

Short Communication

The Challenges, Potentials, and Experts' Opinions on Developing a Malaysian Garden Identity

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ABSTRACT

As well as generally being considered as symbols of national and country identity, gardens fulfill various functions within society such as being aesthetically beautiful, satisfying human needs, and also functioning as places for various activities. In accordance with this, the Malaysian government in her newly launched National Landscape Policy put forth a vision to achieve "The Most Beautiful Garden Nation" by the year 2020, reflecting a desire to develop a distinctive landscape identity for the country. Due to this, the National Landscape Department of Malaysia suggested developing a garden identity as an indispensable part of this vision because even though the country has great potential in the development of parks and gardens, an exclusive garden identity is still lacking. This paper aims to justify that the development of a garden identity could enhance national and landscape identities for the country. It is also presumed that such development faces several challenges. Moreover, the study intends to highlight Malaysia's great potential for developing its gardens. A review of existing literature along with Malaysia's new landscape policy was thus undertaken, and findings were then triangulated by conducting face-to-face interviews with Malaysian local landscape architects. Consequently, the importance of creating a unique garden identity corresponding with Malaysia's new landscape policy was confirmed. Furthermore, challenges (which mainly relate to political, social, cultural, and economic viewpoints) and potentials for such development were recognised. The results

can ultimately be utilised to contribute to the formation of gardens with distinct Malaysian identities.

Keywords: Park, garden identity, garden development

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's unique natural and cultural heritage gives it great potential in developing distinctive gardens and landscapes. As such, landscape development in Malaysia has received strong support from the government, and a lot of effort has been made to improve the development of landscapes in the country (Osman & Suhardi, 2007). It is observed that Malaysia, through its newly endorsed National Landscape Policy, has recognised landscape as an aspect with economic benefits for both the people and the government. Moreover, the policy emphasises that through landscape development, the general well-being of Malaysian citizens will be increased, and sustainable spaces could be created for society (NLP, 2011). Therefore, developing a garden identity is politically significant for Malaysia. Consequently, recognising the challenges and potentials for such development is essential, as it can then provide the primary guidelines for the creation of garden identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gardens and national identity

Gardens play a significant part in landscapes and have always been reputed as a symbol of national identity (Goode & Lancaster, 1986; Ross, 1998; Helmreich, 2002; Waymark, 2003). For a long time, gardens have not just been mere physical forms, but also encapsulations of community identity, a vehicle to enhance past glories, and a space that represents common wishes for

the future (Helmreich, 2002). According to Hunt (2000), gardens have historically provided an ideal form for creating place identity. Not only are they built upon forms and visual appropriations, but are also containers for the formation of identity (Goode & Lancaster, 1986; Hunt, 2000; Johnston, 2005). Helmreich (2002) further claimed each culture endows its gardens with individual forms, which in return contribute meaning and identity to society. Additionally, Clayton (2007) described the practice of gardening as one aspect of social identity, which reflects local and personal identities. Furthermore, as a collection of ideologies in smooth harmony with nature, gardens afford various uses that then stimulate the formation of national identity (Helmreich, 2002; Gross & Lane 2007).

Based on the above-mentioned statements, gardens with their various functions have always been significant aspects of national identity. Furthermore, garden identity depends strongly on the identity of people and their culture, and it also enhances environmental knowledge. As discussed, Malaysia, as a developing country, has recognised a clear objective for the development of an identity for its landscapes and parks (Bunnell, 2004; Osman & Suhardi 2007; Aziz, Salleh, & Ribu, 2010). The principles of Malaysia's National Landscape Policy indicate that cultural values and the natural heritage of the nation should be preserved through landscape development programs. Attention should be placed on sustainability and functional aspects in landscape designs

(NLP, 2011). Hence, the development of a garden identity should be one of the key areas in national and landscape identity development, because gardens provide sustainable settings with functional aspects, whilst conveying cultural values and reflecting national identity.

Challenges in Developing a Garden Identity for Malaysia

Malaysia is a multiracial, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious country. In relation to this, socio-cultural aspects of Malaysian society have been identified as the most important challenge in creating an overall Malaysian identity (Watson & Bentley, 2007). Aziz, Salleh, and Ribu (2010), pointed to the political, social and economic associations based on ethnic groups in creating Malaysian landscape identity. Accordingly, the development of Malaysia's national identity through creating a unique garden identity faces several challenges. These challenges mainly refer to the economic, political, cultural, and social aspects of garden development.

