



The Potential of Adapting Rural Cultural Landscape Characteristics in Malaysian Urban Residential Area

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ABSTRACT

Substantial rural-urban migration in Malaysia between 1971 and 1975 is underpinned by aspirations for better economic, educational and social opportunities. The shift to an urban area requires adaptation to a totally different environment. Migrants continue to practice their local culture and kampong (village) values even after they have relocated to new housing estates. The responsive rural cultural landscape characteristics embody the residents' way of life from the traditional village and are positioned to have great potential for adaptation in urban residential area in Malaysia. This article would like to encourage landscape architects to incorporate residential cultural identities in contemporary housing development that would inspire their residents' aspirations and identity of Malaysia.

Landscaping in Urban Residential Area

Research by Said (2001a) suggests that it is a normal and well-accepted phenomenon among residents to change the provided public landscape during their post-occupancy period. The green buffer zones and other green spaces adjacent to the houses are used to create small orchards with fruit trees such as *Musa* spp. (Banana), *Artocarpus heterophyleus* (Jackfruit), *Nephelium lappaceum* (Rambutan) as well as herbs and spices such as *Capsicum* spp. (Chilli), *Alpinia galanga* (Galangal), *Curcuma domestica* (Turmeric) and *Pandanus annaryllifolius* (Pandanus). Many of the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods construct their personal carports and storage barns in these public areas. In less than a 5-year occupancy period, the overall public landscape could change dramatically, replacing the existing landscape that was designed by landscape architects, approved by the local authorities and implemented by the developers (Said, 2001b). Ismail (2010) defines this adjustment process as the altered landscape.

Responsive Residential Landscapes

In a study by Ismail (2003), she found residential landscape means more than merely planting ornamental trees in rural residential areas. Similarly, Orians (1986) explained that residential areas could promote certain feelings reflecting human adaptation to the spaces thus creating a responsive living environment. This responsive environment is a space for inhabitants to express their physical activities, emotions, social and cultural demands as illustrated in Figure 1 and 2.



Figure 1: Children play in the rural landscape



Figure 2: Nature that promises excitement

The residential landscape can be perceived as an expression of the intrinsic and cognitive values of a relationship between humans and their living environment (Said, 2001a). 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 long been suggested by Proshansky, Ittelson and Rivlin (1970) who had introduced the idea that landscape sometimes represented human personality and behaviour. Larsen and Harlan (2006), who conducted a study in Phoenix, Arizona, also suggested that personal gardens are the representation of social class, preference and behaviour.

Furthermore, a number of scholars also point that landscape could enhance community identity and reflect its cultural heritage thus "linking the past with the present" (Gurstein, 1993; Stewart, Liebert, & Larkin, 2004). Consistent with this, urban designer Gurstein (1993) recommended "cultural planning" to create a sense of community by utilizing the physical arrangement and composition of the space. He, too, noted that the physical environment can nurture a sense of community.

Altered Landscape in Medium-Cost Housing

Perhaps, the memory of the rural landscape is important to the rural-urban migrants. Many scholars such as Maliki (2008), Thompson (2003), Relph (1976) and Bunnell (2002) had described a strong attachment between migrants and their rural environment. Relph (1976) described this strong attachment as a sense of "rootedness". Bunnell (2002), on contrary, described negative aspects of *kampong* lifestyle and behaviour that were, unfortunately, imported by migrants to the urban living environment with them.

Krupat (1983) admitted that environmental psychologists usually rejected the idea that place identity as "coherent and integrated" with a person's self-identity but he could see the importance of place identity acting as a role of "self-expression" in environmental design. Indeed, he suggested that this idea be further explored and developed by architects and planners. This article believes that a majority of residents in urban housing estates tend to express their identities through plant selections and composition in their gardens. Surely the Malays, Chinese and Indians would have created their own particular gardens reflecting their social behaviours and imbued with their respective cultural significance and religious value. In fact, they should be proud to be identified with their gardens as an expression of their particular culture and to share their garden produce with all the neighbours, regardless of their ethnicity.

We define extended gardens as semi-public spaces that residents have turned into their personal gardens. Holmes et al. cited historian David Goodman who said that "garden became a metaphor for all qualities middle-class reformers wished to encourage among the labouring classes-industriousness, thrift, marital stability, home ownership" (2008, p. 18). The article posits that residents of the medium-cost residential areas must aspire to create beautiful gardens that reflect their identity, social status and desire to nurture the most flourishing garden in their neighbourhood. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate a combination of various plant species by individual owners in their extended gardens.

It would not be a surprise to find residents who may re-create their gardens in association with past rural lifestyle. Elements such as a medium-sized *Bambusa vulgaris* or a Striped Bamboo may represent the Giant Bamboo usually found in the village. Residents also tend to collect antique hard landscape elements from the village such as clay pots and vases, timber seating and woodcarvings, and incorporate these in their gardens reflecting personal preferences. The article proposes that these could be memorable expressions of their intimate connections with their rural environments.



Figure 3 and Figure 4 : A combination of various plant species reflecting identity and soul in the garden.



Figure 5 : Typical flower garden in medium-cost housing.



Figure 6 : Gardening is more than a physical activity. It connects the resident's spirituality with the Creator.

Conclusion

In summary, the article would like to encourage landscape architects to incorporate residential cultural identities in urban housing landscape that would fulfill their residents' aspirations and more importantly, enable them to set out towards a prosperous life. Among the benefits includes residents' responses towards their rural cultural landscape memory. As they have invested in purchasing their homes, we can expect owners to invest the same money, time, personal effort and passion in creating and expressing their love to the living environment. More design studies are encouraged to experiment with this concept in contemporary housing scheme.

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