



## Malaysia Going Greens: A Study on Community Commitment towards a Greener Urban Living Environment

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### ABSTRACT

A residential landscape is one expression of the intrinsic and cognitive values of a relationship between humans and their environment. Experiential and phenomenological landscapes are established when people shape their living environment; in turn they are shaped and constructed by this living environment. In Malaysia, the rural cultural landscape is one example of the above phenomenon, creating a sustainable living experience. Rural villagers are communally involved in the establishment of place identity, developing sense of place and sense of belonging towards their living space. In contrast, urban residents of low cost housing in Malaysia experience a different situation. Their physical living setting is pre-constructed and unsustainable, without them getting involved. This includes not only the houses, but also the public landscape surrounding residential areas. These "prepared" living settings present different living phenomena compared to the rural cultural landscape. Landscape alteration is one of the responses to the feelings of "outsideness" during the post-occupancy period. It is known that in some places in Kuala Lumpur residents removed the planted trees in the public landscape areas and replaced them with their desired species. They intruded into the public spaces adjacent to their homes to create small orchards, herb gardens and construct personal carports and storage barns. Overall, the pre-constructed landscape has changed significantly during this period. The discussion will be based on the qualitative research findings. It will contribute to the understanding of how the cultural landscape in an urban residential area provides a means of bonding people and place while creating a sustainable living ambience. This 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.

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### INTRODUCTION

Landscape architecture is one of the well-known design professions in Malaysia that is inspired by natural environment, creating a conducive living environment with artistic touch and technological impressions. In early 1980, landscape design in Malaysia started to progress as a commercial outdoor beautifying effort complementing massive urban development. Since then, the priority of designing landscape is mainly for profit making, aesthetic values and prestige symbols; neglecting the everyday community needs especially in the newly developed urban residential areas. This paper discusses on urban landscape issue a community commitment to a greener living environment in medium cost residential area.

Malaysian government is giving high priority in providing adequate residential area for urban communities since 1970. A government force has led to the mushrooming of development homogenous urban terrace housing with characterless landscape design in the Klang valley of Kuala Lumpur. It is a common understanding among the Malaysians that landscape in urban residential areas is mainly developed to embellish outdoor setting with minimum grass and structural trees. This idea is contradicted with literature search revealing that landscape design has great potential to contribute to the nation and to the community in various forms and benefits. For example, a culturally responsive landscape design in medium cost housing is able to promote for a better quality of life and at the same time contributing towards social and ethnic integration. Research by Ismail [4] informs

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that the local community who resided in urban housing worked so hard to make changes to the characterless landscape provided by developers. She refers to this activity of changing existing landscape into a culturally and religiously responsive landscape as 'landscape alteration'.

One of the major factors inspired residents to alter their existing landscape is when they have feeling to increase their everyday gardening experience beyond fulfilling the importance of sight pleasure. In general, the majority of residents living in urban terrace housing are the rural-urban migrants who used to grow in agricultural tradition. The residents' activities in altering existing landscape and challenges to work with a small gardening area did not stop them from continuing their passion to work with soils and nurture the seeds. The residents made changes to the existing landscape provided by developer by removing existing plants and replacing the very limited green area with other species.

#### *Landscape design for medium cost housing in malaysia:*

One of the ways to provide convenient living environment for people is by creating a conducive landscape design for residential areas. The government accords with this intention and therefore, The National Landscape Department of Malaysia has been established in 1996, with the aim of "landscaping the nation". This movement has resulted in the provision of Green Policy for public spaces in urban areas; including the residential developments [4,8,2] suggests that landscape has added in real estate property market since Eight Malaysia Plan period in order to fulfil the demanding increased that aiming for better quality of life. For example a residential project has included communal and recreational facilities, beautiful landscape with trees and flowers on the track to attract buyers. As a result, developers are willing to challenge each other in providing attractive landscaping in residential developments since developers are among the key players to decide on the cost in providing good landscape development for public spaces.

Landscape design proposal require the submission plan procedures which to obtain the approval from Municipal Council in Malaysia before implemented. Landscape changes or known as landscape alteration shows that resident prefer to have their own garden instead of the provided landscape by developers.