Economic value

Connell (2005) showed in his study that a large number of tourists visit the gardens of Great Britain annually. He also discussed the economic value of garden visits for both the government and public. Rambonilaza and Dachary (2007) discussed the visual quality of landscapes and its direct relationship with economic value. And this can certainly apply to the case study, Malaysia. Malaysia benefits from its geographic position and

plays an important role in global economy (Watson & Bentley, 2007). According to MARDI (2005), visitors come to Malaysia to visit her natural beauty and unique landscapes. Hence, the country will certainly enhance credit by developing its landscapes and gardens. Sternberg (1977) claimed that most tourists arrange to visit a place because of the potential images that they can collect, and because they are interested in taking photos. Gardens can thus be seen as a pictorial phenomenon and they can function as an important tourist attraction for Malaysia that provides economic benefits.

Political viewpoint

During his term in office, Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, set up a vision for Malaysia's development (Osman, 2005). The vision stated the country should be developed in all aspects including landscapes and environments by the year 2020. To achieve this, the government has planned to employ policies and supervise activities for the development of landscapes and gardens (MARDI, 2005). For example, the formation of the National Landscape Department in 1996, as the government overseer of landscape development, has led Malaysia towards better-organised landscape programs in comparison with other developing countries (Bunnell, 2004; Osman, 2005). According to Abdullah and Nakagoshi (2006), Landscape changes in Malaysia are influenced by development politics. As such, landscape development has received strong support from the government, and a lot of effort has been

made to improve landscape developments in the country (Osman & Suhardi, 2007). Therefore, in relation to the political significance of the subject, developing a garden identity is relevant for Malaysia.

Cultural heritage

Aside from a unique natural environment, Malaysia also has a diverse cultural heritage (Aziz, Salleh, & Ribu, 2010). There is great potential for the development of gardens in the country based on her rich legacy in traditions, cultures and beliefs, through which she can identify herself (MARDI, 2005; Huzeima, Hussain, & Ahmad, 2010). The development of landscapes in Malaysia can be interpreted by considering the country's history (Bunnell, 2004; Kamariyah 1989 in Aziz & Osman, 2007). In the early stages, during the period of sultanates, there were royal gardens in urban centres, but they have already been destroyed (Jamil, 2002). Additionally, MARDI (2005) pointed out forbidden gardens in the Malacca Palace.

Nowadays, Malaysian landscapes are shaped based on foreign ideas (Aziz & Osman, 2007) to provide aesthetic beauty and needs of new sustainable and livable landscapes (Hussain & Byrd, 2012). However, the National Landscape Department of Malaysia (2008) has issued a definition for Malaysian gardens. According to the definition, the Malaysian garden or "Taman Malaysia" is a garden with a Malaysian identity that projects images of tropical environment, utilises spaces that satisfy socio-cultural life, and which is strengthened by artistic achievement.

Therefore, culture and the cultural background of Malaysia is one of the aspects to be considered when developing a garden identity for the nation.

Social differences

Malaysia has a complex multiracial population, including Malay, Chinese, Indian and ethnic minorities. These different races have different religious backgrounds, predominantly Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity (Jamil, 2002; NLP, 2011, Cambon & Harper, 2004). It has been argued that it is crucial that the development of landscapes and gardens are relevant to people's culture and daily lives (Watson & Bentley, 2007). As Osman and Suhardi (2007) argued, the Malaysian public — with all their differences in race, culture and religion — still maintain different and even diverse routines. This statement has also confirmed in the course of a study by Aziz, Salleh, and Ribu, (2010). Not surprisingly, Watson and Bentley (2007) identified the difference between social and cultural groups as the most challenging issue for creating a single Malaysian identity. Hence, creating a single Malaysian garden identity is considered a challenge for the country.

Potentials in Development of a Garden Identity for Malaysia

Abdullah and Nakagoshi (2006) pointed to the Malaysian economic development based on the agriculture sector. They pointed that development of this sector could have an impact on landscape planning, management and strategies for the country.

