

FOOD, FOLKLORE, RITUALS:

The Shared Participants of the Kitchen-Garden

A Historical Ethnographic Study of the Practices, Rituals,
and Food Behaviours Surrounding the Domestic Garden
in West-Malaysian Households

Abstract

The thesis explores the historical ethnographic study of the Malaysian domestic garden which integrates a multidisciplinary lens, taking into account areas of architecture, landscape, culture studies, food studies, and media studies. It argues that the nuanced perception of the garden and its close relationship with the kitchen in the Malaysian context is tied to a shared cultural origin of the village which helped shaped perceptions of botany, practice, and food. This relationship is subsequently maintained into the urban-suburban context and reflected in the layouts of housing plans and present-day community gardening projects.

Keywords:

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Architectural History Thesis AR2A011

En Lyn Daryln Sia (6217044) | Tutored by Birgitte Louise Hansen

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Foreword

Most of this thesis is anchored based on recollections – both personal and from various acquaintances – of the interactions between households and their gardens. My personal connection to the garden is largely formed by my frequent stays with my maternal grandmother throughout my formative years. For the first thirteen years of my life, my grandmother’s house was very much my second home. Throughout this time, I managed to witness her interactions with her own house garden, the kinds of plants she grew, the dishes she made, and the fruits she frequently snacked on. The garden played a role in an elderly woman’s routine, and it also facilitated the social interactions between her and her neighbour.

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Introduction

The Intrinsic Patchwork of the Malaysian Domestic Garden

[1] KLANG VALLEY
Locally, the Klang Valley region encompasses the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Gombak, Hulu Langat, Klang and Petaling, which is located at the central west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

The objective of this paper is to explore the historical construct of cultural nuances of the domestic garden in Malaysian households, in particular focusing on the general geographical region of Klang Valley¹. This paper aims to explore ways in which horticultural practices play a part in sustaining traditional and cultural practices amongst Malaysian households, primarily via its direct relationship with Malaysian food culture, and it seeks to argue that the domestic garden is a placeholder and a key to the identity of the cultural food behaviours of Malaysians, thus embedding itself into the rich interwoven cultural tapestry of Malaysia.

Thus, the research question of this paper is as follows:

“How have cultural and traditional practices shaped perceptions toward horticulture, food behaviour, and the domestic garden space from past kampung (village) dwellings to present urban-suburban households in Klang Valley?”

Part of the reason behind the purpose of this paper is due to the author’s personal observances of this fascinating quality behind household gardens disappearing, with the traditions and ritualistic practices mostly survived by those whose grandparent(s) are still living. It is common for households to live in high-rise apartments and for women to no longer be the housekeeper (thus gardener), and, paired with an increasing wave of Westernisation, the physical space of a garden alongside the horticultural practice is steadily diminishing amongst households. Thus, this paper seeks to, firstly, document this historical cultural nuance, and secondly to challenge the ways in which spatial perceptions and meanings are analysed through its methodology.

Gardens are a branch of focus in discourse surrounding climate change and green living in the Malaysian context. One of the most prominent themes featuring the domestic garden is in the topic of urban farming and urban gardening schemes due to increasing focus on concerns such as food security and accessibility to food for underprivileged communities. Another aspect of the garden is expressed in national identity, with proposals for Malay garden designs to become a product of cultural tourism (Zakaria et. al., 2014)². This is stemming from criticism that gardens designed in Malaysia are notably modern and contemporary, and thereby lacking in authenticity. Discourse surrounding the construct of the domestic Malaysian garden also appears to be isolated within individual fields rather than multidisciplinary, either focused on the botanical and landscaping perspective of plants selection, the architectural perspective related to spatial layouts of gardens and dwellings, or the anthropological perspective relating plants with food culture, however there is a research gap which examines the domestic Malaysian garden holistically, exploring the intrinsic qualities in the make-up of a Malaysian garden, unearthing the ways in which horticultural practices play a part in sustaining traditional and cultural practices amongst Malaysian households, primarily via its direct relationship with Malaysian food culture.

[2] CULTURAL TOURISM
Written by Zakaria, Rashid,
and Salleh, who are all
scholars in the landscape ar-
chitecture field of Universiti
Teknologi MARA, whose
interests lie within the areas
of cultural landscapes and
Malay gardens.

[3] JOSHUA GOH NGEE CHAE
A current PhD student at Singapore Management University, whose research interests include urban gardening, urban history of Singapore, British Malaya, and Hong Kong, and memory, identity & place. He has previously participated in various conferences with work centred on the kampong garden and community garden culture in Singapore.

Fig. 1
A diagram depicting the current scene of garden-centric discourse in the Malaysian context in their respective disciplines. This thesis aims to perceive the garden and its associated rituals not as isolated aspects but rather interrelated in its construct.

Lines are drawn to represent certain overlaps in disciplines amongst existing literature. Legend located at top-left.

Author's own.

rituals, and horticultural practices is observed in multiple publications centred on the indigenous and native tribes⁴ of Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo, but there is a lack of publications focused on the unique eclectic rituals, beliefs, and practices of the general Malaysian populace, which is predominantly comprised of Chinese, Malay, and Indian ethnicities.

Methodology

This research paper undertakes a process which seeks to construct the Malaysian perception of domesticity and the garden through an examination of its associated components: whether it be personal family recollections, mythological tales related to festivities and specific foods and the practices which surround them, the relationship between dwellings and gardens both in the past and present through existing architectural documentation, the culture of affordances which commonly shapes lifestyle, or even investigating representations of gardens, food, and cooking through popular Malaysian media. Due to the inherently multidisciplinary nature of this study, the sources will extend beyond the realm of architecture and the built environment, and expand into areas such as ethnographic and ethnobotanical studies, culture studies, media studies, and food culture. The analysis undertaken in this thesis will be presented in the form of written text, images, and drawings, and it will construct a narrative through the means of assemblage⁵—through a collective series of texts and pictures—as a means to holistically expand on the nuances which inform the domestic garden in the Malaysian context.

[4] INDIGENOUS NOVELTY
Some of these publications include, for example, ‘Recalling Forgotten Tastes’ by Syarifah Nadhirah (2020), which explores the horticultural, foraging, and botanical cultures of native tribes in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly of Semai and Temuan subgroups. Similarly, the local creative agency Borneo Laboratory, led by Wendy Teo, also focuses on the relationship between landscape, rituals and practices of Bornean tribes. Interestingly enough, both Nadhirah and Teo are architects by trade.

[5] ASSEMBLAGE
Famously, late English art critic, novelist, painter and poet John Berger also approached his argument through his book, ‘Ways of Seeing’, published in 1972.

Outline

I	<i>Introduction</i>
II	<i>Migration, Colonisation, and Shared Kampung Origins</i> Shared Kampung Origins The Kampung Compound The Balik Kampung Culture
III	<i>A Culture of Affordances, Folklore, Beliefs, and Rituals</i> Affordances in the Kampung: Food, Object, and Play Folklore, Beliefs, and Rituals Pineapples
IV	<i>Urban Migration</i> Urban-Suburban Terraced Dwellings Garden-Snacking Garden Balconies and Windows
V	<i>The Future of the Kitchen-Garden</i> Urban Farms: Kebun-kebun Bangsar Planter Box House by Formzero The Garden as a Bridge Between the Young and Old
VI	<i>Conclusion</i>

Looking back at family history, both my paternal and maternal families hailed from **kampungs**⁶, or villages. My maternal grandmother was born and raised in the hilly setting of Bentong, located in Pahang. This is common amongst all immigrant families in Malaysia, especially considering that Bentong was one of the key tin mining towns back in the day, and Chinese immigrants were particularly drawn to the job opportunities presented by the extraction of raw materials. My paternal grandparents, hailing from Fuzhou, China, settled in the rural village of Kanowit, Sarawak, which primarily performed as two functions: one, a middleman of trade between the port of Sibu and the interior of the Rajang River, and two, exporting rural agricultural goods externally.

Migration, Colonisation, and Shared Kampung Origins

[6] KAMPUNG
The word “kampung” is deeply entrenched in the Malaysian lexicon. It is a Malay word, meaning “vil-
lage”; and in the construc-
tivist view, a kampung refers
to a rural village, but the
word has shifted to imply
“place of origin” or “home-
town” for the everyday
Malaysian, especially if one
hails from outside the city.

[7] ERNEST HENRY
GEORGE DOBBY
One of the three lecturers
who taught geography at
Raffles College in Singapore,
he was the first lecturer of
the college to have a PhD
and eventually became the
Department Head in 1947
and Professor of Geography
in 1947. His work included
not only in adult academia,
but he also published local
textbooks. His work focused
on Malayan life.

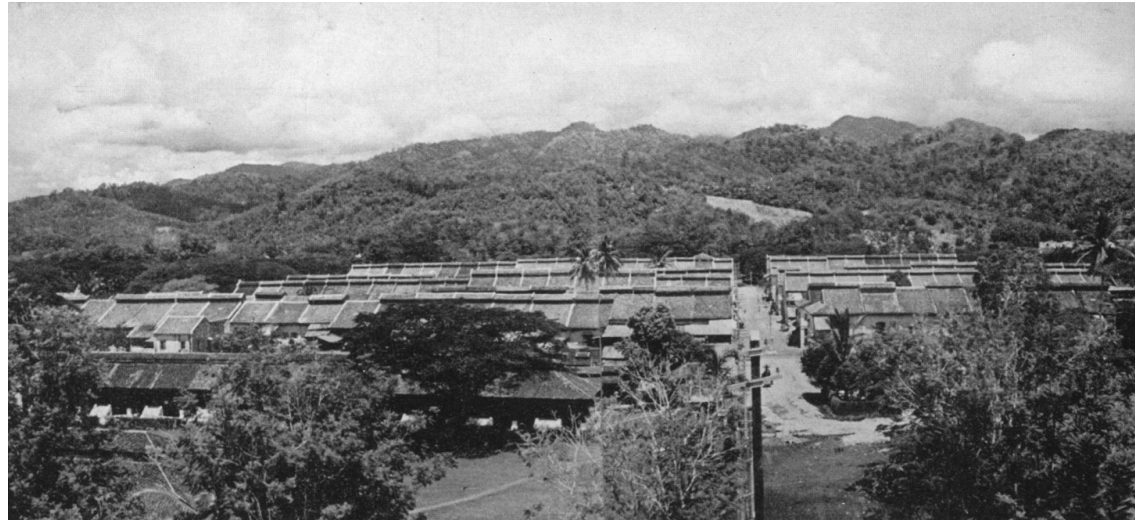
[8] BRITISH MALAYA
Malaya, as it was known in
the past, was part of the
British East India Company
from 1826 until 1846, at the
time known as the Straits
Settlements, comprising the
Dindings, Malacca, Penang,
and Singapore. Malacca,
Penang, and Singapore
formed strategic trading
ports along the Straits of
Malacca which facilitated
trade between the East and
the West, and this gener-
ated significant economic
interest and opportunity in
the Straits Settlements.