It is common to have developers' with monetary attitude, showing their greediness to make money and maximizing their profits by reducing the landscape cost for the majority of residential development. This unprofessional working approach has resulted in inadequate landscape facilities, creating an irresponsive and low quality of green spaces for community.

Commonly, the aims for landscape design for low-cost housing schemes are in contrast with medium and high-cost housing. Development of low-cost housing's landscape design aims mainly to fulfil landscape plan submission requirements as compared to medium and high-cost housing's: which are designed with attractive landscape facilities and amenities. Some developers appealed to Municipal Council to minimize and compromise the landscape submission requirements due to minimal profit return for low-cost housing development. The request made by these developers includes reduction in number of plant species to be planted in public spaces including trees and shrub and to compromise for the minimum cost of providing playground equipment. As a result, low-cost housing's dwellers undergo living with insufficient green spaces and landscape facilities surrounding their neighbourhood [5].



Scenario in medium and high-cost housing in Malaysia shows different issues compared to low-cost housing as this medium and high end housing schemes are provided with attractive landscape design and amenities. For example, the facilities are including proper playground in the neighbourhood park, landscape elements and buffer zones along the roadside as barrier to the main road. However, the landscape provided still did not able to fulfil the residents' desire to have responsive garden that is strongly associated with social needs, cultural and religious values. The example of altered landscape as shown in Figure 1.0 prove that homeowner prefer to have the own landscape with their personal characteristics as compared to homogenous landscape provided by developers. This is due to the characterlessness and homogenous character the landscape provided

as can be seen in Figure 2.0. The lack of character in landscape design provided refer to homogenous landscape which resulted to unmotivated environment towards dwellers. The homogenous landscape of medium-cost housing will discuss in details in research issues section.

#### *Methodology:*

The field work of this study was conducted in Saujana Puchong, Selangor. Meeting with people face-to-face enable the researcher to have conversation with residents and discuss on their home garden. Characteristics that embedded in their garden were recorded and refer to as Documenting Physical Traces. The interview session with residents was conducted along with documenting physical traces process. Analysis of data gathered in medium cost housing reveals that the characteristics of their home landscape reflected the cultural values that one experienced in rural village. The majority of the residents' gardens displayed modern concept with high intensity of aesthetic values. Findings of this research also indicated that there are significant ethnic influences in urban cultural landscape that has great potential to foster social and ethnic integration in Malaysia. The residents are happy to inform the way they share their gardens' elements, information, respecting each other, making landscape as place for social activities, and participate in social events together.

#### *The garden as the locus for social need:*

The idea of garden as the locus for social need is highlighted two section; the first focuses on a beautiful garden to be spread which emphasise the social contact occurred in various ways especially through outdoor activities such as sharing, exchange the plants, and stop by in the garden and appreciate garden's aesthetic values. The second section elaborated on the meaningful spaces found in resident's home garden. Data analysis of this study reveals that a garden itself creates its own identity which can be recognised through verbal communication. For example, the Respondent 5 refers to the house of Respondent 3 when mentioned about flowering species. She said:

Pn. Noor have planted a lot *Alamanda* species in front of her house...the yellow flowers...the flowers grow up very well since the flowers get enough sunlight...lately, my *Bougainvillea* didn't grow well as the changes of the weather...(translated transcription)

It shows that the landscape element itself create its own identity that can be easily identified the homeowner just by the garden's look.

Studies on health indicated the importance of social ties in human life as it affects the individual's health. Social contact can occurred either in formal conversation or informal conversation. Commonly, residents in neighbourhood area tend to have social contact to fulfil their social needs through greetings and short conversation in outdoor areas. This findings of this study revealed that residents in Saujana Puchong spend their social time through home garden by sharing and exchanging the elements of the garden itself. These activities can help to foster social and ethnic integration in this community. When asked about sharing plants, the Respondent 9 told the researcher on her experience sharing of some species as illustrated in figure 3.0:

My Indian neighbour next door has requested for some species...I can't remember what kind of plant, in red colour...but she ask for yellow species...'kemboja' tree...and then she ask my lemongrass, and pandan leaves...she just planted them in front of her house...(translated transcription)

She continues explaining that:

