Rethinking Ritual In The Malay House
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Submitted on January 26, 2016

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The interior of Villa Sentosa, Malacca traditional house, which is now the Malay Living Museum.
Ritual as prescribed by tradition has long been instrumental in defining the essence of ethnicity. It is governed by accepted rules, values and behavioral norms embedded in daily routine through repetition. Contemporary Malays have inherited rituals, dating since the 7th century, known as ‘adat’. The advent of Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century revolutionized the rituals to their highest mature state, defining the essence of ‘Malayness’ through its civilization; by strengthening the Islamic belief, Malay language and traditions. Nevertheless, modernization and cross-cultural influences have created multiple readings of rituals. Hence, contemporary Malays are paradoxical, both traditionalist and modern when it comes to the practice of rituals. This is due to the fact that Malay rituals are practiced in everyday life, rather than symbolically performed. This also implies a strong correlation between traditional principles and contemporary lifestyles. Perhaps it means that their root remains essential to Malays, despite their inevitable evolution along different living conditions.

The traditional Malay house is a living artifact of how rituals are framed in space. Through its layout the notion of rituals is projected in everyday routine, preserving Malay values and manners. In the past, the house allowed Malay to be ‘decent’, in terms of social life, domestic culture, ethics, and religion. Gender segregation and sitting rituals have been since then the most important rituals projected in its interior layout. This has remained almost the same for 400 years, while its exterior façade absorbing various influences. Therefore, rituals embedded into the daily life result in persistent spatial qualities, regardless of a house’s location or stylistic influences. The evolution from the traditional house to a modern high-rise apartment has triggered multiple critiques regarding the performance of rituals. One may think that a generic modern layout allows the practice of ‘zero’ rituals. Yet, it allows rituals to be transposed into ordinary domestic objects framing the life of its inhabitants. This phenomenon is explicit in analytical studies of modern Malay apartments, where furniture and everyday objects are re-appropriated to suit rituals.

Hence, this project is a manifesto that intends to canonize ordinary objects as ritualistic artifacts, fully acknowledging Malaysia’s contemporary modern context. The modern Malay house -now in an urban setting- becomes a background platform that allows the individual to perform rituals through singular objects. Three scenarios based on the daily life of a modern Malay family are created as representations of specific rituals.

The first scenario -‘Who Is Your Best Friends?’- is a story of two ‘serambi’ or reception decks, arrange oppositely in regards to the central corridor of ordinary Malaysian apartment. The object aims in one aspect in particular, to draw an explicit line of guest segregation, and implicitly marked the gender separation. The attributes between the two ‘serambi’ create an anomaly, as one stood open and the others find its place behind a glass frame; one promotes barefooting before the main door and the other allow you to walk passed the door with your shoes. The oppositions between open and close gesture demonstrate different levels of social degree and sense of respect between the two families, justifying the variance of semi-public and semi-private space, friends and best buddy. Various positions between the two ‘serambi’ compliments social relation in the Malay society. Once the relation getting closer, the thought behind gender segregation is becoming relevance.

The second scenario ‘Secret Recipe’ portrays an island kitchen cabinet that highlights the essence of sitting rituals in Malay dining etiquette. The object aims in questioning various implications of rituals on the Malays’ dining etiquette. The duality of kitchen surface allows the sitting rituals to represent specific routine. Beginning from a sitting platform for preparation, the surface is converting into cooking countertop, which then transforming into dining table and finally dining platform. In the preparation zone, the platform accentuates the Malays habits in preparing food collectively. Meanwhile in the dining area it encourage the culture of eating food by hand. The fact that it is a centralized kitchen criticized on the rituals of gender segregation, as it moves beyond its encapsulate domain to a universal space. However, its flexible compartment made the decency appears. Hence, for Malays, the secret of being ‘decent’ is always initiates from the kitchen, as this is the place where a mother moulds her children.

Finally the third scenario -’Hide & Seek’- which represented by the curtain, becoming a design element for children’s room. This object intends to substitute the internal wall, and provide possible expansion for a bigger family. The curtain acts as veil. It highlights the seclusion of genders among children, as well as making enclosure to the most private zone in a house, which is the bathroom. At the same time, its attributes may integrate two open spaces. The opposition between seclusion and integration create a meaning towards privacy and respectability. Hence, the curtain is the ultimate instrument of rituals, as it blurring it beyond its purpose. As for the children, the more you hiding something, the more they are going to seek for it.

As such, the manifesto is a critical tool in order to rethink the position of rituals in the modern Malay house. The scenarios may be exaggerations of reality, however this allows Malays to realize that rituals are part of their daily routine, no matter where and when they are performed to sustain the agenda of ‘decent’ Malay.
Figure above shows the village or 'kampung' living as portray by Malaysian cartoonist, Lat.

SOURCE: Kampung Boy, Muhamad Nor Khalid 1979
Additional Possibility study for the Malay traditional houses.
Design and layout

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.