This chapter seeks to explore the historical background of Malaysians, in particular focusing on the common village origins of the population, regardless of race. It establishes the background behind the traditional Malay village, the eventual assimilation of immigrants into this form of Malayan village living, and the role of colonialism in generating this circumstance of shared origin. Highlighting this shared background is important as it establishes this shared origin of the Malaysian people despite its multiculturalism, and this rural lifestyle has influenced the ways in which Malaysians approach their gardens today.

Shared Kampung Origins

Originally, the kampung refers to the native settlements of the Malay and indigenous people of the Malay archipelago, who were, in the past, known for their seafaring and trading practices. The traditional kampung is understood as a settlement of timber houses built on stilts and, according to Dobby (1942)⁷, a former professor of geography at the National University of Singapore, pointed out that they were fairly uniformly distributed across coastlines, rivers, and valleys.

It is fascinating to acknowledge that, in spite of a multicultural and multiethnic demographic, there appears to be a shared kampung origin amongst the population. This is not particularly surprising considering Malaysia’s colonial history⁸. The ruling British eventually sought labourers to migrate to Malaya, and thus an influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants eventually settled in the country, contributing to the multi-ethnic and multicultural demographic makeup of Malaysia today. With a focus on conversion from subsistence farming to cash-cropping practices, a booming rubber and tin mining industry, foreign settlers eventually assimilated into the kampung lifestyle, which was already the norm for the indigenous Malay population.



The Kampung Compound

The traditional village in itself is of an ad-hoc, informal nature in its construct. The kampung house is virtually just a simple dwelling standing on a plot of land which became the compound of the house. Goh (2018) also elaborated on the fact that the kampung's compound was not viewed as a garden to the British administration at the time, particularly due to their unenclosed nature. Citing Anthony King⁹, he further explained about the definition of a garden from the European perspective, which was to not only cultivate flowers, fruit, or vegetables, but that a garden also had to be an enclosed piece of ground. In a kampung dwelling, the demarcation of land is more informal, and the actual boundary is more blurred—often opting for shrubs and plants rather than fences and walls. Meanwhile, Lim (1987), a Malaysian artist with an educational background in architecture, curiously observed that even the boundary demarcation of paddy fields via irrigation canals is more pronounced than the compound territory: “Although not much importance is attached to the demarcation of house territories, much importance is attached to the usufructuary rights to the fruit trees and coconut trees (pp. 84)”.

Rural kampung houses of today also typically lack proper fencing surrounding the dwelling, however the spaces directly surrounding the house are referred to as different forms of compounds: the front compound (laman hadapan), the side compounds (laman sisi), and the backyard. These compounds each serve a particular function in the activities of the household, with the front compound often acting as the ‘more public’ communal space for hosting events (such as weddings); the side compounds serving as spaces for familial leisure and

Fig. 2
Note. Photograph was used by Dobby in 1942, showing a panorama of a small Malayan town showing its rectilinear form and forest environment. From “Settlement Patterns in Malaya”, by Dobby, E.H.G., 1942, *Geographical Review* 32(2), 214.

[9] ANTHONY D. KING
Anthony Douglas King was a sociologist-turned-architectural historian whose research specialty concentrated on colonial architecture and urbanism. Here, Goh was citing from a book, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, published in 1976.

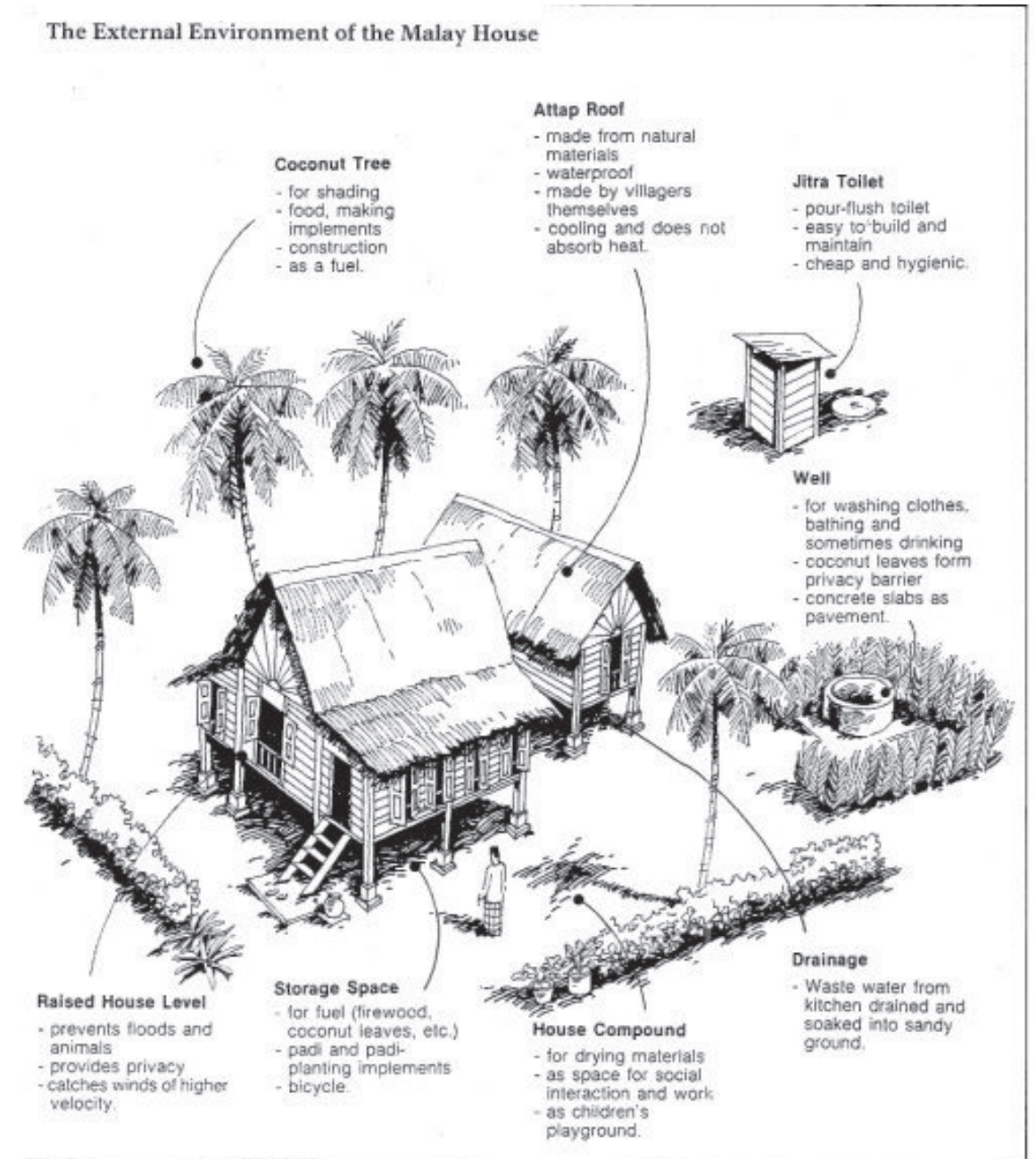


Fig. 3
The external environment of the Malay house. From *The Malay house: Rediscovering Malaysia's indigenous shelter system* (p.83), by Lim, 1987, Institut Masyarakat.

Use of Interior Space in the Traditional Malay House

Diagram shows some common activities in the Malay house. Spaces in the Malay house are multifunctional. The use of space changes at different times of the day and year. There are minimal partitions or interior walls in the house, allowing for the flexible use of space and for good ventilation and lighting of the interiors. Minimal furniture is used and most activities are done on the floor.

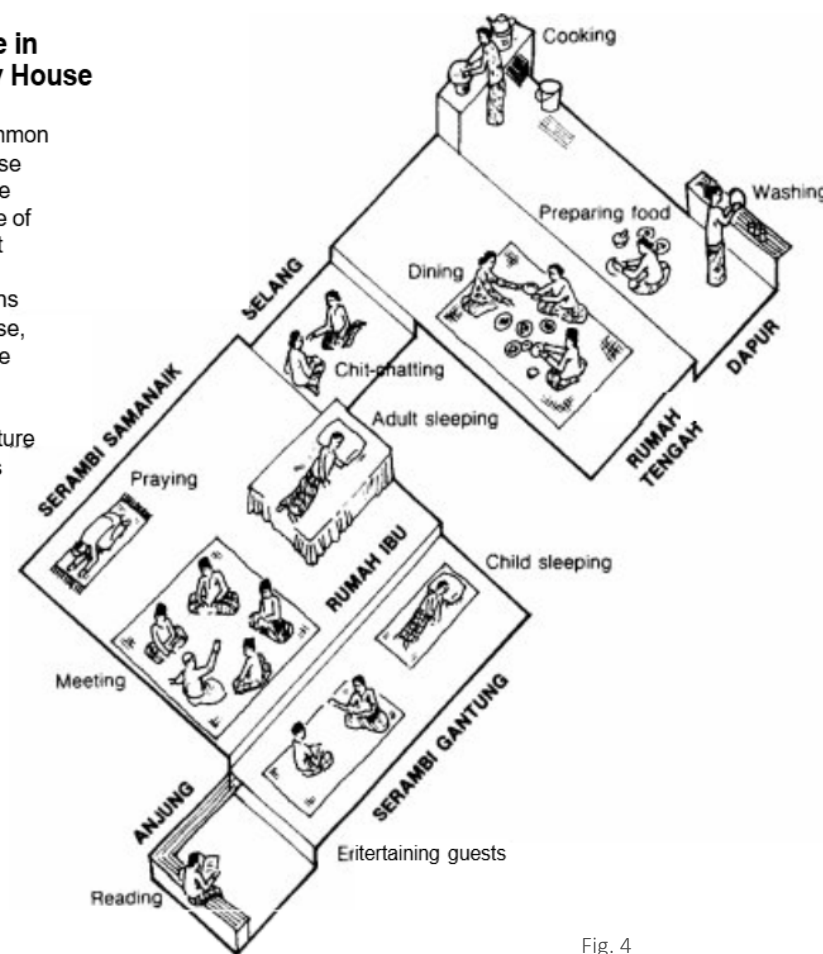


Fig. 4
Use of interior space in the traditional Malay house.
From *The Malay house: Rediscovering Malaysia's indigenous shelter system* (p.76), by Lim, 1987, Institut Masyarakat.

[10] JAFFAR & HARUN
Jaffar was a third-year landscape architecture student while Harun is a Assistant Professor and the supervisor of the referenced thesis, both hailing from the Department of Landscape Architecture, Kuliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia.

relaxation; while the backyard forms an extension of the kitchen as it traditionally sustains the activities of washing, cooking, bathing, and farming (Jaffar & Harun, n.d.)¹⁰. Similarly, Lim (1987) described the kampung compound as a well-swept area planted with vegetables and fruit trees, commonly of the coconut and banana variety. The compound became a place for social interaction, play, and work—with some activities being mat-weaving, drying, rice-pounding, and carpentry.

