

What can we learn from Malay vernacular houses?



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ABSTRACT

Today, the contemporary residential design has been promoted in cities without concerns of the essence of vernacular houses. Recent studies declare that the quality of contemporary residential spaces is often poorly linked to traditions and value of each region. In view of the rapid modernization of Malaysia, the kampong houses as Malay vernacular built environments have been replaced by modern residential design. Thus, several aspects of kampong which embody major vernacular values are lost. Accordingly, many Malay inhabitants still prefer to live in houses that are based on their own traditions. This is because quality of housing as one of the fundamental factors in enhancing the quality of life is not fully in line with their daily lifestyle and local environmental characteristics. Hence, the congruency among local daily functions, environmental characteristics of region, and vernacular functional spatial features is perceived as a substantial principle for enhancing the quality of life. The study theorizes that the aforementioned congruity must be considered during the contemporary residential design in order to address the actual needs of users for enhancing their quality of life. In this line, theoretical analysis concludes that among all identified values, privacy and optimal use of space are the significant social values while natural ventilation is the most significant environmental value extracted from the analysis of Malay houses.

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1. Introduction

Buildings have an immense effect on the lives of their users. In particular, houses are required to allocate spaces for individuals being safe, relaxed and satisfied to do what they desire, such as eating, sleeping, entertaining guests and many other functions based on their aspirations (Clements-Croome, 2006; Rapoport, 1990). Mustafa, Hassan, and Baper (2010) denotes the reciprocal relationships between functional spaces of a house and human functional relations. Moreover, Yu and Kim (2011) argues that the functional spaces of a house must be in accordance with the indoor environmental factors of region. In this regard, Rapoport (2008) also highlights the role of culture–environment relations and the necessity of responsive environments for supporting people.

In view of the aforementioned theories, this study claims that the discrepancy between the condition of interior spaces and the spatial demands of inhabitants in Malaysia often results in users

who are not satisfied with their living environment. These spatial demands including socio-cultural and environmental concerns, requires to be applied into the functional spaces of contemporary houses. The elaborations on the profound role of tradition in built environments towards the opportunities and problems of contemporary residential design are critically reviewed in this study to identify significant constituents of tradition which could be influential in enhancing the quality of living environments.

Recent studies declare that the quality of contemporary residential functional spaces is mostly based on style and modernization rather than the tradition of region. With respect to this point, many inhabitants still prefer to live in houses which are based on their own traditions. This is because the quality of housing as one of the influential factors in enhancing the quality of life of the users is not highly based on their daily lifestyle and local environmental characteristics of region.

The natural harmony among people, house and environment is repeatedly cited in the studies about vernacular architecture (Foruzanmehr & Vellinga, 2011). According to Cromley (2008), “Vernacular architecture is understood to mean the building of the people, built by the people. It does not refer to buildings designed and constructed by professional architects and builders for the

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people which, in suburban housing for example, may be considered as ‘popular’ architecture”. Thus, it is deduced that the interior spaces of vernacular houses, representing smart living environments, are the amalgamation of local environmental characteristics of region, daily functions and lifestyle of that regions people reflecting the vernacular values as the strength which directly influences the level of quality of life.

As a result of the rapid modernization of Malaysia, Malay vernacular house, in the form of kampong house, has been largely replaced by modern residential architecture. We are motivated to conduct this study because we have observed the unfortunate decline of the kampong house that could support Malay local quality of life (Abel, 2000; Nilhan, Sarbulent, Nihan, & Resat, 2007). Thereby, this study would like to put forward a theoretical proposition with regards to the adaptation of vernacular architectural features into the contemporary residential functional spaces according to the social, cultural and environmental attributes.

According to Abdul Mohit, Ibrahim, and Rashid (2009), one of the Malaysian government’s plans is to achieve appropriate quality for the housing developments. This requires high levels of satisfaction of inhabitants in the housing sector (Tan, 1980; Utaberta, Spalie, & Abdullah, 2010; Zohri, 2011). According to the new Malaysian quality of life index (MQLI), the quality of housing highly affects human well-being and quality of life (Hashim, Ali, & Samah, 2009; Lazim and Osman, 2009). Congruence between the local context and the house design needs new solution towards housing developments (Salama, 2006; Hillier, 2008). Bluyssen (2010) highlights that quality of life is determined by creating healthy buildings which are in harmony with end-user’s needs. In this regards, Touman and Al-Ajmi (2005) explicitly overstates on “climate” and “culture” as the neglected factors in contemporary housing design. Dekker, Vos, Musterd, and Kempen (2011) explicitly implies that the quality of houses is overwhelmingly important for user’s satisfaction while highlighting the necessity to sustain congruence between the house design and household’s demands.