Therefore, there is an economic potential for garden development in Malaysia. Moreover, Huzeima, Hussain, and Ahmad (2010) indicated that unique traditions and cultures should be considered to design an image or identity of Malaysian landscape. This statement has previously suggested by Mustafa and Noor Aziz (2009) as a potential for garden development in Malaysia. Accordingly, people's activities in relation to the landscape is another potential for landscape and garden development of Malaysia (Mustafa & Noor Aziz, 2009; Huzeima, Hussain, & Ahmad, 2010; Hussain and Byrd, 2012). Jamil (2002) discussed about plants with specific symbolism and value in Malaysian culture. In a similar vein, Huzeima, Hussain, and Ahmad (2010) concluded that plant is a landscape element with both symbolic and practical functions in Malaysian culture, and could be one of the potentials in development of Malaysian landscape identity.

METHODOLOGY

The literature review recognised the fact that creating a unique garden identity for Malaysia could enhance national and landscape identities. The main challenges in this development were also suggested and the new National Landscape Policy for the development of Malaysian landscapes (NLP, 2011) was reviewed, recognising the main issues in such development. In order to triangulate findings, and recognise specific potentials in the development of Malaysian gardens, interviews with landscape architects were conducted.

Selecting Respondents

As based on the statement of the availability of respondents as suggested by Rea and Parker (1997), the interviewees encompassed Malaysian landscape architects. Previous researchers have also believed that non-random sampling method provides an opportunity to obtain the opinion of the most potential respondents in this field, as well as their judgment of the responses (Rea & Parker 1997, p.160). Hence, the interviewees encompassed university professors in the field of landscape architecture with more than 15 years experience. They were selected from "Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia" (ILAM) executives and members on the basis of their great potential and enthusiasm in the garden development of Malaysia. These respondents were considered the most available for this present study, and they were also selected based on their level of proficiency and experience.

Sample Size

Mason (2010) stated that samples in qualitative studies are smaller than samples in quantitative ones due to the type of information and analysis. In this form of research more data does not lead the researcher to more information, since quantitative research is concerned about meaning in creating framework not testing hypothesis (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The saturation point theory was also utilized in sampling the interviews (Kumar, 2005). This approach is used in qualitative researches as a flexible method

to collect and analyse data for development of theoretical frameworks. This process is based on selection of cases which are most likely to generate a collection of relevant data (Seidman, 2005; Bloor & Wood, 2006). According to Bloor and Wood (2006), at this point the repeated evidence are found to support researcher's conceptual framework. When the sample size in this kind of research is very large, answers are repetitive and redundant. Moreover, analysis of qualitative data is very difficult and selecting a large sample would be time consuming too (Mason, 2010). It has suggested that researchers follow the concept of saturation, when collection of data will not lead to new information of subject (Seidman, 2005; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Therefore, the saturation point theory was employed in this study. After 7 interviews, attention to the repetition of answers, recognition and confirmation of challenges and potentials in garden development, the interviews were stopped.

Interview Procedure

The interviews were semi-structured which allowed the researcher to ask a predetermined set of questions using the same order and words (Kumar, 2005). According to Kumar (2005, pg 135), the "open-ended questionnaire provides respondents with the opportunity to express themselves freely, resulting in a greater variety of information". Therefore, open-ended questions were asked regarding the importance, challenges and specific potentials for the development of Malaysian

gardens. Show cards were offered to them during the interviews to make each interview easier and faster (Appendix II).

RESULTS FROM FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS WITH LANDSCAPE EXPERTS

The data collected from the interviews was coded and the content was analysed. The respondents' opinions of developing a garden identity, its related challenges and potentials are presented as follows:

The importance of garden identity development for Malaysia

The respondents were asked how important garden identity development was to enhance national identity. All respondents agreed on the subject and mentioned that the issue of landscape identity development was one of the most important goals put forward by Malaysia's National Landscape Department. Two of the respondents added that emphasis on creating a garden identity would enhance civilization and strengthen the country's national identity. In addition, five respondents mentioned that developing a garden identity integrates national identity, because the culture of a nation is reflected in its gardens.