The series of images on the next page showcase the representation of the kampung through various forms of Malaysian media, showing a shared understanding and affinity towards the village and its setting in spite of multiethnic and multicultural roots stemming from different socio-economic backgrounds. It can be noted that in each figure, the familiar setting of the village is constructed by similar elements: ad-hoc stilt houses, the surrounding compounds and vegetation, and community. From left to right, top to bottom:

I

[11] ILHAM GALLERY
A public art gallery based in Kuala Lumpur which aims to support the development and enjoyment of contemporary art. It was founded in 2015 and funded by non-profit organisation YAYASAN ILHAM.

Fig. 5 An old advertisement promoting the Lichfield Ten Four Saloon by Borneo Motors Ltd. (1935). Fascinatingly, the image of a kampung is used in association with a vehicle. The company was based in Singapore and had several offices in Malaya at the time. The advertisement promises for “lasting beauty” in the vehicle it is promoting—and the use of the kampung as a backdrop helps to establish its authenticity as a local company. The prospect of a new car is, in this regard, just as attractive as the prospect of a typical Malayan village.

II

Fig. 6 A painting by Tsai Horng Chung (1961), titled ‘Village by the River’. Tsai was a Chinese-Sarawakian painter who was trained at the Shanghai Art Academy who then arrived in Japanese-occupied Malaya to reunite with his family in Sibul, Sarawak (Ilham Gallery, n.d.)¹¹.

Fig. 7 A drawing by Mohammad Nor Khalid (n.d.), also known as Lat, a famous Malaysian cartoonist who started off as a crime reporter for Berita Harian and a cartoonist for News Straits Times. His work, more prominently his books, focus on his recollections and experiences growing up in the kampung. His work is often described as “evergreen”, with Malaysians of older generations often using his work to showcase their kampung memories to the younger generation, who have not necessarily grown up in a kampung (Sim & Khalid, 2010)¹².

Fig. 8 A scene from a Malaysian children’s television programme, Upin & Ipin (2009), depicting characters playing in their rural village setting. Popular contemporary media play a role in preserving the memory of shared village origins and honing on the theme of rural nostalgia.

Fig. 5 Austin. From “Malaysia Design Archive”, by Austin Motor Company., 1935 (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/austin-2/>).

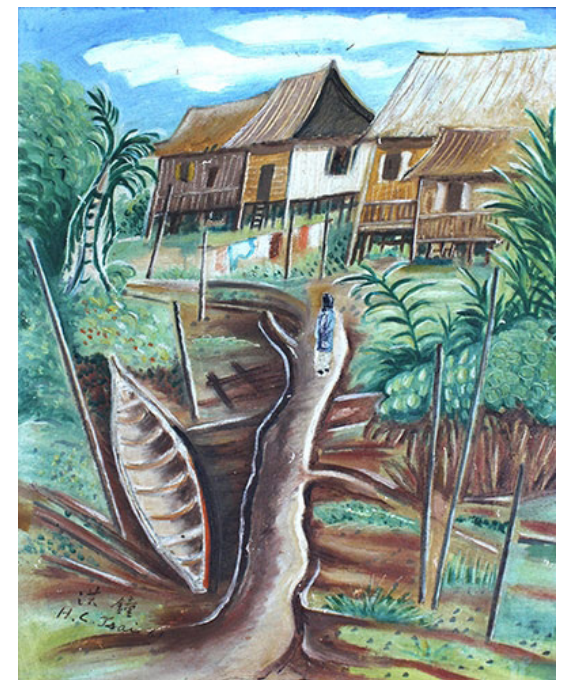
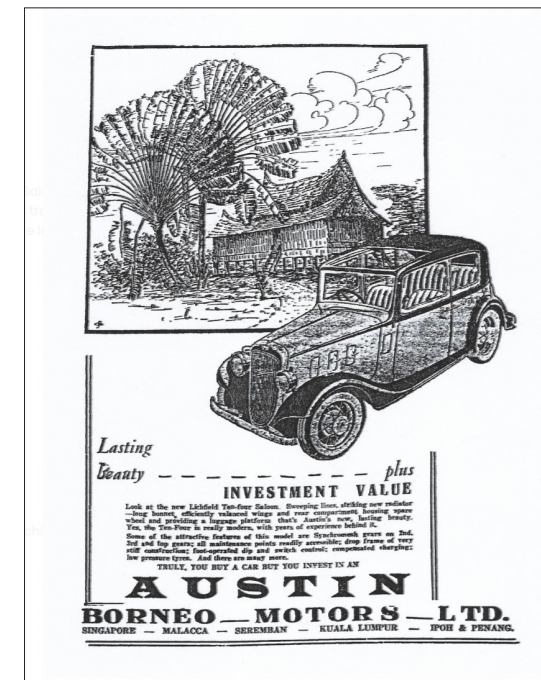
Fig. 6 Village by the river. From “Malaysia Design Archive”, by Tsai H.C., 1961 (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/tsai-horng-chung-village-by-the-river/>).

Fig. 7 [Illustration of a family gathering in a Malay village scene]. From “Free Malaysia Today”, by M.N. Khalid, n.d. (<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2025/02/03/when-the-kampung-boy-came-to-taiping/>).

Fig. 8 Note. Screenshot of an episode of the programme which shows the characters playing in a village. From “Upin & Ipin: Promoting Malaysian culture values through animation”, by D.B.A. Ghani, 2015, *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 20(1), 246.

III

[12] LAT INTERVIEW
This was taken from a preserved manuscript of an interview between journalist Joyce Sim and Lat, which was printed in an issue of Reader’s Digest in 2010.



IV



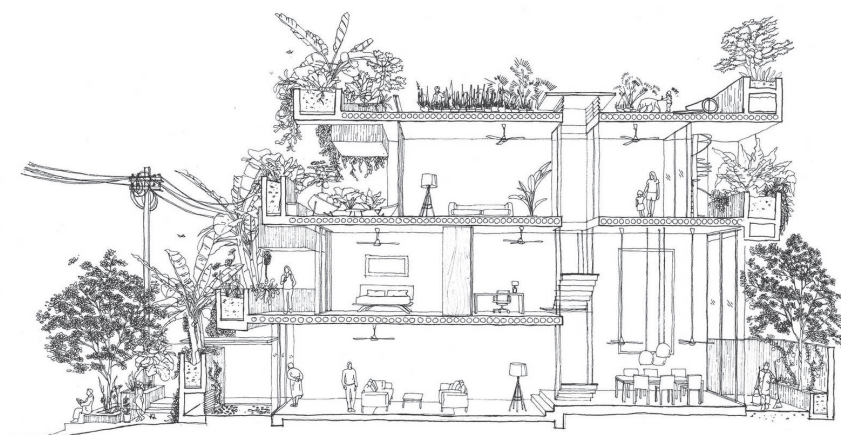


Then it was tea time for us. Usually we'd have either fried bananas or fried tapioca. Or boiled bananas...or boiled tapioca. But occasionally Mum would bake our favorite cake – kueh bengkang.



Mum baked kueh bengkang like this with a fire on top and below because we didn't have an oven. The cake is cylindrical in shape and made of rice flour, coconut milk, egg, and palm sugar.

Very tasty.



A Culture of Affordances, Folklore, Beliefs, and Rituals

This chapter further expands on this shared origin through an examination of the kampung lifestyle, and the ways in which distinct and deep-rooted cultural beliefs have shaped the perception of the garden, kitchen, and common household plants.

Affordances in the Kampung: Food, Object, and Play

[13] JAMES JEROME GIBSON
He was known as one of the most influential American psychologists of the 20th Century, whose most famous work focuses on visual perception. The cited book in the text is part of his later work, when he developed a more philosophical approach in his work in his critique of cognitivism in favour for direct perception and direct realism.

Life in the village can be perceived in the perspective of affordances, which is defined as the relationship between an object's properties and the way it can afford to be used by the user, which was first introduced by American psychologist James Gibson (1979)¹³ in his book, 'The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception'. This culture built on affordances can be observed in the village lifestyle through the interpretation of plants as food, object, and play. In this section, a small selection of common household garden plants are used as examples demonstrating how the quality of affordances have ultimately played a role in shaping a unique Malaysian perspective on plants and their uses.

The four images on the previous page illustrate an example of the relationship between the garden and kitchen through a very common plant that is typically grown in Malaysian household gardens: the banana tree. From left to right, top to bottom:

Fig. 9
[Illustrated comic page of two children playing in a village]. From "1Malasia", by M.N. Khalid, n.d. (<https://ecofrensatu.wordpress.com/2011/03/16/lat-a-sentimental-education/>).

Fig. 10
From *Kampung Boy* (1st ed., p.12), by M.N. Khalid, 1979, Berita Publishing.

Fig. 11
Sri Nirwana Maju (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia). From "Instagram," by A. Chu, 2020. (<https://www.instagram.com/annette.chew/p/B91bvg8lgY4/>)

Fig. 12
Section. From "Archdaily," by Formzero, 2017. (<https://www.archdaily.com/910200/planter-box-house-formzero>)

Fig. 9 A comic page by Malaysian cartoonist Lat (n.d.), depicting a typical village scene with a village house and plenty of flora in its surroundings. Amongst the lush plants, the banana tree leaves are a distinguishable motif of the tropical climate.

Fig. 10 An excerpt from *Kampung Boy* written and illustrated by Lat (1979), with the narrator telling a story about his mother's cooking practices in his childhood, in particular during tea time after school. The narrator talks about the norm of having bananas and tapioca as snacks. It establishes the relationship between people, place, and practices (mother, kampung, frying bananas) — while the reflections of the author reinforces the sentimental undertone of this intrinsic relationship.

Fig. 11 A photograph of nasi kandar¹⁴ served on a banana leaf (n.d.), depicting the approach of affordances embedded within Malaysian culture. The banana tree's lifespan and influence is extended by not only the consumption of the fruit, but also the use of its leaves. This culture of adapted plates is still practiced today, even in modern nasi kandar eateries as a means to establish authenticity.

Fig. 12 Sectional sketch of the Planter Box House by architecture firm Formzero (2019)¹⁵. The abundant use of banana trees communicate the concept of the house, which blends the garden and the internal living space. The clients were adamant on the use of the planters to plant flora species which sustained their food habits (ie. food garden).

The banana tree is undeniably a tropical motif in the world of botany, however the perception of both the tree and fruit are also ultimately shaped by their highly common uses in the daily life of the common Malaysian. Thus, the shared understanding of banana trees being a 'common tropical plant' has expanded into other definitions in the Malaysian lens, perhaps either

I

II

III

IV

[14] NASI KANDAR
A curry and rice dish originated by Indian-Muslim traders in Penang, with the word "kandar" referring to large bamboo poles used to carry containers of rice and curry across the shoulders.

[15] FORMZERO
A local architecture firm based in Kuala Lumpur, whose work focuses on the juncture of sustainable architecture, tropical landscapes, and the urban context.



