

# ASSESSMENT ON CULTURAL ASPECTS IN HOUSING DESIGN IN URBAN AREAS

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the translation and perception of cultural factors in the housing design in the urban areas in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. The paper focuses on the Malay cultural aspects, namely privacy, community ties, hospitality and privacy in the context of housing. The objectives of the paper are to examine the translation of cultural aspect into housing design and identify housing design characteristics which are not consistent with the culture. Survey interview was employed to achieve the objectives. It involves 432 respondents from three different housing typologies in the urban areas; flats, terrace houses and single houses in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Findings that community ties and hospitality are still important, but its importance was not translated into the housing design and may contribute to the diminishing community ties among residents in a housing area and the ability to provide hospitality in comfort. Family privacy is given more importance, but housing design in smaller units such as terrace houses and flats lacks provision of bedrooms for privacy. The lack of external spaces in the house design planning of housing is found to affect community ties and hospitality.*

**Keywords:** Housing design, culture, community ties, hospitality and privacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is the most important factor influencing the traditional house forms [3]. The influence of culture in the traditional house and settlement can be seen in the openness of the Malay house, treatment of openings, space organization and layout of single houses scattered within a settlement. The openness of the traditional Malay house, the lack of internal barriers and shared external spaces encouraged community intimacy, hospitality and social interaction within the village. Spaces are organized according to male and female domains and shared by family members and not specific or defined. Male family members sleep in the transitional space and female members in the main house of the house. Young children would sleep with the mother. The shared usage of spaces created good bonding between family members and there was no need for individual bedrooms for family members. Guests normally sleep together with the family members. The traditional Malay houses illustrate built forms typical of traditional culture, adapted to the larger social and economic unit of the village, to the smaller family unit, climate and ecology. The traditional Malay house reflects the Malay society which emphasized on family privacy and community intimacy. The Malay family has been known to be a close community and have a large family living together under one roof, which is, consists of grandchildren, children and grandparents [12]. At a glance, the traditional Malay houses do not appear to provide privacy at either the private or public levels. The design attributes of the house, which is open in nature and minimal internal barriers might be construed to be the product of climatic response and lack of privacy as opposed to the idea of privacy from the Western perspective which emphasized individualism and physical barriers as important privacy regulating mechanisms. Looking from this perspective, the traditional Malay house undeniably appears to provide less than an optimum level of privacy. This opinion can be argued if the idea of privacy is seen from the Western perspective [8].

An analysis of the traditional house indicated that privacy was provided by the traditional Malay houses, according to the privacy needs of the family [7]. The numerous windows

with decorated lower panels allow a balance of good ventilation, daylighting and visual privacy to the house. The openness of the house was an expression of the Malay traditional culture and tradition; strong family bonds, respect for the elderly and defined position of women in the houses [10, 20]. As individual privacy was not emphasized, there was little need for individual bedrooms for family members. It was common for parents and young children to sleep together in the same room rather than being isolated in separate rooms and thus was considered to be more pleasant, intimate and safe. Unmarried daughters would sleep beyond a screened partition or in some houses, in the attic. The introduction of Islam has developed a concern over the provision of separate sleeping places for parents and children of different genders. As a result walls were introduced to create rooms and replaced curtains, which were being used as walls to define spaces. However, rooms were not needed for individual privacy, but merely to provide sleeping places for the parents and unmarried daughters. Privacy is culturally specific and therefore its definition of privacy in the Malay culture has to be seen in the context of the culture.

Changes in way of life are inevitable as culture changes. Urbanization in the 1970s has resulted in changes in lifestyles and living environment of the Malays who migrated to the urban areas and lived in the Western influenced housing design influenced by colonization [10, 13]. The present Malay family is a phenomenon of conflicting values and norms in the process of changes and accommodation to an alternative pattern of life in an urban setting which affected the fundamental structural unit of Malay family. At the same time, changes in lifestyle eventually resulted in a heterogeneous community living together unlike the traditional setting. Rural-urban migration and the process of modernization has in the changes of way of life and housing environment particularly for the urban migrants. The focus of housing, then was to provide shelter for the fast growing urban population. The introduction of mass housing, which differs from the traditional villages significantly changed the housing scene in the country. A study by [14] finds that community ties were strong in the earlier generation of Malay migrants living in low cost

