



“Ruralizing” Urban Residential Landscape: A Paradigm Shift in Urban Landscape Design

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ABSTRACT

Industrialization and urbanization in Malaysia have highlighted the urgency of providing adequate urban housing units. Environmental factors that could contribute towards well-being of the residents are, however, neglected. This paper investigates the residents' involvement in landscape alterations in low-cost housing schemes which indicated that their rural, home landscape inspires them in creating a responsive landscape. The term responsive landscape was referred to productive landscape elements that responded well to the residents' cultural, religious and spiritual needs. A qualitative research approach was employed in this research. Finding of this research indicates that the residents “replicated a kampong-like landscape” in urban living settings. Malaysian urban residents often consider rural social practices to be outdated, in contrast with urban images of success and progress. This study challenged the notion that the traditional plant species and the traditional social habits necessarily imply inappropriate urban living conduct. This research advocates that the residents' knowledge of gardening, understanding plants and their physical and tangible benefits and the way they re-created semi-public spaces as a meaningful and sustainable living environment should be recognized by the local government and landscape practitioners as well. Findings of this research will contribute to awareness among the policy makers, landscape architects and developers of the importance of developing a sustainable, conducive and responsive urban living environment for the community. This research calls for the needs and urgency to develop a landscape policy that implements rural attributes in urban residential areas. This is to acknowledge the major contribution that utilitarian species have in the gardens in terms of issues of sustainability, although “planners tend to think that urban food growing is a messy business”.

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INTRODUCTION

Substantial rural-urban migration in Malaysia occurred with the establishment of The Second Malaysia Plan 1971-1975. During this period, more than two-thirds of rural-urban migrants were Malays [1]. Migration to cities is underpinned by aspirations for better economic, educational and social opportunities. This policy is regarded as essential for the modernisation of the Malays and “considered as an exposure to the influences of an urban environment” [1]. The shift to an urban area requires adaptation to a totally different environment. According to Bunnell [1], the migrants who earlier lived in squatter settlements continue to practise *kampong* (village) values even after they have been relocated to newly planned residential areas. The *kampong values* referred to by Bunnell relate to the unsatisfactory practice of rubbish disposal by the residents who continue to practise “their habit of indiscriminate rubbish dumping” as they did in the village. The occurrence of *kampong values* in urban residential settings is also disapproved of by the local authority as the local government bodies are focussing towards developing “Kuala Lumpur [as a] globally oriented cityscape” [1]. Thus, the *kampong conduct* is perceived as “out of place” [1] and “deemed unsuitable for urban life” [1].

The Malaysia New Economic Policy (1971-1990) introduced a ‘human settlement concept’ with the intention of building a better living environment in which people could live, prosper and develop. Landscape design for residential areas is one of the ways that enable people to live in a pleasing environment. The

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establishment of the National Landscape Department of Malaysia in 1996, with the mission of “landscaping the nation” led to the provision of a green policy for public spaces in urban residential landscape developments [14]. These public spaces comprise of road medians, neighbourhood parks, parking spaces, children’s playgrounds and green buffer zones. In general practice, the landscape design of these housing schemes includes medium size trees, small and medium shrubs and turf planted along the roads and public parks to provide shade and to enhance aesthetic pleasure in the neighbourhoods [14]. In accordance with this policy, developers are responsible for providing landscape designs for these public spaces.

Low-Cost Urban Residential Landscape:

The housing sector has been one of the important concerns in Malaysian social and economic development programmes over the last three decades, starting from the First Malaysia Plan in 1971. Malaysia has been proactive in providing social infrastructure including the Integrated People Housing Programme under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) and the Zero-Illegal Squatters policy, introduced by the Selangor Chief Minister, Dato’ Sri Dr Khir Toyo in the year 2000. These policies were established with the aim of eliminating slums and squatters’ settlements in Selangor’s urban areas by the year 2005 and providing a good quality of life and affordable housing to the Malaysian citizen [16].

Despite these government efforts, Suffian and Mohamad (2009, pg. 114) reveal social reasons related to squatters’ reluctance or sometimes refusal to move out of their squatter settlements (even though these areas lack proper facilities and amenities) and occupy new low-cost housing. The reasons for this refusal include dissatisfaction at the size of new low-cost accommodation which was relatively smaller than their “single storey wooden bungalow”. The squatters “do not want to be divorced from their previous neighbours” and the majority of them were “involved in agricultural activities producing food crops” in the settlements [16] - creating landscape characteristics that embodied their way of life. Communal activities developed a strong sense of attachment and belonging in these illegal squatters’ settlements.

The mass production of the low-cost housing areas resulted in homogenous architectural and stereotype landscape characteristics, in contrast with the lively living environment in the squatters’ settlements. The government’s demolition of squatters’ settlements around the city areas provided no alternative for the squatters but to live in these newly developed housing schemes which resulted in a feeling of alienation. Nurizan and Hashim [10] reveal that the ‘normal’ indoor family activities are difficult to perform in small, two bedroom low-cost houses, resulting in children and adolescents spending more time outdoors. A study by Salleh [15] on residential satisfaction in the low-cost housing schemes in Malaysia revealed that the residents were dissatisfied with the neighbourhood facilities and the existing characteristics of their outdoor environment. However we know that landscape has the potential to provide very effectively for the physical and emotional well-being of the residents [17] Given this, the developers’ approach to looking at the low-cost residential landscapes as only an act of ‘beautification’ after development need to be challenged. The residents should be given opportunities to express their sense of belonging and attachment to their new living places – on a par with what they have experienced earlier in the village and later, in the squatter settlements. Furthermore, a landscape setting that encourages positive social interactions and strengthens neighbourhood integration was argued by Crowe [2] as one of the ways to curb negative social influences such as drug abuse and truancy. Crowe, in his study in Florida, discussed this notion in his book on *Crime Prevention through Environmental Design* (CPTED), explaining that:

Crime prevention need not amount to building isolated walled and fenced communities. On the contrary, the same design techniques that make communities more attractive and more neighbourly can also prevent crime [2]

In brief, Malaysian government policies and research on low-cost housing largely ignores the value of landscape in providing a conducive and comfortable outdoor environment. Landscape issues remain an unaddressed aspect of low-cost housing development with the exception of basic facilities and trees in the public areas merely for aesthetic value.

My previous research [8] reveals that the residential landscape means more than merely planting ornamental trees. Orians [11] explains that residential areas promote certain feelings reflecting human adaptation to the spaces, creating a responsive living environment. This responsive environment is a space for inhabitants to express their physical activities, emotions, social and cultural demands.

Landscape architects in western countries however, have generally shown little interest in creating this type of living ambience [19]. Similarly, Gillette provokes discussion with the question “*Can Gardens Mean?*” [3]. She suggests that the current public landscape developments are “incapable of meaning anything or anything much” because “the garden designers express complex ideas using only the garden and which are certainly very difficult for an audience to “read”. She further explains that a public garden should be more than those gardens usually described in novels, “which must mean because they have no other function” [3]. Both, Thwaites (2001) and Gillette’s (2005) ideas on the importance of meanings associated with landscape influenced my desire to explore landscape alteration in medium and high-cost urban residential areas. The findings of this study will

hopefully drive a new design approach, which pays greater attention to the social and cultural impact of landscape practices on communities.

The residential landscape can be perceived as an expression of the intrinsic and cognitive values of a relationship between humans and their living environment [17]. As an example, the Malay rural cultural garden reveals its significant intrinsic and cognitive values through its functional characteristics such as provision of food, medicine, cosmetics and shade. The importance of an intimate relationship between humans and gardens in residential areas has also been suggested by Proshansky, Ittelson and Rivlin who introduce the idea that landscape sometimes represents human personality and behaviour. Larsen and Harlan who conducted a study in Phoenix, Arizona, also suggested that personal gardens are the representation of social class, preference and behaviour.

Further, landscape is understood to enhance community identity and reflect its cultural heritage “linking the past with the present” [5,18]. Consistent with this, urban designer Gurstein [5] recommended “cultural planning” to create a sense of community, by utilizing the physical arrangement and composition of the space. He noted that the physical environment can nurture a sense of community.

Research Method:

This study aims to understand the reasons for landscape alteration by the rural-urban migrants in urban terrace housing areas. Landscape alteration by the residents, in accordance with their social and cultural values and as influenced by their experiences in the villages, may enhance place attachment and place identity in the newly developed residential estates.

Landscape alteration in low-cost housing areas in Malaysia is a dynamic phenomenon. The landscape elements change through time, expressing personal preferences and needs while reflecting the community's cultural articulation of their living settings. Landscape alteration is performed by the communities during the post-occupancy period; it portrays a relationship between humans and the environment. With this understanding, I chose to engage with the post-occupancy evaluation approach, also known as the POE method and a qualitative research approach. These methods enabled me to interact with respondents and investigate human events and activities in their natural settings.

Qualitative research is characterised by sets of research questions, issues and a search for patterns, in contrast to the hypothetical-deductive approach requiring the specification of main variables and a research hypothesis. Qualitative research in my study comprises structured interviews, case studies and analysis of archival material. These techniques enabled me to discuss with residents the reasons for, and processes surrounding, the changed landscape. At the same time, this process enabled me to understand the meanings of tangible elements embedded in the residents' gardens and to read the intangible experiences involving feelings and emotions belonging to garden owners.

'Ruralizing' Urban Landscape:

I wished to understand the values and meanings participants ascribe to domestic gardens. Talking to residents face-to-face has enabled me to obtain 'deep' and 'rich' data about landscape alteration in urban residential areas. The interviews have helped open my 'eyes' and my 'heart' to the participants' feelings. This paper addresses one of the themes derived from my analysis, the memories and experiences of rural landscapes that have inspired the urban residents to 're-create' the landscape in semi-public spaces which they later appropriate as a personal garden. When talking about their present gardens, the majority of the interviewees frequently referred to their past living experiences in the rural village. This interconnection manifested itself in terms of gardening inspiration, elements in the rural setting, and personal and emotional attachment. These manifestations support my contention in this study that the rural-urban migrants imitate their experiences in the rural cultural landscape to enhance place attachment and place identity in urban residential areas.

My study indicated that the changes made in the existing landscape in the low-cost residential areas generated a 'utilitarian landscape'. "Utilitarian – usefulness rather than beauty" [17] was the reason why residents selected special plant species that were meaningful on social, cultural and religious levels. The utilitarian landscape was one of their ways of reinforcing their close relationship with the village environment - a repository of their life experiences. I was told by the residents that it was their habit to bring back a few plant species when they returned for the Eid celebration in the villages. Sometimes, the plants were gifts from their parents, plant cuttings taken from gardens that belong to their family members or exchanged among friends in the village. As a result, residents' altered gardens were dominated by indigenous and native plants alongside exotic species, reflecting authentic cultural expressions of their communities. These findings suggest that the residents' altered landscapes can be understood as an interpretation of familiar rural landscapes that are consciously, carefully and constantly developed in the urban settings.

In my study, I found that these utilitarian landscapes were characterized by the use of *Mangifera indica* (Mango). This was the first step taken by the residents in making structural changes to the existing landscape. I have identified that the Mango tree was favoured especially by the Malay and the Indian communities. The

Chinese residents prefer *Cyrtostachys lakka* (Red Palm or Sealing Wax Palm) with red trunks, believed to bring good fortune for the home owner and also reflecting their Taoist beliefs. The Malays favoured the sweet and sour Mango fruits and used them in their cooking or ate them fresh from the trees. The Indians enjoyed not only its delicious fruits, but also utilized its leaves as a religious symbol - protection from spirits. After planting and securing the Mango trees the residents would then add other utilitarian and exotic species. This suggested that the Mango trees were the major structural species in the gardens, while other shrubs and groundcovers around it - subjected to dynamic changes from time to time - reflected the tastes and preferences of the house owners. On the whole, the plant combinations supported the residents in preparing their traditional cuisine and, represented their culture, beliefs and religion. My study has also shown that there was little use of hard landscape elements due to the limited space in the semi-public areas. A few residents however, enhanced the liveliness of this space by placing benches and keeping cages for poultry there. In summary, my case study showed that the urban utilitarian landscapes possessed distinct similarities to the soft landscape elements in the rural areas. The process of changing and improving a garden through time has been termed by Giuliani [4] and Riger and Lavrakas [13] as "involvement and rootedness" – a practice that accentuates residents' sense of belonging to their living environment.

My study shows that the altered landscapes were enjoyed for their healing and medicinal advantages as well. The garden elements plays important role and helped to enhance residents' physical and emotional health and well-being, reinforcing Holmes *et. al's* [7] proposition that "the creation of a garden and the activity of gardening are a reflection of oneself, a healthy, grounding occupation to help us cope with the stresses of life". I found that the restorative experiences [9] in the garden were achieved especially when the residents constructed outdoor seating areas underneath the Mango trees, replicating the *pelenggar* (timber bench) of the rural setting. These hard landscape elements helped them to relax while keeping an eye on their children playing around the neighbourhood areas, especially in the afternoon. This time was also used to tend and nurture their garden - witnessing new shoots, flowers starting to bloom and anticipating fresh fruits produced by plants in the garden. This gardening activity provided relaxation and exercise in addition to the 'satisfaction' of creating their preferred outdoor environment. Helphand [6] explained that gardening satisfaction can be achieved even with a single plant in a small garden which is able to provide "a mental distraction from our usual routine – a sense of being away". The prominent environmental psychologists, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan argued that "[t]he greatest is a sense of tranquillity, followed by the fascination with nature and the pleasure of garden's sensory experience" [6].

My study found that the residents themselves were productive gardeners and well equipped with knowledge about plants and gardening practices, acquired through their life experiences in the villages. They planted plants in the gardens not only for their physical function, but also for their medicinal properties. Some of the residents were keen to continue to practise the traditional procedures in curing certain illnesses using plant and natural materials, without totally rejecting conventional medicinal practices. This was a ways of sustaining their traditional methods of curing sickness which they were very proud of.

In short, the residents' altered garden can be considered as an alternative pharmacy with the house owner himself acting as the pharmacist. The residents managed to explain the distinct characteristics of each of the medicinal plants, the method of preparing the remedies and their application emphasizing their detailed understanding of those natural elements that helped to relieve human pain and discomfort. The residents' defiant garden was also a garden of symbolic representations. This was a platform of personal expression. Tuan describes the power of the everyday landscape in portraying characteristics of the house owner as "they are abstract rather than concrete symbols and hence they can be used to reveal the dark and offensive sides of life without overpowering the listener or reader". A few residents in the low -cost housing grew plants that related to spiritual and mystical values in their altered landscape. Following Bunnell's [1] idea on *kampong conduct* in urban living areas, this suggests that these rituals were still followed by some of the residents - evidence that belief in supernatural powers did not only belong in the rural and orthodox communities in Malaysia.

Conclusion:

My study suggests that the altered gardens developed in semi-public spaces enhanced community engagement and ethnic integration in the neighbourhoods. My fieldwork provided an opportunity for me to talk to the residents, as the end-users of the public landscape developments and in return, they found our conversation a means through which they could express their feelings of dissatisfaction towards the existing landscapes. They gave the impression that their 'layman' suggestions, forwarded to the local authority, on improving the landscapes to better represent themselves in their living spaces, had never been considered. The residents indeed, utilized our meetings as an opportunity to express their disappointment with a local authority that they felt was unable to successfully maintain the semi-public spaces surrounding the neighbourhoods. I could sense their hopes that I, as a landscape architect, could convey these messages and that they could look forward to a new approach to the development of public landscape areas as one of the community projects.

Industrialization and urbanization in Malaysia have highlighted the urgency of providing adequate urban housing units. Environmental factors that could contribute towards well-being of the residents are, however, neglected. Residents' involvement in landscape alterations in low-cost housing schemes indicated that their rural, home landscape inspires them in creating a responsive landscape. The term responsive landscape was used in my previous research [8] and referred to productive landscape elements that responded well to the residents' cultural, religious and spiritual needs. My research illustrated that the low cost residents were physically and emotionally bonded with the serenity and tranquillity of the rural settings. With this study, I challenged the notion that the traditional plant species and the traditional social habits necessarily imply inappropriate urban living conduct. The positive aspects of 'ruralizing' the urban residential landscapes indeed, should be seen by landscape architects, related built-environmental

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