Fig. 13
Kuih seri muka. From "Makan with Cherry," by Cherry, n.d. (<https://makan.ch/recipe/kuih-seri-muka/>)



Fig. 14
Weaving ketupat. From "Roots," by National Heritage Board, n.d. (<https://www.roots.gov.sg/ich-landing/ich/weaving-ketupat>)

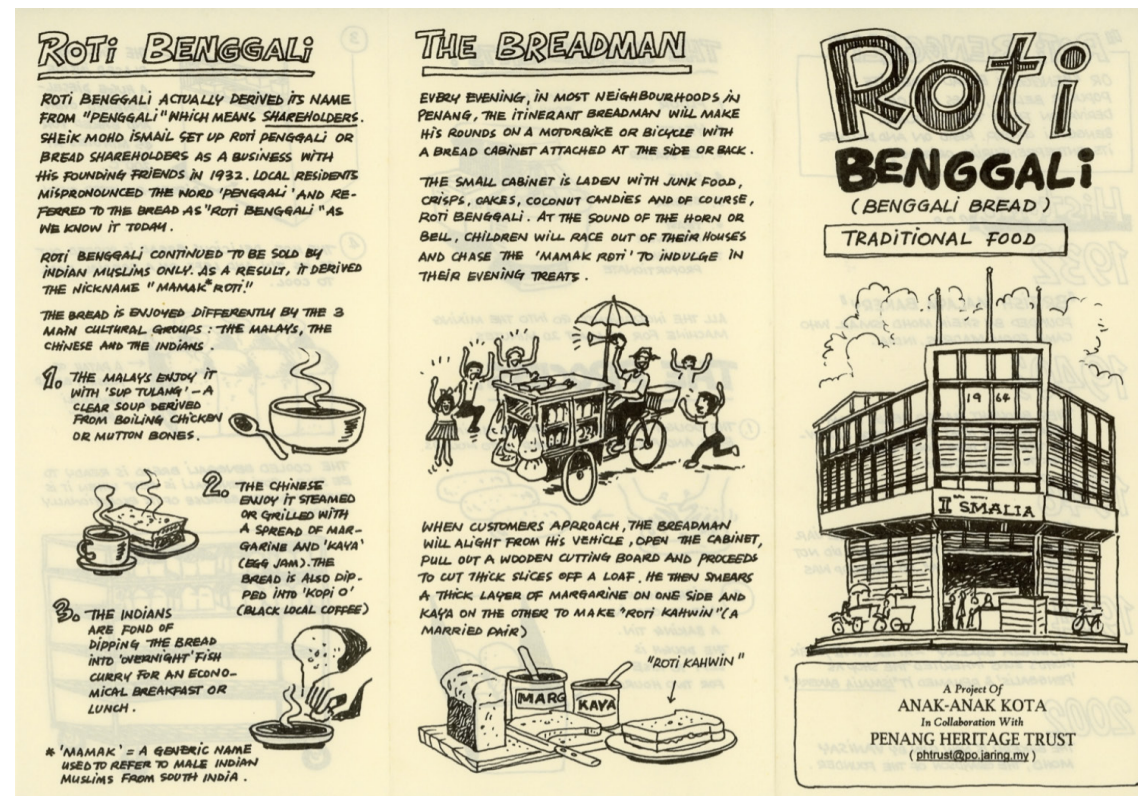


Fig. 15
Pandan-flavoured nasi lemak kukus recipe. From "The Bonding Tool," by S. Han, 2017. (<https://bondingtool.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/pandan-flavoured-nasi-lemak-kukus-recipe/>)

[16] ADNAN & OTHMAN
Both authors hail from the Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. At the time of writing the article, Normiadilah Adnan is a Master's student while Noriah Othman is an Associate Professor with a focus in horticulture and arboriculture.

as 'the fried snack I loved in my childhood', or the 'plate of our national dish', and so on. The motif has become so self-explanatory in the visual definition of a Malaysian garden that it is used in architectural drawings that prominently feature an edible garden as a concept.

This is also commonly documented across a variety of other plants as well, which is reflected in findings from Adnan and Othman (2012)¹⁶, who conducted a case study on Kampung Bharu, an urban village in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and documented the species of plants planted by residents in their gardens. Of particular note, the pandan plant is most commonly planted across their sampled residents due to its multifunctionality, being used in colouring food (Fig.13), packaging food (Fig.14), and flavouring food (Fig.15).



Folklore, Beliefs, and Rituals

Beyond the culture of affordances, the approach towards plants and the garden are also influenced by respective Malaysian cultural backgrounds. These beliefs are more so practiced and maintained within individual cultures rather than shared across all ethnic groups. Take, for example, the brochure on the left which depicts the history of Malaya Bakery and the story behind roti Benggali (Benggali bread), printed in Penang in 2001 to 2003 (see Fig. 16-17).

A bakery started by immigrants from Madras, India, the brochure mentioned the practice of planting mango trees next to the shop for the purpose of bringing luck to the establishment (see Fig. 17). In an interview conducted by Terry Foxx with Selvi Viswanathan (2023), an India-born native, Viswanathan suggests that the mango is culturally inseparable and auspicious in India. Other practices related to the mango include: hanging mango leaves over front doors for good luck during weddings or celebrations, and using mango fruits, leaves, and wood in Hindu ritual burnings. It is an upheld belief in Hinduism that the mango tree is the home of the gods.

The relationship between the Malay culture and plants is more commonly associated with medicinal purposes. However, Adnan and Othman (2012) ascertained that the reduction of medicinal plants being planted in Malay urban gardens is due to a loss of generational knowledge in traditional medicine, alongside the increasing trust in modern medicine amongst the urban community. They deduced that the most common plants that are planted for medicinal purposes in their survey of Kampung Bharu were pandan leaves, citronella grass (serai wangi), kaempferia (cekur), Indian pennywort (pegaga) and noni (mengkudu), which are all plants used for postpartum care. The study ultimately acknowledged an erosion of the intrinsic cultural relationship in the urban village setting.

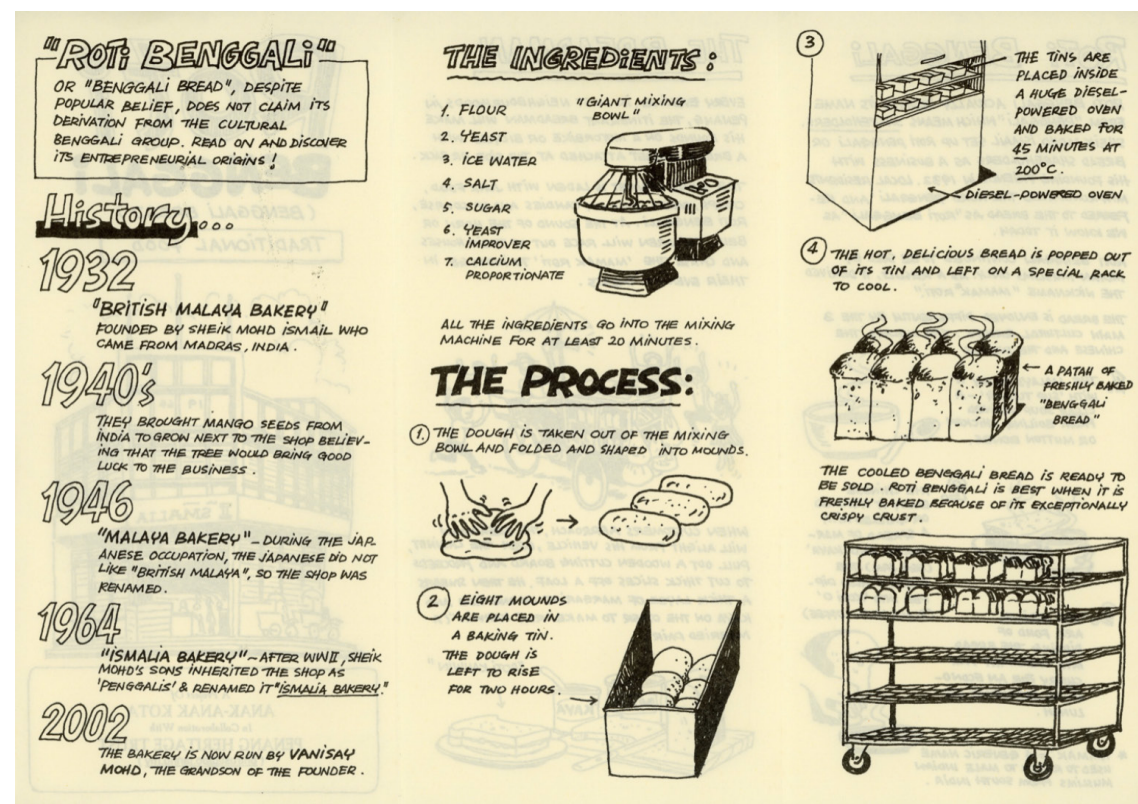
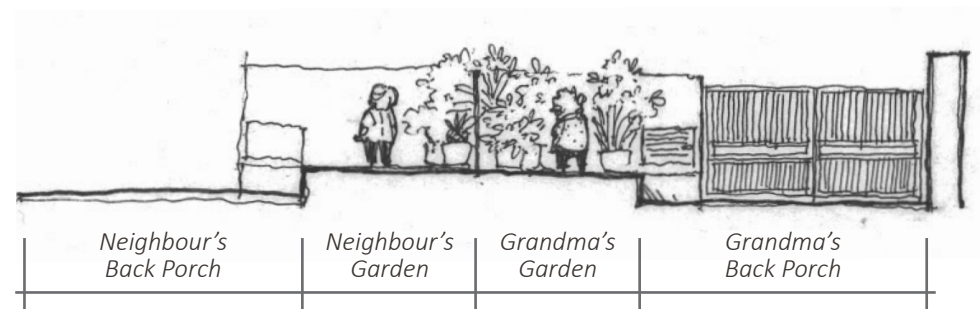


Fig. 16-17
Roti Benggali (Benggali Bread). From "Malaysia Design Archive", by Arts-ED, 2001. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/roti-benggali-benggali-bread/>).