terrace housing. Yet, studies by [2, 11] find that community ties and neighbourhood attachment were not as strong among the Malays living in the many urban housing. These studies indicate the influence of environment on behaviour and the role of the environment as a determinant of behaviour. The introduction of mass housing influenced by Western design principles and prototypes changes the housing scene in Malaysia. The lack of social and cultural consideration of the people reflected in the earlier housing design and planning which manifested in negative consequences. To remove people from housing that is closely related to their particular way of life is to disrupt an important touchstone for an integrated, well-adjusted personality in that culture [18]. A study by [20] has indicated a negative impact on the quality of life and social patterns of the people and a study by [5] on low-cost terrace houses suggest changes in attitude towards privacy. Findings indicate a change in attitude towards community ties among the Malays living in the urban areas [6]. Community ties are no longer strong among the Malays in the urban areas. There are consistent suggestions that privacy is lacking in the existing terrace housing designs [10, 16]. Transitional spaces such as the *anjung* and *selang* acts as a buffer zone between the external and the internal spaces. The front part of the house or the porch (*anjung*) is designated by stairs leading up to a raised covered verandah which acts as a transition space between the public and private domains. This is also a place where guests are entertained. Depending on who the guests are to the family, they may be invited and entertained in the reception area [10]. Mere acquaintances or strangers are restricted to the porch. Within the openness of the house, the porch established the boundary to which a stranger is limited.

Rapid changes in living conditions and contradictions between the global and Eastern world culture and local traditions have created new paradigms and changed culture-housing interactions. Housing is no longer directly influenced by the local culture, but by a culture which is foreign and incongruent with the way of the life of the people. At times, this contradiction indirectly affects some aspects of the Malay culture. The built environment changes in tandem with changes in culture [4]. Changes of culture are not a static sphere, but a spiral that is always moving ahead where some aspects of culture which became irrelevant would be left behind and some of the important aspects would be maintained and interact with new elements. As the relationship between environment and culture is an active and continuous process of interrelated components, it is clearly evident that the components are both causes and effects. In the context of housing, some aspects of culture may no longer be relevant to the present way of life and will be left behind. The important aspects would interact with new physical environment relevant to the present way of life to create a balance between the present cultural needs and the physical environment. Changes which differ from the traditional value system may not necessarily negative. However, any changes which are inconsistent with Islam as a way of life for the Malays can be seen as negative. Privacy is one of the most important factors in the Muslim house [1,19] and therefore must have been provided in the Malay houses. In light of this argument, there is a need to examine the diabolical

relationship between existing housing designs and the present Malay culture and the changes which resulted from it. Changes in the physical housing environment which are not consistent with the traditional culture of the Malays may have a positive and negative influence on the culture of the present Malay families. For example, lack of consideration for sociocultural needs of the terrace house resulted in behavioral adaptation [7, 16, 15]. Review of literature indicated a lack of study on the translation of Malay cultural aspects in relation to housing characteristic.

## 2. Research Objectives

The aim of this paper is to examine the issues pertaining to cultural aspects, namely community ties, privacy and hospitality in relation to the housing design typologies in the urban areas. Based on the discussion presented, the objectives of the research are:

1. To examine the translation of Malay cultural aspects in the housing design
2. To identify housing design aspects consistent with Malay cultural aspects with regards to community ties, interaction, privacy and hospitality in the context of housing in the urban areas.

## 3. Methodology

Survey interview was conducted to achieve the objectives of the research. A total number of 432 survey interviews were conducted from respondents living in three types of houses namely; single unit houses/ bungalows (33.1%), terrace houses (33.1%) and flats (33.8%). These types of houses are the most common typologies in the urban areas and urban fringes. Terrace houses and flats represent the most common housing typologies in the urban areas and single houses are commonly found in the urban fringes. The selection of these housing typologies allows understanding of the role of housing design as the physical living environment in supporting and influencing the cultural needs of the Malays living in the urban areas. The location of the study is the city of Kuala Lumpur, the most urbanised area in Malaysia.

## 4. Findings

Traditionally the external areas around the houses within a village were shared among the villages and played an important role in promoting social interaction and hence community ties in the traditional Malay housing setting. However, in the present housing setting in the urban areas, external areas of individual houses are defined and not shared. However, external spaces and green areas were planned within a housing which includes playground, green areas, community hall and place of worship depending on individual housing development. Findings indicate that only half of the respondents (50.9%) indicated that their housing areas provide areas for interaction. Similarly, only 59.3% of the respondents indicated that the planning their respective housing areas encourage interaction among residents. These percentages are lower than the response of the respondents (68.4%) who agree that the provision of area for activities/ interaction in housing area can contribute to closer community ties. There is no significant difference between housing typologies. The result shows a relatively high "neutral" response as compare to "disagree" response to the statement in the questionnaires (Table 1). Findings suggest that the planning of housing areas did not sufficiently

encourage social interaction among residents. The lack of significant difference in response between housing typology implied that the situation is consistent throughout the planning in all housing typologies.

