

redefining schooling:

Co-crafting a waterscape for the Bajau Laut

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ABSTRACT

Politically and culturally segregated and isolated from the Malaysian population, the indigenous sea people of Eastern Malaysia called *Bajau Laut* or *Sama Dilaut*, live in hundreds of water villages on stilts. Being considered stateless, hence invisible to the Malaysian government, these indigenous people are deprived of access to fundamental human rights such as fair job opportunities, healthcare, and education. This study draws a closer look at how the Bajau Laut have historically been managing natural marine resources that are essential to Malaysia's tourism, patterns of inhabitation in water villages, and the position of NGOs regarding indigenous learning and education. The study aims to identify the nature of tourist activities, traditional conventions within Bajau Laut culture, and educational approaches adopted in Alternative Learning Centers. Finally, the study seeks to generate a set of design tools and criteria in order to propose a range of spaces that will promote and preserve indigenous practices and knowledge.

HISTORY

The Bajau Laut or Sama Dilaut people are an ethnic group of sea nomads who used to occupy a broad expanse of archipelagic South East Asia, particularly the Sulu Sea located between Sabah in Eastern Malaysia, the Southern Philippines and Sulawesi in Indonesia during the presence of the Sulu Sultanate¹. Until 1964 the Bajau Laut lived entirely afloat as fishing communities in self-built boat houses and frequently roamed in search of fish and other marine life since they used to make a living mainly out of fishing and boat building². The Bajau are known to be amazing freedivers being able to dive in depths of up to 30 meters and having the ability to hold their breath for more than five minutes, making them a group of people that biologically adapted into an amphibious lifestyle³. What makes this group of people distinctive is their intuitive knowledge of the oceans and their exceptional understanding of orientation, tides, and lunar phases. Being exquisite fishermen, the Bajau Laut can name more than 200 fish species, all of which can be caught and consumed⁴.

Since the end of the 19th century and with the decay of the Sulu Sultanate, which was taken over by colonial forces, the Bajau Laut identity underwent alterations due to the adoption of a drastically different lifestyle. In 1877 most of present-day

Sabah, Malaysia was surrendered to the newly constituted British North Borneo Chartered Company. During the beginning of the 20th century, the Company introduced numerous policies aiming to monitor the mobility of the Bajau Laut to increase its control over them. By providing more income opportunities and thus creating vacancies in plantation crops, the Company aimed to lure sea nomads into moving closer to the land⁵. By introducing a system of boat licensing, that was utilized to track the sea movement of the Bajau Laut and to collect revenues and boat license fees, the Company gradually forced their relocation to land. Hence, the Bajau Laut people created their first pile house settlements in 1955 and almost completely abandoned nomadism for a sedentary lifestyle along the shore in 1979⁶.

1 Claudio Sieber, "Life of the Bajau: What It's like to Live in the Middle of the Ocean," *Vice*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/evjbye/bajau-life-photos-sea-nomads-sulu-malaysia-philippines>.

2 Ibid

3 Johnny Langenheim, "The Last of the Sea Nomads," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, September 18, 2010), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/sep/18/last-sea-nomads>.

4 Clifford Sather, in *The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History, and Fate in a Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 95.

5 Ibid., pp. 47.

6 Ibid., pp. 67.



INTRODUCTION

Sabah, the state of Malaysia located on the island of Borneo, has a diverse population of 3.2 million people. The indigenous population of Sabah makes up 55.5% of the population, with Kadazan/Dusun and Bajau being the two major ethnic groups⁷. In general, more than one in four residents in Sabah are non-citizens, which is higher than Peninsular Malaysia's demographics. Throughout its history, Sabah has been attracting many immigrants from the southern Philippines, China, and India, especially after the pressuring reforms that the North Borneo British Company imposed. Today, Malaysian Law does not distinguish undocumented inhabitants and stateless people from other unrecognized groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers, who are often referred to as "illegal immigrants" by the locals and the media⁸. Hence, all non-citizen groups are vulnerable to strict penalties such as arrest, detention, or even deportation⁹.

Today, the Bajau Laut have established self-built water villages, also known as *kampung air*, on the fringes of some of the largest cities of Sabah and mainly Semporna. Many have remained only semisedentarized as they occasionally sail for fishing or to visit relatives in other villages¹⁰. Bajau Laut still maintaining "boatholds" only makeup 22% of Semporna's population. The water villages where

Bajau populations reside are often associated with hubs that shelter criminality, prostitution, and illegal drug trafficking.

The coasts of Eastern Malaysia where many water villages are located, are part of one of the most important reef systems in the world, the Coral Triangle. Although it occupies just 1.5% of the world's total ocean area, the Coral Triangle represents 30% of the world's coral reefs¹¹. Moreover, the coral reef is home to 76% of the world's coral species and certain endemic species. However, the Coral Triangle and its integrity are threatened by several factors, such as climate change, demographics and way of living, rising demand for marine products, and the exploitation of natural resources. Several governmental organizations, universities, and NGOs have been collaborating and focusing on conservation initiatives for the damaged coral reefs and the dwindling fish populations. The Marine Parks surrounding Sabah were gazetted in 2004 to control destructive fishing activities¹². Consequently, the Bajau Laut people have been warded off from maritime spaces that initially used to be their primary source of food and income.

While Malaysia is implementing a series of plans in order to achieve its objective of a "fully-developed

country", focusing on to palm oil p Considering is mainly c marine lan flora and fa rainforests, ecosystems tourism acco country's G maintaining is a fac the profitat conservation resourcestha is pursued measures to and enforce areas.

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7 UNICEF, *Children Out of School: Malaysia, The Sabah Context* (Putrajaya, Malaysia: United Nations Children's Fund, 2019): pp. 14.

8 Sriprapha Petcharamesree, "ASEAN and Its Approach to Forced Migration Issues," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 20, no. 2 (2015): p. 178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2015.1079021>.

9 UNHCR, "PDF" (Kuala Lumpur, 2014), pp. 1.

10 Greg Acciaoli, Helen Brunt, and Julian Clifton, "Foreigners Everywhere, Nationals Nowhere: Exclusion, Irregularity, and Invisibility of Stateless Bajau Laut in Eastern Sabah, Malaysia," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (March 2017): pp. 236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1319526>.

11 Alex Gray, "The 'Coral Triangle' Is the Largest of Its Kind, and It's Dying," World Economic Forum, September 13, 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/what-is-the-coral-triangle/>.

12 Greg Acciaoli, Helen Brunt, and Julian Clifton, "Foreigners Everywhere, Nationals Nowhere: Exclusion, Irregularity, and Invisibility of Stateless Bajau Laut in Eastern Sabah, Malaysia," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (March 2017): pp. 239, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2017.1319526.

13 Depart "Tourism Satellite of Statistics Mala www.dosm.gov.my column%2Fcthem 1lWwTJIYm9uV0lv 5CRUZCblh4ZTZ

many initiatives are in Sabah and are related to aquaculture production and tourism. It is noted that Malaysia's tourism industry has centered around idyllic landscapes with lush rainforests, pristine beaches, and coral reefs, as well as tropical islands. Preserving the local environment is highly important as it is estimated to account for 12.8% of the GDP in 2021¹³. Hence, the health of the local ecosystems is a major factor that determines the sustainability of tourism. The concept of a common pool resource is valuable for tourism development through implementing measures to strengthen protection and management within protected

efforts to establish growth in the Malaysian government coastal regions as solely dependent on tourism-oriented activities that could replace traditional activities that depend on natural resources. However, such viewpoints do not take into consideration the large-scale marine-based activities that evolve around the use of natural resources (e.g. seaweed cultivation) or structural inequalities that affect development prospects in coastal areas. The first part of the paper will examine the path and strategies taken by organizations to manage Sabah's natural resources. If ecotourism is promoted further, it will assess if and how government authority and involvement in coastal communities have been successful. Organizations' work and the

ecotourism sector.

Marine-related occupations that belong to the primary sector, such as fishing and seaweed cultivation, as well as the processing of marine goods, have been an inseparable part of the Bajau Laut identity. Therefore, the paper will try to identify and access traces of practices and cultural conventions by taking a closer look at how existing infrastructure is taken advantage of.

The Bajau Laut community's stateless status has created an array of problems, such as the deprivation of access to civil registry, healthcare, social protection, and education. Therefore, to support their low-income families, many children often join the labor market early and become unskilled workers in labor-intensive jobs. It is estimated that there are 18,781 undocumented children in Sabah and that just 2 out of 5 attend primary school while 1 out of 5 participate in secondary school¹⁴. Since stateless children are prohibited from accessing formal education according to Malaysian law, Bajau Laut children are provided education via Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs) by NGO-founded or community-led initiatives and volunteers. The last part of this paper will investigate the position of ALCs regarding indigenous peoples' education, their needs, and the importance of school as a symbolic institution.

¹³ Department of Statistics Malaysia, "The Account 2021," Department of Statistics Malaysia, September 2022, https://www.dsm.gov.my/v1/index.php/index.php?r=account&cat=111&bul_id=NGtqNwMOJ1Y2RZQT09&menu_id=TE-MODZlBmk2aWRRQT09.

¹⁴ UNICEF, *Children Out of School: Malaysia, The Sabah Context* (Putrajaya, Malaysia: United Nations Children's Fund, 2019): pp. 16.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the contemporary world, where the state is the default unit, statelessness is a fundamental problem. Being unprotected by the state implies that stateless communities need to be more politically represented and advocated for, making them vulnerable to the authority and decisions taken by influential stakeholders. Moreover, although several organizations are making efforts to preserve Sabah's natural resources, involving indigenous communities and their views of the environment in such initiatives is challenging¹⁵.

The perception of the Bajau Laut as outsiders is also strengthened by the appearance of the water villages and the poor infrastructural and sanitary conditions in which these low-income communities live. Initiatives and governmental encouragement for indigenous people to get relocated to land omit the vital contribution of the sea to their livelihood. At the same time, the expected job opportunities that are promised with the rise of ecotourism come in contrast with the assumption that terrestrial and marine resources in Sabah are being misappropriated and undermined by the Bajau Laut and other local communities¹⁶.

Moreover, Malaysia's educational system still promotes education for children and young people as a weapon used to work in the industry. Hence, the idiosyncrasy of the government and foreign investors or organizations do not recognize nor tolerate traditional patterns of lifestyle and consumption in their capitalist framework¹⁷.

Thus, the role of indigenous education in breaking certain conventions is vital in preserving indigenous heritage while providing children and adults with a more self-determined lifestyle and occupation.

Therefore, one of the scopes of this research paper is to examine and evaluate the nature of the tourism sector in Sabah and the Bajau Laut peoples' involvement in it. The findings will provide insight into how celebrating and promoting traditional ecological knowledge and cultural conventions could give the community a chance to a more self-determined lifestyle through ecotourism. To better comprehend the identity and lifestyle of the community, this research will look into the patterns and traces of spatial usage in water villages. Lastly, the paper examines the nature of education in indigenous communities and its long-term contribution to peoples' lives. To achieve these research objectives, the research will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) How much authority and involvement do the Bajau Laut have in natural resource conservation efforts and the ecotourism sector?
- 2) What types of cultural conventions and traditions are reflected in the way the Bajau Laut appropriate space?
- 3) What is the position of Alternative Learning Centers regarding indigenous education and the importance of school as an establishment?

¹⁵ Julian Clifton and Chris Majors, "Culture, Conservation, and Conflict: Perspectives on Marine Protection among the Bajau of Southeast Asia," *Society & Natural Resources* 25, no. 7 (November 2011): pp. 716-725, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2011.618487>.

¹⁶ Greg Acciaoli, Helen Brunt, and Julian Clifton, "Foreigners Everywhere, Nationals Nowhere: Exclusion, Irregularity, and Invisibility of Stateless Bajau Laut in Eastern Sabah, Malaysia," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (March 2017): pp. 239, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2017.1319526.

¹⁷ Mohd. Tajjudin and Mohd. Rasdi, "Democracy, the State and Sustainability: In the Sea Nomadism of the Bajau Laut," in *Bajautopia: Tales of Borneo's Sea Nomads: A Collection of Essays and Architectural Research* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre,



METHODOLOGY

In an individualistic world, the commons are the means by which people stay connected. Avermaete recognizes other theorists' urge to address urban commons as a matter of collective practices in the built environment. In his article "Constructing the Commons", he refers to three categories of commons and investigates their fundamental concepts and contribution to the city's architectural development¹⁸. The three categories are presented as: "Res Communis", "Lex Communis", and "Praxis Communis". In establishing the methodological framework of the research paper, the three definitions of commons were utilized as organizing tools to categorize the parameters that the paper aims to investigate.

Res Communis

Res Communis refers to collective resources and shared assets found in the environment. This category describes common-pool resources, comprised of a resource system such as fishing grounds, crops, groundwater basins, and resource units such as harvested fish or agricultural produce and water extracted from groundwater basins¹⁹. As a resource system of great importance, marine environments, their flora, and fauna are inherited commons that governments strive to preserve, indigenous communities have extended empirical knowledge about and are vital for ensuring a growing economy in the tourism industry.

Res Communis will investigate the initiatives run in Sabah by local and non-local environmental organizations to restore damaged coral reef areas and

preserve the diverse flora and fauna in Sabah's marine parks. The aim is to identify the amount of authority given to the Bajau Laut, whose livelihood was historically dependent -and still is- on the subsistence of the seas they reside on or in. Moreover, Res Communis will investigate the nature of tourism in the region of Sabah, meaning the activities and types of accommodation offered. Via the use of platforms such as Trip Advisor, Google Maps, TikTok, and visitor reviews of places and vlogs (video blogs), the research aims to identify problematic and pleasing aspects of the tourism industry in the region of Semporna and the effect these have on the local Bajau Laut community's lifestyle and economy. Finally, the findings will be presented as narratives reinforced with the extracted video and photo material in screenshots.

Lex Communis

Lex Communis refers to a set of common codes and conventions regarding the built environment surrounding us²⁰. When investigating self-built environments, cultural conventions and traditions unavoidably inform the way people construct the settlements they inhabit. Hence, architecture becomes a common denominator for designers and users. Patterns of spatial use expose traces of occupation that occur without architectural intention and whose existence reveals the needs of a community and its inventive ways of adapting or modifying its built environment to accommodate them. This research aims to investigate the codes and conventions of the Bajau Laut water villages and to document the ways by which various architectural instruments and spatial conditions enable social encounters and daily

practices in space to provide insight into how digital tools allow a common language of Res Communis and Lex Communis and how they challenge and conventions of the built environment. Therefore, observation is a key part of this qualitative research.

The most optimal way of conducting the research is on-site ethnography due to the particularities of the reduced time available for the research had it been also the fact that the remote areas of water villages are not conducive to conducting an ethnography that is not possible. This research will adjust the research methodology to an online ethnography. With the unprecedented impact of COVID-19, online ethnography has become increasingly relevant. Ethnographic data collection to the past, digital ethnography and media have become an integral part of ethnographic practice in social and cultural humanities. The lack of informative nature of digital ethnography to tackle the problem of conventional ethnographic studies, since it offers new ways of developing and understanding and acting for change²¹.

Through unedited digital ethnography taken by locals and researchers on platforms such as YouTube, and TikTok, the research will document the public spaces of water villages, the spatial organization of the units, and patterns of

¹⁸ Tom Avermaete, "Constructing the Commons," in *The New Urban Condition: Criticism and Theory from Architecture and Urbanism*, ed. Leandro Medrano and Recamán Luiz (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 59.

²¹ Sarah Pink, "Digital Ethnography: Intervention," *Arts and Humanities Research Review* 13, no. 4 (August 2014): 1454-1464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022214541454>

. This perspective can
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community's access to Res
how social etiquette
orchestrate everyday
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where the majority
are located is limited,
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of space in the form of drawings,
accompanied by narratives of
observations and literature research
that provide input on the traditions
and conventions spotted within Bajau
Laut communities. This common will
be investigated via "Public Drawings"
as defined by Kajima²², which is the
term to describe public space draw-
ings that showcase construction ele-
ments combined with traces of occu-
pation. This approach focuses on the
ecology around architecture, which
derives from the bilateral relationship
between architectural devices (roof,
wall, column, window) and non-
architectural elements (water, gravity,
earth, trees)²³.

Although documentaries contributed
to initially obtaining a better
understanding of the community, using
documentary footage was avoided
since documentary journalism tends
to provide edited material and a
narrative that, although informative,
the input provided can often be
unilateral or biased, particularly in
cases when film-making crews and
journalists do not come from the
same cultural background with the
communities they are documenting.

Praxis Communis

Praxis Communis refers to the social
dimensions of the commons. It describes
values such as mutual support,
cooperation, and communication
essential to managing common
pool resources and engaging with
standard codes and conventions²⁴.

²² Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kai-
jima, *Architectural Ethnography: Atelier Bow-Wow*, ed.
Jennifer Sigler and Leah Whitman-Salkin (Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University, Graduate School of Design,
2017), pp. 11.

²³ Ibid., pp. 13.

²⁴ Tom Avermaete, "Constructing the
Commons," in *The New Urban Condition: Criticism and*

Praxis Communis is about the "care
work" put into creating sustainable
situations that can be utilized to help
and support others²⁵. In this context,
care work can be described as the
initiatives by NGOs, local communities,
and volunteers to educate the Bajau
children. This part of the paper
will investigate the approaches of
Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs)
on indigenous education and their
position regarding the pedagogical
approaches adopted. Understanding
the notion of alternative schooling
and the role of the school as an
establishment is an integral part of the
research.

To gain a better insight into the work of
Alternative Learning Centers, an open-
ended interview was conducted via
Zoom. The participant consented
to have their identity revealed as
part of the research. Although some
structured questions were formed
before the interview, the participant
was allowed to elaborate and narrate
stories regarding her experiences with
teaching indigenous children and
residing in a water village.

To document activities, extracurricular
initiatives, and the schools'
collaboration with other organizations,
Facebook has been a valuable
source of information. Via the official
Facebook pages of various Alternative
Learning Centers, valuable qualitative
data about events, collaborations,
and activities were extracted and
later documented in a graphical
manner. Through observation and
interpretation of the images, I
translated them into partially traced
hand drawings.

Theory from Architecture and Urbanism, ed. Leandro
Medrano and Recamán Luiz (New York: Routledge,
2021), pp. 63.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 65

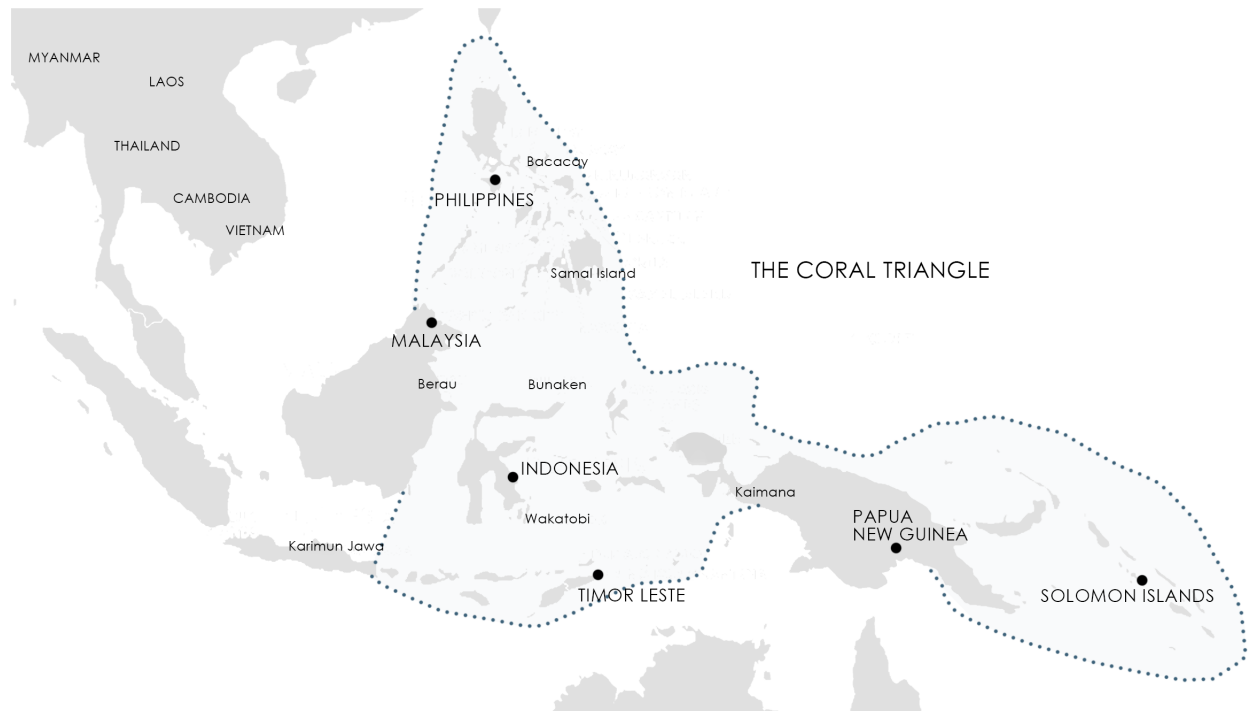


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NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



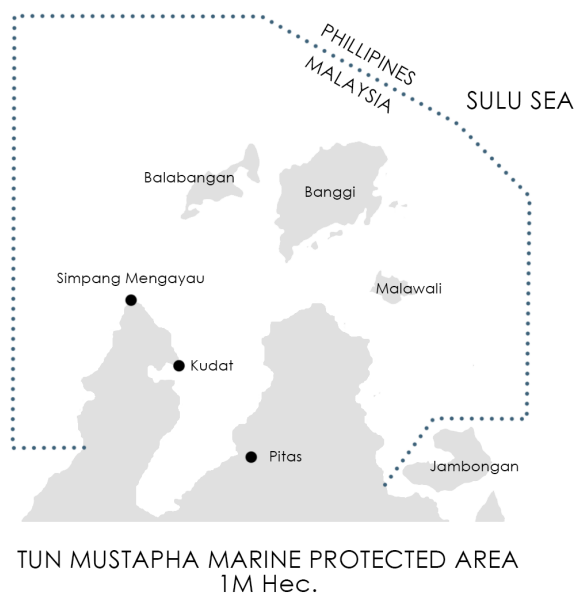
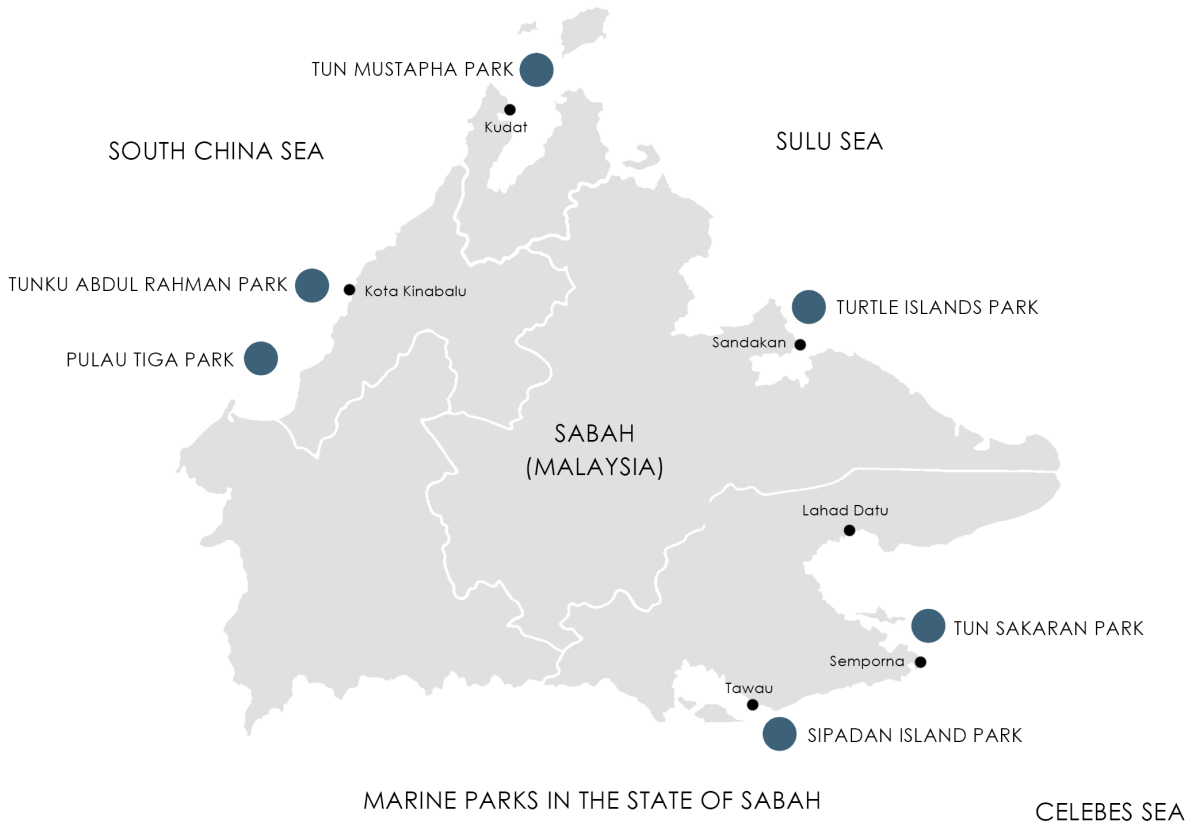
The coasts of Eastern Malaysia are part of one of the most important reef systems in the world, the Coral Triangle. The Coral Triangle covers 132,636 kilometers and extends across the maritime landscape of six countries; Malaysia, Papua-New Guinea, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and the Solomon Islands²⁶. Malaysia and Indonesia are part of the 17 mega-diversity countries. Both countries are endowed with a wide variety of species of fauna and flora, a high percentage of them being endemic to the region. Due to climate change and overharvesting, many species are endangered, while others are threatened with extinction²⁷. Nevertheless, climate change and overharvesting are not only a threat to biodiversity and ecosystems since they are responsible for environmental conditions such as the quality of river water and the pollution of freshwater sources due to the lack of control over development activities.