Fig. 16-17



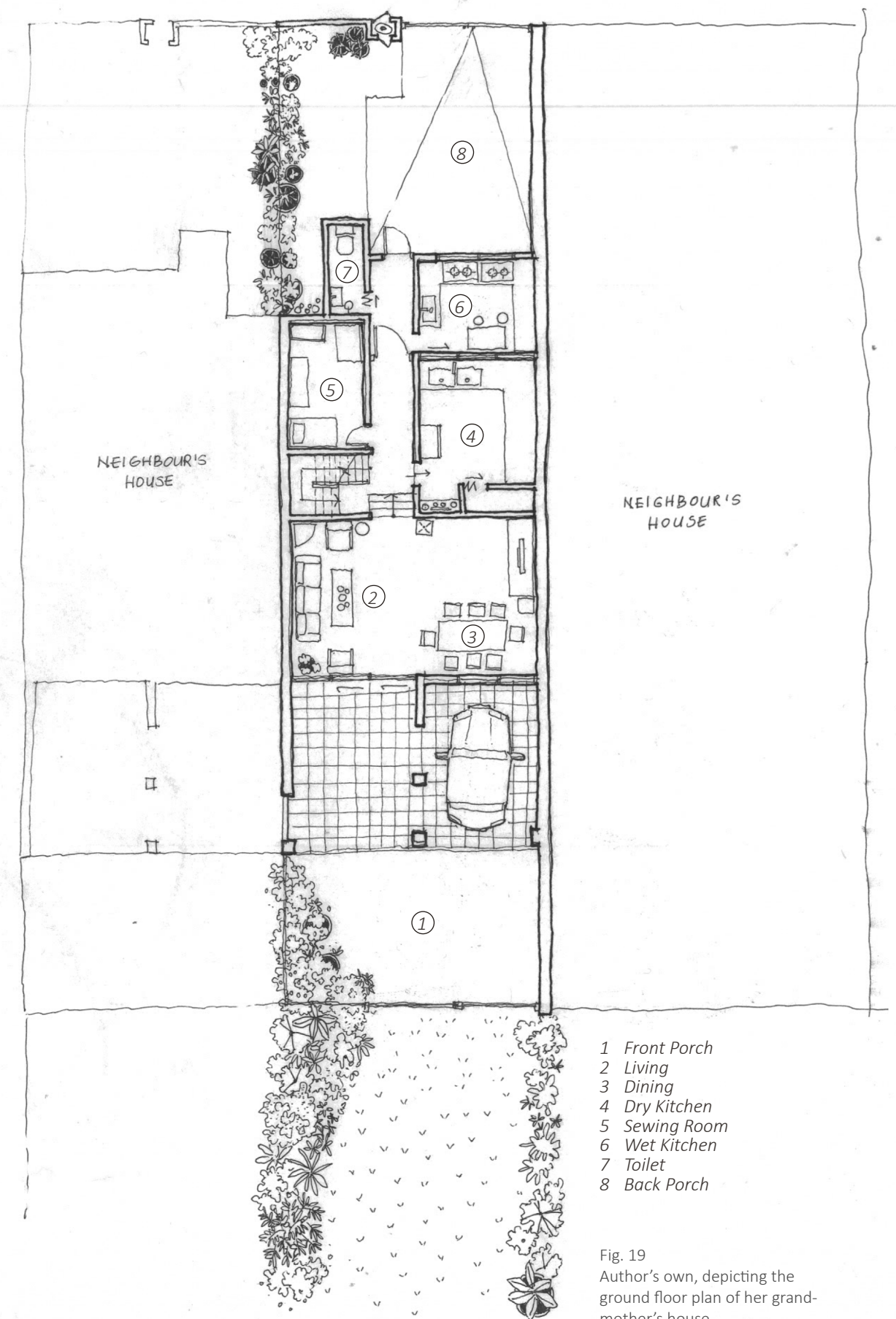
Stemming from the author's Chinese background, her grandmother's garden became a point of study in this thesis, and an observance is made in the relationship between the house garden, the grandmother, and her neighbour in the following story:

Pineapples

My grandmother was very close to her neighbour whom I've encountered unnamed for my entire childhood – to me, she was just "the aunty next door". Both houses were conjoined together and separated only by a partition wall. Both houses had a front and backyard, separated only by a wire fence acting as trellis for each neighbour's garden. Grandmother and the neighbour would spend most of their mornings and afternoons chatting in Cantonese while tending to their gardens – pruning shrubs, watering flowers. For the two neighbours, the garden became a spatial agent for interaction between a housewife and a widow.

I remember being in the backyard one day while my grandmother and her neighbour were busy tending to their gardens when the neighbour suddenly called me over and proudly pointed at a flower pot right by the fence – a young pineapple. The neighbour did not elaborate further on the fruit, but overtime I have come to learn that pineapples represent wealth, prosperity and good luck in Chinese culture. A culture enamoured with names, the simple pineapple (凤梨) is called ong lai in the Hokkien dialect, which almost sounds like ong lai (旺来), meaning "incoming wealth". It is for this reason that pineapple tarts have become a staple during Chinese New Year; perhaps it is common for households from rural backgrounds to make their own pineapple tarts, but my urban-suburban grandmother would very often purchase at least one basket of them annually for the grandchildren to snack on during family reunions. The simple pineapple has thus become an auspicious symbol (amongst many others) in Chinese culture – and thus it was likely the reason why it is favoured in the domestic gardens of Chinese households.

Fig. 18
Author's own, depicting a section through the back porches and gardens of the grandmother and neighbour's houses.



- 1 Front Porch
- 2 Living
- 3 Dining
- 4 Dry Kitchen
- 5 Sewing Room
- 6 Wet Kitchen
- 7 Toilet
- 8 Back Porch

Fig. 19
Author's own, depicting the ground floor plan of her grandmother's house.

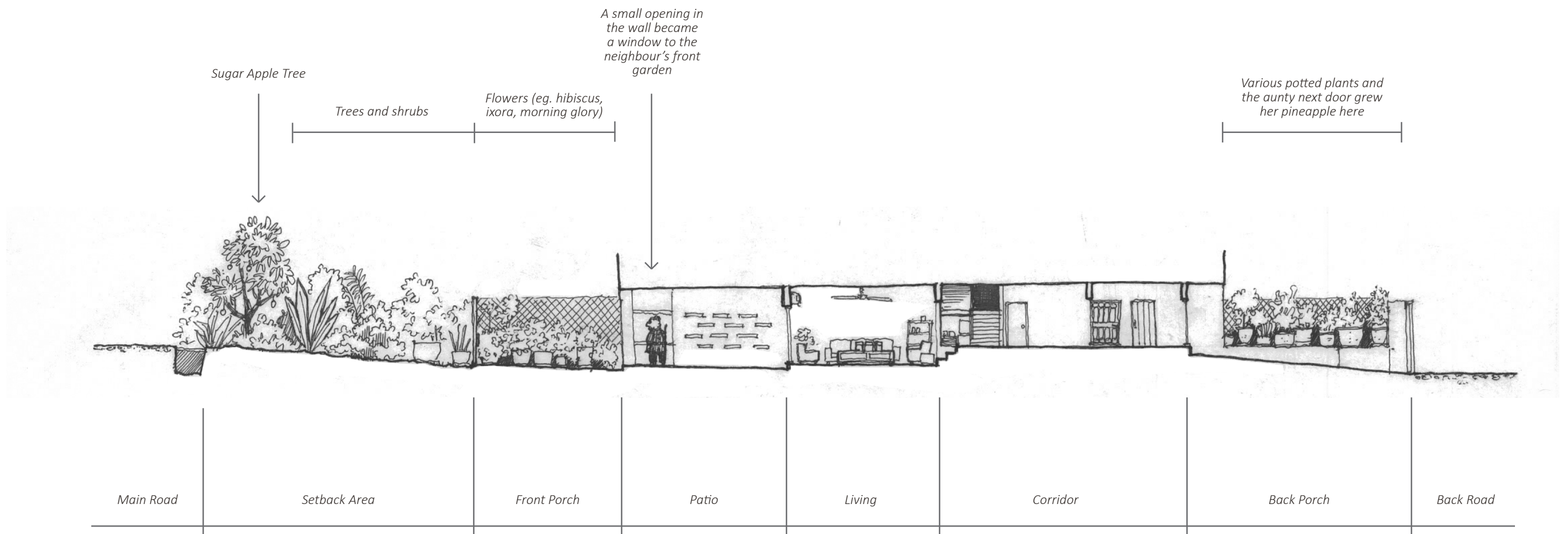


Fig. 20
Author's own, depicting a section through her grandmother's house.

A housing brochure by Malaysia Building Society BHD. (n.d.) featuring a house designed by TJ Kho. The idea of a suburban home, close to the city, became the new ideal.



Fig. 21-22
Home ownership booklet.
From “*Malaysia Design Archive*”, by Malaysia Building Society BHD., n.d. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/home-ownership-booklet/>).

Urban Migration

In this chapter, the domestic Malaysian garden transitions from the past rural kampung setting into the suburban-urban setting taking place in Kuala Lumpur and the greater Klang Valley. This relationship is reflected both from the home garden of the author’s grandmother, alongside other gardening experiences documented by Malaysians of various backgrounds. Furthermore, the suburban neighbourhood home is used to observe the ways in which the garden is integrated into this typology of dwelling.

Urban-Suburban Terraced Dwellings

With a growing economy and eyes on better prospects, people soon migrated out of their kampung dwellings towards the city, growing the urban-suburban landscape in Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley. Modernising the country called for rapid construction of new suburban neighbourhoods; the timber stilt kampung houses translated into a language of suburban terrace houses made of brick and clay tiles, often longitudinal in plan and separated by partition walls on either side.



Fig. 23
From “*New Straits Times*,” by S. Kaur, 2024. (<https://www.nst.com.my/property/2023/09/950954/road-rail-improvements-will-boost-demand-well-planned-projects-while-keeping>)

