

## A Cultural Responsive Landscape Study on Perak Malay Garden: An Expressional Value

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 12 October 2014

Received in revised form 26 December 2014

Accepted 17 January 2015

Available online 28 February 2015

#### Keywords:

Residential garden, landscape, cultural responsive landscape, Malay garden

### ABSTRACT

The residential landscape can be perceived as an expression of the intrinsic and cognitive values of a relationship between humans and their living environment. 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 scholars who introduce the idea that landscape sometimes represents human personality and behaviour. The residential landscape means more than merely planting ornamental trees. Residential gardens 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.

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**To Cite This Article:** Nor Atiah Ismail, Nangkula Utaberta, Mohd Yazid Mohd Yunos, Sumarni Ismail., A Cultural Responsive Landscape Study on Perak Malay Garden: An Expressional Value. *Adv. Environ. Biol.*, 9(5), 485-490, 2015

## INTRODUCTION

Culture plays an important role in our lives and shapes our experience. The role of culture in influencing landscape experience is obvious.

*The physical landscape, wherever it has been so changed by people as to make that change visually apparent is a direct cultural expression, even as a various arts and sciences...culture focuses in many ways, on the qualitative aspects of the interaction between people and people, people and nature, and people and landscape – the latter a product of interaction between people and nature (Stillman, 1976).*

These influences permeate every aspect of an individual life influencing both thoughts and behavior, thus determining how one looks at the world [7]. Kaplan et al. [1] agree that the understanding of the environmental setting elicits emotional growth, which in turn symbiotically influences the behavior of others. As an example, looking into the perspectives of the Malay communities, culture is manifested in landscape through religion and belief, values and norms and custom and behavior. As the Malays practice Islam, we believe that the landscape is the manifestation of the goodness; strengthening man's devotion to the creator. This understanding forms the landscape of the rural residential area as a humble and peaceful setting with verdant forest and vegetation; which is shared by the whole community.

### 2.0 The Importance of Responsive Residential Garden:

My previous research [9] reveals that the residential landscape means more than merely planting ornamental trees. Orians [8] 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 [10]. Similarly, Gillette provokes discussion with the question "*Can Gardens Mean?*" [11]. 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" [11]. Both, Thwaites [10]

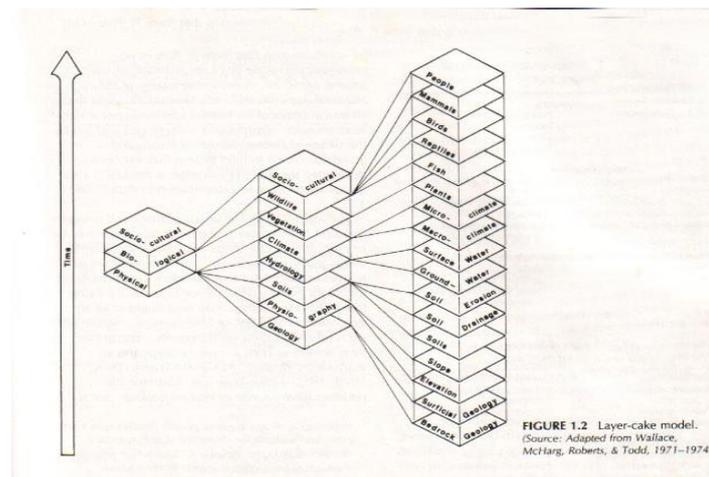
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and Gillette's [11] ideas on the importance of meanings associated with landscape influenced my desire to explore landscape alteration in medium and high-cost urban residential areas. The findings of this study will hopefully drive a new design approach, 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 [5]. 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.

#### Methodology:

The Layer-Cake Relationship that is also known as overlay method influenced the data collection and data analysis of the case study in three villages in Perak. This model was developed by Ian Mc. Harg *et al.* (1971) it provided a central group of biophysical elements for the inventory and analysis. In this method "each element is considered one "layer" in the landscape as a whole" [6]. This layered or also known as overlay cake has been numerously lent to help to "illuminate bivarite relationships and aids in analyzing multiple interrelationships between elements across the landscape" [6]. This method is normally preferred in the study of natural resources in sensitive areas such as forest recreational areas. The aim of this method is to identify site potential and site constraints in order to produce design guidelines in the development of the area. Illustration of this method is presented in figure 1.0.