Sometimes my friends and my relatives ask for my plants...they said its beautiful, and then they ask some to bring back to their home...I feel close with my neighbours when they stop by my house in the morning while having their exercise...they praised my flowers "so beautiful...". Some of them are Chinese and Indian. They ask "what kind of new plant do you have?"...(translated transcription)



**Fig. 3.0:** Edible plants that shared with neighbours.

Besides the edible plants, one of Indian respondent shared flowers species with her neighbours for prayers purposes. Similarly, the Respondent 12 purposely transformed the open space in semi-public spaces in front of his house into a garden and planted a lot of edible species for food consumption as shown in figure 4.0 and 5.0. He explained:

Many people ask for 'kantan' flower, lemongrass, henna leaf, and jackfruit. I just shared with them what I have...some Malay ladies come and ask for 'kantan'. They use them for cooking and business purposes...(translated transcription)



**Fig. 4.0:** The gardens owner with his jackfruit tree.



**Fig. 5.0:** 'Kantan' flowers (source:www.deamira.com)

Typically, the home garden is created to fulfil various reasons for community; Garden is to provide source of oxygen, fresh air, for functional purposes, gardening as interest, family tradition, culture, and to bring back the past experiences and memories. This 'beautification' of garden has expanded through direct or indirect way. The direct way can be seen through the sharing and exchanging the elements of garden, information and knowledge of gardening. The 'beauty' of the garden itself tends to attract people to come and visit referred to indirect way to spread the garden 'beautification'. For example, during having conversation with respondent 1, she mentioned about her next door garden that can attract people to appreciate the garden as illustrated in figure 6.0:

Usually when people in this area jogging early in the morning, they will stop by in front of uncle's garden (refer to next door, Chinese family)...they said it's so beautiful, with white 'Champaka' tree...and they love to smell the fragrant...(translated transcription)



**Fig. 7.0:** The garden that can attract people.

Medium-cost housing schemes are allocated with some portion of open spaces for each unit. Commonly, the space is provided with typical type of landscape with single tree planted as discussed. The typical landscape design refer to homogenous landscape resulted to the landscape alteration by residents. The landscape changes made by residents' accord to their preferences influence by past experience and cultural. These experiences associated to imitating rural cultural landscape [1,4]. Ismail suggests that one of the factors that contribute to landscape alteration is to have space or place to fulfil their social need which enhances the integration among communities. The Respondent 12 expresses his social need through creating the open spaces in his garden at semi-public spaces as shown in figure 8.0. He said:

The garden is belonging to me...I have planted all the species. Previously, the spaces are abandoned area, I manage the area and turn it into a garden...now, and most of the species produce fruits and grow well...especially fruit trees...(translated transcription)

He further elaborated how he spends his time in the garden:

Normally, in the evening, I prefer to have my leisure time outside...so that I can have conversation with my friends when they come to my house...we can sit on the benches or swing in the garden...it is kind of relaxing besides I can meet and chatting with my friends and neighbours...(translated transcription)



**Fig. 8.0:** Creating a space for social activities.

Another example of the importance of open spaces was expressed by the Respondent 2 through his garden setting like '*kampong*' style as illustrated in figure 9.0. He purposely created seating area in his garden to reflect his rural cultural landscape to bring back the memories live in village. He also stresses his intention to grow all the traditional plant species in his house compound:

Actually I have my own intention when I decide to buy this house...I want to plant all these plant species...for example, if I planted this star fruit tree, I can eat the fruit later after it grow up and produce the fruits...I have guava tree...that *rambutan* tree is not produce yet...after that, I planted coconut tree...I prefer do something can give me benefit...rather than I planted those big trees (point out his neighbour's garden at semi-public spaces)...it doesn't give any benefit...at least I have something for my next generation, for my children, my grandchildren...even if I'm not around anymore, they have these fruits to eat...(translated transcription)



#### Conclusion:

The findings indicated that there are ethnic and community influences in landscape characteristics of medium-cost housing in Saujana Puchong. The landscape characteristics of this medium-cost housing scheme embedded with spiritual and cultural values, functional values, and social values. The values embedded seen as imitating cultural landscape in rural area. In addition, the residential landscape embedded with cultural values potential to help to foster social and ethnic integration in this community. The green spaces were successful to integrate social and ethnic which can be seen through the expression of cultural landscape as everyday landscape in this residential area.

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