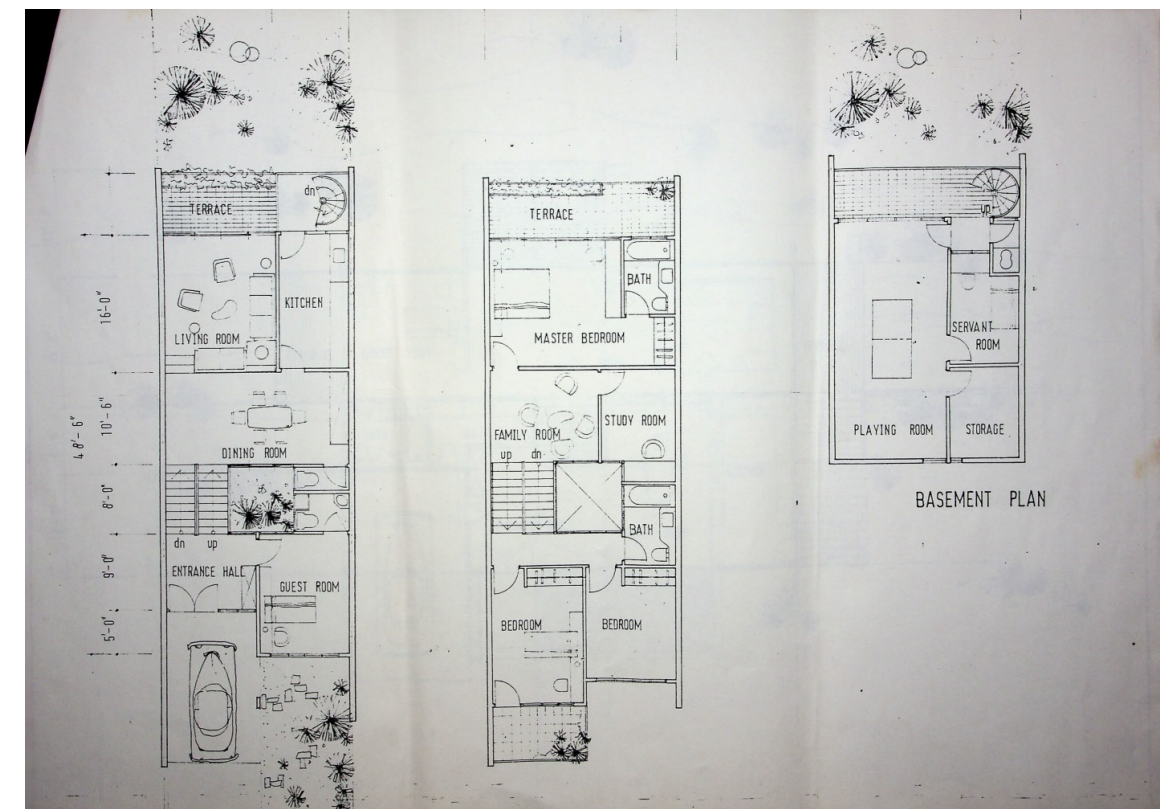
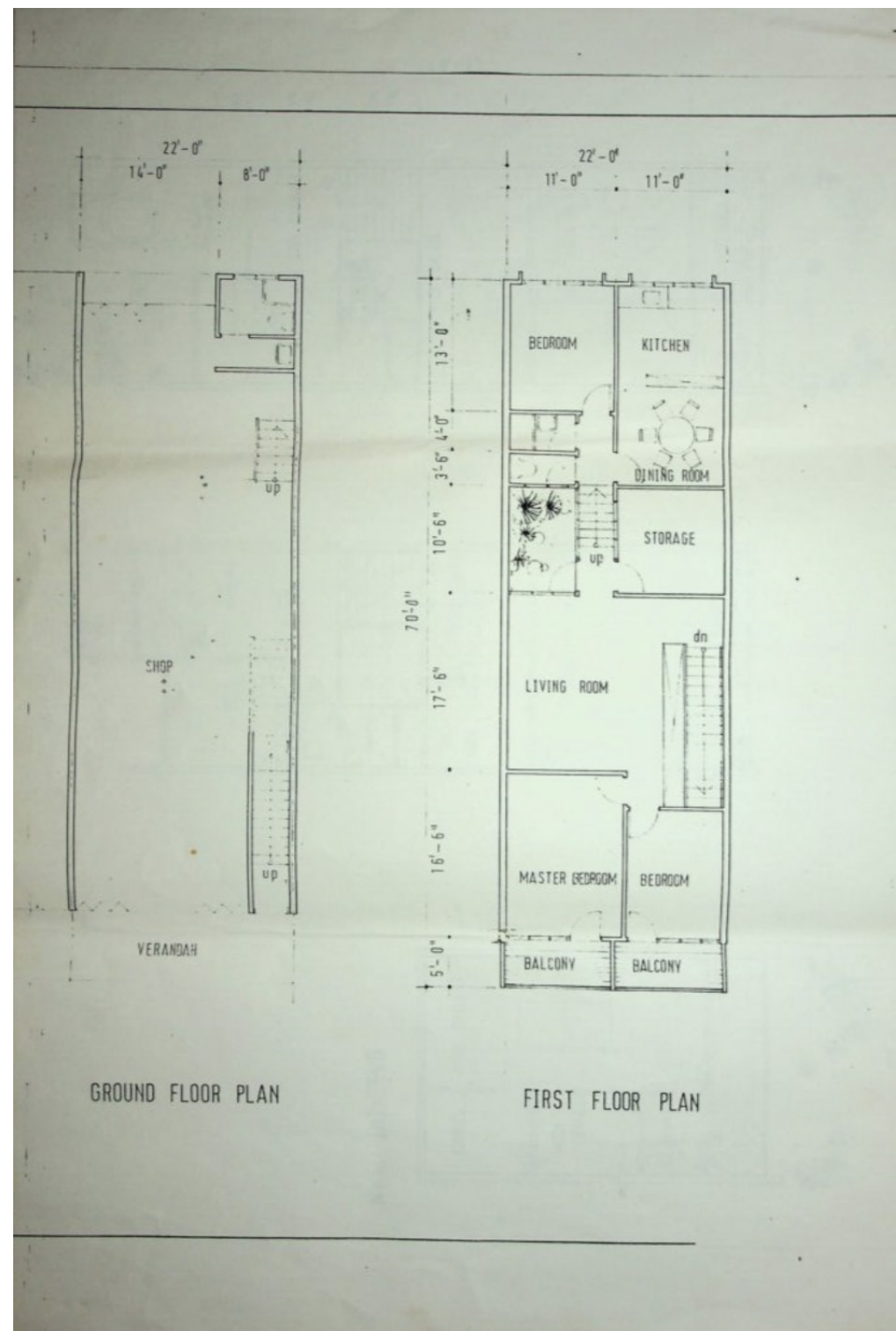
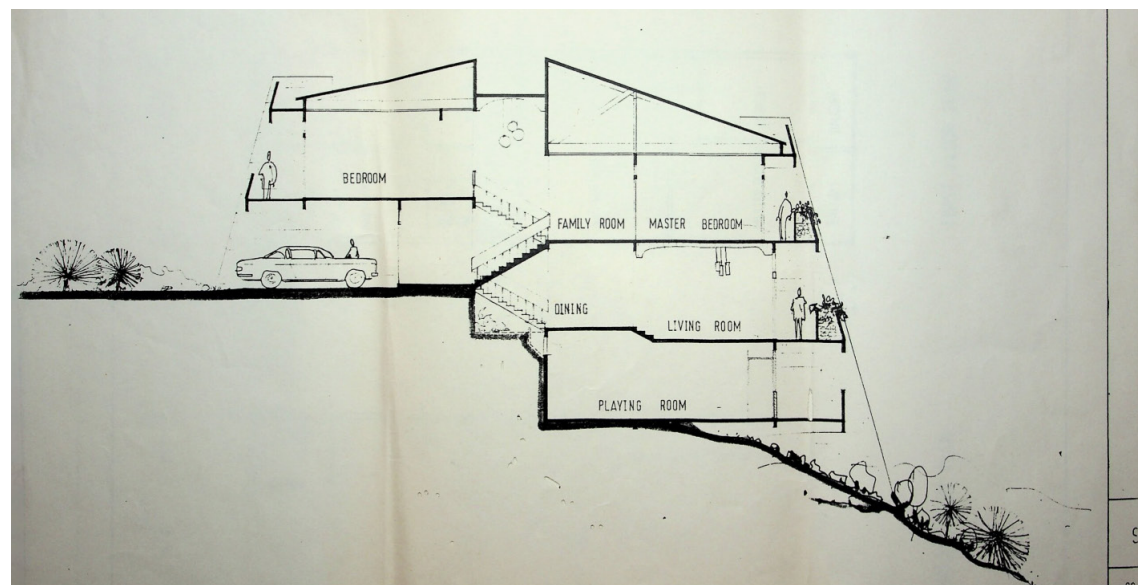


Fig. 24 (left) and 25 (above) Building plans. From “*Malaysia Design Archive*”, by T.J. Kho Chartered Architects, n.d. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/building-plans/>).

[17] SHOPHOUSE
An architectural typology integral to the vernacular architecture of Malaysia and Singapore, borne from the region’s British and Dutch colonialism mixed with Chinese aesthetics. They are typically categorised as long but narrow units and defined by the prominent five-foot-walkway fronting the building, and the internal airwell courtyard.

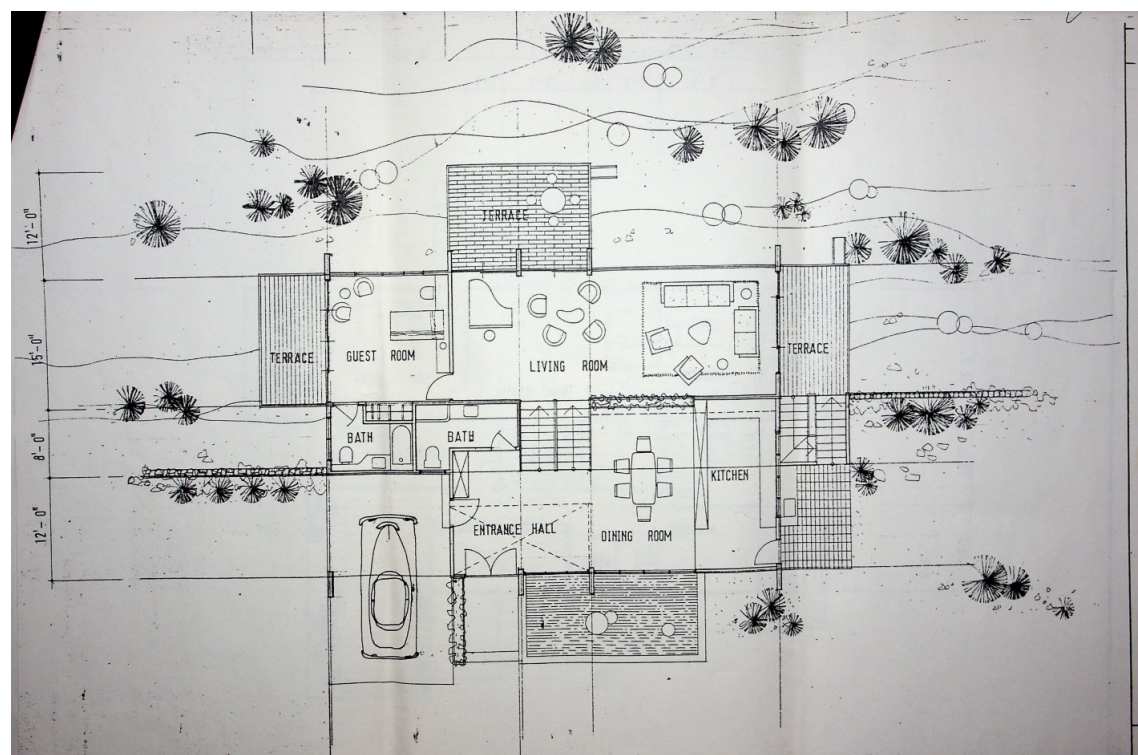
Take, for example, a set of preserved building plans by famed modernist architect firm T.J. Kho Chartered Architects (n.d.), who also designed, amongst other projects, the suburban neighbourhood Taman Paramount located in the district of Petaling Jaya (note that it is uncertain whether the following floor plans are all located in Taman Paramount).