Interior space of the traditional Malay house.
The analysis of the traditional custom derived from the traditional house and transpose into the modern context of housing.
Pachik was my near
neighbor. He had three children;
the younger had just left
primary school. His wife, 25 years
old, worked in a factory. But we did
not hear from a while. Pachik was a
kind person. He didn’t talk much,
but always brought us a nice country plane.

Many people were invited tonight. I did
not know Pachik, who lived in front of my house.
But one early morning, I didn’t spot any of his
appearance. The glare of his beacons’ lights blinded my
view. Perhaps he was inside his house.
Ishani and his family finally arrived. It has been quite a long time that we haven't met like this. Neha, my wife stood there at the main door, while waiting for Ishani's wife, Abishah and their daughter, putting their shoes at the shoe rack.

Rahul, our neighbour was the first person to be here. Sitting at the verandah, Rahul really enjoyed the evening breeze, with a cup of coffee.

Luckily, I shared my araniki with Rahul, who had the same type as mine. I can always ask for his favours if I need more space, especially when I hold a 'banjir' like today.
Although Victor's family was poor, something for sure that his teenage children always making some noise. Well, you know teenagers. But I might shut my door because it is not that comfortable for me.
If Rustam is my next neighbor, perhaps I cannot have the same help as I had when I was giving them. Simply because his door was fully closed.

8:00 p.m. - After dinner prayer, the man hit on the grandma and grandma inside. The best part is that, Rustam was very happy and he was not alone as he was coming with his family. Perhaps this is the best moment to get to know each other more.
After a year, I managed to renovate my house a little bit. This time, I got a nice kitchen that suited my style. Ever wonder how I came out with this idea, but it fit well in my apartment.
Takemi, my husband’s friend, came to our new house for work. It was early in the morning and my daughter was helping me for the house warming feast tomorrow.

It was quite unpleasant working in an open kitchen when the guests had dinner. Even my husband had the same thought as well.
There was an intention to create a smooth flow of cooking process: from preparation till dining. So, I requested a 'hole' at my partition. My kids always pop through it.

I'm smiling. When Ahmad always says: "Mom, why did you make this hole, when I just can see your hand, but not your face?" I guessed one day he will understand it.

It's not decent when children sit with the elders, hearing and interrupting their conversation. So, whenever my parents were writing me, I will ask my kids to have their meal at our nice dining platform.

Sometimes, I cannot resist myself to join them as well, as I recalled both my childhood memories.
Sometimes my cousin played, Fish Long, Fish Long, Fish Long. He came to my house and here comes the problem. My dining table was not big enough to cater for a huge crowd.
I loved my 'room' so much. It was a big space that I shared with my brother, Ammar. My two sisters occupied the other space, which still snuck my room. Whenever I needed them, I just pushed my curtain, and called them. Sometimes, I did encroach their space. Fatimah, my eldest sister will be mad of me. She will chase me around the house.

My grandparents also stayed in my 'room'. They have their own space next to me. So, whenever they pay their visit, they will stay there. I love to listen to their story. If I wanted to, I can just flip my curtain, and I'm with them!

Wake up in the early morning was difficult for me. My curtain was not strong enough to hold the 'arafa' of my mother, as she sneaked inside with her 'ihat' everyday. So, at 5:00 am, my siblings and I will be prepared for our first prayer of the day.

As we always performed our prayer together, we always used grandma's space and prayed. Dad will always opened the curtain, as wide as he can and gathered the rest of us at women's prayer space.
Manifesto 3: Hide & Seek

Normally, dad was the 'mom', but if grandpa was around, he would lead the prayer.
Save my sister left for boarding school. Hamo and I were occupying their spare as Dad started to create his workshops in our 'room'.

I noticed that every night, my parents would surely check on us, whether we were asleep or not. Perhaps my sisters were very well lived according to their schedule, but not for me. I would pretend that I was asleep, once they were gone, and everything silent. I was crowded and grabbed by torch and started reading.
Grandma's spare also being converted to a wedding room for my mother's youngest brother, which I referred to as "pau Cik".

If there were guests in our house, mother would ensure that the curtain was tightly closed, so that nobody can peer through it, especially at the bathroom's entrance.
Visualizing Manifesto in Low-Rise Development
Visualizing Manifesto in Mid-Rise Development
Visualizing Manifesto in High-Rise Development
The Traditional Malay House is a documentation of the origin and the evolution of the Malay traditional houses in Malaysia. The author describe the traditional house as a simple hut with pillars and roof sheltering the occupants, constructed by woods which are tied together, resembling the earliest method of construction. This however changes due to the blooming of knowledge encounters by the Malay as the trading exchange through out the archipelago. A new method of construction evolved, thus constituted towards a layering of ornaments, belief, and power that is vital in the traditional society.

The author also describes the varieties of Malay traditional houses in Malaysia and the elements surrounded each of the structure. Basically, the traditional house is base on three elementary objects; the pillars, the walls, and the roof. It applies the concept of men’s life; birth, life and death, or the fragments of the body of man; legs, body, and head. This belief derived from animism culture inherited by the Malays before the emerging of Islamic religion that influence the life of the Malays. Hence, the Islamic teaching has inspired towards the spatial arrangement of the houses, whereby separation between genders is an absolute rules that dictate the interiors and the used. Here, base on the diversity of the houses, the author try to extract the ideology of the Malays into a common platform that serve as a basic principle of the traditional living.

