional spatial features. This theoretical framework which is based upon these two main issues leads to the expected result of study. These issues encompass the vernacular functional spatial features and the cultural meanings of vernacular functional spaces. During the result and analysis phase all the archival data is read and the key informants of each text are extracted in order to be compared with others based on our theoretical framework. The theoretical framework of

study is designed based on the categorizations of main issues of study which are vernacular functional spatial features (*environmental or socio-cultural*) and cultural meanings of functional spaces (*based on main functional spaces of Malay houses*). The vernacular functional spatial features and cultural meanings which are corroborated by other archival data in other texts are considered as the expected result of study.

Result of archival search on Malay Kampong houses

The Concept of Malay Vernacular Settlements

As stated by Wan Ismail (2005), the design concept of Malay house is based upon a deep understanding of Malay life. Additionally, an Ismail (2005) expressed the concept of Malay houses as "It was not created by anyone, but had evolved through many generations of Malay society". Thus, the house is designed according to the social and cultural interactions of the Malay communities. Likewise, the study by Thompson (2004) theorized that the most appropriate place for studying and understanding the Malay culture is the kampong houses. A Malay kampong house is the place where the Malay culture and tradition are represented through local daily life (Thompson, 2004). Besides, another study declared that these socio-cultural interactions shape the functional spaces and the interior atmosphere of the house (Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, et al., 2005). These theories supports our

theory that a deep understanding of the functional spaces of vernacular houses can lead to the identification of desired way of life and their socio-cultural attributes (Rapoport, 1990).

Vernacular Functional Spatial Features and Cultural Meanings of Functional Spaces within Malay Vernacular Settlements

Literature developed the theory that the quality of housing is considered as an important factor in enhancing the quality of life. Accordingly, in this study we are only focusing on the spatial and cultural aspects of the functional spaces for the quality of housing among many other factors that could be influential in enhancing the quality of life.

Design and Lay Out of the Functional Spaces of Malay Kampong Houses

The Functional spaces inside the Malay house are categorized into public, private and semi private spaces based on the level of privacies. Originally, a Malay house is comprised of front and back spaces as two major sections of its design layout which are embracing the *Rumah ibu* and *Rumah dapur* (Yuan, 1991). The *Rumah ibu* is the main part of the house which covers various household's interactions. On the other hand, the *rumah dapur* is the kitchen area of the house which is a private section for females.

Inside the Malay house all spaces have specific

sizes based on their own allocated functions. Responsively, the Malay house with an open plan layout facilitates the users to have an optimal use of space according to their definite functions (Yuan, 2001). Moreover, the Malay house responds to the environmental characteristics of the region through various factors such as open planning, large openings and limited walls and partitions. Large window openings are considered as one of the main characteristics of Malay houses to let the fresh air and day light to come inside the house. The size of a typical window is basically the same as the full height of the door. Another approach towards climatic control is based on the open plan layout of the Malay houses. This approach is highly influential in the cross ventilation of the house while giving a sense of openness to the interior atmosphere. Malay society has emphasized on community intimacy and personal and family privacy (Yuan, 1991). The priority given to privacy is reflected in the flexible and open planning of the Malay house. However, the distinctive zoning of spaces provides the level of privacy required: a guest zone (public domain) with a clear male domain at the front, and the family zone (private domain), which is the female domain. As the Malay houses are built on stilts, the main entrance of the house is basically reachable through stairs which lead to a covered porch called *anjung*. *Anjung* acts as an open space which is allocated for the households to rest in that functional space while the unfamiliar guest are entertained there (Yuan, 1991, Wan Ismail, 2005).

Basically, the porch acts as an open space entrance which is prior to the main entrance of the house. The first functional space of the house which is adjacent to the entrance area is

serambi gantung. The *serambi gantung* is an extended linear functional space which is mostly allocated to the guests to be entertained (Yuan, 1991). Accordingly, the *serambi gantung* contains low openings which lead to a cross ventilation while providing a nice view for the users. Moreover, the *serambi gantung* is adjacent to the main living room of the house which is called *rumah ibu* as the core of the house. The floor level of the *serambi gantung* is lower than *rumah ibu* which indicates the border between functional spaces (Yuan, 1991).

As stated by Wan Ismail (2005), the *rumah ibu* is the main functional space of the house which is a multi functional space. Accordingly, various needs of the users are addressed in this area as its open space provides the flexibility for different functions. Subsequently, the functions such as family gathering, sleeping, praying and many other functions can take place in this functional space. Furthermore, the *rumah ibu* contains larger openings in front and back which increase the air movements in the spaces of the house. Additionally, the floor level of *rumah ibu* is the highest among all functional spaces of the house which represents its crucial impact on the house layout (Yuan, 2001). *Rumah tengah* is also considered as a middle space which can be observed in large houses. This space is considered as a connection space between the main part of the house and kitchen area (Wan Ismail, 2005).