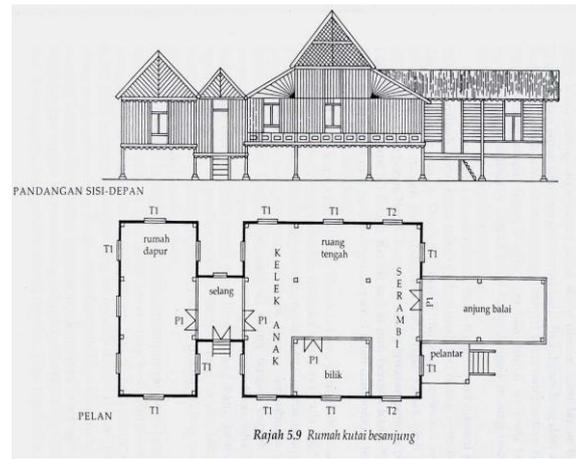
**Fig. 1.0:** Illustration of the layered-cake model [6]

#### Characteristics of the Cultural Responsive Landscape of the Perak Malay Gardens.

From the literature review the gardens are of great importance to the Malays. They collectively compose the garden into preferred personal expression that represent their culture, beliefs and religion. The community believe that the garden is the mirror of themselves and a reflection of sensual and personal experiences [3]. Traditionally, the Malay garden plays a major function of sustaining the residents. The planting compositions in the gardens indicate not only cultural intrinsic values, such as food, medicine, cosmetic, belief but also decoration and provision of shade. As a result, the gardens become individual as well as communal spaces that are systematically arranged to accommodate people and their social activities. It is a source of pride to the family and a place to be shared with the neighbors and residents within the community. The garden has undergone dynamic changes for a long period of time. It is an expression of culture and religion.

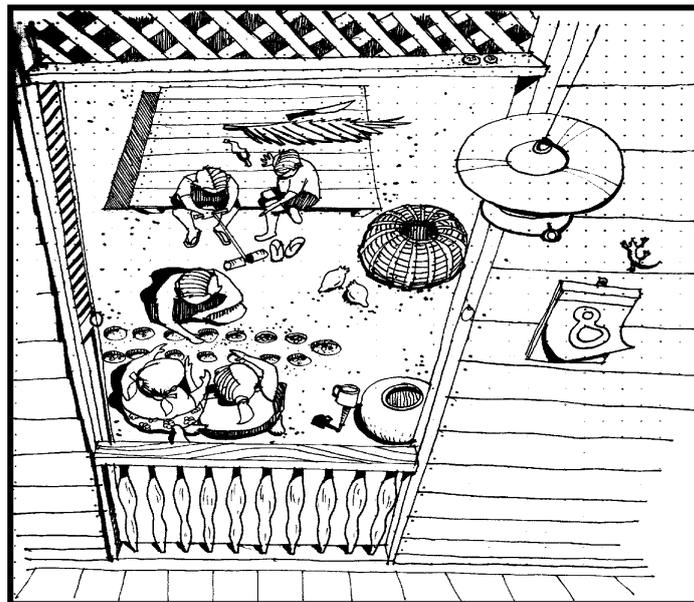
#### Spatial Composition:

The analysis informed that the Perak Malay garden is divided into three spatial zones, namely, backyard garden, side gardens and front garden. The location of each of the garden around the house compound is summarized in Figure 2.0. The garden in the house compound plays an important role in complementing indoor spatial function and activities. Indeed, the traditional architectural layout of the Perak Malay houses correlate with the outdoor spaces as illustrated in Figure 2.0. This tradition is inherited by the generations which preserve their residence as part of the natural entities.



**Fig. 2.0:** Traditional house design of *Rumah Kutai*

The front of the houses is normally designed with an open verandah facing the front garden. The residents often spend their leisure time by having tea while enjoying the beautiful scenery of their gardens. The verandah also acts as a transitional space from the house to the garden. The feature of the space from the enclosed living room gradually extended to the semi- enclosed verandah that leads to the open lawn of the garden. Having tall windows is also a responsive attribute of the house to the garden. The windows, built for ventilation purposes, encourage integration between the indoor and outdoor spaces so that the residents can view the garden from their house. Figure 3.0 illustrates an example of this interaction.