Challenges in the development of Malaysian gardens

The Malaysian experts interviewed confirmed all of the suggested challenges. Six out of seven of the respondents agreed that cultural and political challenges were the most important in the development

of a garden identity. They also agreed on the importance of social challenges in terms of differences between the perceptions, preferences and cultural values of the multifaceted Malaysian public. They mentioned that although gardens can be a good place for social gatherings, in terms of political challenges, there could be a bias, and so Malaysian gardens should be deemed acceptable by Malaysia's three main different ethnicities.

One of the respondents notably said "*there are different ethnicities in Malaysia... we even have different ethnicities in Malaysia in different regions... they differ in culture or philosophy...*" and concluded that the political aspect is the most important challenge. In contrast, the majority of the respondents believed that the economy is the least important challenge in the development of a Malaysian garden identity. Two respondents agreed that people's needs based on their different social classes should be considered too. Finally, the interviews concluded that cultural differences between the ethnic groups should be considered in the development of gardens for Malaysia.

Potentials of the garden development of Malaysia

The interviews confirmed that Malaysia has a great interest and urge to develop her own garden identity. The interviewees argued that the garden could be a symbol of power and civilization for a nation. In addition, cultural potentials of developing Malaysia's gardens,

in relation to religion, beliefs and people's attitudes were suggested. The respondents also discussed the importance of culture and symbolic ideology, adding that we have to define and compare the specific motifs of Malaysia's different states. It was stated that although some differences exist among the motifs of Malaysia's different states, we can recognise their particular patterns which are different from the motifs of other countries that share common cultural aspects with Malaysia. This, for example, can be seen in the differences in the architecture and carving patterns of Malaysia and her Southeast Asian neighbour, Indonesia.

The majority of the respondents believed that historical disputes have caused a loss of character and value in landscape designs, and one of the experts pointed to the specific icons that can be recognised from Malaysian rural landscapes. All of the respondents pointed to the unique traditions, activities, histories, stories, costumes, and vegetation of Malaysia that should be identified and employed in the country's garden design.

The interviews concluded that gardens should create harmony within the landscape, whilst paying attention to history. The findings of the interviews indicated that the starting point is crucial and that the emphasis should be on developing enforcements, guidelines and politics. Ultimately, all interviewees felt that technology and the use of new materials could be one of the great potentials for the development of Malaysian gardens.

DISCUSSION

Importance

The findings from the literature review and Malaysia’s vision –to be “The Most Beautiful Garden Nation”– clarified the importance of the development of a garden identity to enhance national and landscape identities. This was confirmed during face-to-face interviews with local landscape architects. In fact, the interviews concluded that creating a distinct garden identity could be regarded as one of the best approaches to enhance national and landscape identities whilst reflecting culture. These findings correspond with Malaysia’s landscape policy (Fig.1), as the new policy –launched by the government (30 Sep 2011) –indicates that there is a need to identify a “high value visual landscape, and to integrate local landscape character and natural environment in development process” (NLP, 2011, pg 22). Therefore –whilst paying particular

attention to the distinctive visual quality of gardens and their importance in reflecting national and cultural identity –creating a unique garden identity for Malaysia could be one of the aspects that can be used to enhance national and landscape identities.

Challenges

The literature review clarified existing challenges in the development of a Malaysian garden identity. The findings were confirmed by local landscape architects during face-to-face interviews. Social and cultural differences along with potential economic benefits of garden development were confirmed, and the experts pointed to the politics in such development. In this regard, the NLP has focused its policy of landscape development on socio-cultural, environmental, and economic aspects, and put emphasis on the development of a Malaysian landscape identity. It should

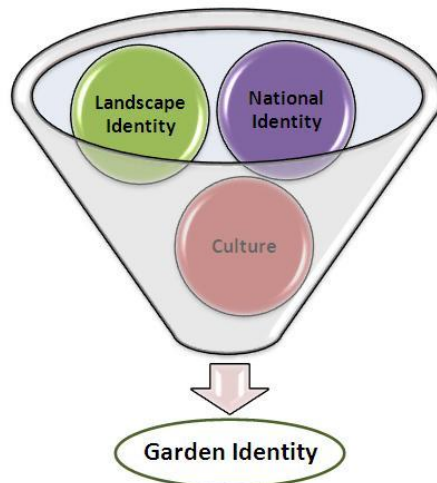


Fig.1: Garden identity as a vehicle to reflect culture, landscape, and national identities (Model suggested by authors)