In the last decade, several governmental, overseas, and NGO organizations and local universities have raised awareness of the importance of preserving and managing natural resources. Via scientific research, advocacy, and collaboration with the local authorities and community, environmental organizations have been striving to tackle issues such as the bleaching and decay of coral reef areas, the tracking of declining fish populations, the regulation of destructive fishing activities, and the management of solid waste in remote areas. In 2017, in collaboration with Semporna's District Office, WWF Malaysia launched the Coral Bleaching Early Response plan, which aims to preserve the integrity of Sabah's coral reefs²⁸. WWF Malaysia recognizes the urgency of preserving the local reefs as they host and provide food for marine life and protect coastal areas from significant storms and wave surges. Organizations like WWF Malaysia recognize the importance of collaboration with different industries and stakeholders -influential or not- such as

²⁶ Alex Gray, "The 'Coral Triangle' Is the Largest of Its Kind, and It's Dying," World Economic Forum, September 13, 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/what-is-the-coral-triangle/>.

²⁷ Saiful Arif Abdullah, Amin Setyo Leksono, and Hong Sön-gi, *Conserving Biocultural Landscapes in Malaysia and Indonesia for Sustainable Development* (Singapore: Springer, 2022), pp. 8.

²⁸ WWF Malaysia, "Semporna Leads the Way in Adopting Coral Bleaching Early Response Plan," WWF Malaysia, December 2017, <https://www.wwf.org.my/?24945%2FSemporna-Leads-the-Way-in-Adopting-Coral-Bleaching-Early-Response-Plan>.





ZONATION OF TUN SAKARAN MARINE PARK

DIAGRAM CREDIT: [unreadable]

government agencies, dive operators, resorts, and the locals²⁹.

Although various organizations have been organizing learning exchange events where governmental representatives, academics, conservation, and community groups gather to share their opinions and perspective regarding marine conservation, there is still skepticism regarding the amount of authority and voice that is given to local stakeholders whose knowledge and relationship with said ecosystems is empirical.

In principle, traditional ecological knowledge is often neglected because its foundations usually originate from a particular society and are not a product of scientific research³⁰. Consequently, traditional knowledge systems are declining, with modern knowledge systems gaining more and more popularity. However, traditional ecological knowledge represents a summary of empirical knowledge acquired over thousands of years of a

particular community's direct interaction with the environment and is passed down from generation to generation.

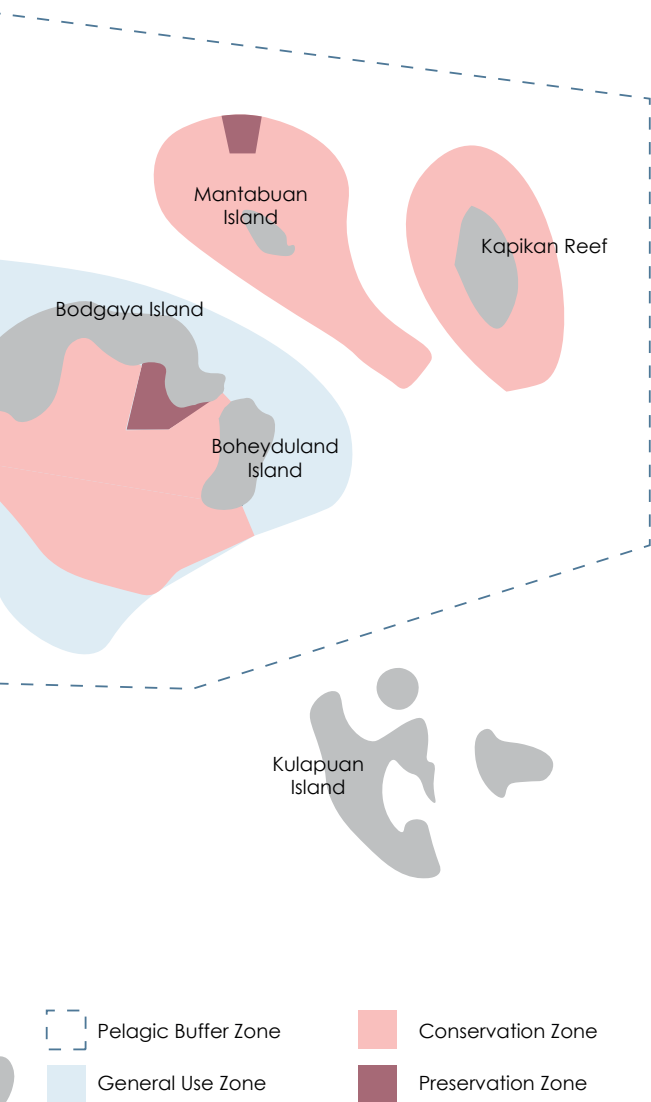
Bajau Laut peoples' livelihoods are deeply intertwined with the resilience of the natural resources that surround them. Environmental conservation of these resources, making the community one of the primary stakeholders, and their perspectives and input shall be considered in any decision between organizations and communities. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge into modern conservation is not understood. However, policies like "conservation", "preservation", and "protection" means that the extraction of any resource is prohibited, that non-influential stakeholders are excluded, and such measures are not being considered.

29 Ibid.

30 Z.M. Siti et al., "Use of Traditional and Complementary Medicine in Malaysia: A Baseline Study," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 17, no. 5-6 (2009): pp. 292, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2009.04.002>.

31 Fikret Berkes, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Concepts and Cases" (Ottawa: International Council for Traditional Knowledge, 2014), pp. 1-11.

32 Greg Acciaioli, Helen Brunt, and Jonathan Nowhere, "Exclusion, Irregularity, and Inclusion: The Case of Sabah, Malaysia," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013): pp. 1-11.



MARINE PARK, MALAYSIA

DESIGNED BY THE AUTHOR

interaction with its surroundings
contribution to generation³¹.

islands are directly dependent on
resource systems whose integrity
organizations strive to protect,
the essential stakeholders whose
are considered. For the cooperation
communities to be fruitful, their
value should be acknowledged and
like categorizing all reef areas as
or No Take Zones (NTZs) -which
any resources is prohibited- imply
s who are directly affected by
considered³².

Local Knowledge in Perspective,” in *Traditional
Knowledge* (IDRC Books / Les Éditions du CRDI,

Clifton, “Foreigners Everywhere, Na-
visibility of Stateless Bajau Laut in Eastern
Asian Studies 15, no. 3 (March 2017): pp. 239,

Sabah Parks, a conservation-based statutory body functioning under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment of Sabah, Malaysia, is responsible for conserving and promoting various scenic and historic reserves in Sabah. In 2020, Sabah Parks published a strategic plan of objectives to be accomplished by 2025. In the report, it is stated that “Although our park management has evolved to engage with and include these communities in things that we do, problems still persist. The communities in and around the parks’ boundaries could become important allies if cultivated properly”³³. Therefore, organizations appear not to recognize the value of the community’s potential contribution to conservation attempts. However, since ecotourism is a rapidly growing industry in Sabah, important stakeholders such as foreign investors who can fund tourist infrastructure and promote Sabah’s marine reserves are considered important partners since they actively contribute to the local economy.

DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2017.1319526.

³³ Sabah Parks, “Pelan Strategik 2025: Taman Taman Sabah,” <https://www.sabah-parks.org.my/> (Board of Trustees of Sabah Parks, April 21, 2021), <https://www.sabahparks.org.my/resource-centre/publication>, pp. 6.

TOURISM

Due to its idyllic landscapes, Sabah has become a popular tourist destination. Some of Sabah's most important tourist destinations are national marine parks such as the Tunku Abdul Rahman Park, the Kinabalu National Park, and the Tun Mustapha Park. With over 1.3 million international and local visitors arrivals in 2022, the tourism sector has been vital to the island's economy. The development of the tourism sector has made Sabah a recipient of foreign investment that amounted to RM9.9 billion between January and September³⁴. Consequently, the tourism infrastructure of Sabah has developed, providing a diversity of activities and types of accommodation that cater to all tastes and budgets.

As observed in vlogs, TikTok and Trip Advisor, activities mainly center around water sports and exploring marine fauna and flora. Some activities include sea walking, diving, canoeing, surfing, and stand-up paddling³⁵. Regarding accommodation, foreign parties invested in constructing hundreds of luxury resorts and smaller chalets, thus introducing two types of tourism in Sabah; enclave and rural tourism³⁶. As defined by Ceballos-Lascurain, enclave tourism accommodation is often found in remote places where other types of convenience cannot easily be found, and the local community cannot afford its provided goods and services³⁷. Starting from three luxurious resorts, Mabul Island developed into a popular tourist destination with more than five luxury resorts and thirteen chalets, most of them owned by foreigners.

Rural tourism refers to -usually- low-budget accommodation located within a local community's residential area and focuses on providing

locally sourced goods and experiences. Such establishments often focus on providing holiday packages for visitors keen on adventure, sports, arts, and heritage tourism³⁸. Out of the total labor force employed in Mabul Island's tourism sector, the local population only makes up 20% of it, which is comprised mainly of the local youth³⁹. Most of the positions held by the locals are in service, while foreign workers occupy managerial positions. Due to their lack of education, Bajau workers are often paid low wages, although many Bajau families have been running small family-owned stores. Meanwhile, through the rise of tourism, many Bajau women have been able to financially support their families by washing clothes and selling fresh produce⁴⁰.

Semporna City, which serves as a gateway to Sabah's most popular islands, is a location well-known for its seaweed cultivation by local fishermen communities. The city is also well known for its homestay tourism. Homestay tourism refers to a type of accommodation offered by a local host who lets parts of their residence out, so visitors spend their stay within a local community. Although a less popular option, the homestay program has been profitable primarily to local fishing communities whose income accounted for more than RM7.3 million in 2012⁴¹. This type of hospitality has been identified as a mechanism to promote seaweed cultivation tourism that attracts visitors who wish to obtain a first-hand experience of harvesting and processing seaweed and the locals involved in such activities⁴².

Through the screenshots and Trip Advisor reviews illustrated below, I attempted to identify a series of activities promoted by local travel agencies and specific typological characteristics found in different luxury resorts. Moreover, part of the

34 Mariah Doksil, "Sabah Receives Third Largest Foreign Investment in Malaysia," Borneo Post Online (Borneo Post Online, September 16, 2022), <https://www.theborneopost.com/2022/09/16/sabah-receives-third-largest-investment/>.

35 Sabah Malaysian Borneo, "Things to Do," Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.sabahtourism.com/things-to-do/>.

36 Norhaya Hanum Mohamad and Amran Hamzah, "Social Identity and Community Resilience towards Tourism Development in Mabul Island, Semporna Sabah, Malaysia," *International Journal of Built Environment and Sustainability* 2, no. 4 (2015): pp. 331, <https://doi.org/10.11113/ijbes.v2.n4.101>.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 332.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 331.

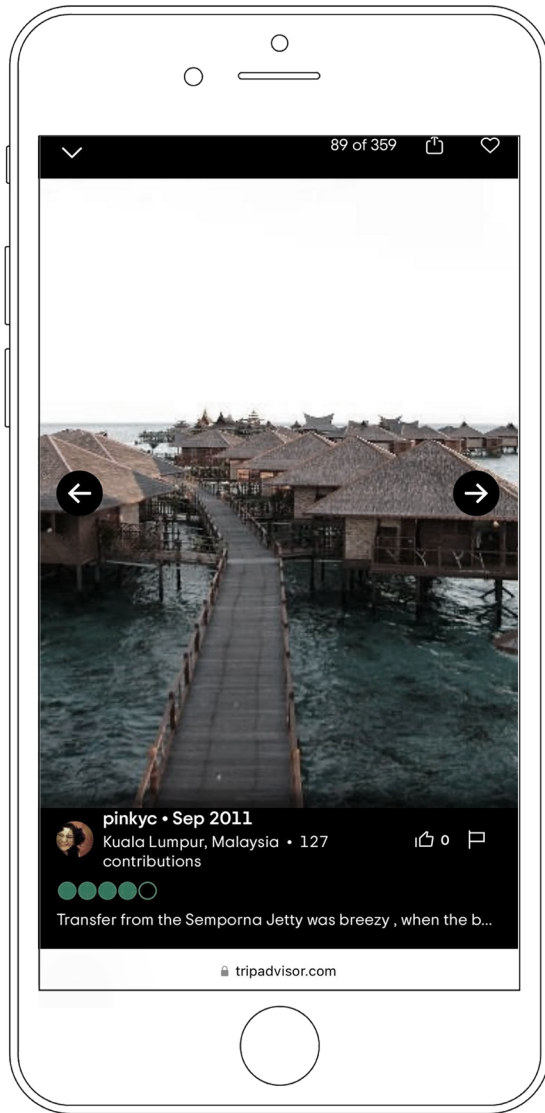
40 *Ibid.*, pp. 335.

41 Rosazman Hussin, Suhaimi Md. Yasir, and Velan Kunjuran, "Potential of Homestay Tourism Based on Seaweed Cultivation from the Views of Seaweed Cultivators in District of Semporna Sabah, East Malaysia," *SHS Web of Conferences* 12 (2014): pp. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20141201005>.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 3.

Research included mapping chalets and resorts in relationship to the location of local residential areas as well as the ways in which Bajau Laut communities are involved in tourism. During the research, several visitor reviews (Trip Advisor) and short videos (TikTok) were studied in an attempt to understand the consumers' experiences and their viewpoints towards the local communities and their interactions with them.

RESORTS & TRIPADVISOR

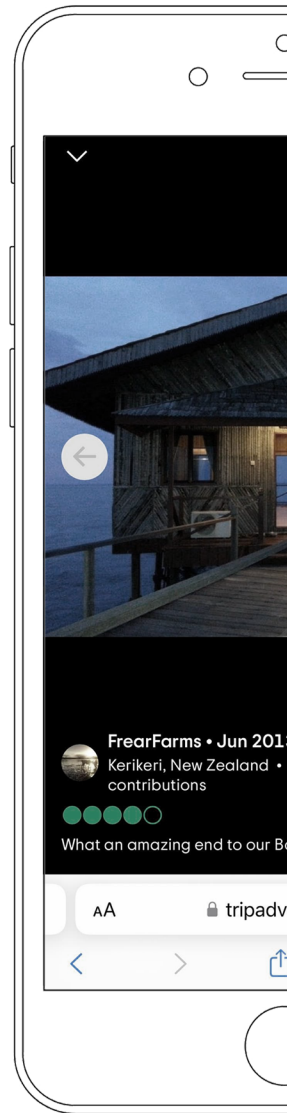
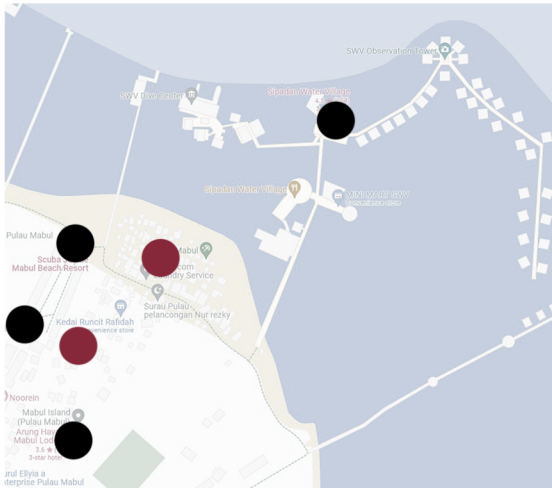


- Resorts and Chalets offering private villas with private entrances

- Units are accessible via a communal path on stilts

- Indigenous Water Villages form house groups for every family group.

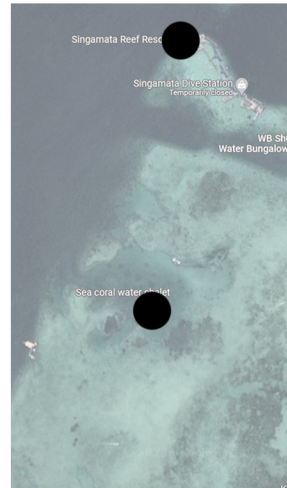
- In house groups, dwellings are connected via alleys, organising them in clusters

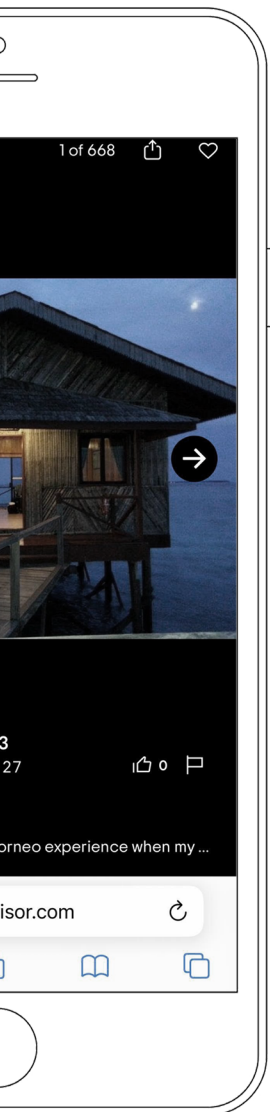


- Private villas on the designed to provide

- Unless located on the group, dwellings are seawards (kalea).

- Docks function as users gather.

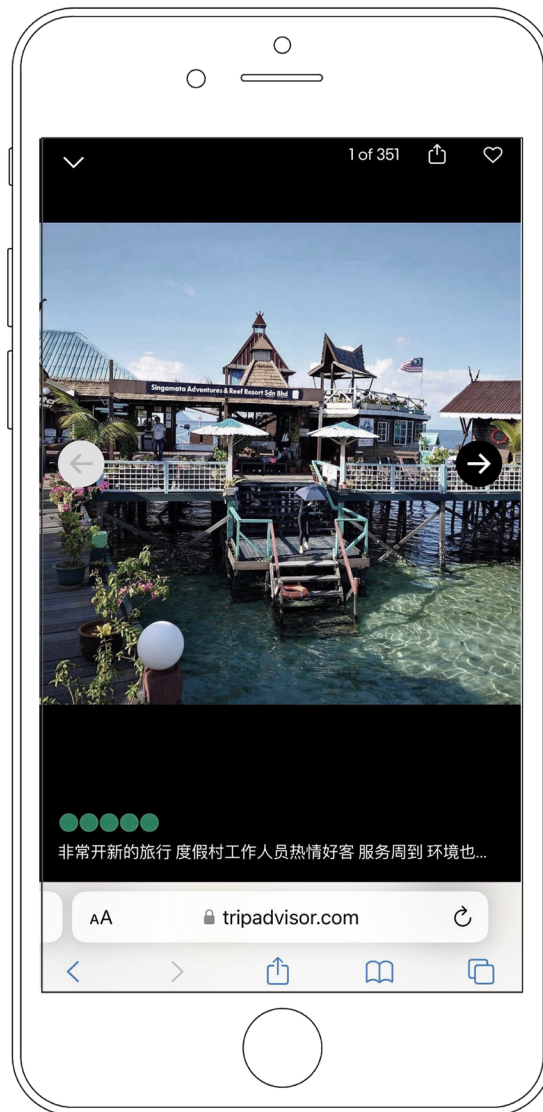
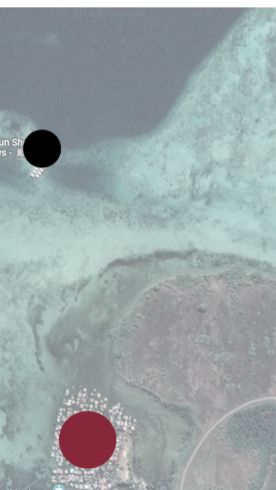




the edge of walkways, views of the reefs

the fringes of a house don't provide views

ending points where



- Resorts and Chalets have planted greenery.

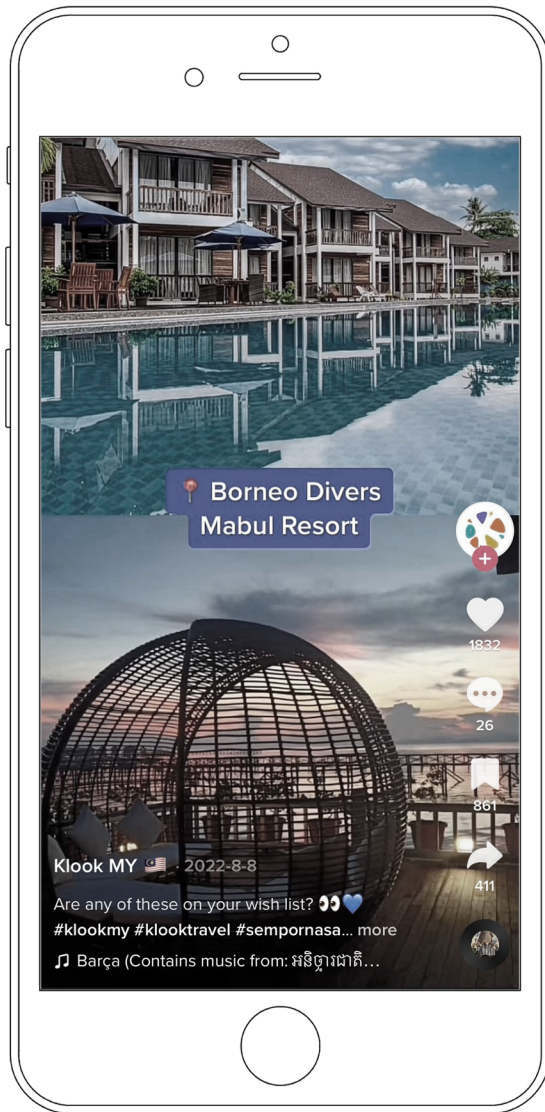
- Docks are organised in different heights in relation to the sea level, providing various experiences.

- Water village docks are solely connected to the water via wooden ladders.
-There are no signs of greenery in water villages.



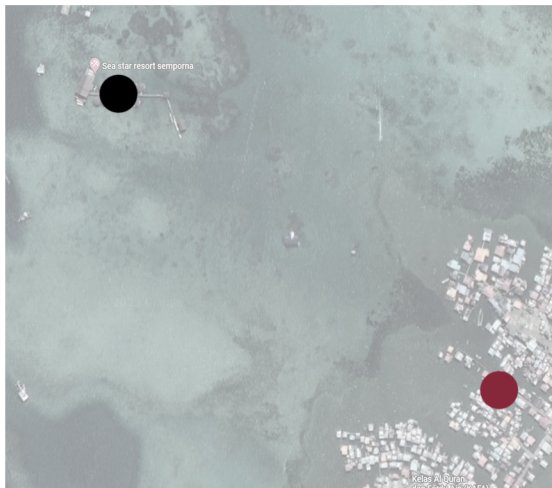
Resorts
Water Villages

RESORTS & TIKTOK



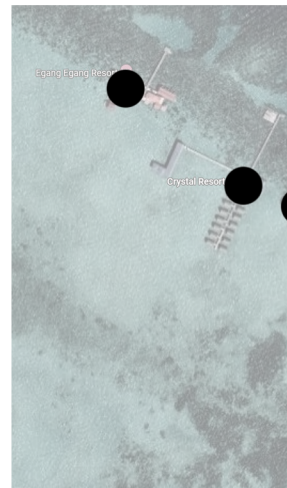
- Western typologies
- Unsustainable practices like providing freshwater pools.