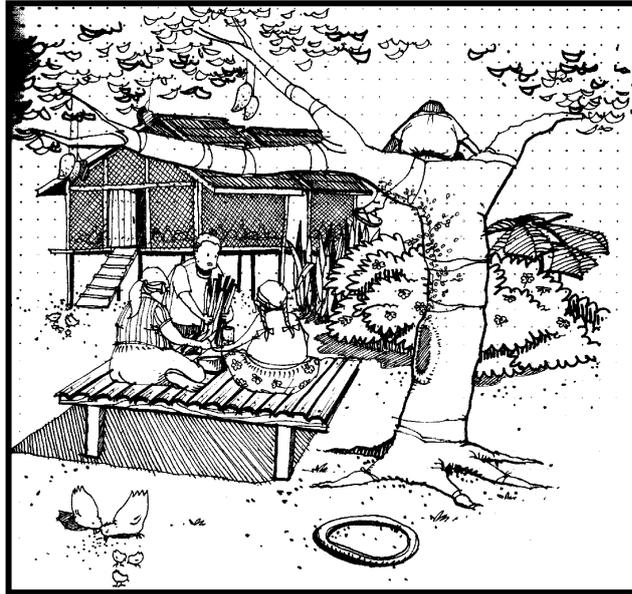


**Fig. 3.0:** View of a responsive interaction between the indoor and outdoor spaces in the Perak Malay houses

The analysis of spatial composition in the Perak Malay garden portrays significant characteristic that influence planting composition in the garden. The three zones that characterize spatial zoning of the house compound is important in providing the residents with various experiences.

The backyard garden is as legible as orchard or farm to create a sense of ultimate privacy to the space. This is due to the planting compositions that are organized closely in the backyard garden merging with the adjacent forest. Its spreading canopy defines a space and identity of the place. At the same time, these occurrences give a containment that helps to create the backyard garden as a secluded zone. Its location close to the kitchen turns this area into a kitchen garden cultivated with herbs and spices. This kitchen garden can reach up to three acres of land before subtly merge with adjacent forest. This character offers children opportunity to play *hide and seek*. The Malay community sometimes manipulate the backyard mysterious character to ground their children for bad manners. Children like to play passive activities such as dramatic play imitating house experience as

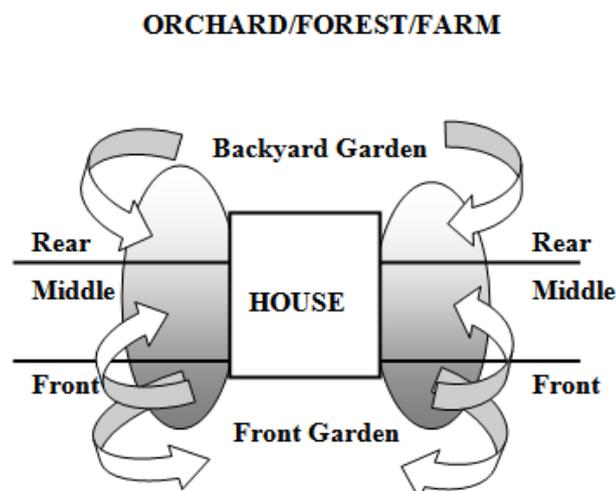
presented in Figure 4.0. They utilize the enclosed ambience of this backyard garden. The figure illustrates wonderful experience of children who play joyfully in the conducive environment. Sometimes, the children attempt to extend these activities at the side and front gardens. Some residents keep domesticated animals such as chickens, ducks and goats in this garden. The residents also utilize this space to plant herbs and spices to be used in the food preparation. Unconsciously, the residents have determined that this garden is a private area.



**Fig. 4.0:** The backyard garden is utilized by children to play passive activities

#### *Side Garden:*

The mysterious attributes of backyard garden are extended to the side garden on the left and right side of the house. This sequential spatial gradation is strongly supported by clumps of plant composed around the space. Landscape elements and their attributes in the side gardens have significant characteristics which facilitate interesting leisure experience of the residents. This is due to its function that can be characterized as intermediate space from the backyard garden to the front garden. It is found that the side gardens are subtly divided into three minor spaces, which is the space extended from backyard garden to the rear space, middle space and extension to the front garden (the front space). This finding is illustrated in Figure 5.0.



**Fig. 5.0:** Illustration of the side gardens division as transitional space

The rear space of the side garden is an extension of the backyard garden which is full of mysterious character formed by its planting composition. Dense plant arrangement ranging from shrubs and ground cover can be found in this space. For instance, trees composed randomly in this space helps to create semi- enclosed ambience. The structural character of the trees acts as screening, sheltering, enclosing and complementing the space of the adjacent area. Their canopies also create legibility to the garden. Sometimes, the villagers keep their