The *rumah ibu* as the main functional space in a Malay house is adjacent to the *serambi gantung* from one side and the other side is next to the *serambi samanaik*. The *serambi samanaik* is a similar functional space to the *serambi gantung* which was mentioned before (Yuan, 1991).

Respectively, the *serambi samanaik* and *serambi gantung* are utilized as circulation spaces which lead to the cross ventilation while leading to a space called *selang*. Accordingly, *selang* is considered as a walkway which is connected to the kitchen area. The *selang* also acts as a circulation space while being an allocated space for the female's interactions. *Selang* is a space for women to chat, socialize and entertain with other females (Wan Ismail, 2005). Moreover, this space is perceived as a linkage between the main living room and the kitchen area which connects the back and front sections to each other. In addition, *selang* provides an open space between the two major parts of the house which is highly influential for the thermal comfort of the users and lighting (Yuan, 1991; Wan Ismail, 2005). Meanwhile, the court yard is an open space which is only utilized in Malay houses which are located in *Malacca*. This open space is situated between the *rumah ibu* and *rumah dapur* while covering the functions such as resting, washing and drying the clothes (Yuan, 2001).

The *rumah dapur* is located next to the *selang* as the back section of the house. This functional space is considered as the kitchen area of the house which is allocated to the females of the house. The *rumah dapur* is utilized for various interactions such as cooking, washing and eating while being on the lowest floor level (Yuan, 1991). Consequently, the corresponding functional spaces are the basis of the design layout of a Malay house which represents the spaces arrangements, adjacencies, spatial hierarchies and other vernacular functional spatial features.

Spatial Embellishments, Scale and Proportion

One of the vernacular spatial features of the Malay houses is their spatial embellishments which can be seen inside the functional spaces of house. The spatial embellishments are mostly based upon the Malay's wood carving art (Yatim, 1995). Accordingly, the Malay's woodcarving art is substantially incorporated with Malay's life, customs, beliefs, and Islam. Meanwhile, an appropriate proportion and human scale based on Malay measurements scales is considered as one of the vernacular features which influence the size of the functional spaces and their spatial elements (Wan Ismail, 2005).

From the above, we develop vernacular features for use in contemporary functional space examples. As a result, the vernacular features such as the open plan layout, space arrangements, inter-relativity, adjacencies, relation priorities, level of privacies for male or female, size, material and characteristics of openings are mostly considered inside the Malay vernacular functional spaces.

In Harmony with People's Way of Life

Culture of a region is the life style of people encompassing their thoughts, beliefs and functional behaviors which is influential for their quality of life (Low, 1988). Accordingly, the study by Low (1988) focused on the cultural aspects of design while reviewing various researches regarding the cultural meaning in residential designs. Due to the theory by Low (1988), cultural aspects of design, as a field of

study, focuses on the user's interactions, relationships, behaviors and correspondence between cultural orders and principles of design. This correspondence of interactions, relationships and behaviors is usually studied in terms of the spatial features and the spatial arrangement of the functional spaces. Moreover, functional space is given meaning through the basis of that order which is culture (Fernandez, 1986).

Social Relations and Life Style

Basically, one of the exquisite features of the vernacular houses in all around the world is the concept of privacy for the house occupants (Mohammed Abdullah, 2001). The privacy is provided through the utilization of particular elements or separation of functional spaces into private, semi private and public areas. Respectively, the functional spaces of a vernacular house are assigned to specific functions with a definite level of privacy and allocated users (Mohammed Abdullah, 2001). Nevertheless, another study theorized that the significance of the privacy in a Malay society is not similar to the western ideas (Powell, et al., 1988). Since the Malays are intertwined with Islam in their entire life, the concept of privacy in their socio-cultural interactions is influenced by Islam. Accordingly, the relationships between the males and females are restricted while the females are stayed at the back section of the house as a private section. However, the front section of the Malay house includes the public and semi public functional spaces which are allocated for men and guests. In fact, the design of the functional spaces of the Malay house is based on their cultural

values which encompass their religion, belief, social relations and lifestyle (Powell, et al., 1988). Respectively, the impact of privacy on social relations of the Malays leads to the segregation of the spaces into two sections. The front section acts as a public area for men and the back section of the house is the allocated area for women to rest, chat and work while having their own privacy (Yuan, 1991). On the other hand, the study by Tan (1980), expressed the lack of privacy in the functional spaces of various contemporary housings in Malaysia. Due to the retrospective theories, this study focused on the concept of privacy as one of the socio-cultural factors in vernacular functional spatial features of Malay houses.