Moser (2009) develops the theory of People-Environment congruity in residential environments. In view of this, the interrelations between the individuals and living environments must ensure the user’s well-being and satisfaction based on standards of living towards enhancing the quality of life. In this regards, it is stated that the respective standards are inclusive of environmental quality and the cultural consideration of people who are utilizing the residential environments. In view of the aforementioned standards, Rasdi (2003) criticizes the quality of contemporary houses of Malaysia. Subsequently, he showed how socio-cultural and environmental values are embodied in the functional spaces of vernacular houses, particularly Malay houses.

This study proclaims that the incongruity between socio-cultural and environmental values of region and current housing design in Malaysia could be solved through successful integration of vernacular values into the functional spaces of contemporary houses. Therefore, in this research, a theoretical framework will be utilized to analyze and compare the identified vernacular functional spatial features with regards to the congruity level with the local daily lifestyle and environmental characteristics of region.

2. Quality of housing and quality of life in Malay housing

Housing satisfaction is a broad issue encompassing four main criteria including homeownership, socio-economic characteristics, housing characteristics and housing delivery system as shown in Fig. 1. This study focuses on the circumstances of spatial characteristics of residential functional spaces in order to be intertwined with socio-cultural and environmental concerns.

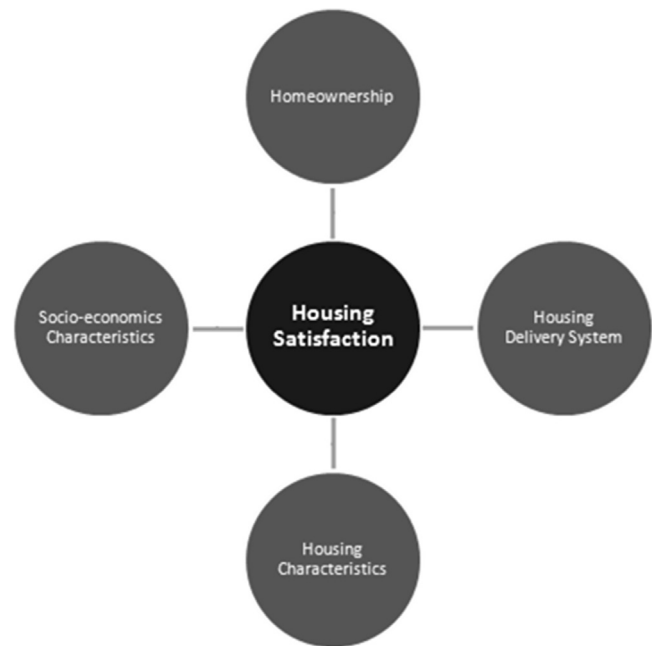


Fig. 1. Housing satisfaction parameters.
Re-designed from Teck-Hong, 2011.

Undoubtedly, the spatial characteristics of a house are significantly important for assessing the quality of living. Similarly, the perception of occupants based on the spatial characteristics of a house according to their actual demands is a fundamental aspect. In this regard, the dissatisfaction arises once the occupant’s actual demands are not fully considered (Dekker et al., 2011).

Similar studies argue that the failure of contemporary residential architecture was due to the vernacular architecture of the region and its cultural aspects not being given consideration, and pretending that modern buildings could be built in any environment regardless of their regional characteristics (Abel, 2000; GhaffarianHoseini, Ibrahim, Baharuddin, & GhaffarianHoseini, 2011). This has led to a space quality in contemporary houses which is mostly based on modernization, with western countries attributes rather Malaysian ones (Nilhan et al., 2007).

According to various theories, the quality of housing and its functional spaces are influential factors in determining quality of life (Glenn, 2004). The literature suggests that the answer to a high quality of life is based on consideration of the socio-cultural and environmental aspects within the functional spaces (Kowaltowski et al., 2006).

The rapid modernization of Malaysia has resulted in the kampong house as a part of Malay vernacular architecture being replaced by modern architecture. It is stated that various aspects of kampong, a major vernacular value, have been lost inside contemporary functional spaces (Zulkifli, Ghafar Ahmad, & Jupri, 1996). Moreover, a study by Wakefield (2000) 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 vernacular functional spatial features of the interior spaces within Malay houses representing the local environmental concerns of region and daily lifestyle of Malays could be considered during the design process of contemporary residential design as influential factors in enhancing the level of housing satisfaction. The Malay kampong house was designed and built based on a deep understanding of environmental characteristics of the region, nature and climatic factors. It represented the cultural values of users in the form of lifestyle, and it was incorporated with Malay

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