also be noted that the policy puts stress on driving the nation towards attaining higher income in its economy through landscape development “to attract local and foreign investments” (NLP, 2011,pg3). Accordingly, the development of landscapes based on cultural values, heritage, and for the purpose of research and public recreation was mentioned in the 2011 NLP policy. Another considered issue in the policy was the potential increase in tourists by improving the quality of national landscapes and creating public parks to preserve and showcase cultural heritage and indigenous plants (NLP, 2011:30). With these findings, it is concluded that Malaysia faces economic, social, cultural, and political challenges in the pursuit of developing its own garden identity.

Potentials

Besides the above-mentioned challenges, the specific potentials for the development of a garden identity for Malaysia were recognised through existing literature and face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews confirmed that attention should be paid to specific customs, beliefs, rural landscapes, and also the historical and cultural background of the nation. These findings were with NLP's mission, which puts emphasis on preserving cultural backgrounds as well as rural landscapes. In summary, existing literature and interviews, the strength of Malaysia's natural and cultural heritage, in addition to politics and new technologies could be identified as powerful potentials in the garden identity

development for Malaysia. Finally, with regards to the experts' recommendations and Malaysia's landscape policy, there were two more issues that should be considered in the development of a Malaysian garden identity. These issues are sustainability and maintenance, which were suggested by the respondents through their interviews and which have also been considered in the new NLP policy.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has a vision to become the most beautiful garden nation by the year 2020 and, as such, it puts emphasis on the development of a unique identity of its own landscapes. Malaysia's National Landscape Policy (NLP) has focused on the development of sustainable landscapes with a unique identity to provide economic benefits and enhance the well-being of society. In this regard, the development of a distinctive garden identity is recognised as one aspect of landscape identity development for Malaysia. But, however challenging from a political viewpoint while considering social differences these developments seem, they gardens could potentially increase economic value and could exhibit the country's cultural heritage as well. And, it is presumed that Malaysian gardens will be sustainable, maintained and well-designed, meeting the needs and expectations of her multicultural society. Thus, the development of a garden identity has to be an echo of Malaysia's unique natural and cultural heritage, whilst utilising new materials, technology, and ideas to attract local users and tourists.

Accordingly, this study provides a diagram which illustrates the relationship between Malaysia’s national landscape policies and the development of a unique garden identity (Fig.2). The economic value of gardens in presenting natural resources and attracting tourists is one of the aspects that enhance income for both the government and the people. In addition, there is a great interest in the development of gardens in the country. New technology and materials could be exploited to create gardens as suitable and well-maintained public places to improve the well-being of Malaysian citizens. Furthermore, making use of local materials and plants inspired by

rural landscapes and cultural heritage could create gardens that are sustainable and well received. Above all, social differences from the multiracial society of Malaysia have to be considered in setting the main guidelines and politics in such developments.

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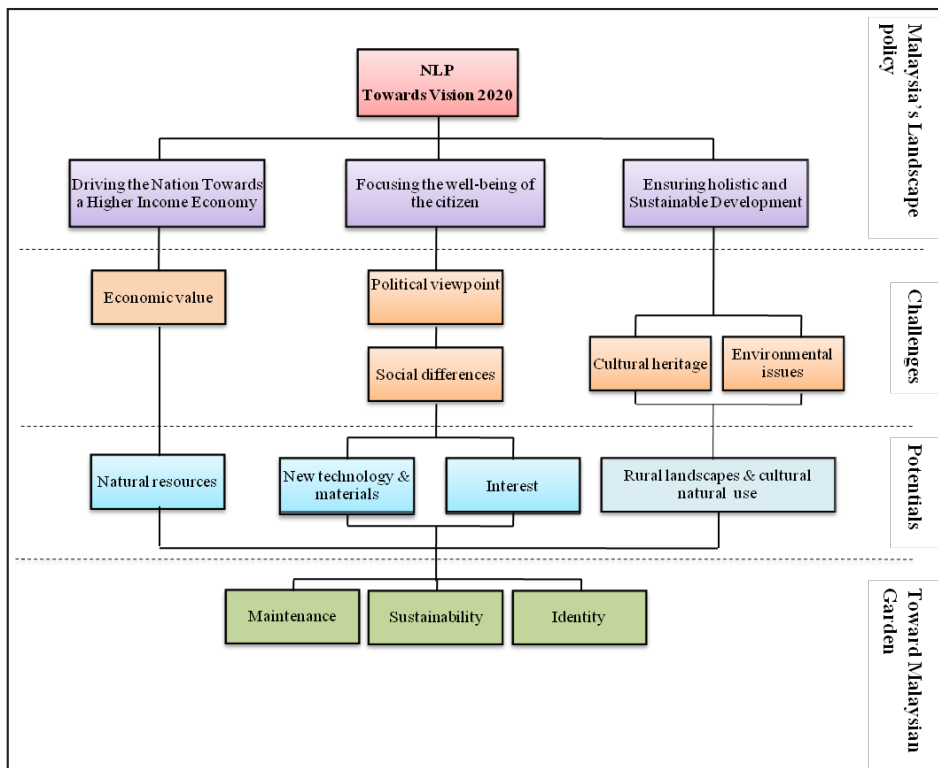