The drawings on the left (Fig. 24) showcase a dwelling more akin to the shophouse¹⁷ typology which preceded Malaysia’s independence, whereby the ground floor is made public for commercial purposes while the upper floor is privatised residential. It can be noted that in spite of its elevated nature, a small garden pocket space is designed into the dwelling itself, in close proximity to the kitchen and dining room. The drawings above (Fig. 25) however, depict the typical terrace housing arrangement, albeit the inclusion of a basement plan suggests that the house is built along a hill (as depicted in Fig. 26)—it is nevertheless very common for the front yard and backyard spaces to be treated as car porches and garden spaces. The section drawing on the following page also suggests the use of planter boxes as a means to maintain the relationship between dwelling and “garden”.



Curiously, in spite of this change between the traditional kampung house into the suburban terrace house, the kitchen tends to maintain its indoor-outdoor relationship with the garden space, perhaps due to the culture of “wet” and “dry” kitchens in Malaysia (in Fig. 27, take note of the kitchen on the right side of the plan, and the immediate outdoor sink area). This spatial distinction is preserved due to the culinary culture in Malaysia which favours strong spices and flavours, which often produces strong odours during cooking—thus, the “wet kitchen” is often located outdoors.

Fig. 26-27
Building plans. From “Malaysia Design Archive”, by T.J. Kho Chartered Architects, n.d. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/building-plans/>).



Garden Snacking

For most urban dwellers who have detached away from life in the village, the use of the garden space remained largely either for aesthetic reasons or for day-to-day convenience rather than for ritualistic or medicinal purposes.

For my grandmother, at least, her garden became more of a catchment area for fruits and flowers she enjoyed growing. One of the fruits she grew were sugar apples (Fig. 28), which became the occasional snack when the fruit was ready to harvest—as per my mother’s recollection, it was grandmother’s favourite fruit. She likely grew them herself because they were hard to come across in the wet market she frequented. Flowers were also a staple in her garden, though I most poignantly remember the hibiscus, morning glory, and ixora flowers. The need for self-sufficiency in the domestic garden became obsolete with the convenience of commercialisation which the urban context offered. Thus, the practice of harvesting from the garden for the purpose of preserving cultural practices was not practiced as much in my grandmother’s home—though, sometimes, the ritualistic practices of cooking and preparing culturally-significant foods was still practiced, just with produce purchased from the nearby neighbourhood market instead. One such common example is the making of 汤圆 (tangyuan, or Chinese glutinous rice balls) during the Chinese winter solstice, or the preparation of 年糕 (niangao, or Chinese sweet rice cake) during the Lunar New Year.



Fig. 28
Annona squamosa fruit from Myanmar. From “Wikimedia Commons,” by Yarzaryeni, 2016 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annona_squamosa#/media/File:Annona_squamosa_fruit_from_Myanmar.jpg). Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Garden Balconies and Windows

Besides the suburban terrace house, people also shifted into high-rise dwellings in the form of apartments and condominiums. Lacking the physical space of a grounded garden, the unit's balcony becomes a fascinating point of departure as the treatment of the balcony often implied certain ways of living of the inhabitant. This became a subject of interest for Malaysian artist Wong Sze Yoong¹⁸, who, having grown up in a low-cost flat, frequently depicts the liveliness of the high-rise dwelling in the form of balconies and windows. There is a certain familiarity in these scenes—from the varying stages of dilapidation of the window grilles, to drying laundry, national flags, air conditioning condensers, television satellite dishes, and the makeshift garden formed by potted plants, either maintained or overgrown. From top to bottom:

Fig. 29 Acrylic painting, titled 'Behind the Grille' (2020), won the Gold award under the Emerging Artist category in the UOB Painting of the Year¹⁹ competition in 2020. Wong took inspiration from his own home, showcasing the sense of community through the subtle ornamental hints of the window grille (United Overseas Bank, 2020).

Fig. 30 A more recent painting, titled 'Life in the Neighbourhood' (2024), which similarly won the Usaha Tegas Heritage art competition in its 2024 cycle. The artist touches upon the multicultural communal aspect of Malaysian dwellings of this nature, while capturing the "spirit of resilience, shared history, and the lasting beauty of local traditions that shape this living space" (Wong, 2024).

[18] WONG SZE YOONG
A young local artist and painter who graduated in the field of fine arts from Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2019.

[19] UOB PAINTING OF THE YEAR
A prestigious art competition within Southeast Asia, which started in Singapore in 1982 and later expanded into Malaysia in 2011. It is hosted by Singapore-based bank, United Overseas Bank (UOB).

I

II

[20] USAHA TEGAS HERITAGE
An annual art competition held within Malaysia with an aim of promoting and preserving Malaysia's cultural heritage through the medium of art.



Fig. 29
Behind the grille. From
"UOB Painting of the Year,"
by Wong S.Y., 2020 (<https://www.uob.com.my/assets/web-resources/about/pdf/poy/2020-uob-painting-of-the-year-catalogue.pdf>).



Fig. 30
Life in the neighbourhood.
From "Usaha Tegas Heritage,"
by Wong S.Y., 2024
(https://d23rvx00wditgi.cloudfront.net/uth/media/uth-media/asset/pdf/digital-booklet_ut-heritage-2024-artwork-catalogue.pdf).



Fig. 31
I love Kuala Lumpur! The coolest city ever! Full of not just hidden gems, but cool hidden gems!. From "Instagram," by P. Stanionas, 2020. (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDye69G-plIM/>)



Fig. 32
yes we are open throughout the cny holidays. walk in. From "Facebook," by Kebun-Kebun Bangsar, 2022. (<https://www.facebook.com/kebunkebunbangsar/photos/pb.100078678824968-2207520000/3204990903064054/?type=3>)

The Future of the Kitchen-Garden

This chapter discusses the present state of the kitchen-garden relationship in domestic Malaysian households and the present-day implementation of gardens in dwellings. It calls to question the livelihood of the relationship between culture, kitchen, food, and garden moving forward through an investigation into several case studies of community and home gardens, and the ways in which they are used.

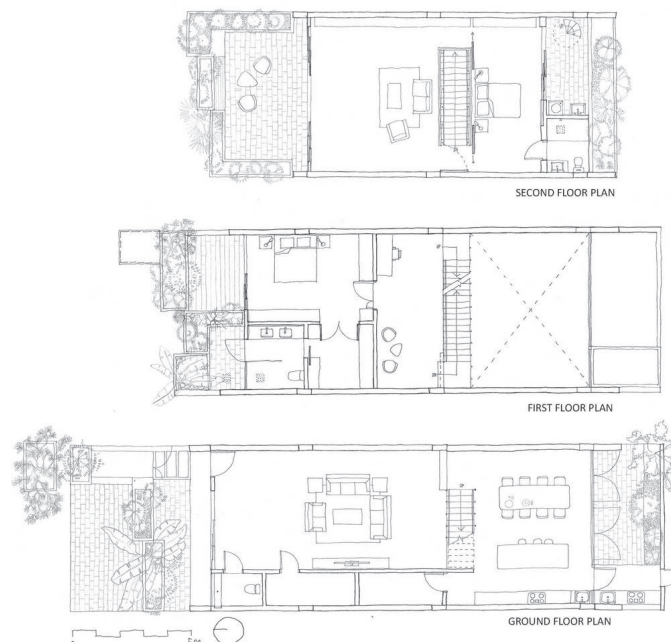
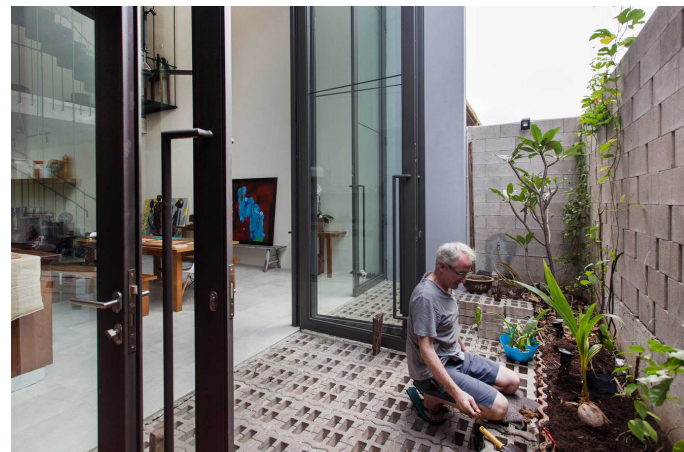
Urban Farms: Kebun-kebum Bangsar

Kebun-kebum Bangsar (lit. Bangsar Farms) is a non-profit community garden-cum-farming project led by Malaysian landscape architect Ng Sek San, whose personal philosophy on design focuses on blurring the boundaries between gardens and buildings (Tatler Asia, 2021)²¹. As a community garden, it is sustained by the residents of Bangsar with intentions of addressing the lack of open green spaces in Kuala Lumpur, the climate crisis, and food insecurity. Ng acknowledged the importance of eating in Malaysian culture, thus explaining the presence of a pizza oven built in the garden by a volunteer, which is used to prepare pizzas and breads using freshly-grown produce, thus sustaining the rural farm-to-table relationship. Children are taught on how to grow their own food via their education programmes, and residents of Bangsar also bring their own household organic waste to add to the garden's compost bin (MYND, 2021)²².

The organic and ad-hoc feel of the community farm resembles that of the kampung compound, with its boundaries defined by vegetation, and activity spaces being defined by placements of furniture rather than clearly defined plots of land. Furthermore, a Facebook video posted by local restaurant chain My Pizza Lab (2020) showcased a community pizza-making lunch event which, besides featuring the preparation of ingredients harvested from the garden, also presented the use of banana leaves as makeshift plates, preserving this nostalgic and cultural practice in the present day.

[21] TATLER ASIA
Touting itself as a magazine with a focus on luxury and lifestyle in the Asian context, based in Hong Kong but with a global reach extending to Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam. Ng Sek San was featured under Tatler Asia's annual list of "Asia's Most Influential MY" in its 2021 cycle.

[22] MYND
A journalistic YouTube channel which aims to highlight thought-provoking stories. An interview with Ng telling the story of Kebun-kebum Bangsar was featured.



Top to bottom:

Fig. 33-34
Planter box house. From
"Archdaily", by A. Deen,
2017. (<https://www.archdaily.com/910200/planter-box-house-formzero>)

Fig. 35
Plans. From "Archdaily", by Formzero, 2017.
(<https://www.archdaily.com/910200/planter-box-house-formzero>)



Planter Box House by Formzero

[23] DESIGN SEED
A YouTube channel
dedicated to the areas of
architecture and design and
showcases various architec-
tural projects across Ma-
laysia of various typologies.
The channel is hosted by
Malaysian content creator
and interior designer Alex
Lee, and operates under Nu
Infinity, a Malaysian interior
design firm.