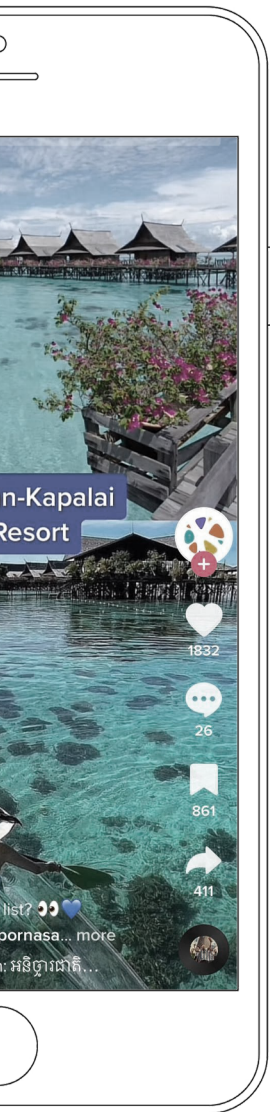
- Indigenous Water Villages form house groups for every family group.
- In house groups, dwellings are connected via alleys, organising them in clusters



- Resorts built on the
- Private units access from the Semporna J

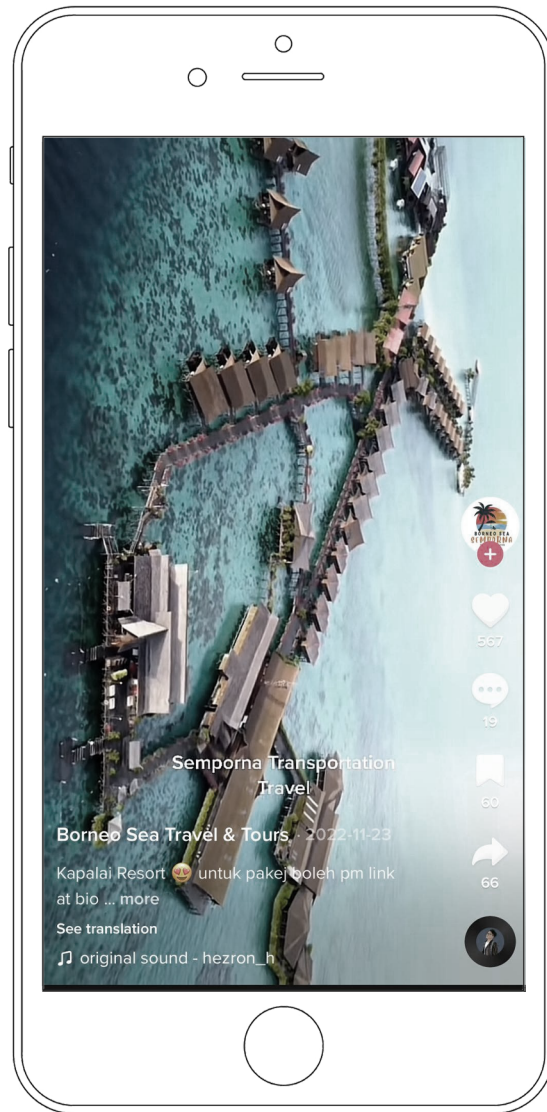
- Most water villages shoreline, facilitating access to goods





fringes of coral reefs
 accessed solely by boats
 Jetty

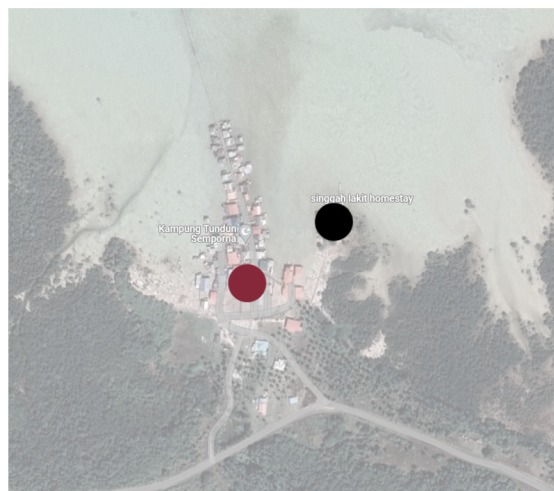
s are located on the
 g commerce and



- Homestays: More affordable accommodation where amenities such as WC, living room and kitchen are shared with other tenants

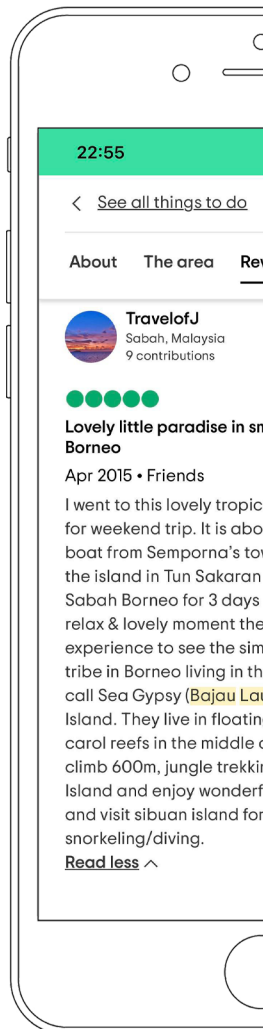
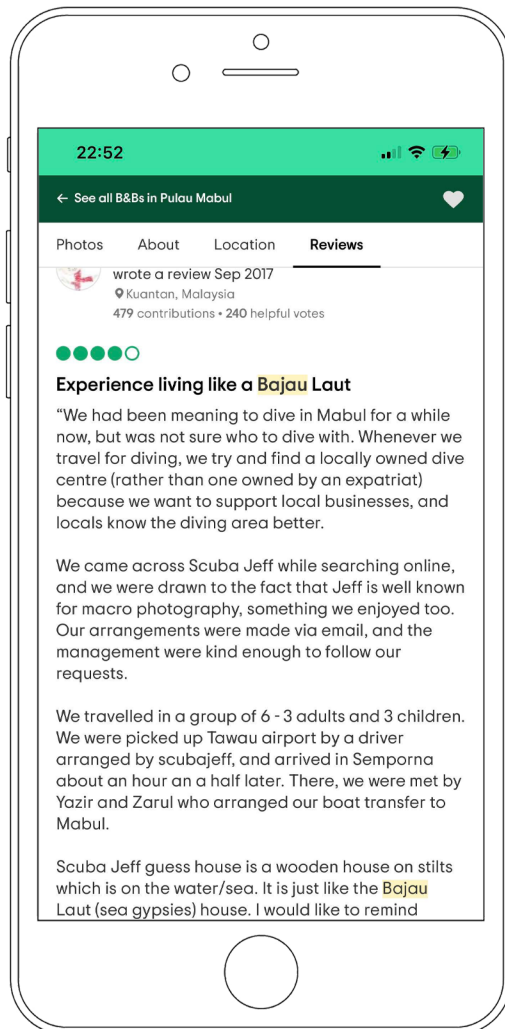
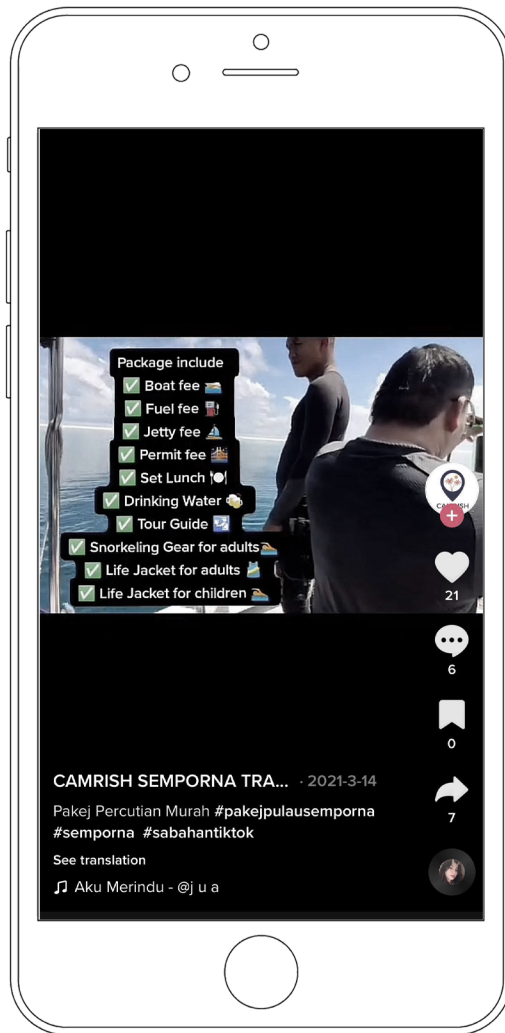
- Homestays are usually located in proximity to residential areas and water villages

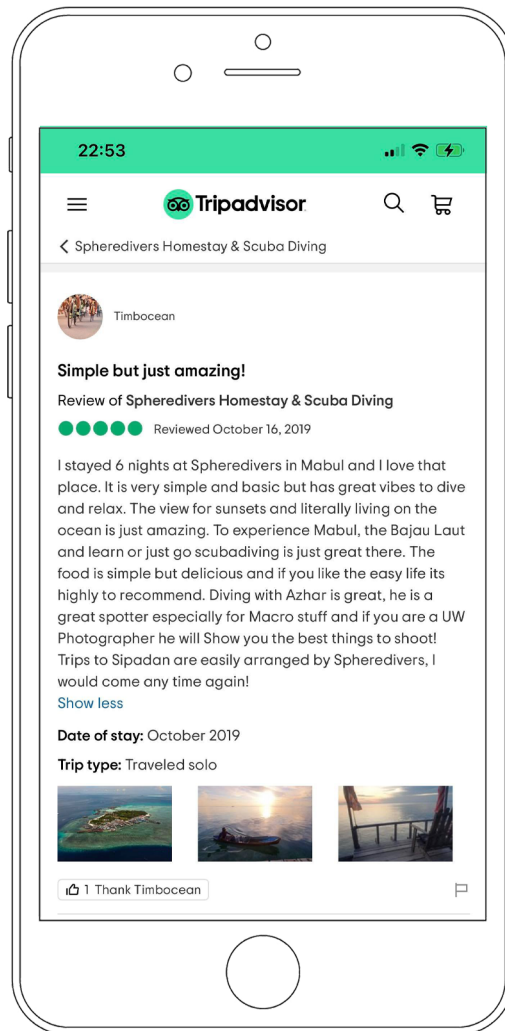
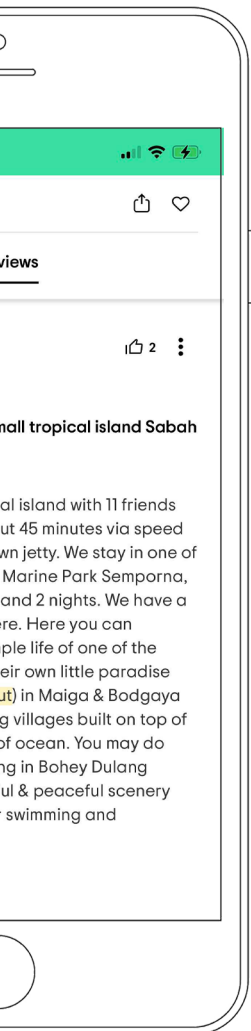
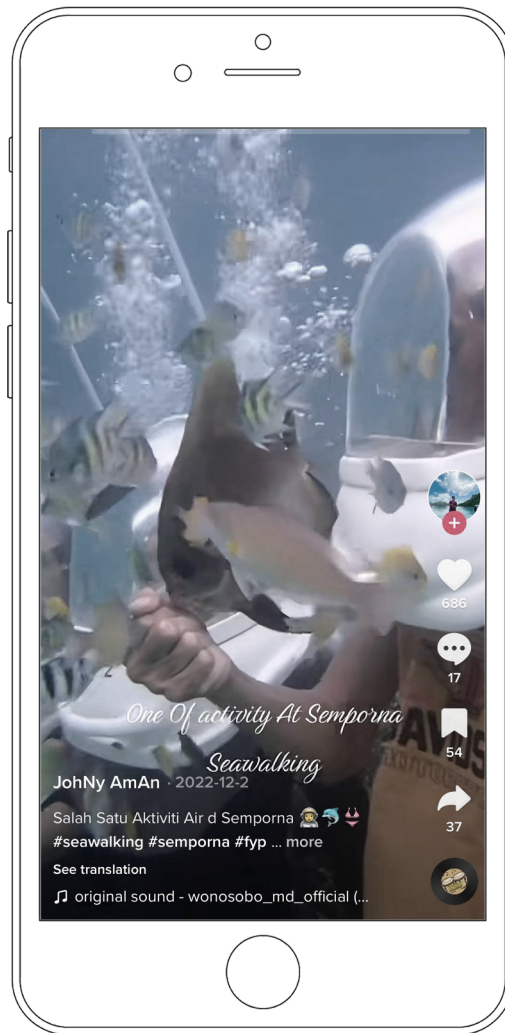
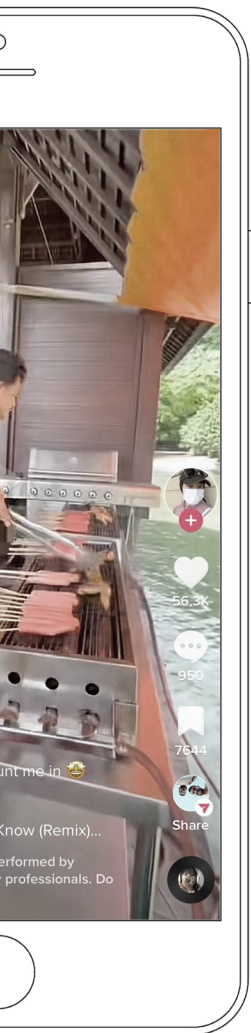
- Higher chances of experiencing Sabah like a local



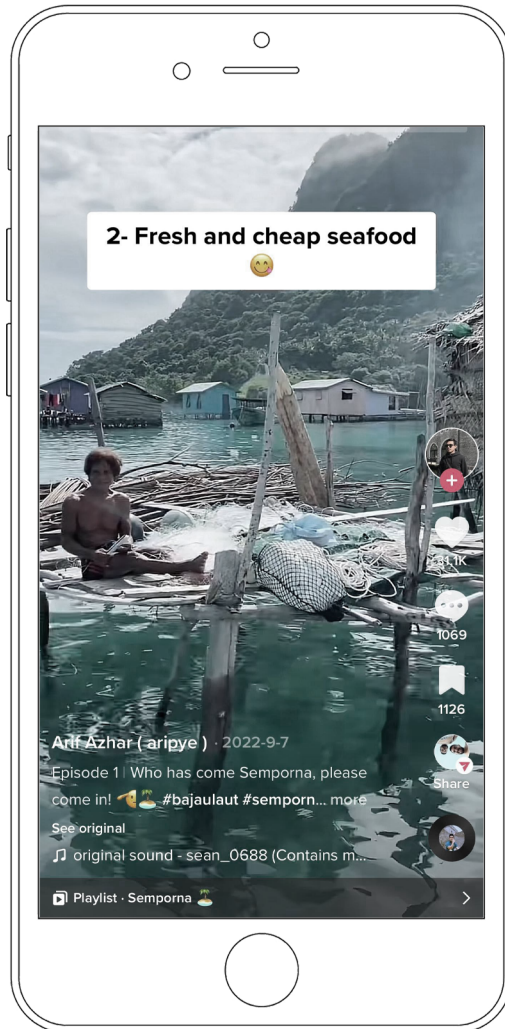
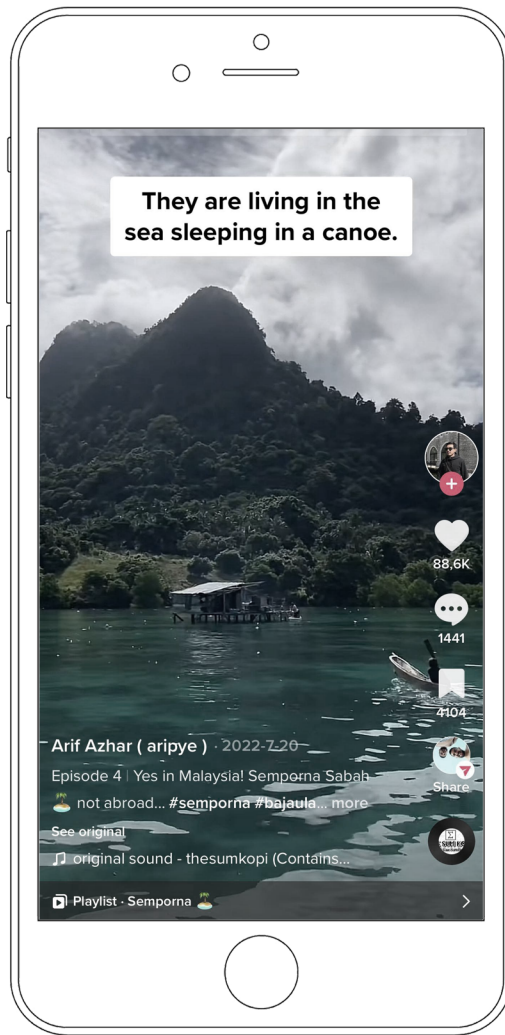
■ Resorts
 ■ Water Villages

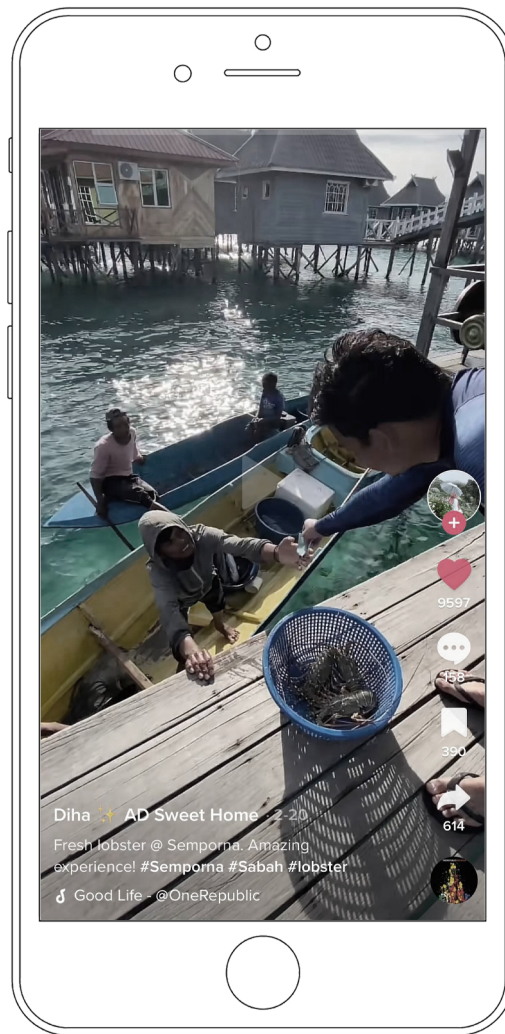
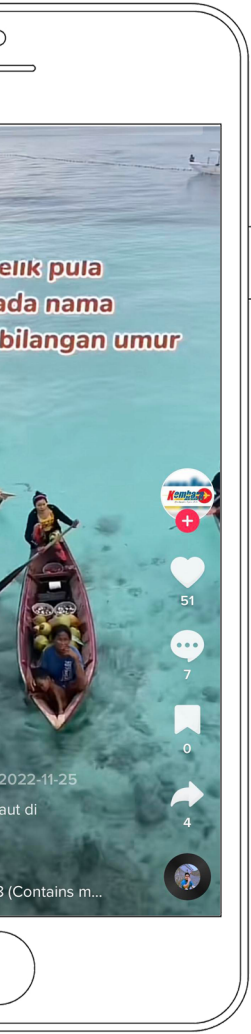
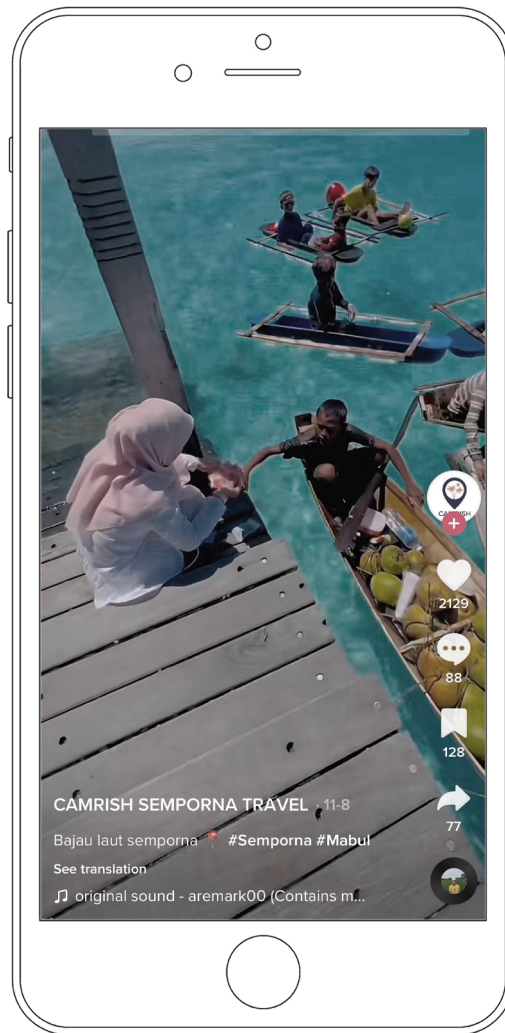
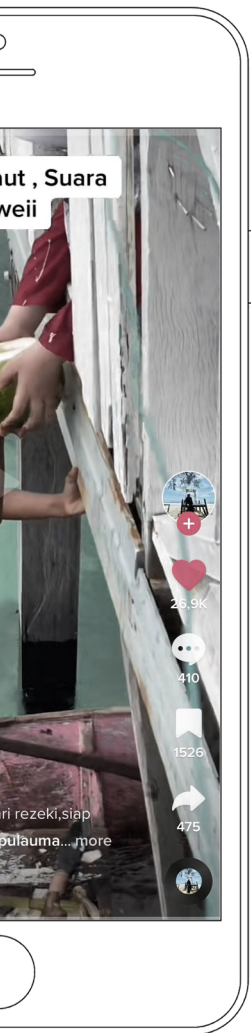
ACTIVITIES TIKTOK & TRIPADVISOR





BAJAU LAUT INVOLVEMENT IN TOURISM & TIKTOK





CONCLUSION

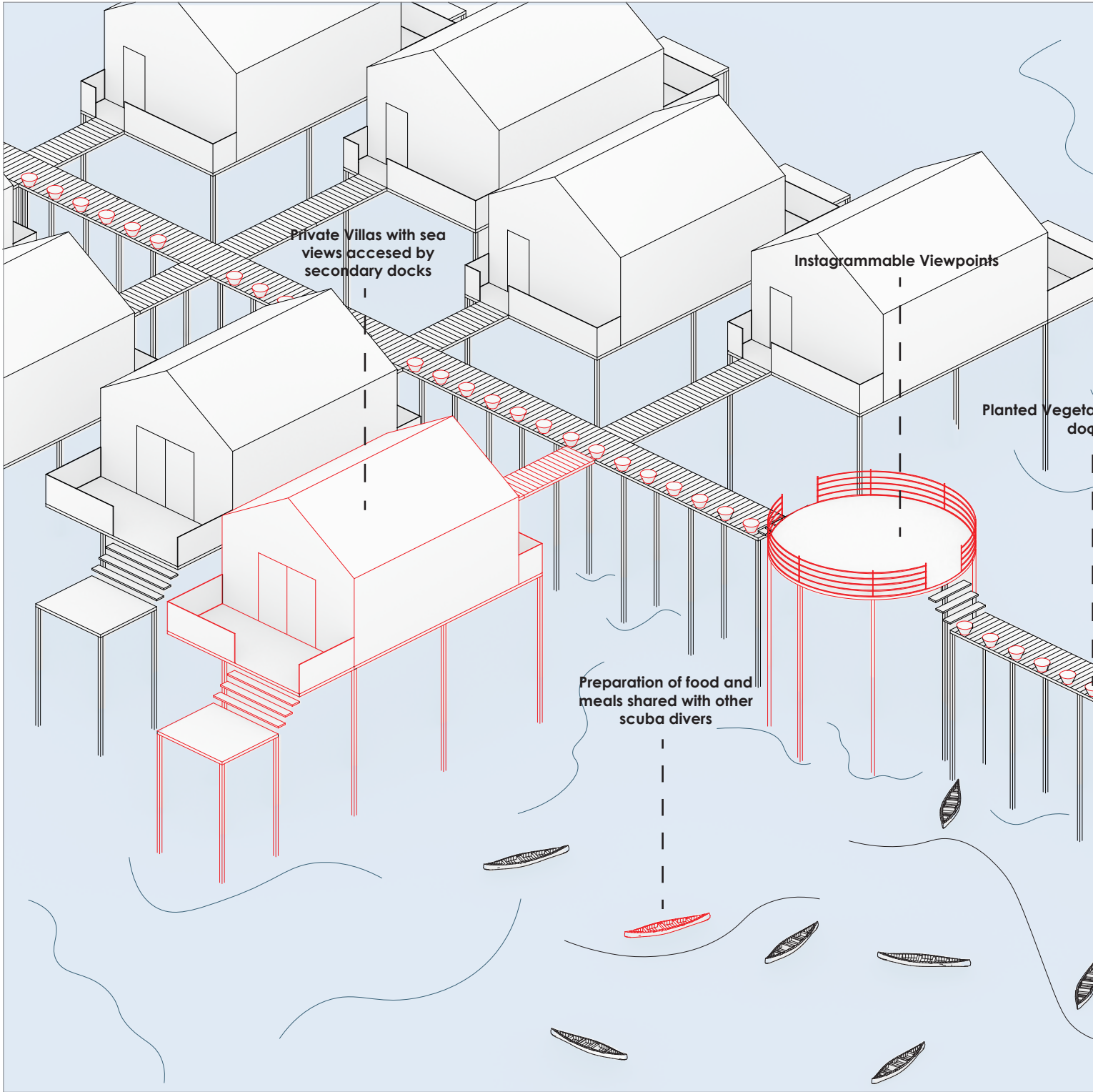
Although infrastructural developments have benefited the tourism industry in Sabah, enclave tourism gentrifies remote islands, abusing energy resources destined for local communities. Even though the local labor force is employed in hospitality, that is mostly in backbone and underpaid positions, making hospitality unattractive as a sector for locals to work in. However, employment in the tourism industry has created the potential for the employment of Bajau women, benefiting thus many households by providing extra income.