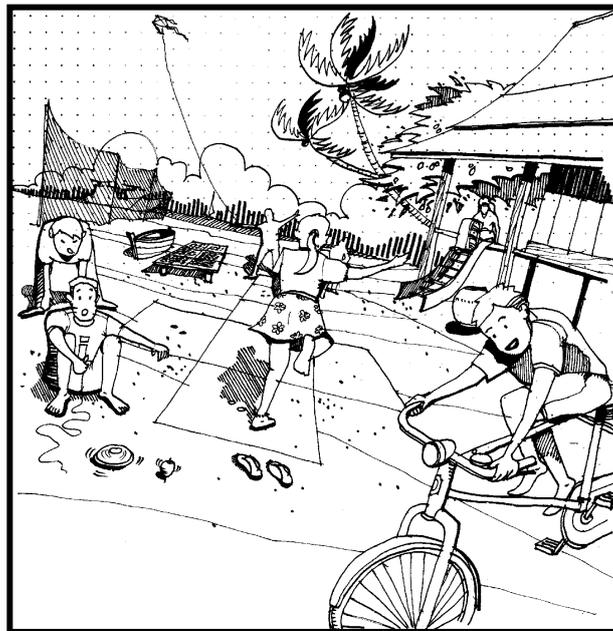
domesticated animals in dense place in the garden. This composition influences the rear space of side garden with a sense of a semi-enclosed character before entering the backyard garden. Subtle changes of space can be experienced towards the middle part of the garden. Here the space is left open with lesser plants. A variety of plant species such as sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*) and yam (*Alocasia spp.*) forms a dense and complex compositions close to the side boundary of the house lot.

Open ground about six square meter is usually located in the middle part of the side gardens. It is perceived as the second access into the house and is normally located close to the kitchen area. From the field inventory, it is observed that the front entrance of the Perak house, as the main access, is less used than the side entrance. It is opened generally for guests who come for ceremonial events. The families and neighbors prefer to use the second entrance to meet the residents.

These interactions make the side garden as the most preferred space in the house compound and most of the leisure activities either by children or adults are held here. These attributes develop the side garden as communal spaces with natural and inorganic layouts. Unpaved trails joining a house garden to its neighbor's garden accentuate the communal activities. They freely access the garden with a sense of respect to each other. The linkage is mostly provided through the second entrance which offers a shorter distance from one house to another. As a result, it helps to strengthen communal interrelationship among the villagers. The front part of the side garden extends different spatial attributes. The residents prefer to cultivate flowering plants that embellish the exterior of the house with colors and scented smell in this area. The shrubs and ground covers are composed in cluster and linear arrangement around the site creating visual and spatial links between the related areas. Its significant characteristic is derived from the appearance of the leaves, twigs, barks, flowers and fruits. The fragrance of the flowers and aromatic foliage, the physical texture of the barks and leaves, even the sounds stirred by the winds or beaten by the rain can create a responsive interaction with the residents.

#### Front Garden:

The side gardens of the Perak Malay house is a complementary to the front garden especially in the aspect of decoration. The residents prefer having open turfed ground for pleasant view. Hence, lawn becomes a major feature that links the front and side gardens. Some residents prefer unturfed ground with only sand and clay. They constantly sweep the ground to remove dead leaves and debris. This action prevents herbs and grass from growing at the front yard. Significantly, they create a pattern on the ground that is extended to the side garden resulting in a cohesive quality between these two spaces. Limited decorative plants are cultivated for instance near the house staircase to accentuate the entrance of the house. The open spatial characters of the front garden represent a cultural significance of the Malays. They occasionally hold events such as festive congregation called *kenduri*. These activities require a large space and subsequently influence the openness of the front garden. This open space is occasionally utilized for building temporary shelters for any ceremonial occasions or sometimes used for vehicle parking. It often becomes a playing area for children. This experience is illustrated in Figure 6.0 which show children playing joyfully at the front



**Fig. 6.0:** Open space characteristics of the front garden provides plenty of opportunities for children to play and enjoy

*Conclusion:*

The analysis informed that, the Perak Malay villages have a lush greenery formed by verdant vegetation. Diverse of plant species are cultivated in the orchards and house gardens indicate the strong interaction between man and nature. It is achieved through the composition of native and exotic plants available in the garden. Examples of native plants are fruit trees comprising of mango (*Mangifera indica*), jackfruit (*Artocarpus integer*), ciku (*Achras zapota*) and durian (*Durio zibethinus*). The exotic plants mostly found are shrubs and ground covers namely *Duranta* (*Duranta spp.*), ixora (*Ixora javanica*) and roses (*Rosa spp.*). The residents grow these plants randomly on ground or in pots, or sometimes they combine both of these ways. In summary, the spatial organization of the Perak Malay house compound is unified by mass planting, simple and complex forms linking three zones within one garden. Thus the Perak Malay residential compound have no significant boundary within each of the garden, but are rather interrelated and responsive towards each other.

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