Fig.2: Policy, Challenges, and Potentials in Developing a Malaysian Garden Identity (Suggested by authors)

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APPENDIX I

EXPERTS' INTERVIEW FORM:

Interview NO:

Date: _____ Start time: _____ End Time: _____

Place: _____

Academic qualifications:

Master PhD Other: (Please state) _____

Greetings,

The aim of the study is to clarify challenges and potentials for development of a Malaysian garden identity. Malaysia is gearing toward a developed country by the year 2020. The Country has a vision to become the Most Beautiful Garden Nation has been selected as my case study. I have reviewed related literature to clarify importance of garden development in addition to the challenges and potentials which Malaysia is facing in this approach. In order to complete my findings, I would like to seek your professional opinion regarding the subject matter. Your identity will remain anonymous, and the information will only be used in my research to develop a guideline for creating and proposing design of garden in Malaysia with Malaysian identity.

1. General about Garden

- a. What is your definition of a garden? (Record sound)
- b. What items do you think have been considered in creation of gardens in the past? (Record sound)

2. Garden and Identity

- a. How do you define a garden identity? (Record sound)
- b. Can we create a garden identity? (If Yes, then go to c)
- c. How can we create a new garden identity? (Record sound)
- d. Do you agree that creating a garden identity can enhance the national identity of a nation? (Please explain your answer) (Record sound)

3. Development of New Garden Identity

Based on the literature, I have defined some issues and problems in the development of a garden identity (Give them Show Card #1);

- a. Do you agree with these issues (Please explain your answer.) (Record sound)
- b. Please suggest other issue related to this subject (Record sound)

4. Development of a Garden Identity for Malaysia

I have identified some challenges in the development of garden identity for Malaysia (Give them Show Card #2);

- a. What is your opinion regarding these stated challenges? (Record sound)
- b. Please state other challenges regarding the topic that you know? (Record sound)

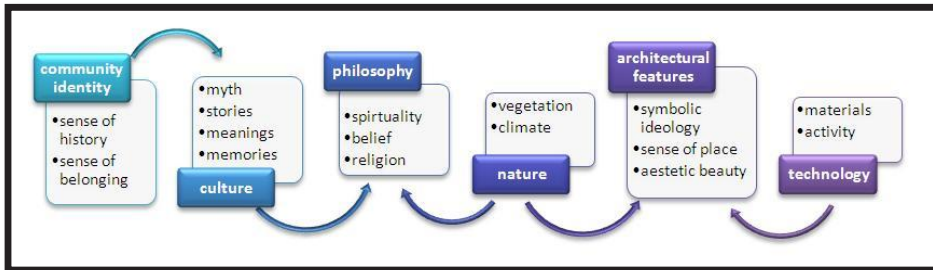
5. Comments and Recommendations

Please state your comments and recommendations. (Record their sound)

Thank You for Your Cooperation

APPENDIX II

Show Card 1: Key Issues in Garden Identity Development



Show Card 2: Challenges in Development of Malaysian Gardens

- Economic viewpoint
- Political viewpoint
- Social viewpoint
- Cultural viewpoint