**Table 1: Housing design and community ties**

Community ties	N	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
The housing planning of my neighbourhood encourages interaction	432	59.3	25.7	15.0	100.0
The housing area provides areas for interaction	432	50.9	29.2	19.9	100.0
Provision of area for activities/ interaction in housing area can contribute to closer community ties	432	68.4	20.4	11.1	100.0

The community was close knit and shared communal activities which promoted social interaction and community ties. Communal activities such as building a house, preparation of wedding, the process of burying the dead and other activities strengthened the community ties. Shared external spaces around the houses allow the community activities to take place. However, the design and planning of houses in the urban areas are not based on the local culture. Single houses planned along the street are defined by the boundaries and are not shared. Similarly flat units are arranged next to the corridor. Findings indicate that external spaces within the territory of the house are identified as a place for interaction with neighbours by majority of the respondents (72.9%). Other spaces such as the house itself, the local mosque, playground or other spaces were identified less than half of the respondents as a place to have social interaction. The result indicates that most respondents would interact with their neighbours within the external area of their house. The findings indirectly show the importance and role of external spaces to promote interaction among the neighbours in the present housing context. Bonding between the villages started at young age where children play together in external areas around their houses within the village. Finding indicates that only 64.8% of the respondents agree on the importance of showing good hospitality. However, the results indicate only 60.1% and 53.2% of the respondents agree the designs of their houses allow them to receive guests in comfort and entertain friends, neighbours and family in comfort respectively (Table 2). There is a significant difference in the response ( $\rho \leq 0.05$ ) between housing type as shown in Table 3. As expected, a high percentage of respondents living in single houses indicate that the design of their house allow them to receive guests in comfort as compare to those living in terrace houses and flats. The design of terrace houses and flats are seen not to provide comfort in entertaining guests as less than half of the respondents living in these two types of housing agree to the statement that their houses have comfortable are to entertain friends, neighbours and families. The low percentage (55.5%) considers exterior spaces are suitable to entertain guests. The

result reflects these spaces are not used as an extension of space for socialization and lack the characteristics of the traditional Malay house which has transitional spaces such as the *selang* and *anjung* (porch) where unknown visitors or strangers were entertained. Only 55.5% of the respondents agree that their houses have exterior spaces suitable to entertain guests. The terrace houses may have porch but commonly use to park the car. On the other hand, the only exterior space in a flat is a small balcony which is too small to be used to entertain guests. Only There is no significant difference ( $\rho \leq 0.05$ ) between housing types. The findings also indicate that the designs of the houses are not consistent with the aspiration of the Malays who prefer to have separate areas to entertain male and female guest (Table 3).

**Table 2: Social interaction and hospitality in housing design and hospitality**

Social interaction and hospitality	N	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Total %
My house design allows me to receive guests with comfort	432	60.1	24.1	15.8	100.0
My house has a comfortable area to entertain friends, neighbours and families	432	53.2	24.5	22.2	100.0
My house has an exterior area to entertain guests	432	56.4	21.6	22.0	100.0
Exterior spaces such as terrace and porch is suitable to use to entertain guests	432	55.5	25.6	18.9	100.0
It is good to have separate areas to entertain male and female guests	432	63.7	21.5	14.8	100.0

**Table 3: The difference in response between housing type on house design and hospitality**

Housing typology N=431	The design of my house allow me to receive guests in comfort			Total (%)
	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	
Single house	69.7	19.0	11.3	100.0
Terrace houses	56.6	28.7	14.7	100.0
Flats	54.1	24.7	21.2	100.0
Chi-square value = 10.814, df = 4, $\rho = 0.029^*$				
Housing typology N=432	My house has a comfortable area to entertain friends, neighbours and families			Total (100%)
	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	
Single house	63.6	23.1	19	100.0
Terrace houses	48.3	26.6	36	100.0
Flats	47.9	24.0	41	100.0
Chi-square value = 12.680, df = 4, $\rho = 0.013^*$				

The traditional Malay houses were designed according to male and female domain, which allow gender separation during social interaction. The findings suggest that the

designs of the houses in the urban areas are not consistent with the need to provide hospitality that is still important in the Malay society. The low percentage of responses which agree with the statements in the questions on housing design, social interaction and hospitality suggest that the housing designs are not supportive of the Malay culture (Table 2). The limitation of space in the flats and terrace houses partly contributed to the lack of external spaces which can be used as an extension of space for socialization.

Many authors are in the opinion that traditionally the Malays did not emphasized on privacy, [7] is in the opinion that privacy was important in the traditional Malay society within the boundary of its culture as privacy is culturally specific. Privacy of the family is very important in Islam which influenced the idea of privacy in the traditional Malay society. The need for privacy in Islam has resulted in the addition of internal partitions in the traditional houses. However as individual privacy was not emphasized, there was no need for many rooms in the house. The use of partitions and screen provided visual privacy for female family members when required. However, based on Islamic requirement, a house should at least have three bedrooms; for the parents, daughters and sons. Results show that family privacy is important among the Malay respondents. The findings support the previous findings as the results show 87.0% of the respondents consider privacy of the family as important. Only 17.5% of the respondents disagree that family privacy is more important than community tie (44.9% agree and 37.6% neutral response).