The emergence of colonialism era has again affecting the form and introducing new material for the houses. Malays were adapting into the colonial construction methodology that change several elements; the roof, positioning of bathroom, and a hybrid mode of construction in between woods and bricks. The interiors are no longer an open space but consist of rooms that identified a more specific function. The author outlined the elements in order to define the alteration and adaption by the Malay society that contributes towards the current modern scheme inhabited by Malays.

This article is base on the research on the privacy perspective of the Malays in the current modern housing inhabited by them. The issue rise due to the booming of property sector in Malaysia especially in Kuala Lumpur, built in a large scale to the extend of satellite city stressing commodification and generic spatial planning that had overlooked on the aspect of heritage and traditional values used to mold the Malaysian society. Here, the authors are documenting a survey of satisfaction of the Malays family, in relation to the modern context and the traditional value embedded in their daily life. Malays has become the subject of the authors, as it constitute as the majority ethnic of the Malaysian, and the origin ethnic of the Malaysian peninsular.

The analysis is constructed by outlining the ideas of traditional living of the Malays, whereby it is captured in the essence of Malay traditional houses. Several values that are rational within the Malay and the Islamic value become a principle in justifying the living condition such as the separation of gender and how the traditional society perceive the concept of privacy. In defining privacy, the authors also made up cross-cultural references of the westerners perspective and the oriental perspective. By defining this concept, the authors describe privacy in Malay as a collective privacy; in relation to family privacy and society privacy within a certain spatial condition, and not a singular privacy defined by westerners.

The methodology of the research is base on survey, constructed through multiple modern planning of housing in Shah Alam, 30km from Kuala Lumpur (a city with seventy percent Malay population). This planning was given to certain participants, in order to extracted their opinion and lifestyle. Thus, it was found through the survey that most of participants required a ‘serambi’, or reception area that separated the guest and the family, which is not part of the modern housing planning. The existence of ‘serambi’ shall create a line of privacy, in terms of social relation between genders, providing a safety zones and guarding the exposure of ‘aurat’ or ‘the intimate part’ especially by the woman family members. This ideas is in parallel with the originality of the Malays traditional housing, and an evidence of the rational of the traditional values in the modern context.
The Kampung Boy is a story of a young boy known as “Mat”, living with his family; parents, sibling and grandparents, in a small traditional house situated within the ‘kampung’ or village environment in the state of Perak in Malaysia, in 1950. It is a caricature, documenting the lifestyle of the Malays and the rituals and values practiced by Mat’s family, commencing before he was born, through his childhood life and his teenager’s experience. The authors demonstrated the lifestyle by observing the scenario captured in the daily life that constitute towards the Malay society.

The lifestyle is not only revolving in human attributes, but it also represented through the apparatus, an ancient relics that associated with the lifestyle; traditional torch during the night that assists reading during the night, cooking in the kitchen, dining and spark the fireworks during festive season. The authors also describe Malays in its traditional costume; ‘sarung’ and ‘baju kurung’ for woman, ‘baju melayu’ for man, ‘kopiah’ during praying. Hence, this relics contributes to the main activities and rituals such as; ‘mengurut’ or massaging pregnant woman, circumcision process, wedding ritual, ‘berendoi’ as a celebration for newborn baby, Al Quran recitation. These activities demonstrated values in the Malay society and how they perceive their social life that impacted the modern condition today.

The author also describes the organization in the Malay society. The family institution plays an important role in defining the teaching of both Malay and Islamic values. The community becoming supporting character towards the main actor, showing how the values are practically applied in a society realm which becoming a precedent study of the Malay culture. Hence, it is obvious that the author not only capturing the memory, but also the Malays lifestyle to its original condition that becomes a vital evidence in creating the modern society of the Malays.

The authors justified a building as a social objects which is not primarily art, technical or investment object. This is by the fact that a building represented certain relation towards society, which is governed by two idealistic social relation; power and unconditional bond relation. This is evidence that has been outlined by the authors through a historical timeline that represented forces of structuring a building; the secular power of palaces, extended into the public realms and the emerging of new industrial building. However, this building may establish certain freedom and control towards the society that make it as ultimate tools in shaping the society.

The classical details govern the architectural language of a building, through verbal and graphics and become an exporting object to many colonies around the world. Hence, this object resulted on the experience of modernist movement that stands by the concept of form, function and space. Here, the authors derived a methodology in defining forms and function within the classical building and the modern context. This justifying the roots of the original power and how it is perceive as an element that controlling the social aspect.

Hence, base on the analysis, the author derive a new order, a collection of spatial knowledge, whether it visible or invisible into the production realms that become a point of conflict between art, humanism aspect and the technology. The author also defines the condition that lead towards a building, an investment condition and intention between the builder (architect) and the initiator (client) that creates a justification on the end user.


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