Above, left to right:

Fig. 36 (left)
People feeding the farm
animals. From "Urban
Biodiversity Initiative," by
ShangMing, 2021 (<https://ubi-my.com/2021/04/27/case-study-series-kebun-kebun-bangsar/>)

Fig. 37 (right)
our myanmarese volunteers
gave us a delicious treat to
their version of laksa today
n it was absolutely yummy.
From "Facebook," by
Kebun-Kebun Bangsar,
2021 (<https://www.facebook.com/kebunkebunbangsar/photos/pb.100078678824968-2207520000/3166420846921060/?type=3>)

At the scale of the home, however, the relationship between the garden space and the dwelling interior is completely dependent on the user. A prominent, contemporary example of the garden becoming a strong feature of the dwelling is the Planter Box House by local architecture firm Formzero, completed in 2017. The reason for this project being particularly mentioned is due to the deliberate efforts of the clients in planting and growing plants and trees of foods they commonly consume (Lee, 2020)²³.

As observed in the building's plans and the section aforementioned in Chapter 3, the relationship of the garden in the front and backyards are maintained, but even more so throughout all the levels of the terrace house. And, much like the distribution of spaces in a traditional kampung house, the dining room and kitchen are located towards the back of the house, with the kitchen featuring both an indoor and outdoor component. Plants are planted in an ad-hoc nature alongside the deliberate design of the planter boxes being in irregular size and depth.

The Garden as a Bridge Between the Young and Old

For Kebun-kebun Bangsar, the community farm has become a space for the elderly and children to spend recreational time in, especially in the educational aspect for younger children. Perhaps this depicts the sentiment of the garden today, as some youth find the act of gardening as a commonplace for connection with the older folk.

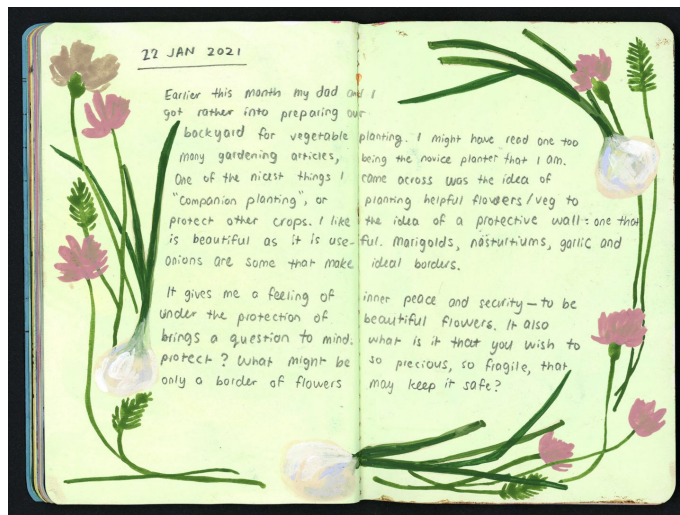


Fig. 38

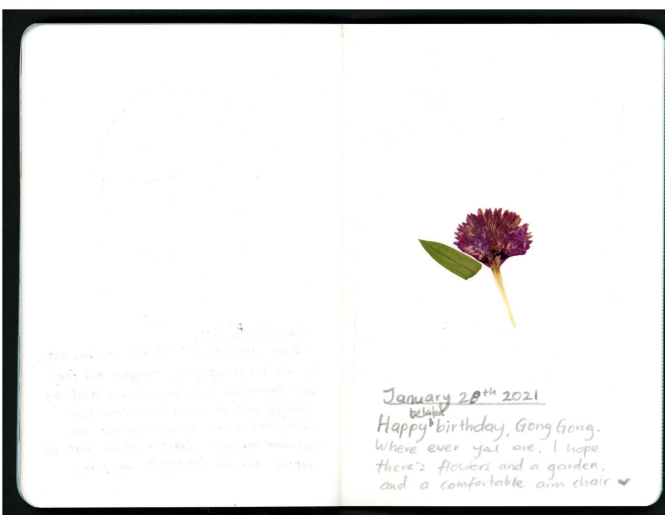


Fig. 39

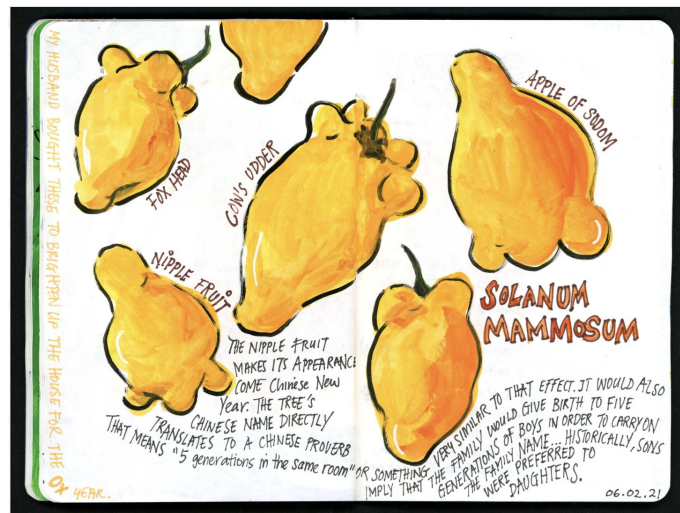


Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42

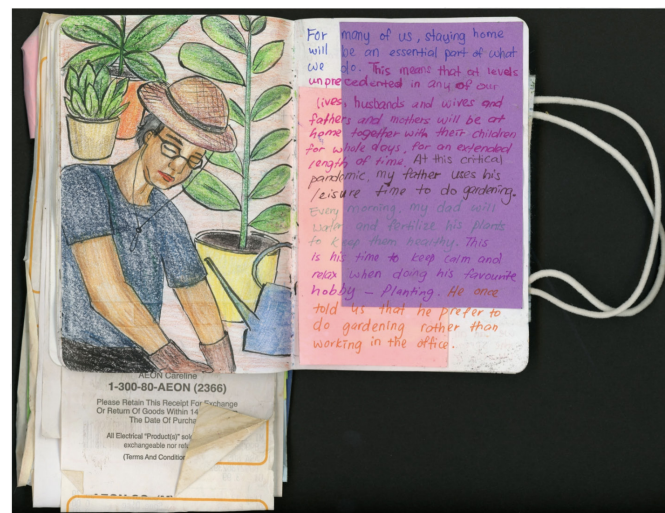


Fig. 43

[24] MALAYSIAN DESIGN ARCHIVE
An organisation focused on documenting and preserving the visual and graphic design history of Malaysia from the pre-independence era until today. It highlights the importance of archiving and the preservation of visual history.

The Malaysian Design Archive²⁴ hosted Projek 555, an open invitation for visual diaries made by Malaysians between 2020 and 2021, in order to document the voices of commonfolk during the pandemic, when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented as a control measure against the Covid-19 pandemic. Several sentiments surrounding the relationships between Malaysians and gardening, cooking, and food were documented in these diaries, displaying a revival of the garden space of sorts:

- I Fig. 38 By Joanne Loo (2021). Documenting the practice of gardening with her father and the process of learning.
- II Fig. 39 By Amrita Soon (2021). The author does not participate in gardening, but she associates the ideas of flowers and a garden as a tribute to her grandfather—perhaps suggesting that it was an activity and place her grandfather enjoyed the most.
- III Fig. 40-41 By Gladys Teo-Simpson (2021). The author documents the associations between certain fruits and foods with the cultural celebration of Chinese New Year. The author also documents her very first time making Sarawak acar whose recipe came from her mother, in line with Chinese New Year.
- IV Fig. 42-43 By Isabel Yap Ye Ern (2021). The author documents the impacts of the MCO period on her household activities, citing that her mother has started cooking on a daily basis while her father has rekindled his love for gardening.

Fig. 38
Joanne Loo. From "Malaysia Design Archive", by J. Loo, 2021. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/joanne-loo/>)

Fig. 39
Amrita Soon. From "Malaysia Design Archive", by A. Soon, 2021. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/amrita-soon/>)

Fig. 40-41
Gladys Teo-Simpson. From "Malaysia Design Archive", by G. Teo-Simpson, 2021. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/gladys-teo-simpson/>)

Fig. 42-43
Isabel Yap Ye Ern. From "Malaysia Design Archive", by I.Y.E. Yap, 2021. (<https://search.malaysiadesignarchive.org/item/isabel-yap-ye-ern/>)

Conclusion

Returning to the introduction, this paper was written with the intent of investigating the historical construct of cultural nuances of the domestic garden in Malaysian households, accompanied by the following research question:

“How have cultural and traditional practices shaped perceptions toward horticulture, food behaviour, and the domestic garden space from past kampung (village) dwellings to present urban-suburban households in Klang Valley?”

Perceptions towards gardens are varied and nuanced throughout different parts of the world. In West Malaysia, at least, this perception is influenced by the people’s rooted ancestral experiences of rural life shaped by a collective culture of affordances and respective cultural beliefs, which, overtime, has been translated (to a certain extent) into the urban-suburban lifestyle. Informality of space and the ad-hoc organic nature of the garden (or farm) and dwelling have overtime manifested in urban-suburban contexts of domesticity, while the spatial custom of distinct kitchens for different demands of cooking have managed to maintain the relationship between the garden and the kitchen through time. It is unfortunate that the cultural component of this relationship is observed to be somewhat severed—urban dwellers simply do not need to rely on their gardens to prepare certain cultural foods when these ingredients (or even the final food product) can be easily obtained as a commercial commodity in towns and cities—and it was this very observation which propelled the writing of this paper; this noticeable cultural erosion.

This thesis, in a way, also serves as a question to the discipline of architecture and the way spaces are perceived and analysed. There lies a superficiality when the physical construct of a space is unsupported by the localised, multidisciplinary and multidimensional perception of said-space—it seeks to argue that architecture is not limited to just three-dimensional spaces, but it also encompasses the performative aspects of rituals, beliefs, and practices surrounding the space. This was the reason behind the unorthodox methodology undertaken, as it sought to address a prominent research gap: whereby the topic of the Malaysian garden is one that is thoroughly-researched but remains in isolated disciplines, whether it be (landscape) architecture, ethnography, botany, cultural studies, etc., but there is a lack of nuanced depth presented when confined within these isolated perceptions.

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Image Credits

Fig. 2	Dobby, E.H.G. (1942). Panorama of a small Malayan town showing its rectilinear form and forest environment [Photograph]. Settlement patterns in Malaya. <i>Geographical Review</i> , 32(2), 211-232. https://doi.org/10.2307/210271
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Epilogue

After starting secondary school, I no longer had a need to frequent my grandmother's home as often as I once did, as my parents eventually figured that I was grown-up enough to take care of myself independently at our own home in between the time of school dismissal and my parents returning home from work. Since then, I only ever returned to my grandmother's home during family gatherings for festivities. During those times, she still tended to her garden, and prepared the usual cultural foods.

My grandmother's developing Parkinson's disease hastened at around 2019 to 2020. The loss of her agency for mobility eventually became a loss of interaction between her garden, and later her cooking. This, paired with the pandemic, significantly limited my visits to my grandmother's home. She would eventually pass away from her disease in December of 2023.

My mother never really had a penchant for gardening and farming, but she started to try her hand at growing simple herbs at home during the pandemic. Today, she still experiments with growing small herbs and spices in our own house garden, and is keen to eventually start growing chili peppers and okra in the near future.