Privacy is the most important consideration in a Muslim house. The earlier discussion on the finding has indicated that majority of the respondents agree that privacy of the family is important in the context of housing. The result shows that 83.6% of the respondents agree that the designs of their houses provide privacy to the family even in the presence of guests. There is a significance different difference in the response (Chi-square value = 8.054, df = 2,  $\rho = 0.018^*$ ) whereby a higher percentage of respondents living in single houses agree that the design of their houses provide privacy during the presence of guests. However, a lower percentage of respondents agree that the planning of houses in their neighbourhood and the number of room provide privacy to the family (Table 4) is sufficient to provide privacy even in the presence of sleepover guests.

The findings suggest that the act of hospitality towards guests is still important among the Malays in the urban areas and therefore should be a consideration in housing design and planning. The result also indicates that lack of room may not provide the required privacy in the presence of guests, but did not prohibit the family to extend their hospitality within the limitation of their houses.

Despite the number of rooms, the size and configuration of bedrooms in the flats and terraces houses may not be able to provide privacy to all family members especially during the presence of sleep-over guests at home. The close proximity of bedrooms in the flats and adjacent units and the location of corridors immediately to the housing units affect the privacy

of the family. Mirror image arrangement of the terrace houses and close proximity of the houses. There is a significant difference in the response on three aspects of housing design between housing types (Table 5). Respondents from single houses were more likely to feel satisfied with the provision of privacy in the house design. Despite having only three bedrooms, half of the respondents still consider the number of room in their houses

**Table 4 : Privacy and housing design**

Privacy and housing design	N	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
The design of my house provides privacy in the presence of guests	432	83.6	0	16.4	100
The number of bedrooms in my house provide privacy to all family members	432	58.4	26.7	14.9	100
The planning of my housing provide privacy to individual family	432	55.3	29.9	14.8	100
The number of bedrooms in my house able to provide privacy in the presence of sleep-over guests	432	53.3	28.1	18.6	100
the design of my house did not provide audio privacy	429	41.2	34.0	24.0	100
The design of the windows in my house did not provide privacy	429	36.1	29.8	33.8	100

**Table 5: Differences in response between types of houses**

Housing typology N=431	The number of rooms in my house provide privacy to family members			Total (100%)
	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	
Single house	63.4	26.8	9.9	100.0
Terrace houses	45.1	32.4	22.5	100.0
Flats	51.4	25.3	23.3	100.0
Chi-square value = 14.770, df = 4, $\rho = 0.005^{**}$				
Housing typology N=432	The design of my house provides privacy in the presence of guests		Total (100%)	
	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)		
Single house	90.8	9.2	100.0	
Terrace houses	80.1	19.9	100.0	
Flats	80.0	23.7	100.0	
Chi-square value = 8.054, df = 2, $\rho = 0.018^*$				
Housing typology N=431	The number of rooms in my house provide privacy to family members			Total (100%)
	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	
Single house	65.5	27.5	7.0	100.0
Terrace houses	52.8	28.9	18.3	100.0
Flats	56.8	24.0	19.2	100.0
Chi-square value = 11.525, df = 4, $\rho = 0.021^*$				

### 4.3. CONCLUSION

Community ties, social interaction, privacy and hospitality are still important among the Malays living in the urban areas but have undergone some changes. However, these important cultural aspects of the Malays were not considered in the housing designs in the urban areas. The lack of external spaces within the defined boundary of the houses did not encourage social interaction. Even though there is an attempt to provide shared external spaces within a housing development, the lack of understanding on the role of external spaces in promoting community ties resulted in limited external spaces within the defined boundary of the houses, if any. Hospitality which is very important in the Malay culture should be considered in terms of provision of spaces including internal and external spaces for entertaining guests, socialization and accommodating guests who stay overnight. The lack of internal spaces due to housing design constraints can be balanced by providing external spaces for both social interaction and entertaining guests. Consideration for visual and audio privacy is particularly important in mass housing such as the terrace houses and flats. Planning of units should avoid mirror image arrangement and a good distance between housing units are required to provide privacy in general.

The lack of cultural consideration in the present housing designs in the urban areas contributed to the weakening of community ties, hospitality and the ability to have privacy for the Malay families. Contrary to the traditional setting, the physical housing environment in the urban areas influenced the culture of the people, and over a period of time, resulted in diminishing important cultural values of the Malaysia. Consideration of the present culture of the people in the design of houses is crucial for sustainability of a culture.

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