The organizational layouts found in resorts and chalets offer a variety of shaded and open outdoor spaces built on stilts. The accommodation units are connected to the resorts' public areas via dock routes of different heights with kiosks and open spaces that offer "instagrammable" views of the Sulu Archipelago.

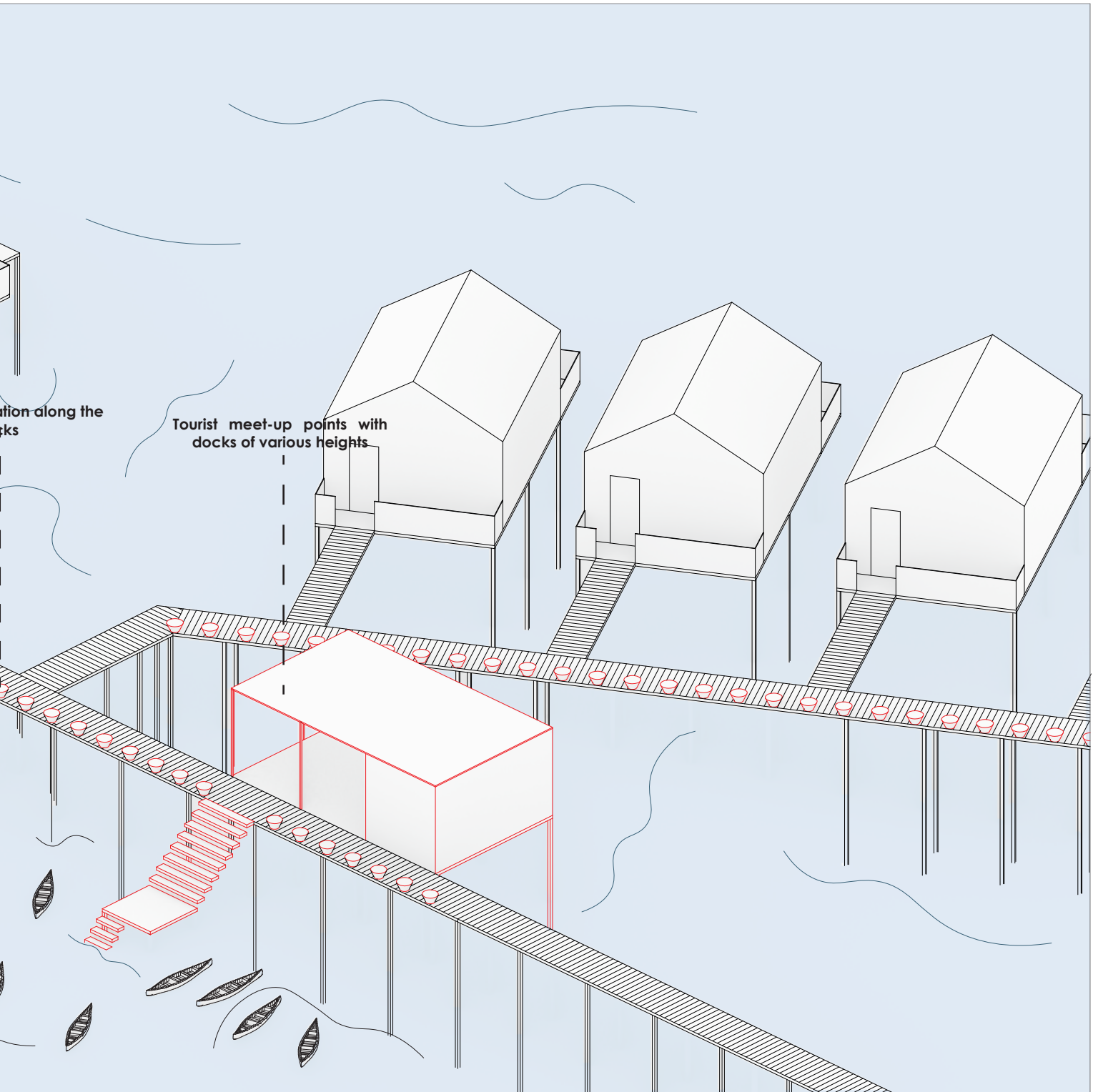
As seen through TikToks, the activities are centered around water sports, sightseeing, and diving in some of Sabah's marine national parks. Some tourist agencies provide tours in water villages where indigenous people reside. Several TikToks were studied, a few of which showed that tourist guides do not offer tours in the water villages themselves but rather let tourists take pictures and observe indigenous people from a distance. This has led to the promotion of indigenous lifestyles as a profitable spectacle for tour operators. However, activities promoted by travel agents, such as cooking and sharing food, are historically rooted in indigenous people's lifestyles and integral to indigenous heritage. Hence, such practices in water villages could attract visitors interested in ethnic tourism.

Ethnic tourism shifts the focus away from the visitors' experience to the local community and their experiences. Although community tourism can improve a community's life through infrastructure development and encourage infrastructure development and the promotion of heritage and culture, -if not sustainable- it can trigger the commodification of culture and alter the locals' behavior, resulting in the loss of traditional practices and undermining the authenticity of a community's heritage⁴³.

⁴³ Jacob Konwar, "Ethnic Tourism: Problems and Prospects for Community Development in North East India," in *Mosaic: A Collection of Research Articles* (Dibrugarh, Assam, India: Kaustubh Prakashan, 2014), pp. 11.



PRE-EXISTING



Lex Cor

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THE HOUSE GROUP

To comprehend common codes and conventions within the Bajau Laut communities, it is essential to understand the built environment that hosts them. Originally a nomadic people – and after the restrictive policies imposed by the North Borneo Chartered British Company- most Bajau Laut people became sedentarized in 1955, when they self-built the first pile-house settlements⁴⁴.

The settlements are predominantly densely constructed networks of rectangular plank houses, also known as *luma*. Residences tend to vary in size, although they mainly consist of a single rectangular space of approximately 4,5 x 6-9m. Most windows have wooden shutters, and the walls consist of wooden planks and, less often, of *kajang* matting⁴⁵. Dwellings are organized in dense cluster formations, most facing “seaward” (*kaut*)⁴⁶. The dwellings are accessible via a wooden platform built on stilts, and often, the platform (*pantan*) functions as a common access point for more than one dwelling while providing access to the sea floor with ladders⁴⁷. Usually, the outdoor platform is used for outdoor tasks such as drying fish, drying nets, carpentry projects, and cassava flour production⁴⁸.

In the case of Kampung Bangau Bangau, a house-on-stilts settlement located in Semporna and one of the few water villages that are legal settlements, a main dock walkway connects the settlement to the land. In the '70s, the village's chief's house was located in the center of the village, on the seaward edge of the main dock that connected the village with the shore, reflecting thus the importance of the headman's role to the community⁴⁹.

A house group is an essential notion in the Bajau Laut society. The people share a

common household, also known as *kami daluma* (we of one house), under the authority of a *nakura luma* (house leader) whose role is to provide advice, decide for the sake of their house group and advocate for them in public negotiations⁵⁰. House leaders were usually male. Each house group is a single commensal unit, hence a unit that prepares and consumes the main meal of the day together. In principle, married women are responsible for the preparation of food, and when more than one married woman resides in a house group, then it is expected that cooking is done collectively⁵¹.

Meals are prepared in a separate shelter designated for cooking, the *kusina*. The *kusina* is usually attached to the house but not necessarily accessible from the interior of the dwelling. In large gatherings, related women often set up extra portable hearths on the outdoor wooden platforms, and the senior woman of the house orchestrates cooking activities⁵². Although married women are responsible for the most tedious domestic tasks and cooking, young girls are usually responsible for the maintenance of the house and tasks like collecting the family's bedding and storing the sleeping mats along the walls in the morning, converting the house into a shared space where relatives and visitors are entertained⁵³.

44 Clifford Sather, in *The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History, and Fate in a Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 65.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 146

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 135.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 137.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 147.

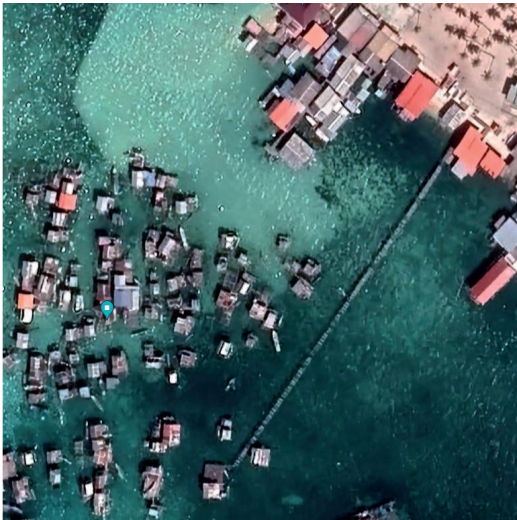
49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

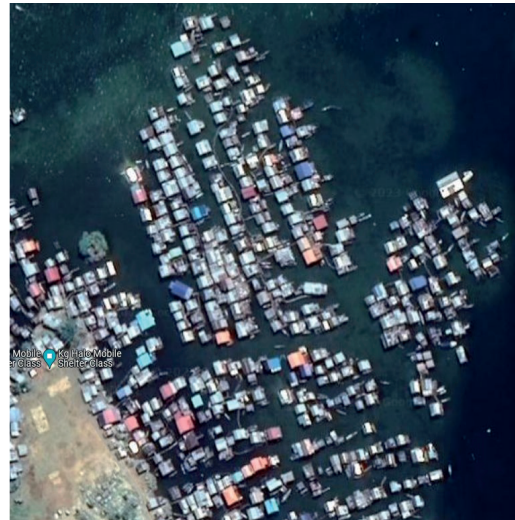
51 *Ibid.*, pp. 145.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 146.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 147.



KAMPUNG OMADAL



KAMPUNG HALO



KAMPUNG HAMPALAN



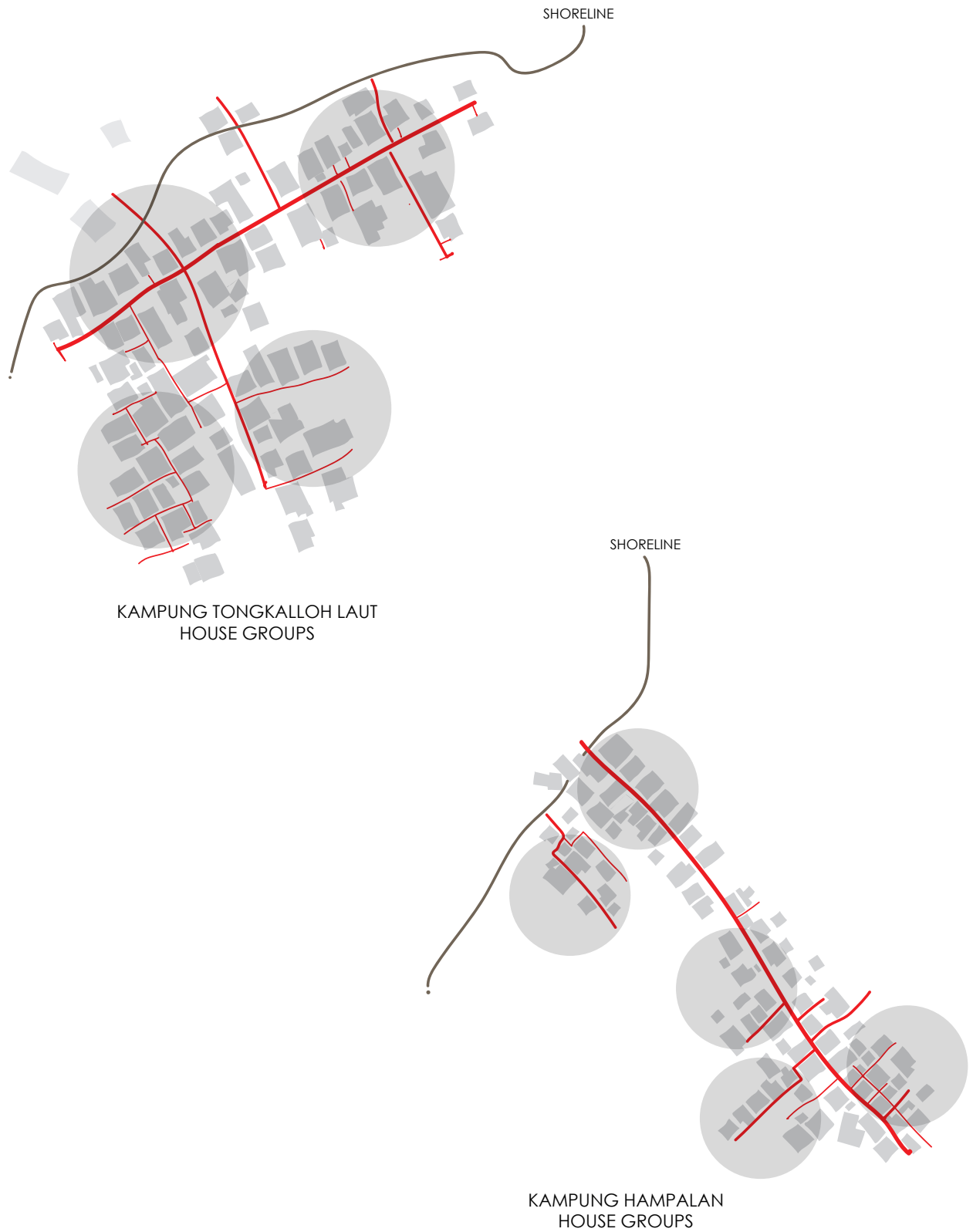
KAMPUNG TONGKALOH LAUT



KAMPUNG BANGAU-BANGAU



KAMPUNG BERJASA



DIAGRAMS CREATED BY THE AUTHOR

Gender, Conventions, Occupations

In 1965, over 60% of the village, including women and children, fished daily. A decade later, and with more job opportunities becoming available in the city of Semporna and other agricultural estates, less than half of the community engaged in full-time fishing, while the primary source of income for the other half was mainly wage employment, salaries, and small-scale commerce⁵⁴. The establishment of timber camps on the island's interior resulted in increased demand for fresh fish, and fishermen were able to respond to the demands with outboard boat engines. However, as the need for dried fish decreased and the Bajau Laut became mostly sedentarized, fishermen became less reliant on the labor of women and children, shifting family fishing crews to short-term all-male units⁵⁵.

By 1980, villagers were employed in various occupations, including permanent skilled labor, daily paid manual labor, and clerical and supervisory positions. Activities such as commerce and boat construction constituted only a fraction of the occupations that were still related to traditional practices. As a result of pursuing professions unrelated to fishing, conventional relations of sustenance, such as food sharing, were cut loose since many house groups could not respond with gifts or fish in return anymore⁵⁶.

Although fishing was a predominantly male responsibility, food sharing has been the responsibility of the women of the different house groups, and these social obligations needed to be met before engaging in any commercial activities⁵⁷. Food sharing is a practice that was frequently done in order to ensure the subsistence of every house group by providing an adequate supply of fish for every family's consumption⁵⁸. Therefore, each family was implicitly connected

by a network of distributive responsibilities. Nevertheless, women also held an active role in providing extra income for their families by working as market traders and selling goods such as fresh or dried fish, sea cucumbers, cassava flour, and handcrafted items, while others held supervisory positions in dried fish markets and collecting commission from fishermen that would supply them with dried fish for sale⁵⁹.

It is evident that, in principle, a male's primary concerns are with administrative tasks such as managing income and serving the interests of their immediate family members. Hence, the network of social relations most essential to males extends outside the family unit and comprises other fellow fishermen, work partners, and village supporters⁶⁰. On the contrary, a female's concerns are centered around the well-being of their house group and the house group cluster in which they reside. They maintain social and work relations with fellow women of neighboring house groups. Everyday collaboration and food sharing between females establish the principal points of creating networks of interconnected house groups and clusters⁶¹.

Below, observational drawings of how such conventions are depicted in the spatial environments the communities inhabit can be found.

54 Ibid., pp. 79.

55 Ibid., pp. 80.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., pp. 182.

58 Ibid., pp. 183.

59 Ibid., pp. 81.

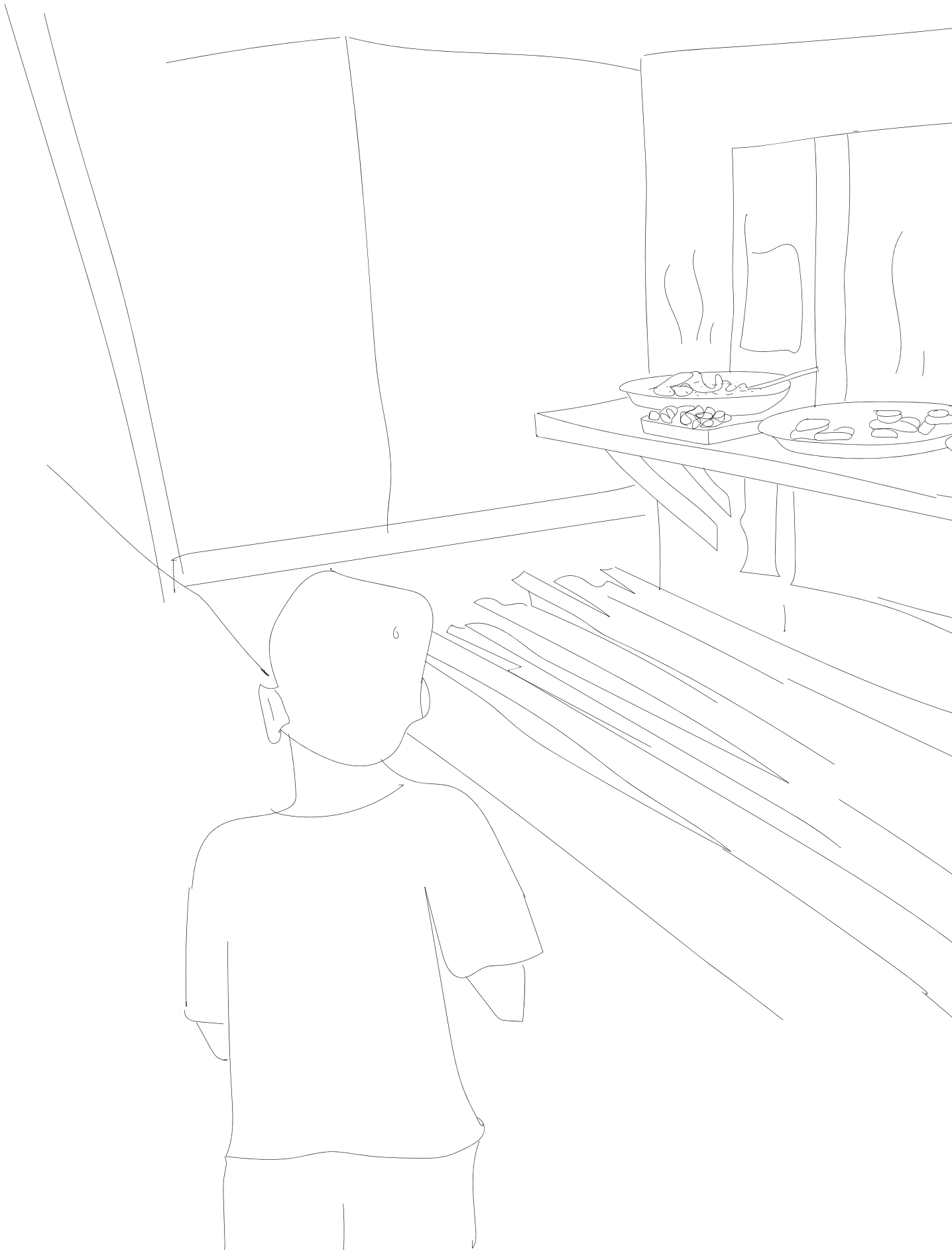
60 Ibid., pp. 176.

61 Ibid., pp. 177.





COMMERCIAL DOCKS
HAVE AN ABUNDANCE
OF MARKET STALLS
WHICH SELL ALL KINDS OF
GOODS INCLUDING FRESH
PRODUCE, CLOTHES AND
ELECTRIC APPLIANCES.
ALTHOUGH OUTDOOR,
COMMERCIAL DOCKS ARE
USUALLY SHADED.

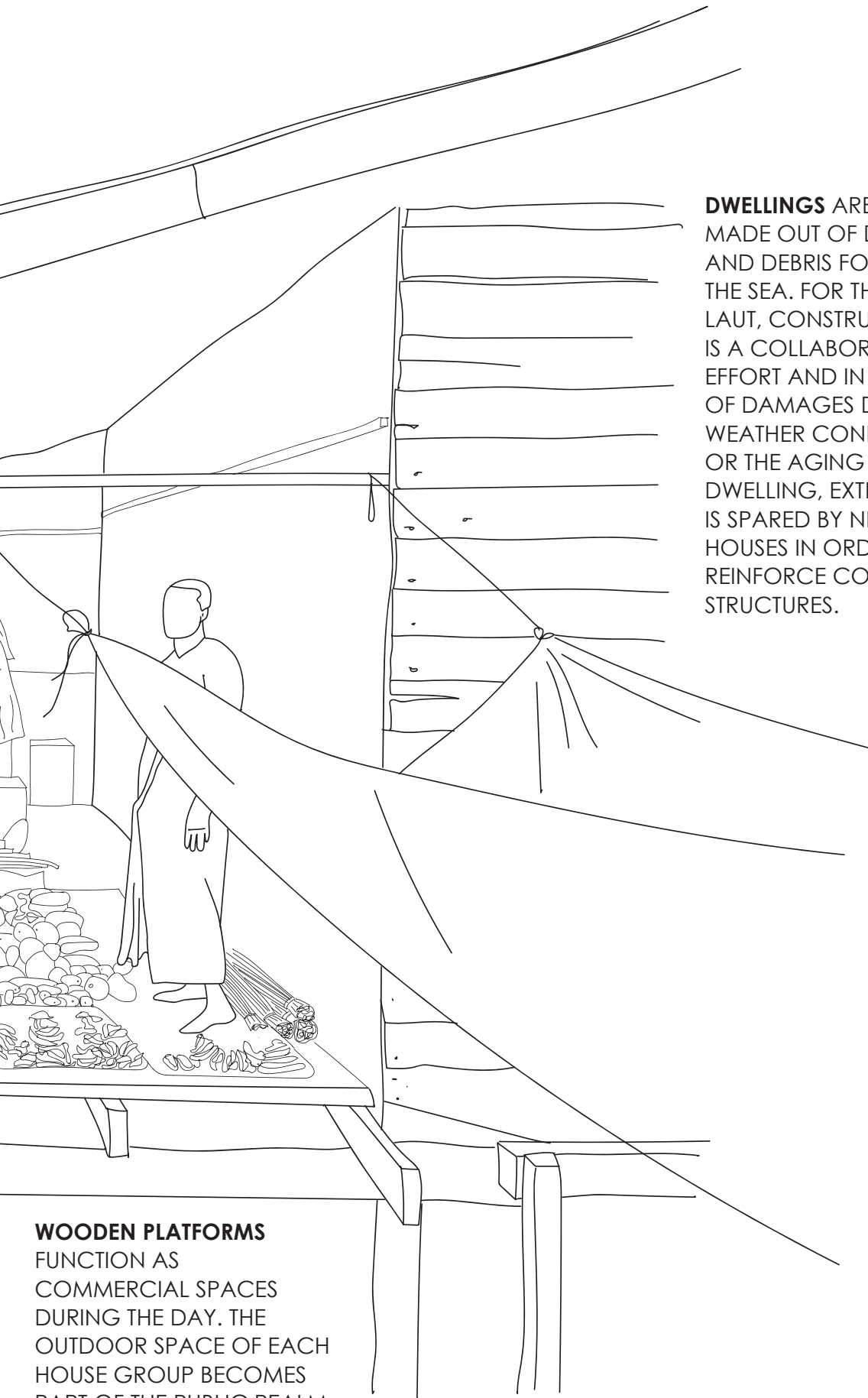




FOOD SHARING IS A TRADITIONAL PRACTICE THAT IS GRADUALLY DISAPPEARING DUE TO THE PROFITABILITY OF SELLING HOMEMADE FOOD IN MARKET STALLS. THIS TYPICAL TYPOLOGY OF A MARKET STALL ACTIVATES THE VILLAGE'S PUBLIC SPACE (AKA THE DOCKS)

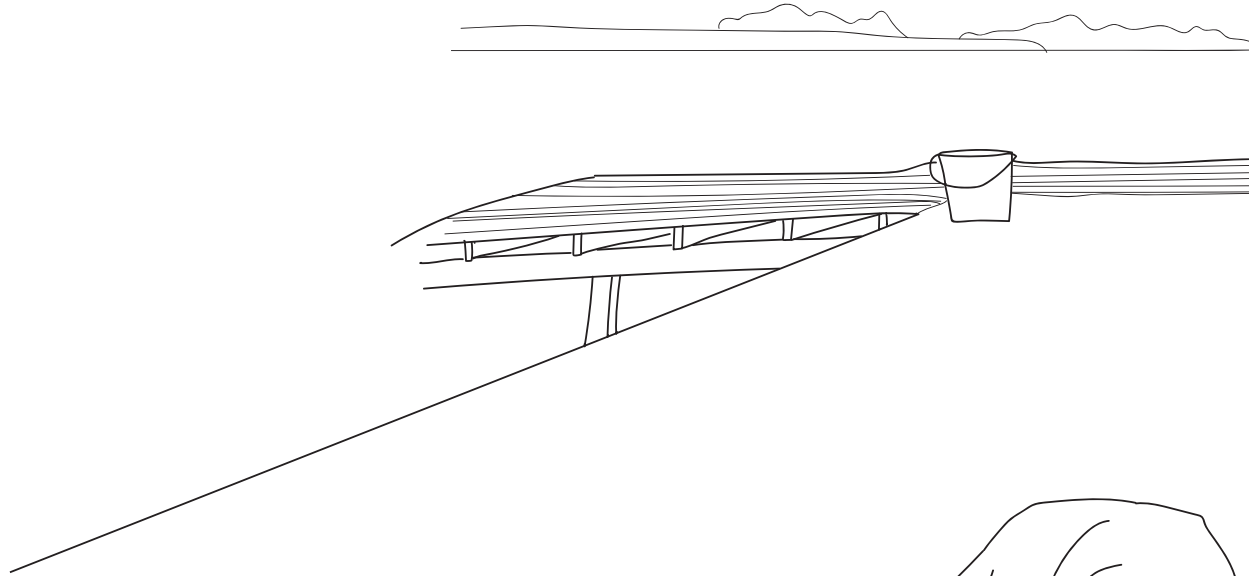


DRYING FISH IS USUALLY TAKING PLACE IN NON-DESIGNATED AREAS SUCH AS THE OUTDOOR PLATFORMS OF VARIOUS HOUSE GROUPS, CREATING A DEMARKATION BETWEEN THE DOCK'S PUBLIC SPACE AND A PROPERTY'S PRIVATE SPACE

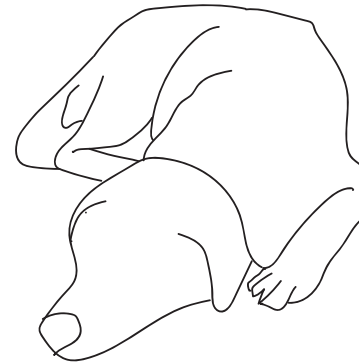


DWELLINGS ARE USUALLY MADE OUT OF DRIFTWOOD AND DEBRIS FOUND IN THE SEA. FOR THE BAJAU LAUT, CONSTRUCTION IS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT AND IN CASE OF DAMAGES DUE TO WEATHER CONDITIONS OR THE AGING OF A DWELLING, EXTRA MATERIAL IS SPARED BY NEIGHBORING HOUSES IN ORDER TO REINFORCE COMPROMISED STRUCTURES.

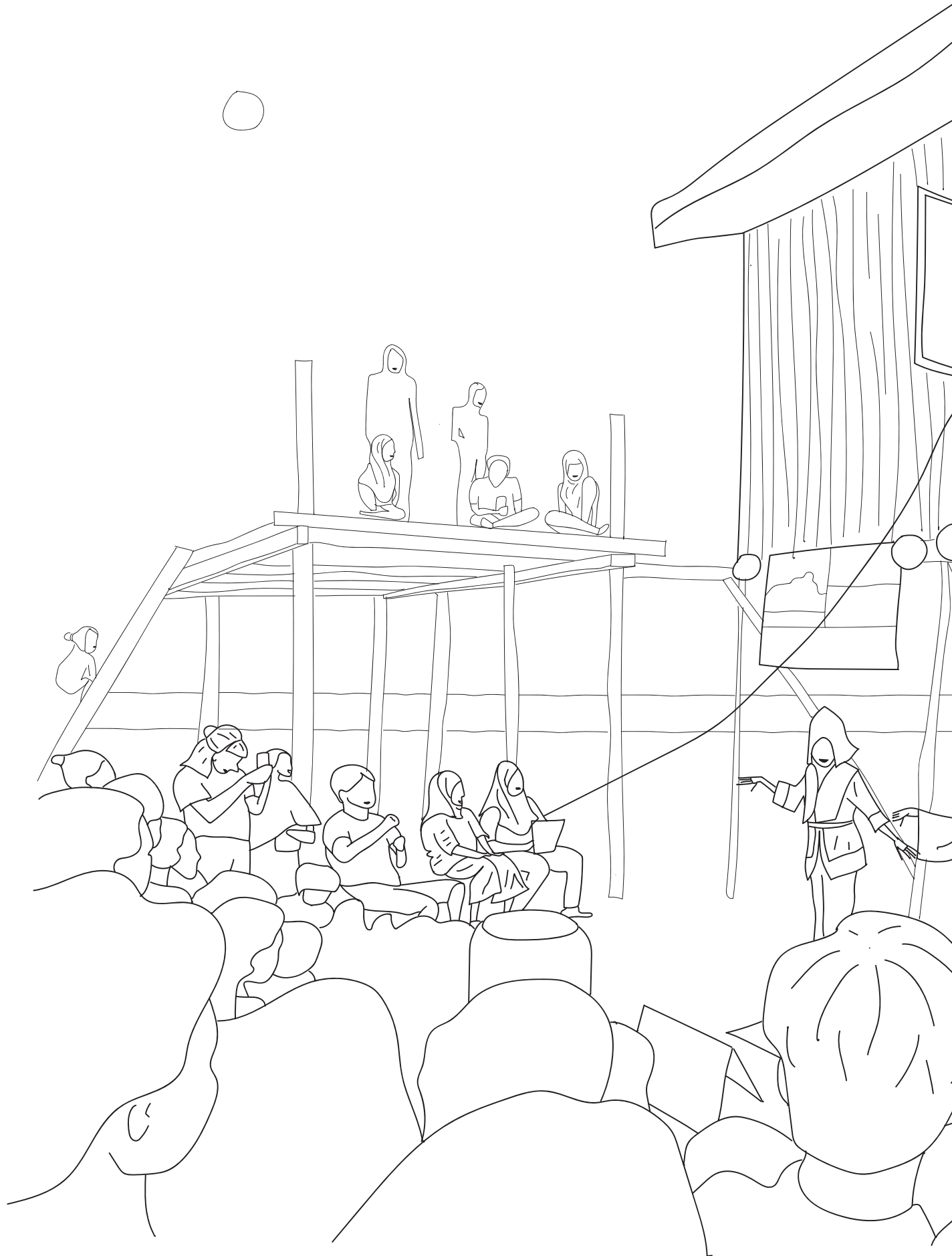
WOODEN PLATFORMS FUNCTION AS COMMERCIAL SPACES DURING THE DAY. THE OUTDOOR SPACE OF EACH HOUSE GROUP BECOMES PART OF THE PUBLIC REALM.



"SEAWARD" DOCKS
FUNCTION AS ACCESS
POINTS TO THE WATER. THEIR
FUNCTION AS MEETING
POINTS IS HIGHLIGHTED BY
THE EXISTENCE OF SELF-BUILT
SHADED AREAS.

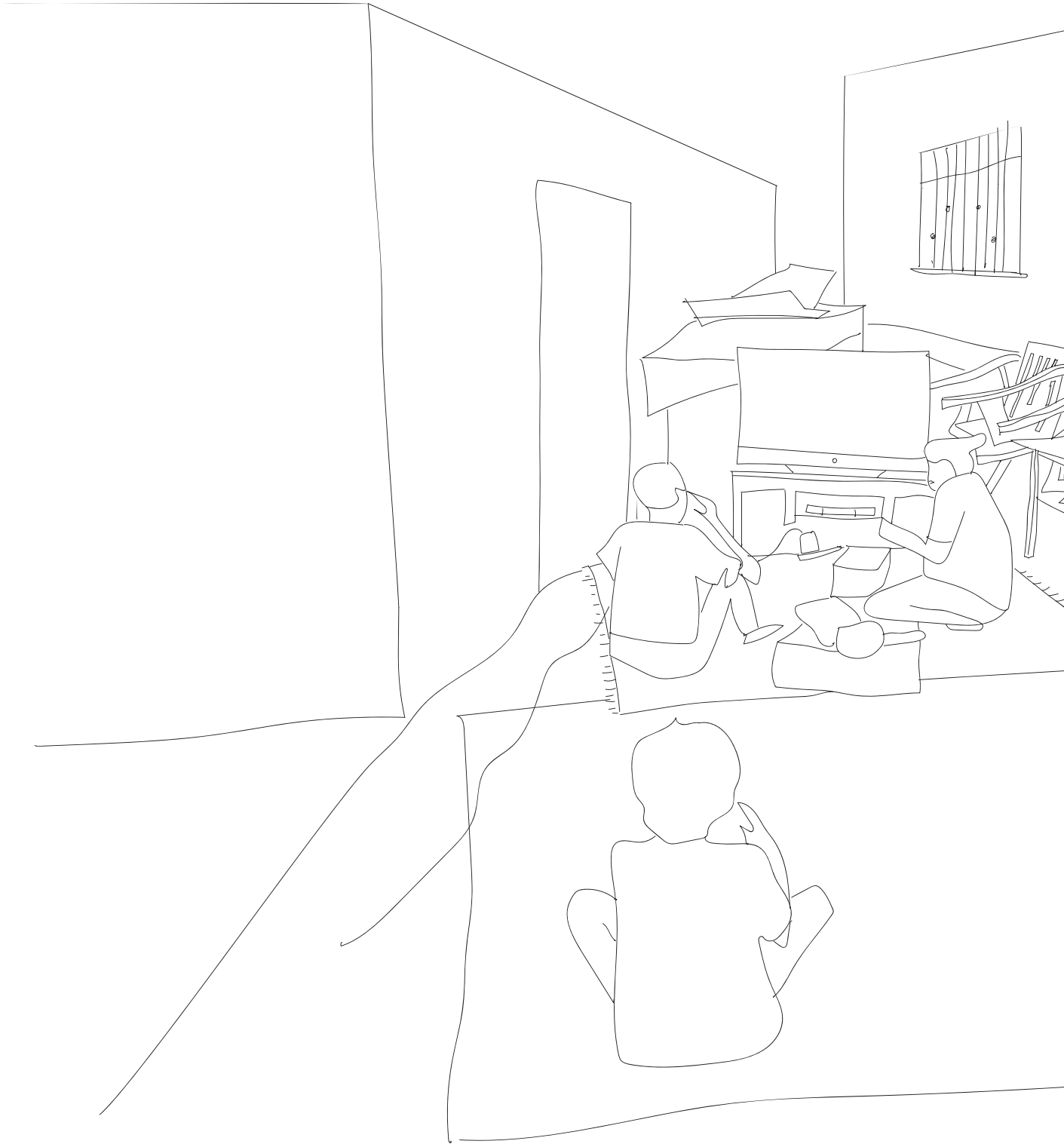


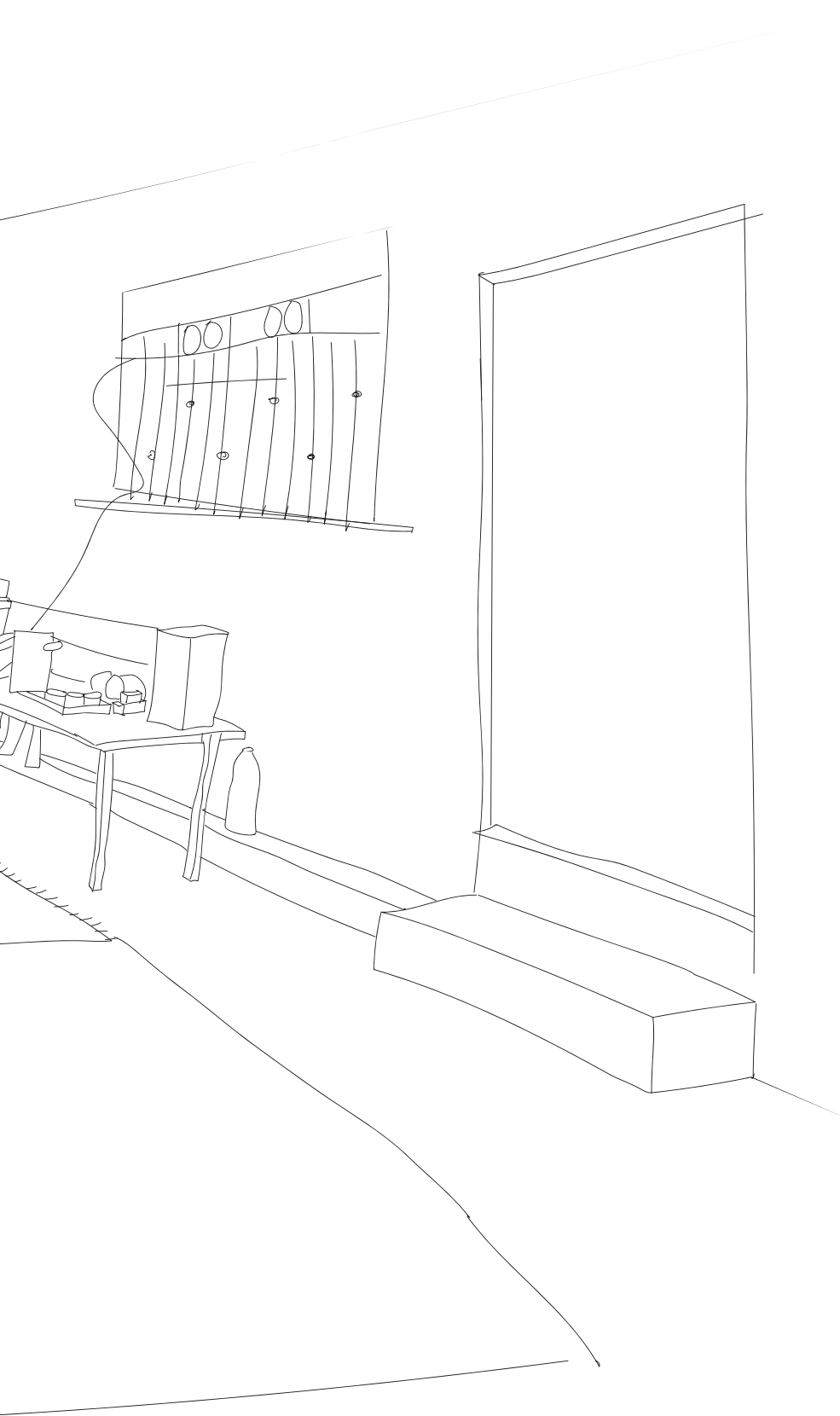




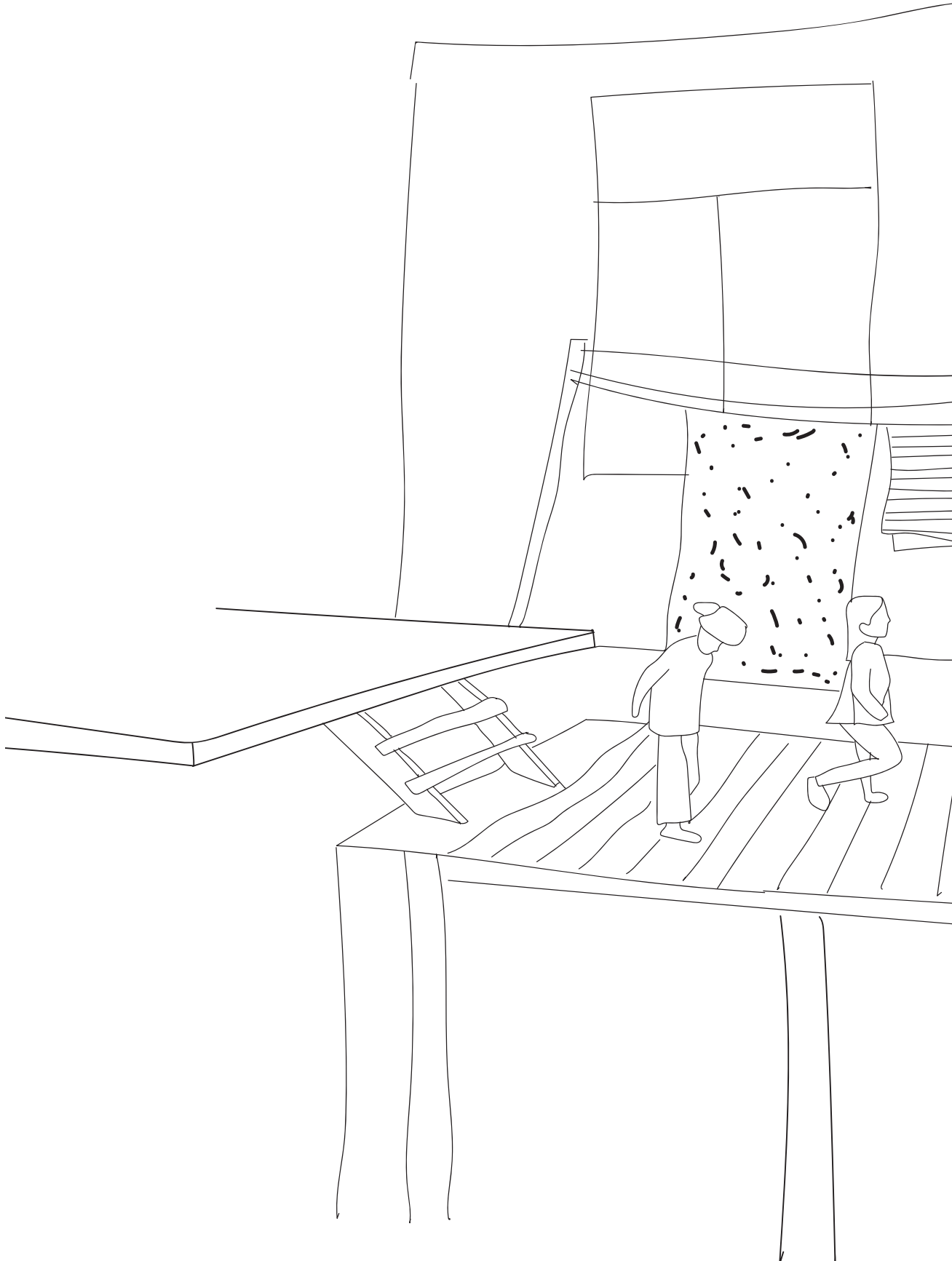


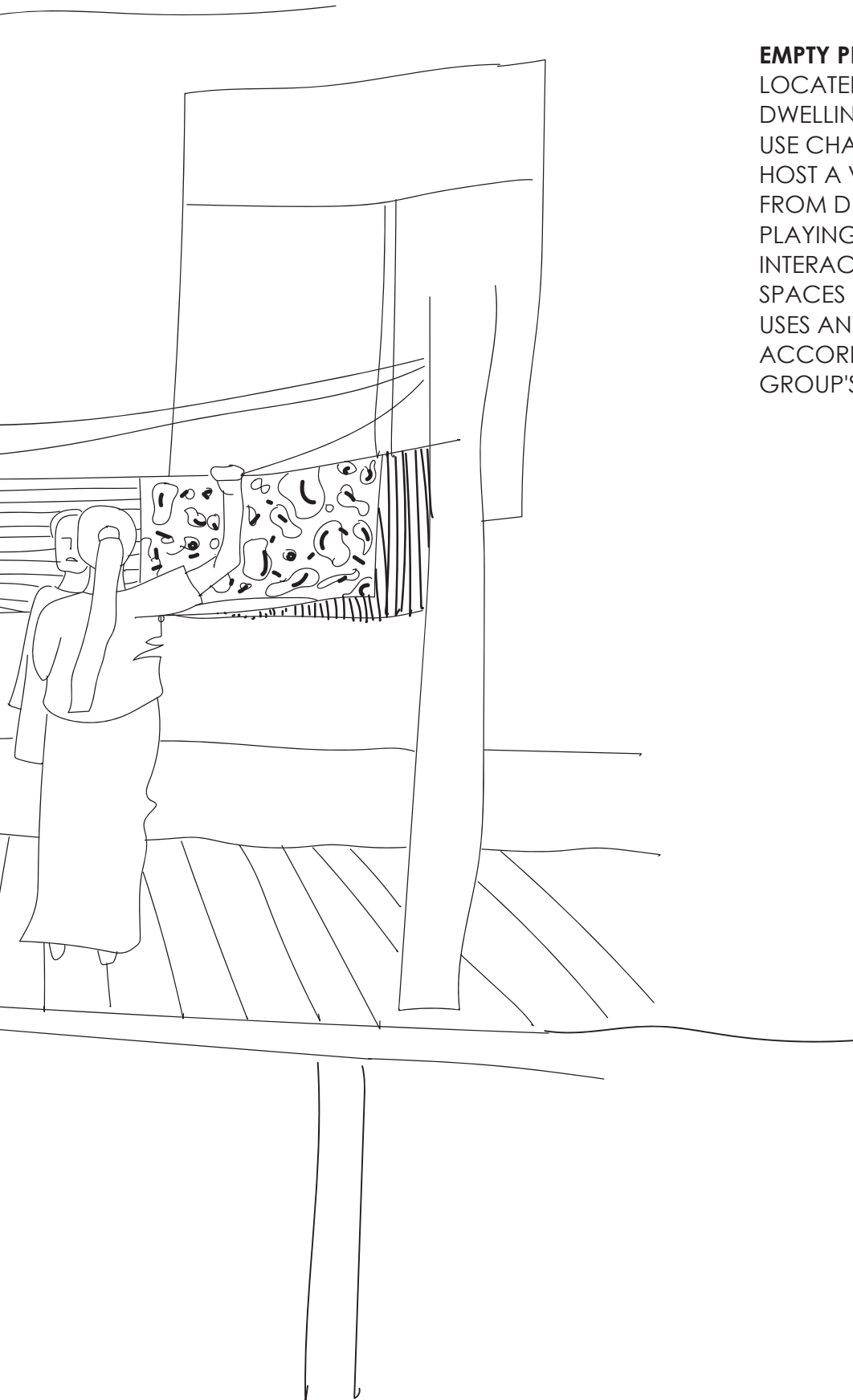
WATCHING TOWERS ARE ELEVATED PLATFORMS FOUND OUTDOORS. THESE PLATFORMS FUNCTION AS SITTING AREAS THAT OFFER DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS OF OUTDOOR SPACES AND THE SEA. WATCHING TOWERS ARE USUALLY ADJACENT TO OUTDOOR SPACES WHERE WEDDING CEREMONIES AND CELEBRATIONS TAKE PLACE





LIMINAL SPACES ARE SPACES FOUND BETWEEN DWELLINGS AND ARE ACCESSIBLE BY THE MAIN DOCKS. LIMINAL SPACES ARE UTILIZED BY MORE THAN ONE DWELLING WHOSE MAIN ENTRANCES ARE LOCATED ON THE FASCADES FACING THESE LEFTOVER SPACES. APART FROM FUNCTIONING AS STORAGE SPACE, USERS APPROPRIATE LIMINAL SPACES BY TRANSFORMING THEM INTO OUTDOOR LIVING ROOMS DURING HOT SUMMER DAYS





EMPTY PLATFORMS

LOCATED NEXT TO DWELLINGS HAVE A MULTI-USE CHARACTER SINCE THEY HOST A VARIETY OF USES; FROM DRYING CLOTHES TO PLAYING AND INFORMAL INTERACTIONS, THESE SPACES HOST TEMPORAL USES AND ARE CUSTOMIZED ACCORDING TO THE HOUSE GROUP'S NEEDS





RAINWATER TANKS

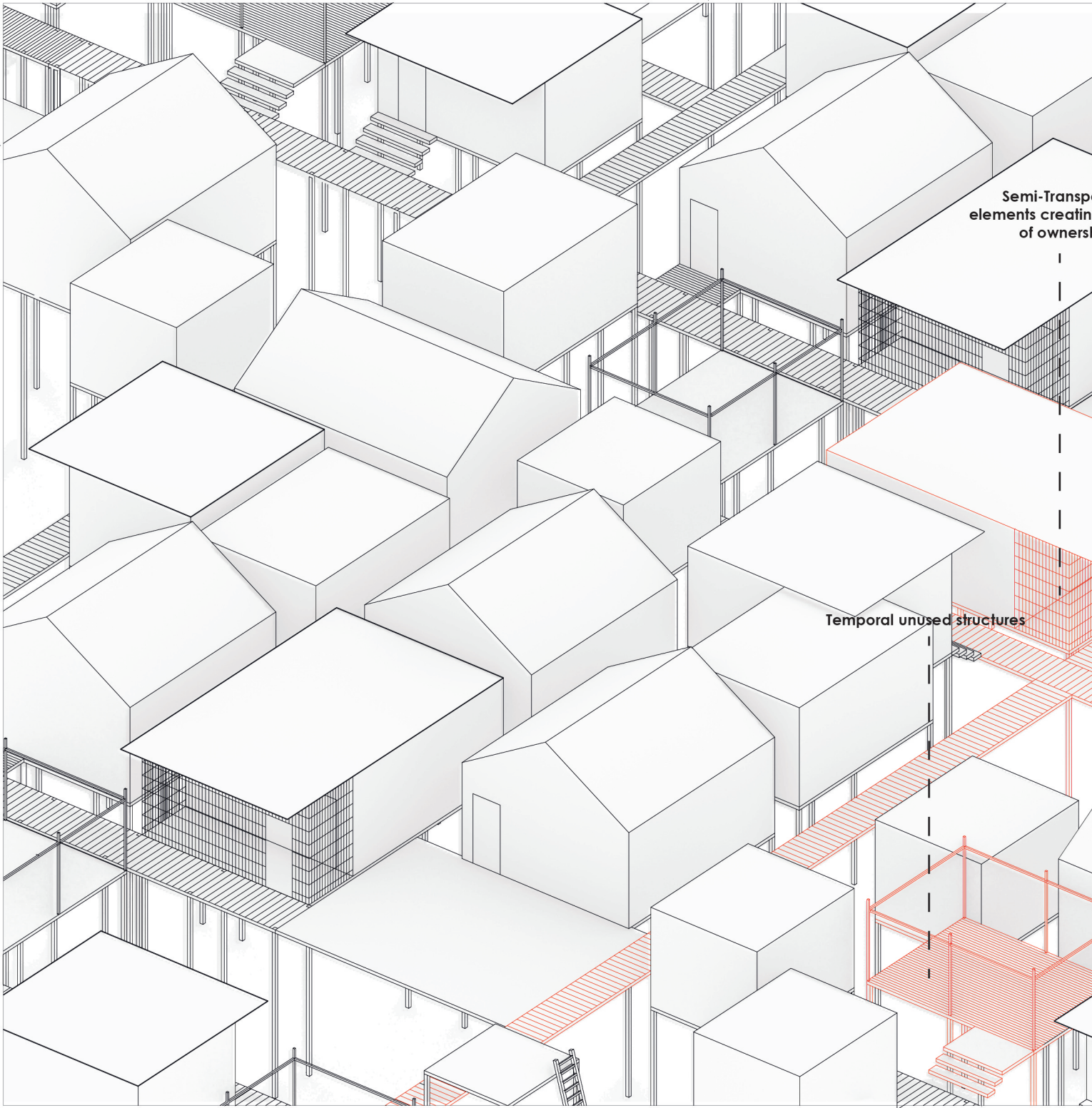
ARE USED TO COLLECT RAINWATER FOR DOMESTIC USE. THE LIMITED ACCESS TO FRESHWATER AND THE FREQUENT WATER SUPPLY DISRUPTIONS, MAKES RAINWATER TANKS INTEGRAL TO COMBATING WATER SCARCITY

CONCLUSION

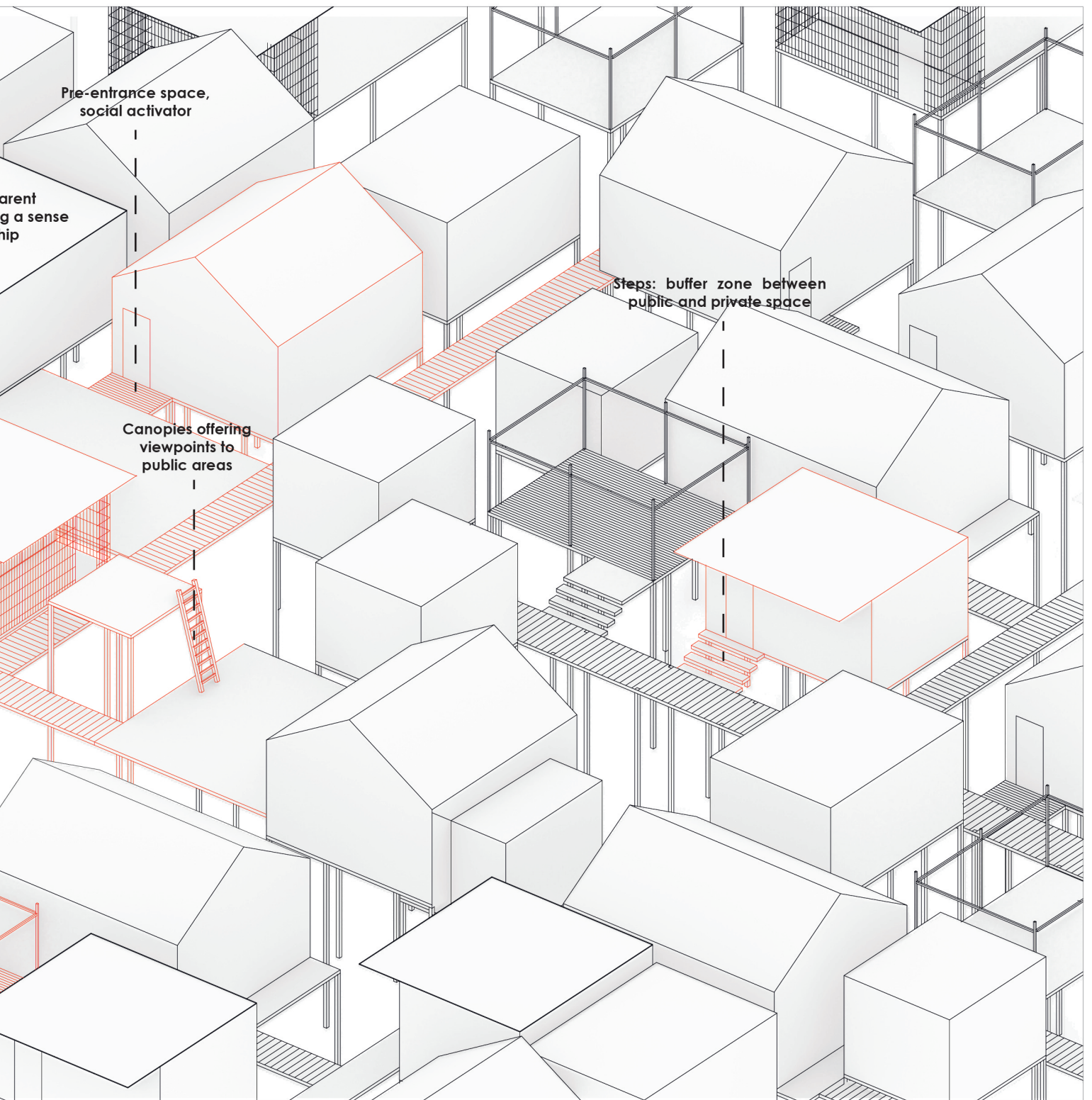
Commercial activities activate the public realm, which unravels in the docks. The constant flow of users in the markets, creates a hierarchy between the docks in terms of movement. Therefore, commercial docks serve as passages and docks connecting house clusters, and docks providing access to individual dwellings are potentially more likely to host informal encounters.

Moving to a “neighborhood” scale, the tradition of creating house clusters has survived until today. Values such as reciprocal acts of sharing, alliance, mutual support, and collaboration long rooted in Bajau Laut societies are evident typologically with the existence of house clusters.

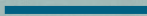
The existence of outdoor wooden platforms for each dwelling and open wooden platforms that can be used collectively indicates the need for a variety of open spaces that can accommodate the needs of the dwelling or the house cluster, respectively. Additionally, leftover spaces found in between dwellings are activated as a vessel of family life and games, showcasing the importance of spending time outdoors for the community, while indoor spaces only serve the purpose of sheltering essential functions such as the preparation of meals and sleep.



PRE-EXISTING VILL



Praxis Co



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EDUCATION: STATUS QUO

In Malaysia, access to formal education provided by Malaysia's national system is restricted for refugees, immigrants, and undocumented and stateless children. Luckily, various diverse Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs) founded by individuals, communities, foundations, NGOs, and faith-based groups have managed to combat illiteracy among children under informal educational premises. The term alternative education refers to educational programs that are informally catered outside of national education and are designated to fill the education gap for children not eligible for enrolling in the formal national system⁶². Educational initiatives as such might resemble formal education by utilizing pedagogical tools and methodologies typically used in legal education. However, the teaching staff is usually uncertified and untrained by the Ministry of Education, and the government does not provide learning certificates to the children that have received education from Alternative Learning Centers.

The reason why these Learning Programmes are considered alternative is that, in principle, they take place in spaces whose characteristics do not define educational buildings and because they ensure that children coming from communities that are often marginalized, either geographically or due to their religious beliefs, ethnic background, or culture, are provided with basic literacy skills, which is a fundamental human right⁶³. Although ALCs are not allowed to use the national curriculum followed by traditional Malaysian schools⁶⁴, most alternative schools borrow traditional pedagogies and modify their taught curriculum depending on the skills and knowledge of the volunteer teachers. Therefore, teachers have the freedom to create a more contextualized curriculum that considers the traditions and peculiarities of their students' ethnic

backgrounds that aims to nurture and recognize the importance of alternative lifestyles.

In Sabah, there are three major types of ALCs. The first category is ALCs founded by local and international NGOs. These alternative schools are accommodated in rented spaces or mobile teaching units and provide education to immigrant, stateless, or children living in plantations and remote areas⁶⁵. The second category consists of alternative schools supported by the Philippines and Indonesian governments that cater to the children of legal or illegal Philippine and Indonesian migrant workers and welcome students for a maximum of three days per week. The third category is alternative schools founded by employer companies and religious parties. Usually, these schools are located within palm oil company grounds or in private homes. The education provided is directly related to religion or aims to equip the students with skills that will later allow them to work in one of the sponsoring companies⁶⁶.

An open-ended interview was conducted to comprehend better the nature of alternative education that is specifically provided to Bajau Laut children. The interviewee, Wan Shakila Adiola Wan Azmi, is one of the founding members of the NGO organization named "Borneo Komrad" and the manager of "Sekolah Alternatif", Borneo Komrad's initiative through which four Alternative Learning Centers around Sabah have been established since 2015⁶⁷. Apart from teaching in Sekolah Alternatif's school in Kampung Bangau Bangau, Semporna, Shakila is also a resident of the water village where the school is located. Accompanied by hand drawings, the position and main goals of Alternative Learning Centers for the education of Bajau children are presented as narratives informed by the original interview (see Appendix).

62 UNICEF, "Mapping Alternative Learning Approaches, Programmes and Stakeholders in Malaysia" (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: UNICEF, 2015), pp. 8.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 9.

64 Tharani Loganathan et al., "Undocumented: An Examination of Legal Identity and Education Provision for Children in Malaysia," *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 2 (February 2022): pp. 14, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0263404.

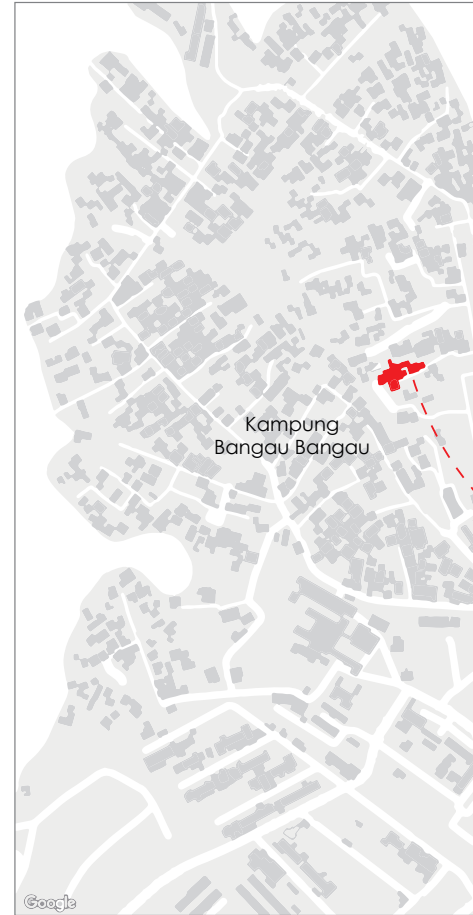
65 UNICEF, *Children Out of School: Malaysia, The Sabah Context* (Putrajaya, Malaysia: United Nations Children's Fund, 2019), pp. 54.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 55

67 "Sekolah Alternatif," Sekolah Alternatif - Pendidikan Alat Perubahan Bangsa!, May 17, 2022, <https://borneokomrad.com/sekolah-alternatif/>.



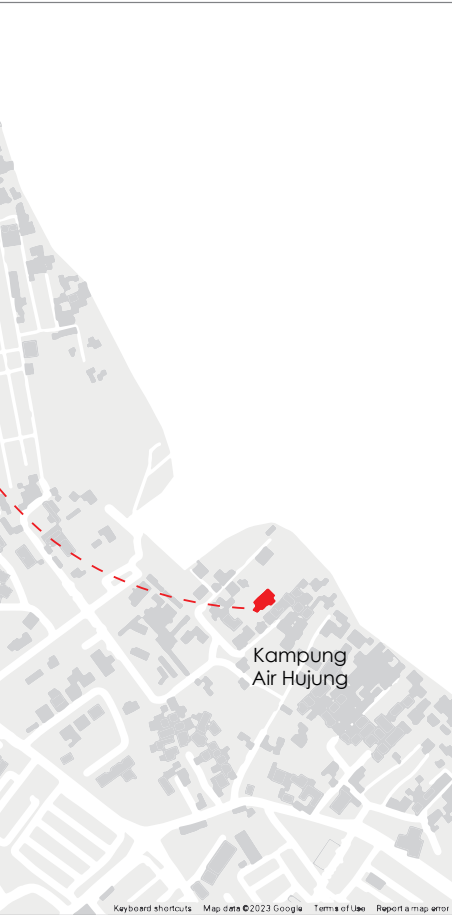
2017



20

DIAGRAMS CREAT

INITIALLY, when the organization was founded in 2017, the volunteers sought a space that could accommodate the school in Kampung Bangau Bangau. Because of the dense morphology of the water village, finding an empty dwelling was challenging. In 2018, Borneo Komrad managed to rent a second space to host the increasing number of students, which was located in Kampung Air Hujung. This water village is in proximity to Kampung Bangau Bangau. In 2021, Borneo Komrad found a second space in Kampung Bangau Bangau for Sekolah Alternatif Semporna, which has been extremely helpful considering that the number of students has increased from 20 to 70 students attending classes in the water village.



18

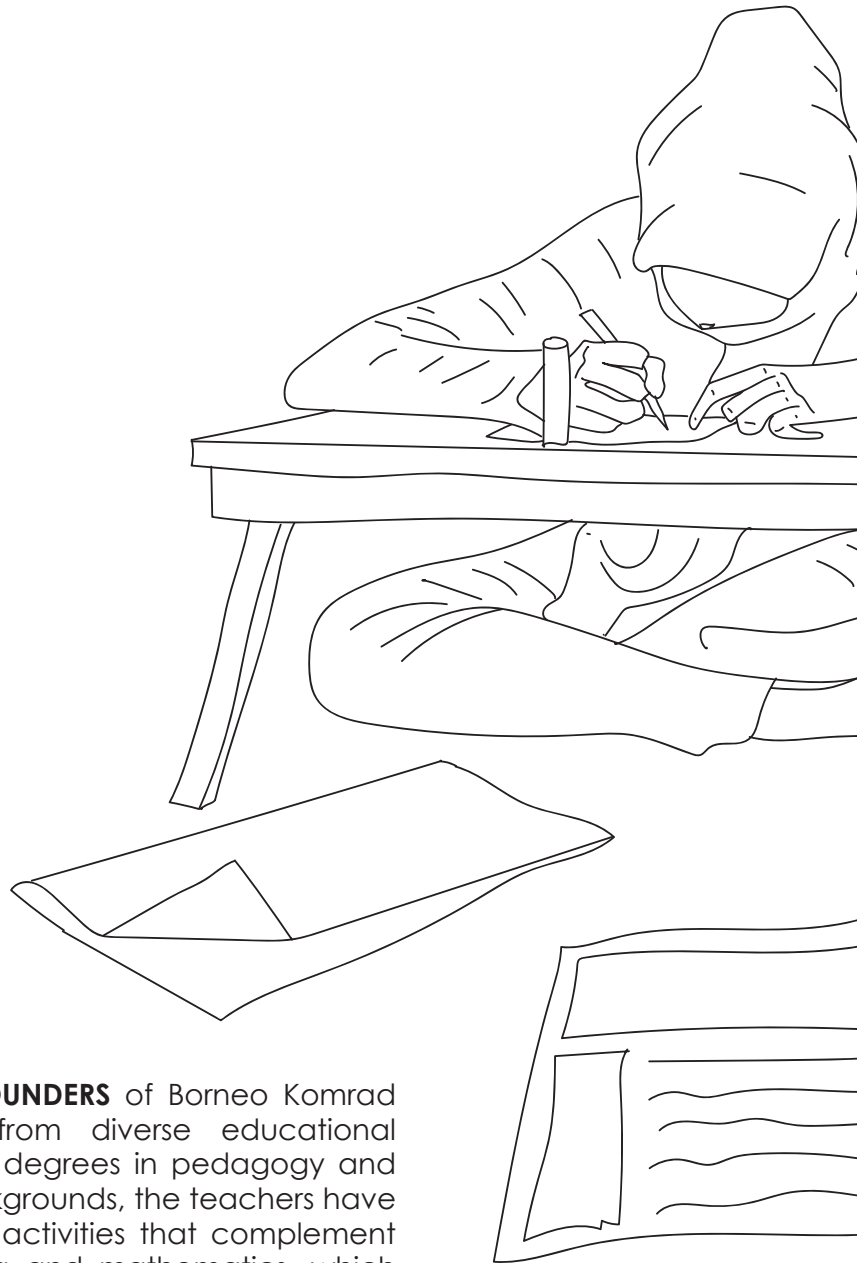
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2021

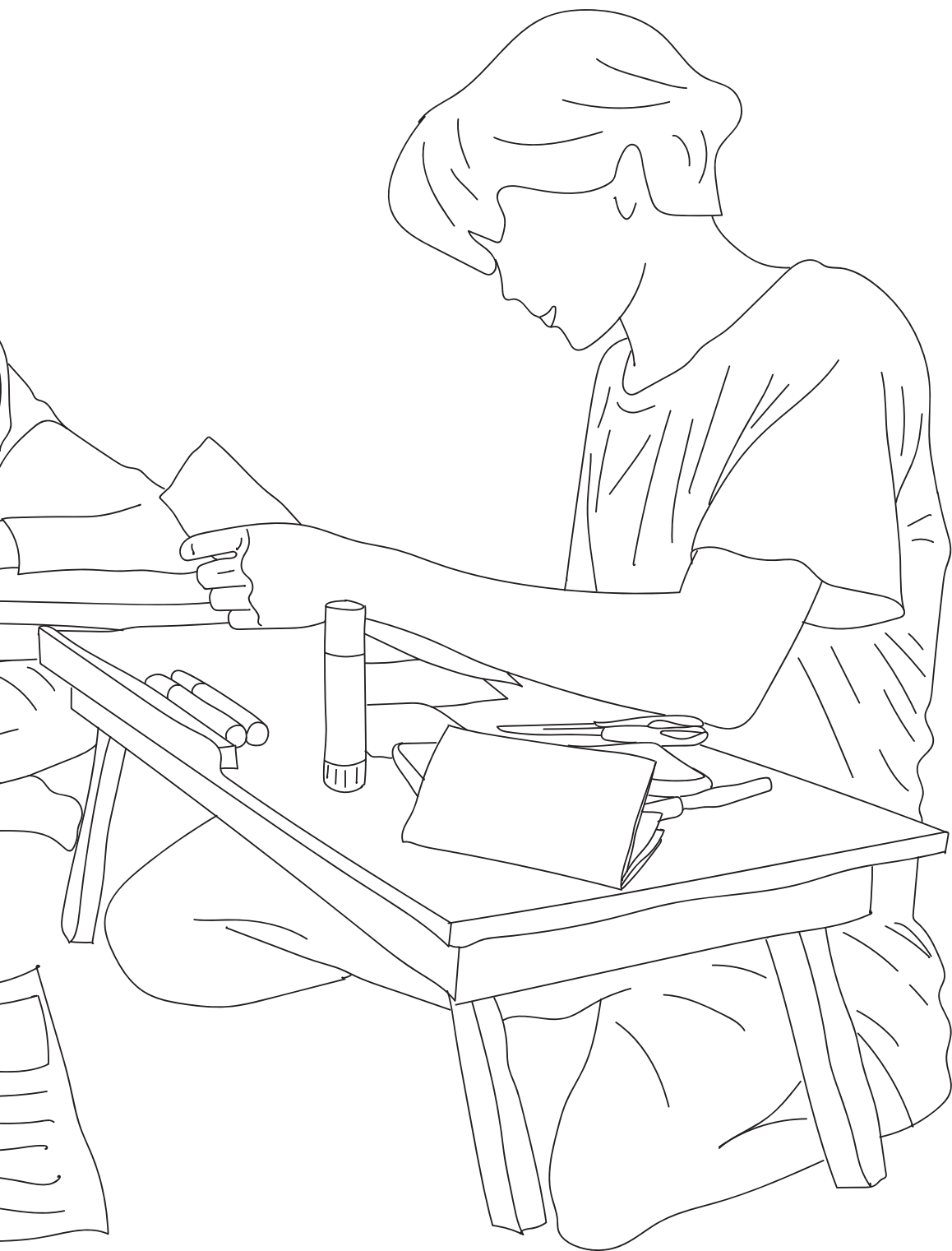


IN COLLABORATION WITH local environmental NGOs such as Reef Check Malaysia and Green Semporna, -as an official partner- Sekolah Alternative participates in initiatives that raise awareness regarding the importance of the conservation of natural resources. Via the annually organized Sabah Community Leadership Camp, all village leaders of several water villages, volunteers and students gather to discuss the importance of waste management and how waste is managed in the islands and is exported to land. Sekolah Alternatif sends several students to learn about leadership and the environment every year.





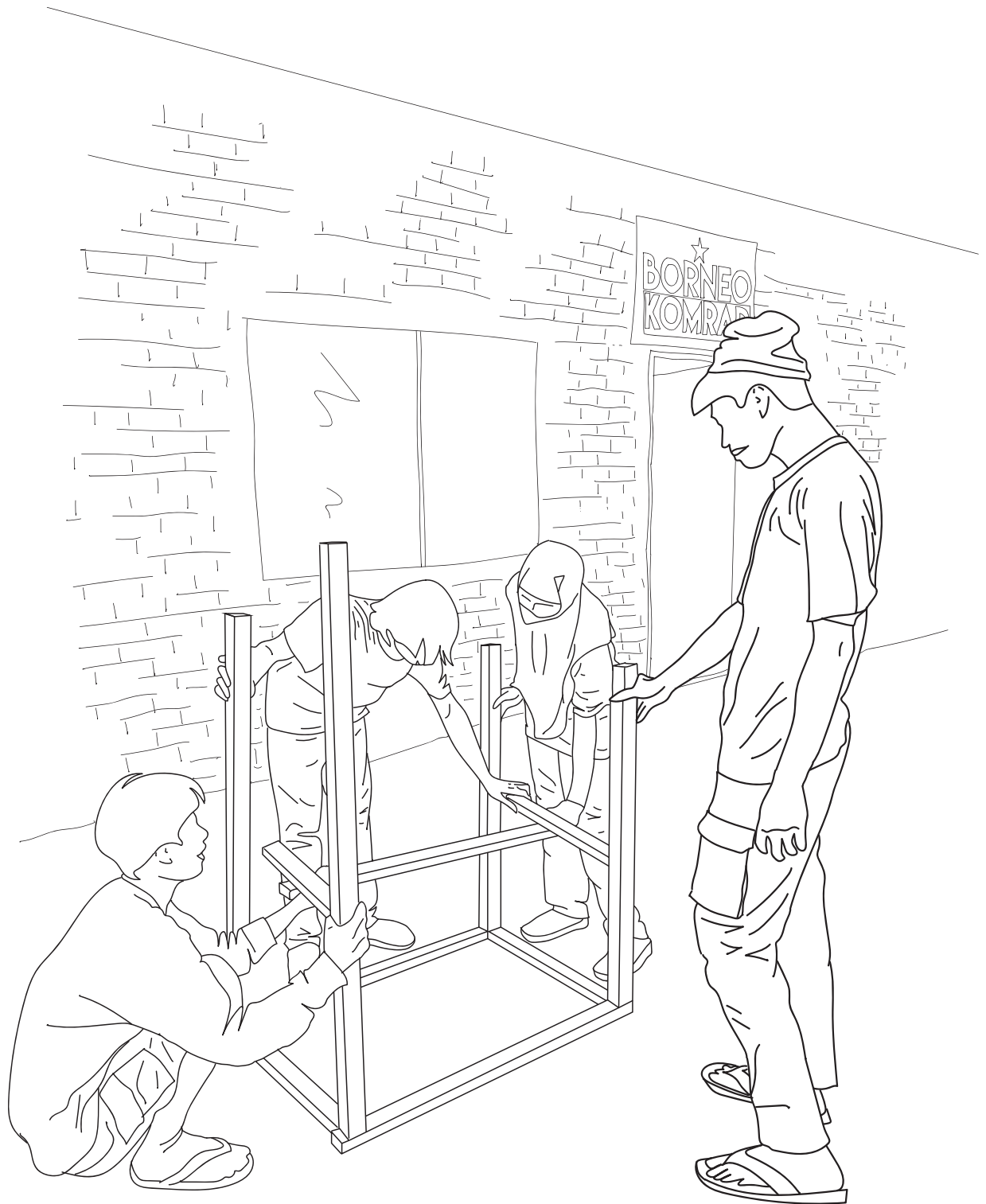
THE VOLUNTEER TEACHERS AND FOUNDERS of Borneo Komrad and Sekolah Alternatif come from diverse educational backgrounds, the majority having degrees in pedagogy and arts-related fields. Due to their backgrounds, the teachers have introduced a diversity of creative activities that complement the instruction of Bahasa Malaysia and mathematics, which are the two fundamental modules of the curriculum. However, the teachers encourage third-party participation from external visitors that can provide the children with valuable skills in fields that the teachers do not specialize in.



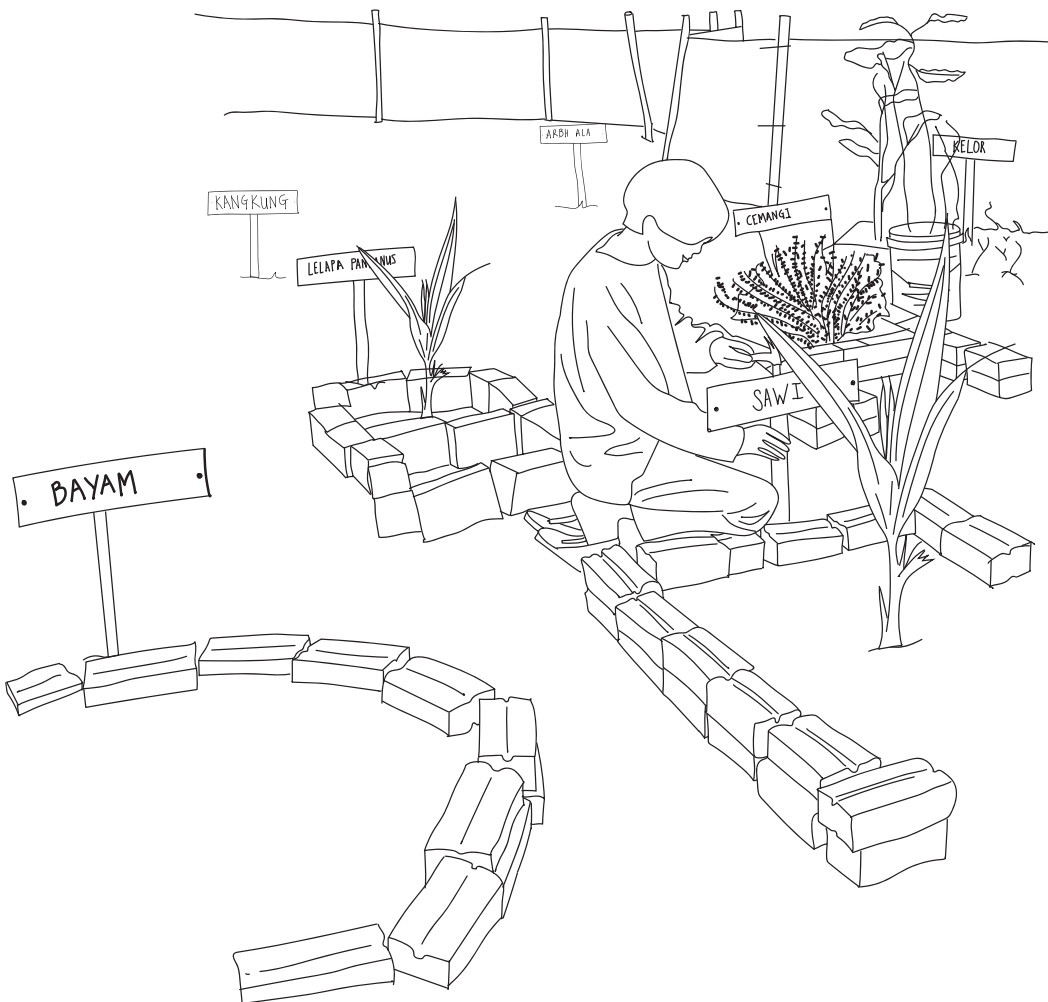


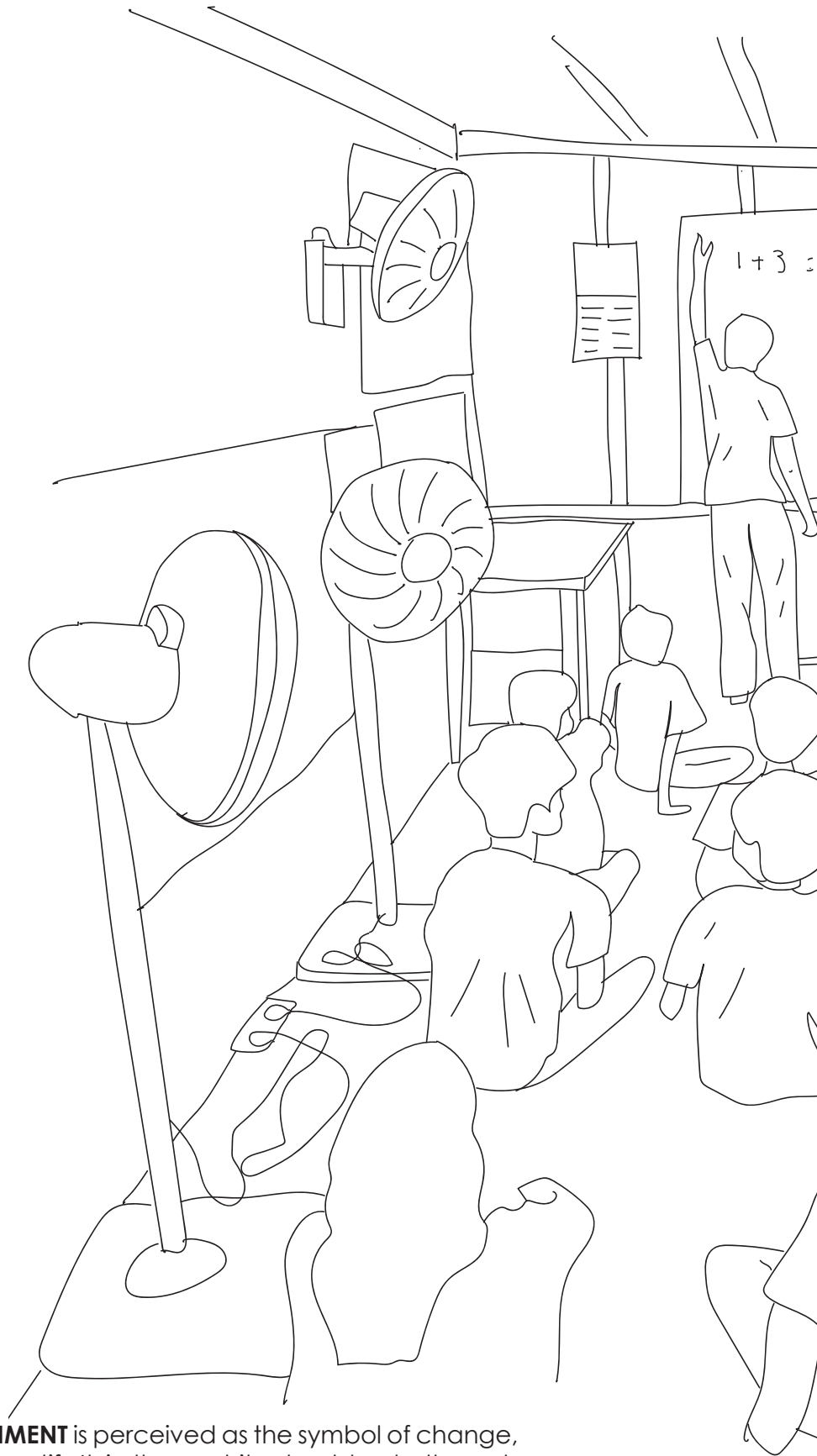
ENCOURAGING children to celebrate their identity as Bajau Laut is very important for Sekolah Alternatif. In between classes and when the students ask for a break, they usually play music and sing in the Bajau language. The teachers often learn a few words in Bajau in order to communicate better with the children, creating a mutual bond between them. The opinion and guidance of the students regarding the skills and knowledge they wish to obtain are taken seriously into consideration by the teachers whose approach to education is based on an improvisational model. Hence, teachers are not perceived as the authority but as the conveyor of valuable knowledge and skills. Therefore, activities recommended by students, such as outdoor drawing classes and collective cooking, are always encouraged and realized. Via these types of activities, children come in contact with the public realm and develop social skills such as interacting with vendors, comparing prices, and knowing their rights and how to defend themselves in case authorities ask for forms of identification.





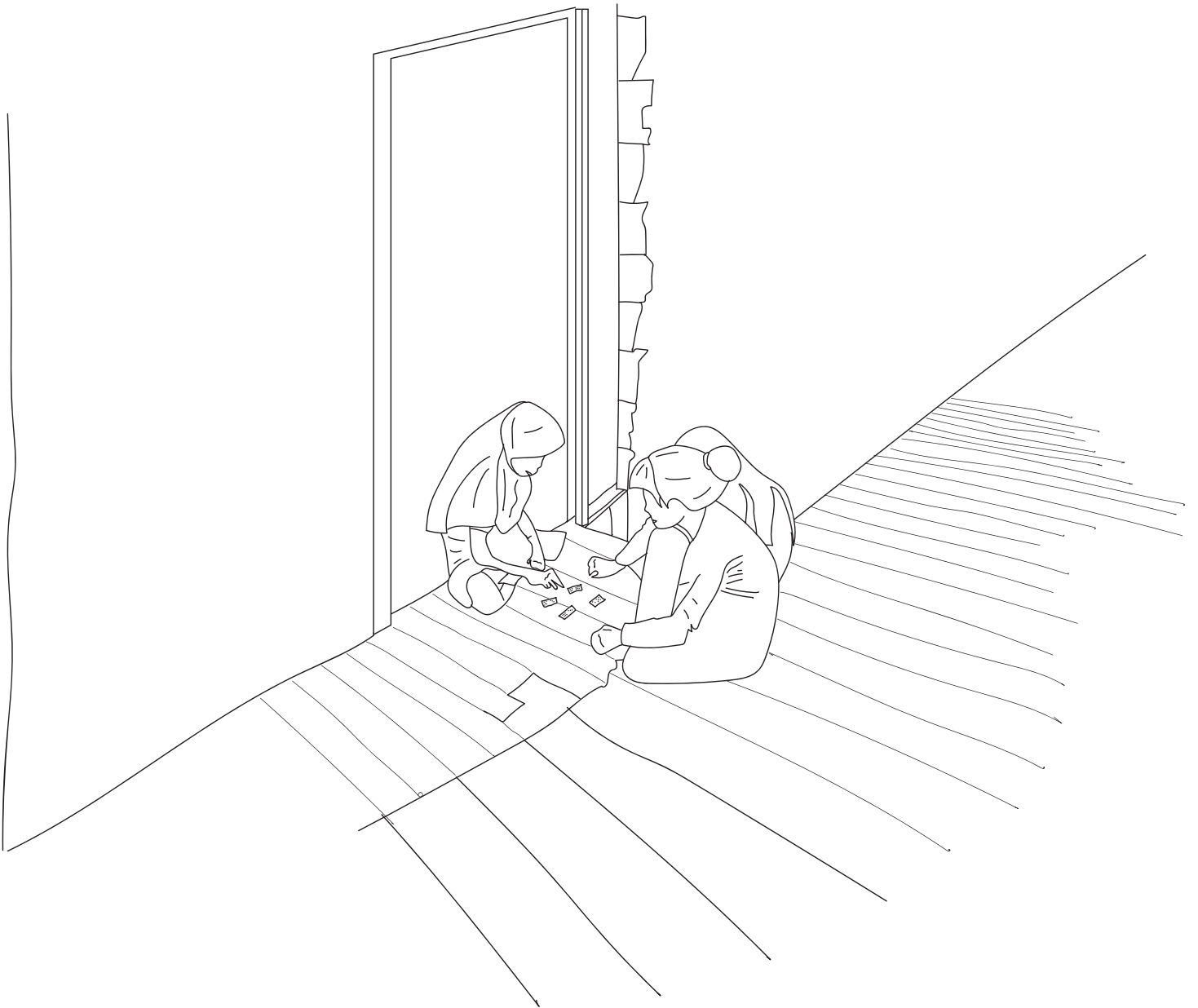
SUSTAINING THE SCHOOLS is a challenging process. To support their action, Borneo Komrad engages in commercial activities like selling drawings, NGO merchandise, paintings, and homegrown vegetables they plant in the schools' gardens. In this way, the schools have gained financial autonomy, and they have managed to sustain the organization independently. Teaching students to be independent and autonomous is one of the main objectives of alternative learning. By inviting teaching visitors holding plumbing or gardening classes and organizing DIY workshops, Sekolah Alternatif is trying to equip students with practical skills so that the children grow into autonomous adults, able to sustain themselves and assist others in their communities.





AN EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT is perceived as the symbol of change, according to Sekolah Alternatif. It is the architectural body through which communities can find their voice and advocate for their rights. Sekolah Alternatif's action is not to be considered charity work. Although the school has specified opening times, in the evening, students are welcome to come to school and participate in extracurricular activities. Additionally, there are cases when due to strong winds and bad weather conditions, some dwellings might be unsafe. Hence, students often stay in the school overnight, utilizing its space as a shelter.





THE CEMETERY is one of the communal spaces found in Kampung Bangau Bangau, where people gather and functions as the only playground that the children have. Located on a small islet, the cemetery and its surroundings is the only void in the densely inhabited village. Moreover, in-between spaces such as small extensions of the docks that function as a buffer zone between public and private spaces, are used for informal gatherings and offer opportunities for playing.



CONCLUSION

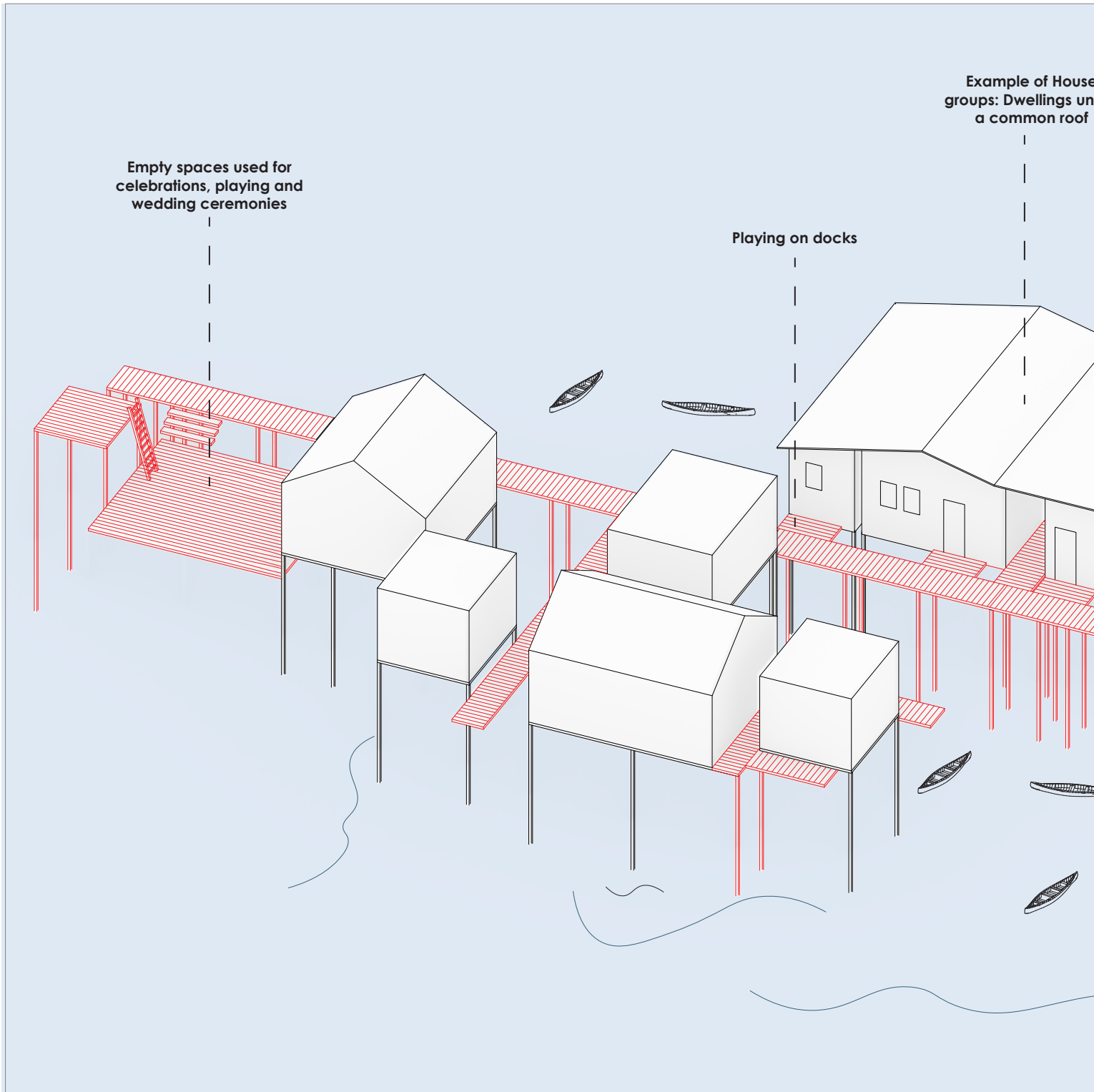
Alternative schooling is characterized by improvisation and reciprocal relationships of aid, consultation, and support between students and teachers. As the leading actor, children can modify and enrich the curriculum with topics or activities they are fascinated about, making alternative schooling highly adaptive to changes that fuel their curiosity and need for exploration. Obtaining life skills through activities promoting their independence is a precious strategy for giving children -hence future adults- the confidence to sustain and advocate for their needs and rights.

Hence, an alternative school as an educational establishment is perceived as a symbol of change and it is the architectural body that can empower change with its operation and via its students. It is an activist move that symbolizes the liberation of indigenous people from the systemic marginalization that hundreds of communities experience. The school in Semporna functions as a device that shelters knowledge and ensures the safety and well-being of children.

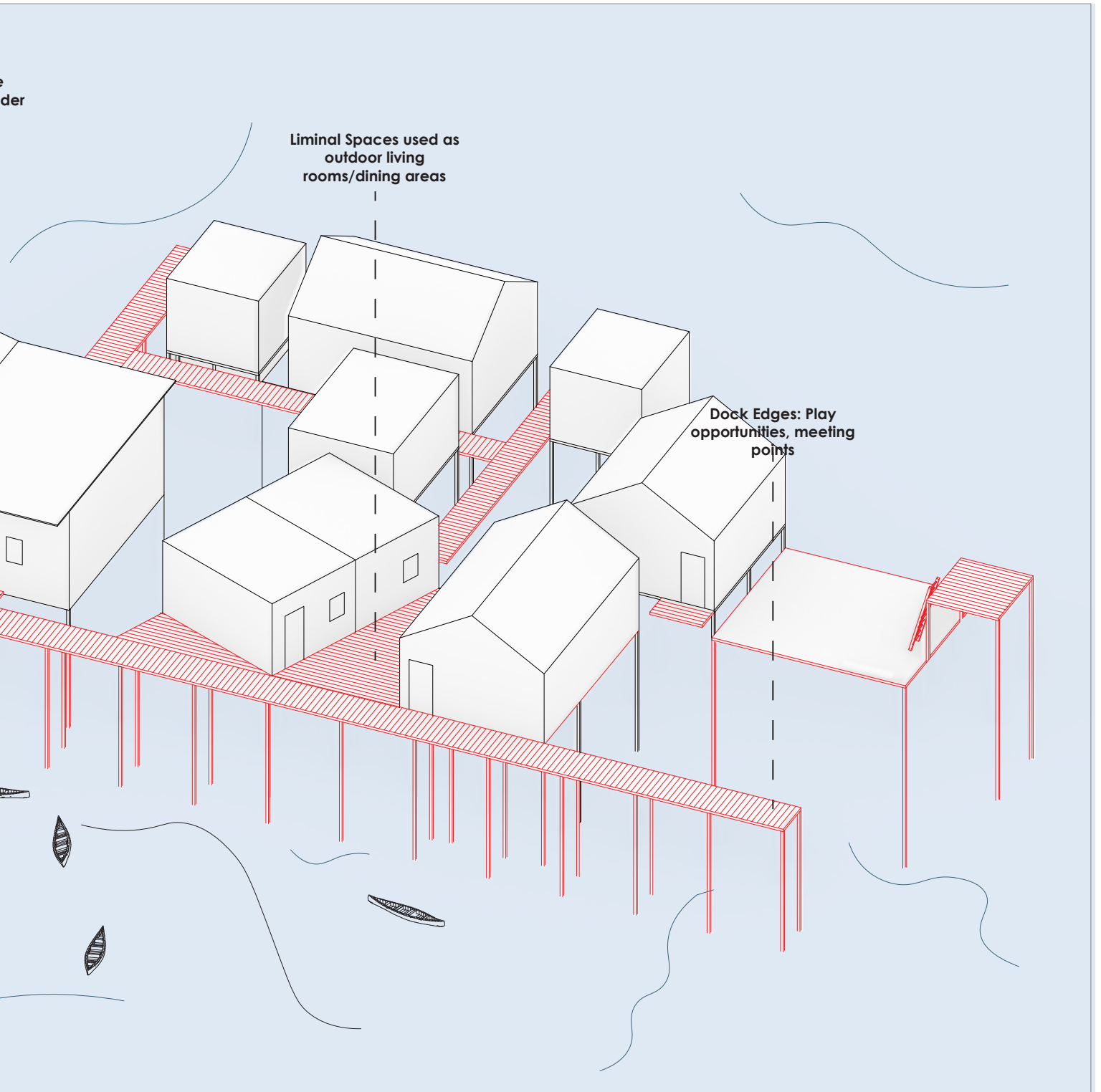
At the same time, considering that Bajau Laut people are used to learning from the outdoors means that schooling Bajau Laut children predominantly in indoor spaces raise several questions regarding what types of architectural bodies could host and shelter indigenous knowledge, which is by nature experiential and empirical. Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the kindergarten, recognized the positive impact of providing a stimulating environment for children⁶⁸. Although in an unorthodox way, the use of the cemetery -a space not designated for playing- as the principal playground confirms Aldo van Eyck's position that simple forms with no allocated functions stimulate a child's imagination and urge to explore, and they encourage gymnastic movements characterized by acrobaticism and flexibility⁶⁹.

68 Naomi Heller, "A Brief History of Playground Design, Part 1," *The Field*, March 12, 2020, <https://thefield.asla.org/2020/03/12/a-brief-history-of-playground-design-part-1/>.

69 Liane Lefaivre and Ingeborg de Roode, *Aldo Van Eyck: The Playgrounds and the City* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2002) pp. 6.



DOCKS, LIMINAL SPACES AND TYPOLOGIES ENCOUR



URAGING COMMUNITY FORMATION AND PLAYING

DISCUSSION

In principle, the promotion of Sabah as a tourist destination is centered around its popular resorts located along or in the water. By definition, resorts are places where visitors can disconnect from ongoing mental processes of thinking, analyzing, and evaluating by resorting to settings that prioritize shelter and nurture the human body. In the context of Sabah, activities such as snorkeling, diving, canoeing, and sea walking are majorly promoted, bringing visitors closer to nature and its richness. Apart from their recreational nature, these activities actively stimulate people's urge to explore, discover and experience new places through bodily movements and actions. One's bodily explorations and interactions with nature allow one to obtain body wisdom and make one aware of the potential and capacity of their physical reality.

In the Western world, education acquired is focused on training the human mind to memorize, analyze, compose, process, and evaluate. In this context, western education tends to disconnect the mind from the body and perceives them as separate entities, focusing exclusively on the development of the first. However, it is vital to recognize that everything we identify and describe as knowledge owes its very existence to our innate need to explore the world through somatic experiences. Hence, the body cannot be separated from the whole person since it defines our very existence.

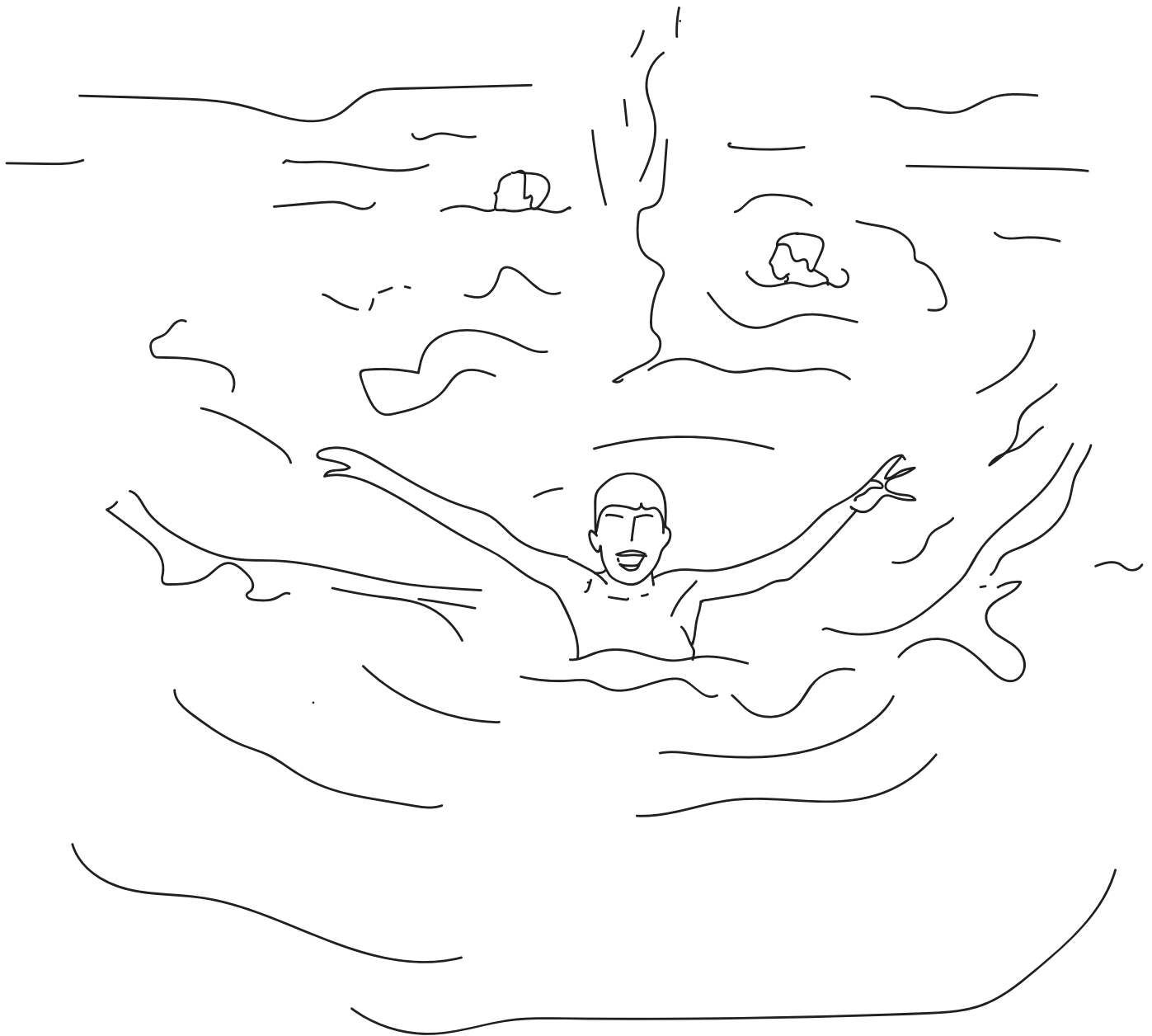
Knowledge is both mental and somatic. Observing the approach that ALCs have adopted toward teaching, it seems that little attention is given to outdoor learning and playing. Considering the context in which educational issues are addressed and investigated, apart from a necessity, stimulating children's imagination and curiosity through explorative spaces is a matter of preserving the Bajau Laut blood memory. Blood memory is a term that describes the knowledge that runs in people's bloodlines and is orally conveyed from generation to generation, connecting them to their "mother

communities" and the environment they originate from⁷⁰.

The cosmology of the dominant culture, which promotes individualism, values autonomy more than the creation of bonds of alliance, subsistence, support, and interconnectedness, which are very prominent in the Bajau Laut culture. However, indigenous knowledge comprises body wisdom and blood memory, making community involvement substantial in education and learning. Therefore, to decolonize educational perceptions and practices, designers need to rethink the role of an educational establishment.

The architectural bodies that host education ought to be a resort where blood memory, and somatic and mental stimulation find refuge, providing a holistic educational framework that protects indigenous knowledge through which children can develop. Therefore, designing educational bodies and devices that decolonize the nature of education means that community participation and playing are factors that call for experimentation and further exploration. Finally, apart from being a symbol of indigenous resurgence, an educational establishment as such could contribute to recognizing that there are alternative ways of being in the world that do not align with colonial perceptions of being and should be equally understood and accepted.

⁷⁰ Allannah Young Leon and Denise Nadeau, "Embodying Indigenous Resurgence," in *Sharing Breath: Embodied Learning and Decolonization*, ed. Sheila Batacharya and Yuk-Lin Renita Wong (Edmonton, AB: AU Press, Athabasca University, 2018), pp. 58.



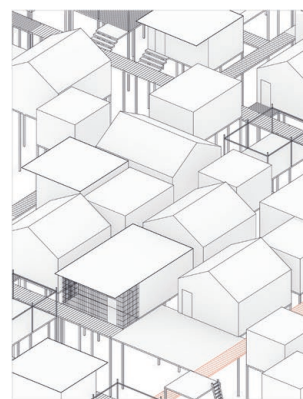
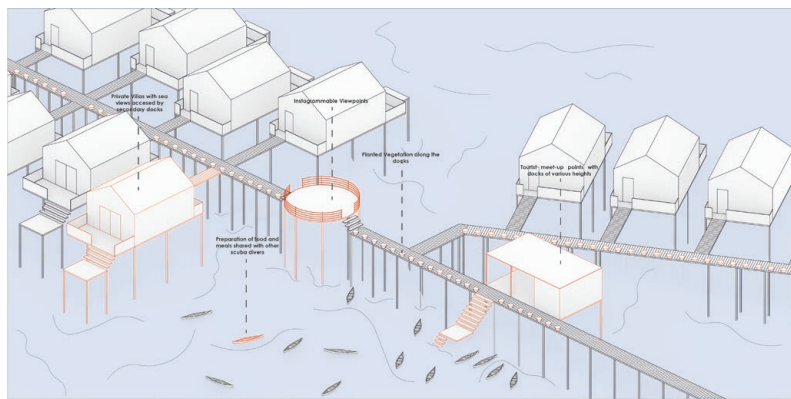
RES COMMUNIS

ACTIVITIES

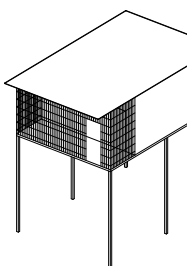
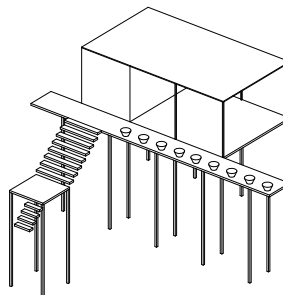
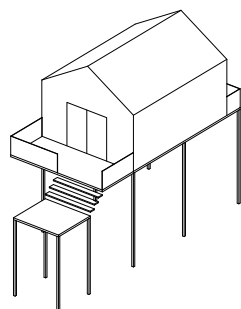
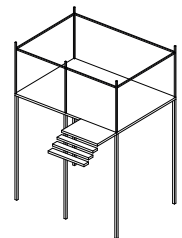
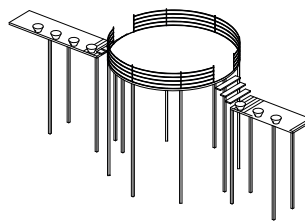
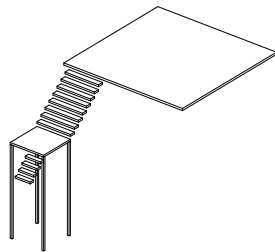
- Snorkeling
- Seawalking
- Diving
- Canoeing
- Surfing
- Stand-up Paddling

LEX C

- Fresh fish
- Handcr
- Je
- Spa
- Designated
- Rainwa
- Solid v



TPOLOGIES



COMMUNIS

Fishing

+ produce commerce

rafts (Basket Weaving)

Jewellery Making

Food Sharing

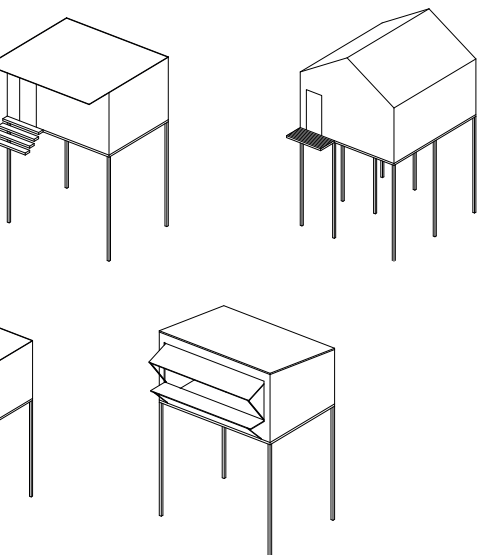
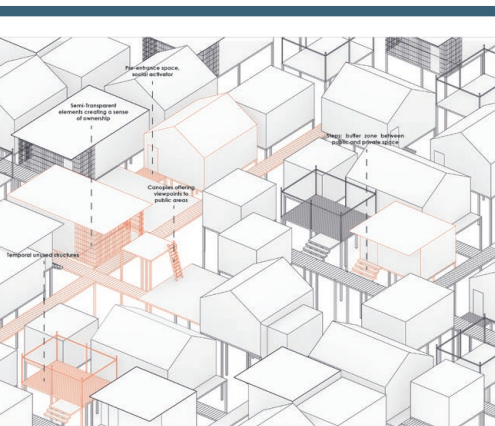
Infrastructure

Spaces for drying fish

seaweed cultivation areas

water storage tank areas

waste disposal areas



PRAXIS COMMUNIS

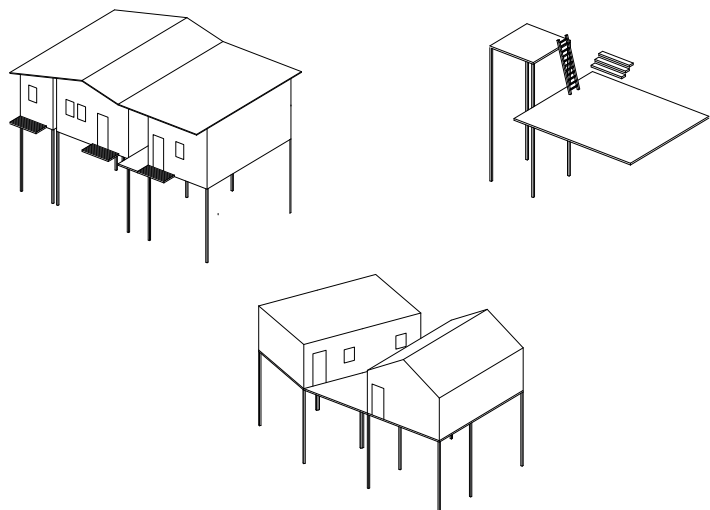
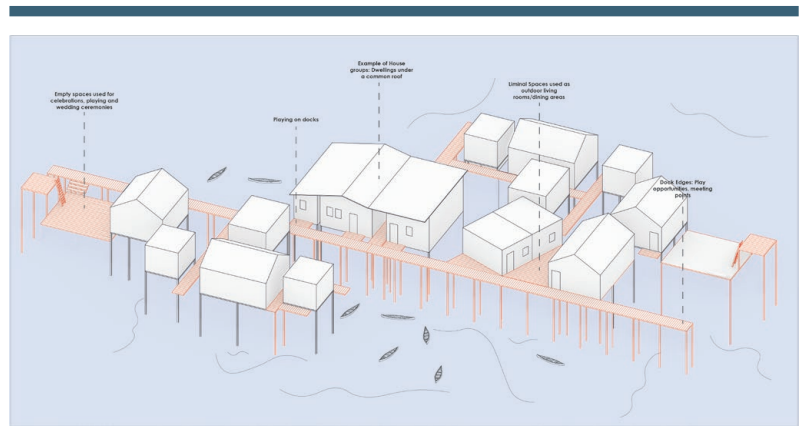
Play Areas (indoor/outdoor)

Playground instruments

Workshops for DIY + handcrafts

Communal kitchens

Exhibition/Celebration Spaces



DESIGN AGE

P3

-Definition of types of interventions and the design program.

-Interpretation of discovered typologies into a synthesis of outdoor and indoor spaces (3D)

-Experimentation with connecting user programs and creating a network of interventions (Drawing, Model Making)

-Extended research on vernacular building techniques and experimentation on unit scale via models

P4

-Design in building scale and in

-Testing the relationship between structures and water, experimental design elements that enhance

-Experimentation with temporary structures that take into account change of landscape during the experience of playing in an

-Technical models on 1:1 scale of indigenous and contemporary techniques

P5

NDA

interiors

between afloat
experimentation with
this relationship

and permanent
consideration the
tides, sound and
and along water

: materiality tests,
temporary building

-Production of detailed drawings (plans, sections, elevations, 3D)

-Production of board of materiality tests, technical models

-Complete 1:1 models of technical details found in the proposed interventions

-Final visuals and diagrams explaining the design concept, vision

-"A Day in my Life": Narratives from the future: How the interventions will have responded to the creation of a successful and robust educational building that encourages learning from the three lenses of: blood memory, mental stimulation and somatic experiences

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APPENDIX

Interview with Borneo Komrad - Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Wan Shakila Adiola Wan Azmi, Manager of Sekolah Alternatif

20/12/2022

Christina: I have been getting a lot of input from Borneo Komrad's and Sekolah Alternatif's Facebook pages and I observed that you have been collaborating with organisations like Green Semporna and Reef Check Malaysia. Are these organisations listening to what Bajau children have to say in terms of how they experience nature and how it is to live close to nature?

Shakila: Reef Malaysia and Green Semporna are local NGOs that are founded by local people here in Semporna, so we collaborate in a leadership camp called Sabah Community Environmental Leadership Camp. So this is the fourth time that it is organised this year in December. The main organiser is Reef Check and Green Semporna and Borneo Komrad is an official partner. During the program we call all the leaders of the people that live by the sea and on islands to talk about.. This year's theme is risk management, so how we manage the waste on the islands and how we export it to the land. We sent four students, 2 from Semporna and 2 from Tawau to learn about the leadership and the environmental in the camp. Borneo Komrad solely focuses on the education for the Bajau Laut children but Reef Check and Green Semporna they work on environmental issues and also preserving the native's rights and traditions. They also do community projects and protocol documents for the Bajau to preserve their lands to know what their rights are and what corals they need to protect. So yes, they listen to the local community, because the community has its own local tradition and knowledge to particular topics. So they implement the local knowledge on their research because it contributes a lot to it.

Christina: I saw that you guys in Borneo Komrad are really promoting independence and children to be independent and as far as I have understood you try to work independently. How are the schools sustaining themselves?

Shakila: Borneo Komrad was founded by University Students back in 2015. We try to observe a lot, we go to the village, we make analysis and research and we were thinking why Sabah is the poorest state in Malaysia and why thousands of children couldn't go to school. Why were children were lying on the streets begging for money, trapped in a system and dragged in child labor since they were 4 years old. Why were children taking drugs, being malnourished. This is really the situation in Sabah. We really believe that education is the key to change this cycle. School functions as a symbol of change. 3 schools are 3 symbols that hundreds and thousands children couldn't go to school. Since university, me and my friends have worked hard to run the organisation. So we are selling drawings, food, we are printing t-shirts and until now we still believe that this works because we run our own economy and sustain our

organisation independently. But it takes a lot of efforts, capital and a lot of strategies because advocating for people and mobilizing the villagers is a different thing. After we graduated we legally registered our organisation to the Malaysian government as an NGO. We send our proposals to different kinds of corporates, we run projects and also gained the trust of Malaysians so we receive funding from them and we have also received grants. Some of us studied something pedagogy or arts related but we appreciate anyone that can come in and teach our children other types of knowledge that we cannot provide. For example we had this visitor coming from Joho and taught some students how to repair things, how to do the plumbing. Because the water system here is quite challenging, because we are located on a water village house so there is no proper water sewage system. So he used his knowledge to teach the children but also to help the school with water management.

Christina: Are you encouraging children to celebrate their customs and traditions as Bajau Laut?

Shakila: Always! One time it was almost 10am and the children wanted to rest. Some children would go to small shops and buy snacks and drinks but there are some students who didn't know what is the definition of "tired" so after one of our classes they would turn on their speaker and would play some music and they would dance with their friends. They love to dance and sing. We always encourage them to do so. They love playing music in their language and they really appreciate when teachers know 1 or 2 words in Bajau and when we are able to communicate with them.

Christina: Is the school comprised of a single building or does it extend in more buildings?

Shakila: Back in 2017 when our action started in Kg. Bangau Bangau, we were looking for a space that could accommodate the school. It was very hard to find a space because the village is so compact. We also had to gain the trust of the locals because we were so young back then and we went to the village to provide education to the stateless children and to combat the stigma that exists around them. We faced a lot of challenges. In 2018 we managed to rent another local house, 1km away from Kampung Bangau Bangau named Kampung Air Hujung. However our students were all coming from Bangau Bangau so they would walk to the school everyday. In 2021 we were lucky enough to find a space in Kg. Bangau Bangau to accommodate Sekolah Alternatif Semporna. Because the amount of students is rising every year, from 20 students, to 40 and now 70 in Semporna, the house is very small so we cannot accommodate all the students and the space wouldn't be comfortable anymore. That's why we have multiple

spaces right now, we have three, 2 in Kampung BB and one in Hujung.

Christina: What would you say are your needs now? What are the problems you are facing?

Shakila: Our schools need funds to operate because the main needs is the teachers to be paid a fair salary, because this is not charity. We didn't come from Kuala Lumpur to come to the slum to do charity. This is a long fight and activists and teachers need to be paid. So we always appreciate when others come in and teach children new skills that can improve the lives of the children.

Christina: Would you say that you also observe that the locals have knowledge about nature that we do not have? Do you also notice it in school?

Shakila: Yes yes! For example, there are different types of Bajau. For example we had a conversation with the locals, and they say that if they want to make a move to a new place they have this basic knowledge we call astrologi.. they look at the moon, the stars and also how the sea looks like and they know which period is the safest for them to travel. For marriage as well. If the partner from the grooms side and bride's side, they look at their palms and they read something and they know which day is perfect for the couple to get married. There are traditional customs that they still practice.

Christina: How old are the children that are attending school?

Shakila: We receive children from 7 years old and above.

Christina: Does the school have a specific opening and closing time or are the students encouraged to come and study or play in the school?

Shakila: The official opening times in Semporna.. we have classes from 8-12. Normally on the evening there are programmes and activities happening and it's leisure time and students are always welcome to come to school. Sometimes there are students that ask to stay in school overnight. Right now at the end of the year there is a monsoon and some states of west malaysia are suffering from floods. In Semporna we don't have floods but there are strong winds which affect a lot of dwellings since they are poorly built and there are chances that some of them might even collapse. So some students ask for protection to stay. We always say to the students that this school does not belong to the teachers, it belongs to them. What we are now doing is that we are preparing the students to operate the school by themselves one day. With that being said we have a number of students

who are now being assistant teachers and we are lucky enough to have funds to pay them a salary in order to teach other children

Christina: How is the life in the village? Do you personally live in the village too?

Shakila: The concept of Borneo Komrad is that the activists live in the village and are involved in the local community. We are not like other typical NGOs who clock in daily just to teach and then go back at 5pm. So we experience the struggles that the locals face too. For example the water system is compromised so the community has to purchase freshwater. So in order to understand the struggle of the slum areas, how living so close to water is, and the local culture we have to also be part of the village.

Christina: What would you say are the main meeting points and landmarks in the village?

Shakila: For example in Kg Bangau Bangau there are common spaces but usually people would gather around during wedding ceremonies. If the wedding ceremony is open to the public, there are a lot of performances which local people are invited to watch. There is a common space in Kampung Bangau Bangau but we have to contribute to the rent if we want to use it. Another communal space would be the graveyard. People gather around there and the kids play there because that is the only playground they have. If you go there at 4o clock until 6-6:30 you can see that hundreds of children are playing around the graveyard, playing football and volleyball.

Christina: Do the children do activities close to the water as well?

Shakila: Yes, always. During this evening, when the water level rises, they always dive. Sometimes they also do that after school in their spare time, they meet in school and they swim behind the school compound.

Christina: I see. What is the structure of the curriculum like?

Shakila: The main objective of Sekolah Alternatif is to eradicate illiteracy among the Bajau Laut children so we focus on literacy and numeracy. Also, we provide a shared space for the children to play and study. We try to make out the best potential out of these children. For curriculum, we group children into classes according to their level of literacy. So if a teen that is 16 years old doesn't know how to hold a pencil, they will be in the first level of classes. But if a child is 9 years old and they kind of know how to read they will be group in a class of

higher level. So that's how the class system works. The main subjects are Bahasa Malay and Mathematics. So if the children graduate from school these two are the things that the employers will be looking for in an employee. Apart from these we offer other classes such as nature education, philosophy, tech education, art, literature, music, sports, agriculture, religion and belief and we are not limited to Islamic education. We also teach children archeology. Via these course we encourage children to be open minded and become critical thinkers and celebrate diversity. These classes are provided with an improvisation model created by the teachers. We always ask the students what they want to learn. This model is a guideline for the teachers to use all available resources. We also offer other classes for the children that have graduated. We hold a lot of classes outdoors. So normally students will ask for anything that they have seen, heard or looked for online. One time a student asked if they can cook together instead of holding a normal class. We perceive this as a type of learning as well. We did not just go to the kitchen and ask the children to cut things and cook. We took the children to the market, to show them around the items and taught them how to compare prices, to communicate with the cashiers and say "thank you". They became familiar with the things they have to be aware of when walking from the village to the market, to watch out for the authorities and know their rights when they are asked for some form of identification. This is also a learning process. What matters is what they want to learn and not what we want to teach.

Christina: How is tourism affecting Semporna and the village? Are there Bajau people that work in the tourism industry?

Shakila: On the islands there are numerous plots and land that is sold to outsiders. For example island E is supposed to be owned by locals but was sold for cheap to outsiders who then created resorts and leisure facilities that are run in the name of locals. So if the authorities come and do an inspection, the ones that are in trouble are the locals. In the case of Mabul island which is very famous and attracts a lot of tourists every year. However, because of the tourism, the increased needs of the island resorts in freshwater is covered by the city of Semporna. Water has been overextracted from wells that used to supply locals with freshwater, making these natural resources to be in shortage since most of them now have sea water. However, there is also stigma against undocumented people. For example Kg Bangau Bangau, there is a Jetty for the people to go to the land. There are rumors that people want to displace the people living in water villages because it's not a pleasant sight for the tourists. Tourism has also affected market prices, since prices have been increasing for all items and services and not only to the ones addressed to tourists.

Christina: Is the Bajau Laut youth working more on the village or the city?

Shakila: It depends on the background, the gender and the capabilities they have. There are still a lot of people who fish. During the day usually men go to the sea and catch fish and on the afternoon or the evening they sell them at the market. Most youngsters go to small towns and they work in labour

intense jobs. Women who are most likely housewives, do crafts and have small market stalls where they sell merchantise, groceries to the village. If they are lucky enough to have documents, they travel outside of Semporna to look for more stable jobs. Because if you are undocumented you get payed a salary of around 300/m which is very cheap labor. It is very hard for them to compete and have equal opportunities with a documented person.

Christina: Are parents encouraging children to go to school? Are they also coming in sometimes?

Shakila: Yes, the parents are very supporting of their children attending school and they trust the teachers. They see changes and they notice the impact of education to the children. In the beginning it was more challenging because we also had to ask students if they want to attend school. But now parents and relatives ask us if their children can come to school.