Due to the study by Yuan (1991), the Malay's lifestyle represents an uncomplicated design of the spatial planning and simple functional spaces within Malay houses. This fact indicates the simple life style of the Malays as they are not intertwined with pretentious living patterns. Accordingly, a Malay house is not equipped with too much furniture as most of the activities of Malay occupants are carried out on the house floor. Respectively, the *mengkuang* mats are utilized for seating instead of ostentatious furniture to welcome and greet the guests. Meanwhile, anyone who intends to enter the house must take off the shoes in order to keep the house floor as clean as possible (Yuan, 1991). Likewise, a clean house floor enables the Malays to pray as the prayers are carried out on the floor. Prayers are usually accomplished in *rumah ibu* while the *serambi* is another allocated functional space for praying. Meanwhile, the flexibility of *rumah ibu* with its limited partitions leads to an open space for many other activities to be

performed on its raised floor. On the other hand, the *rumah dapur* is utilized for cooking, serving the food and dining. According to Malay life style, they seat on a mat on the house floor of the *rumah dapur* while dining (Yuan, 1991). Eventually, we claim that the vernacular spatial features and the cultural meanings of the functional spaces in Malay houses encompass the desired Malay lifestyle.

Conclusion

This study represented that a Malay vernacular house is comprised of valuable features in terms of versatile aspect of the house. Nevertheless, the Malay house while holding

profound features is not highly considered in contemporary residential design as this remarkable heritage is getting vulgarized. Accordingly, this study opens further insights for researchers to study the Malay vernacular houses in terms of other remarkable aspects. Correspondingly, the identification and adaptation of vernacular architectural features is necessary to address local needs inside the contemporary functional spaces. These vernacular architectural features embrace the vernacular functional spatial features and the cultural meanings of functional spaces. Eventually, the study represents that the vernacular functional spatial features and cultural meanings of the Malay vernacular functional spaces are highly needed to be integrated into contemporary residential designs for enhancing the quality of life.

References

- Abel, C. (2000). *Localization versus Globalization, in Architecture and Identity: Responses to Cultural and Technological Changes*, Boston: Architectural Press.
- Fernandez, J. (1986). *Persuasions and performances: the play of tropes in culture*, Bloomington (Indiana): Indiana University Press.
- Glenn, I. (2004). Enhancing the Rural South's Quality of Life: Leveraging Development through Educational institutions, *Journal of southern rural sociology* 20(1): 1-24.
- Kowaltowski, D., Silva, V., Pina, S., Labaki, L., Ruschel, R & Moreira, D. (2006). Quality of life and sustainability issues as seen by the population of low-income housing in the region of Campinas, Brazil, *Journal of habitat international* 30: 1100-1114.
- Low, S. (1988). Cultural Aspects of Design: An introduction to the field, *Journal of Arch. & Comport. /Arch. Behav* 4 (3): 187-190.

- Mohammed Abdullah, E. (2001). The evolution of planning & urban theory from the perspective of vernacular design: MOMRA initiatives in improving Saudi Arabian neighborhoods, *Journal of land use policy* 18: 170–190.
- Nilhan, V., Sarbulent, V., Nihan, E., & Resat, S. (2007). Eastern black sea region—A sample of modular design in the vernacular architecture, *Journal of building and environment* 42: 2746–2761.
- Powell, R & Wong, B. (1988). The contemporary kampong, *Jornal of Majallah Akitek* 4(88): 22 – 28.
- Rapoport, A. (1990). “Defining vernacular design” in *Turan: Vernacular architecture paradigms of environmental response*, Avebary: Gower publishing company limited.
- Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, Ali, M. K. M., Nihan, E., Syed Ariffin, S. A. I., Mohamad, R., & Mursib, G. (2005). *The architectural heritage of the Malay world – The traditional houses, Malaysia: Johor Darul Ta’zim*.
- Tan, S. H. (1980). *Factors influencing the location, layout and scale of low-cost housing in Malaysia, in Public and Private Housing in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia).
- Thompson, E. (2004). Rural Villages as Socially Urban Spaces in Malaysia, *Journal of urban studies* 41(12): 2357-2376.
- Wakefield, J (2000). *Some micro issues – Housing, profit and culture, Klang Valley, Malaysia*. Proceeding of the second international conference on quality of life in cities, 21 century goal. National University of Singapore, Singapore.
- Wan Ismail, W. H. (2005). *Houses in Malaysia “Fusion of the east and the west”*, Malaysia: Johor darul ta’zim.
- Yatim, O. M. (1995). *Islamic arts, Malaysia: Ministry of education, Malaysia*.
- Yuan, L. J. (1991). *The Malay house: rediscovering Malaysia’s indigenous shelter system*, Malaysia: