

Malay Culture and Space Usage in Modern Malaysian Terrace House

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ABSTRACT

Culture cannot be separated from our lives as a human. Yet, culture is considered as subjective and too vast to be applied in design. Even though culture is important and there is an increase of interest and literature in this subject, 'culture' is still difficult to be used in design. The main objective of this paper is to find out the meaning of 'culture', its importance, what is our culture and how culture can be used in this research and how culture can be considered in the design of terrace house in the future. This paper analyze three main culture in Malaysia which are Malay, Chinese and Indian which represent the Main ethnic groups of Malaysian people. It is expected from this paper that we can be more aware of this aspect as fundamental basis for future design in Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

Culture cannot be separated from our lives as a human. Yet, culture is considered as subjective and too vast to be applied in design. Even though culture is important and there is an increase of interest and literature in this subject, 'culture' is still difficult to be used in design. This situation is pictured through a statement by Mark Twain which is; 'Culture' in design is like the weather. Everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it'. This statement clearly shows that there is awareness on the importance of culture in design, yet no one takes action on it.

According to Rapoport [4], this happened due to the vagueness in the cultural concept and the 'culture' itself was not discussed clearly. So, explanation and consideration on the term 'culture' is vital in this research to enable the design assessment of terrace house from the perspective of culture to be carried out. This matter is important to be discussed as there is no explanation on 'culture' which is abstract in nature. This has led to those involved in this industry to take an easy way out by not using 'culture' particularly in the construction of terrace house. The effect of this can be seen and felt when we visit or live in these modern terrace houses. Because of that, the aim of this paper is to find out the meaning of 'culture', its importance, what is our culture and how culture can be used in this research and how culture can be considered in the design of terrace house in the future.

1.0 The nature and definition of 'culture':

According to Rapoport [4], the first thing that we should give attention is that 'culture' is not a 'thing' but an idea, a concept and a construct, which is a label for many things that people think, believe, do and how they do it. Culture was proposed and used in today's anthropological meaning in 1871 in England by E.B. Taylor, the first anthropologist. According to him, 'culture' is a complex entity which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, moral, tradition and other abilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a community. Generally, that definition is still useful even though it seems to include almost all things that characterized mankind. At that time, the term 'culture' did not exist in the English Dictionary which was not for general use until 1920s. In some languages, this concept is still limited in its anthropology way or technical way. Culture has been used in the

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traditional way which is on 'a person who is cultured' meaning in terms of behaviour, knows about food and wine, music, arts, literature and has 'a taste which has been nurtured'.

Then, hundreds of definition on culture emerged which eventually makes it difficult and confusing. Yet, according to Amos Rapoport [4], he believes that this matter could be solved by identifying and dealing with types of classification on the definition of culture. The way is to make classification on the definition of culture to help explain culture through questions on 'what is culture?', 'what does culture do?' and 'why people should have culture?' such as below:

'What is culture?'

The first type of definition pictured culture as a way of life of a person including the ideals, norms, rules and regulations, behavior, routine and others. The second definition defined culture as a schematic system which send symbolically across generation through enculturation or children socialisation and acculturation of immigrant. This sending happened not only through language but also through built environment, how the background of the setting is used and others. The third definition about culture is the ecological adaptation, the use of sources and the most main nature which enable human to live by exploiting various ecosystem.

▪ 'What does culture do?' and 'why people should have culture?'

The answer to the question above can be explained through 3 complete answers which is the aim of culture. The aim of culture is to provide 'design for living' through rules and regulations such as how something should be done. Besides that, the aim of culture is also to prepare a structure which gives meaning to certain matters. Lastly, the aim of culture is to define culture from the many groups to separate these groups and makes them different from each other.

2.0 The Scope Of Cultural Research In Modern Terrace House In Malaysia:

To research culture in housing, the important thing to give attention to is what are the cultural activities done and where do they take place. In this research, the determined scope will only focus on the cultural activities done inside and outside the house which is at a micro scale and not included the outside environment or macro and meso scale due to limited time factor. This is because the cultural research actually include the environment at a larger scale which is at macro and meso scale. The macro scale includes the environment such as work place, bank, shops and specific service, major institutions and others. The meso scale includes the environment such as schools, shops, religious buildings and others while the micro scale only includes the housing unit itself and the surrounding nearby.

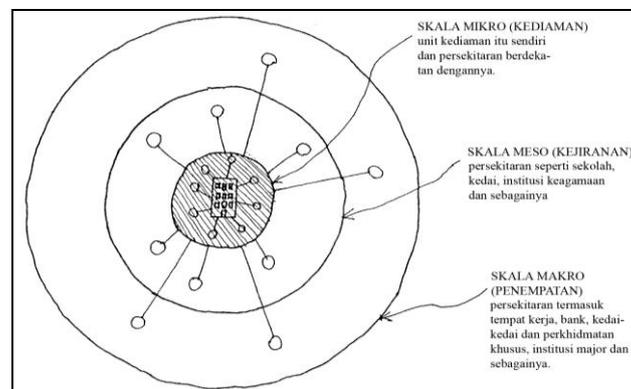


Fig. 1: A sketch interpretation from *Amos Rapoport* [4], page 23 on the Relationship Between Housing.

Which is Defined as a System of Background Settings and a Bigger Background System From Neighborhood and Settlement.

Even though 'culture' can be seen and observed clearly, yet basically the term 'culture' is a general term and too abstract. Culture is a term in an ideational form, a concept and definition which is referred to since 1871 for all or many things which people believed, thought, did or created where the product of culture are not something which people have seen but only as an effect, product, expression or the end product of elements which are a part of it. Thus, culture is said to be too abstract because its references are often found from diverse social-cultural. 'Social' and 'culture' are actually different and can be separated. 'Culture' is a concept with an idea in nature while 'social' is a more concrete manifestation which is produced from culture. What is important is the social expression from culture which can be observed such as family relationship, social network, roles, laws, social institution and others.

Even though the nature of culture which are too abstract and general, yet culture can be loosen to things or elements which can be seen and research. Thus, this research is intended to research culture based on things that can be studied and observed directly from the design effect on culture, from the issues that have been raised in

the literature materials, interviews, questionnaires and observations at the research site. Because of that, to start and make the discussion on culture easier, culture will be divided into two major sections which are the universal culture and the cycle of family development and the culture of the people. Before this, it is stressed that even though in actual reality this universal culture is influenced by 'the culture of the people', yet the aim of dividing this culture is to make it easier the explanation in this research and has no intention of adding more meaning of 'culture'.

3.0 The Research Scope Of Universal Culture And The Cycle Of Family Development:

Universal culture in this research is referred to all activities of life which are related to our basic need as human. As said by Spencer Wells "...in reality there is only one race on earth – the human race. This should come as no surprise; it is exactly in accordance with the teachings of all the major religions. We are all related. We all have the same basic needs...". Examples of basic need or universal culture are the need of washing clothes, bathing, cooking and sleeping. Usually, the design of terrace house will be based on these basic needs. In spite of this, one important aspect which is always forgotten in universal culture is on our life cycle as a human being where aspects such as the increase in family size and the changes in our life until we grow older. According to a fact, generally the average number in a family in this country is 5 people (rounded from 4.47 people) in 2004. Demographically, the population and composition growth of people in Malaysia has increased from 1957 until 2004, the same as population life expectancy which has extended to 73.2 years in 2004. This matter clearly portrayed that the population of the elderly is increasing and also consist of teenagers age 15 and above and also adult.

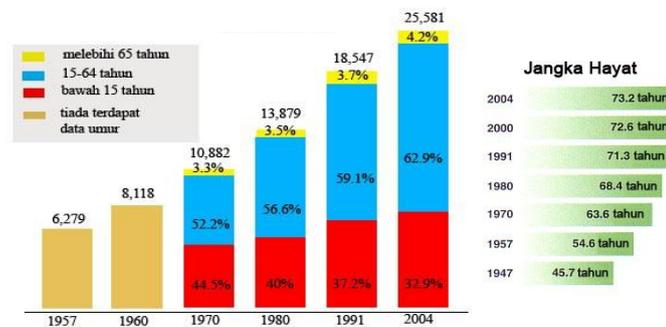


Fig. 2: Growth and Population composition and their life Expectancy.

Interpreted from Hood Salleh [3] a Source from Statistic Department, 2004:

It is hereby that the paradigm shift in the architecture of modern terrace house is seen increasingly urgent since the fact on the growth and population composition and resident's life expectancy increasingly on the rise. This matter will definitely give an impact on the demand of cultural needs in residential architecture now and in the future.

Therefore, residential architecture particularly terrace house should at least accommodate a minimum of 5 people in a household. Besides that, the design should start thinking of the elderly as their numbers started to increase. Moreover, another matter which the designer should think of is on how the architecture of terrace house could be produced so that it could fulfil the need of cultural life and family development today which changes with the current state. Because of this, the residential architecture in this country not only aiming to fulfil the demand of housing but facing another obstacle which is a house is not only a building but should be able to expand or change in line with the current cultural need of the residents.

This situation can be portrayed by understanding the fact that even though people have the same basic needs, yet the size and form of their needs will always changes according to the current state of those residents. As an example, a newly married couple do not need a big kitchen because they don't have many family members. From the social perspective, this couple may rarely have gatherings. Yet, this need will definitely change when they have many children and stronger financial situation. Their kitchen utensils will also increase and the kitchen space will become crowded in order to accommodate the increase in their family members. Then that family will also start to take part in social activities or community activities such as gatherings and open houses which need a bigger and comfortable space. Thus, this condition clearly demanded a bigger kitchen to fulfil the basic needs and family social needs which have expanded. Because of that, the size of their kitchen is not suitable to accommodate the increase in family size and the addition of activities. When this couple grew older, their children grew up and have families of their own. Their needs become less and automatically the use of spaces becomes less again. Thus, the changes in needs resulted in residents living in terrace house often tend to do renovation or remodeling to accommodate their needs with current situation. So, the basic thing related to

the culture of universal life and the cycle of family development of Malaysian community is important to be assessed in design so that houses could be adapted in line with the culture and the changes which happened throughout the process of their family's development could be considered in the future.

4.0 The Research Scope Of Culture On The Malays, Chinese And Indians:

The term 'race culture' in this terrace house research is referred to the culture which is practiced by its majority and often associated with specific races in this country. The research scope on race culture covers the rituals and practices which they practiced according to religion and beliefs on Islamic housing or ancient architectural science and traditional architecture of every races which are the traditional heritage of their races. Basically, this race culture becomes the identity of their races which becomes the role in giving the clear differences between the Malays, Chinese or Indians. This race culture also differentiates the rituals or management of a particular race when birth, marriage, death and other things happened in that particular race. Festivals that are celebrated based on their religion and beliefs also highlighted the differences between these races. Overall, the 'race culture' in this research is referring to a more specific culture which gives significant differences between other races. By that, the discussion will cover matters such as customs, ritual and religion which are practiced during death, birth, marriage and festival, Islamic housing culture or ancient architectural science which is inherited and cultural expression into architecture which is highlighted and instilled into their traditional architecture. However, due to time constraints the research sample on the culture of races will only focus on 3 major races in the Peninsular which are the Malays, Chinese and Indian generally without taking into account their sub-ethnic. By that, the following sub-topic is about a short introduction on the background and culture of the three races in general as a representation before any complex cultures which involve the three races are resolved to be used in assessing the typology of terrace house later.

5.0 The Background In The Malay Community:

In 1972, UNESCO has defined the term 'Malay' as the Malay ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Filipina, and Madagascar. Besides that, there is two other definition on 'Malay' which are the definition in terms of the law and the definition in terms of anthropology. According to the constitution in subject 160(2), a Malay is defined as a person who is a Muslim, speaks Malay language, practices Malay customs, born before Independence Day whether in Federation Of Malaya (Malaya) or in Singapore or on Independence Day and resides in the Federation or in Singapore. The definition in terms of anthropology according to Syed Husin Ali who is the member of the Malaysian anthropologist said that a Malay is generally browned skinned, medium size built and steady, always gentle and mannerly. In terms of ethnology, the Malays means a group of people who practiced community system which is included in the Mongoloid race.

The Malay culture is mostly influenced by its belief and religion. In the beginning, the Malays believed in animism which means they believed in ghosts and spirit. Belief in ghost and spirit was basic to their belief in religion which were firstly born in the thinking of primitive people. However, this animistic characteristic is still found among some of the Malay community today. After the era of animism, the Malay community shifted to Hinduism and Buddhism. Their life at that time depended a lot on witch doctors which played an important role as a middle man because they still believed the existence of invisible power and spirit and they practiced caste. Then, after the arrival of Islam, Islam has changed the Malay's viewpoint from believing in gods and goddesses during the Hindu era to believe in Allah (s.w.t.) the Almighty. Then Islam continues to seep into all aspect of their life including architecture, politics, social, custom and others. So, almost all festivals celebrated by the Malays are related to Islam such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Hari Raya Aidiladha, Israk and Mikraj and others. If looking at the cultural point of life, the family system of the Malay community is quite flexible where they practiced marriages in the form of monogamy or polygamy. Besides that, there is variation in the development of the Malay's family where this system allows divorce and get back again for those who have divorced. Moreover, in the traditional Malay community who live in a traditional Malay house, a particular house may be able to accommodate up to three generations less than one roof. This is because this traditional house can expand in line with the needs of the family's development. This house can be enlarged or some of them can be opened to be divided among the children of the owner of the house when they passed away. The components of the house can then be used by their children as a component of their own house. This situation is different if compared to the modern terrace house. Modern terrace house can no longer able to or difficult to accommodate 3 generations under one roof. This is because the construction of modern terrace house cannot afford to give comfort especially for the development of resident's family. However, in general terrace house can still accommodate the basic need of cultural life and cultural activities as portrayed in the next page.

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