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Rumah Ibu – An Analysis on Concept and Function

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Abstract

The layout and functions of 'rumah ibu' in a traditional Malay house design which once characterize the socio-cultural community now was less inherited by the current generation. Perhaps it is inappropriate or incompatible with the lifestyle in this modern age. The importance and role of this space in the formation of the family institution has been proven in the Malay heritage architecture. However, most modern Malay tends to model more of the foreign architectural design mainly from the west. Pride conscious, westernization characteristics as well as underrating the ethnic Malay native elements have deteriorated the identity that leads to the confusion and identity crisis. Hence, this study was undertaken to assess whether the concept of 'rumah ibu' is relevant and suitable to be applied in residential and modern way of life towards upholding the Malay resilience today. This study is carried out using document data or text and image analysis methods. This study aimed at identifying the basic principles that support the importance of 'rumah ibu' to the community and its relationship with the formation of national identity. The results of the study are to reveal the concept and the importance of 'rumah ibu'. Some practical approaches would be suggested towards the establishment of the family institution and the nation dignity.

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Key-word: - traditional Malay architecture, Rumah Ibu, concept of space and sustainability of the Malay architectural heritage

1. Introduction

The significant role of 'ibu' (mother) in the Malay community is proven in the usage of phrases like 'ibu pertiwi' (nation), 'ibu negeri' and 'ibu negara' (capital), 'ibu pejabat' (headquarters), 'ibu jari' (thumb), 'ibu roti' (yeast) etc. Even the religion of Islam throughout its verses of the Holy Quran and Al-Hadith (Prophet's PBUH sayings, actions and tacit approval) that commemorate the status of mothers on a very special position and important in an

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institution of the family. In the context of a house, the traditional Malay community had named the main space of the house as 'rumah ibu'. According to Kamus Dewan; 4th Edition (2005), 'rumah ibu' terminology has the meaning of the master's main space (or living room) and close relatives. This meant the space element is very important and influential in the traditional architecture to the point that the connotation of 'ibu' had been combined with the word 'rumah' (house). On this foundation that the space is essentially needed to be researched, thus to discover the value and uniqueness which are hidden behind the literal expression.

2. Issue and Problem Statement

The Malay community lifestyle has been changed as a result of modernization. Fascinated and engrossed with high-tech in the lives of modern Muslim Malays make them giving less attention to high-touch. Human relationships decreases, while feelings of humanity had become blunt (Fadzil 2012). The inherit values from the ancestors such as spiritual values, aesthetic values and ethics are increasingly fading over time when people are now prone to live in an individualistic and materialistic lifestyle. Busy work led each of them to carry their own courses.

Societal values and ancestry cultural heritage have been sidelined in the modern residential design. Symptoms of boasting and conceit with the west, by downplaying native's characteristic, had made national identity slowly vanished (Fadzil 2012). Modern life which is not based on religious beliefs has bring many problems and lead to identity disorder, due to the act of adhering to confusing cultural values, which had failed to distinguish between good and bad, genuine and fake.

The implementation of traditional Malay architecture into modern houses are mostly limited to physical style (appearance) development (Kosman 2007). Humanity factor as the emphasis in the heritage architecture has been of less exemplary. The problem is the growing number of outside influences that shape new architectural identity of modern Malay society. The influence of the West which is materialistic values are more affecting in their minds, thus influence on the architecture of their homes (Nasir 1994).

The concept of single-function spaces for a modern home as well as the size of the space that is not flexible shape the culture of family life which is increasingly limited in terms of socialization. Spaces are defined by walls or partitions. Family ties are getting loose with a reduced time to interact between family members. Children are now more likely to spend time in their bedrooms with availability of all equipment to play, to have fun and so while their parents are busy with their own affairs.

3. Objectives

This research had been done in order to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify basic principles that support the significance of 'rumah ibu' space to the traditional Malay community.
2. To relate between the role of space and ancestry identity.
3. To suggest the implementation of relevant aspects in heritage architecture onto modern Malay house design.

4. Research Methodology

Method that had been used in this research is through review of previous researchers and fundamental knowledge.

5. Literature Review

A traditional Malay house is not defined by its function, but rather by the form of the house itself. Each room is flexible enough to be modified its function in several different times. Spaces in the house are open and not separated as rooms because socialization of the Malay which conscious with mass gathering during festivities of customs or religion (Mohamed 1981). The Malay culture embodies the concept of division in spaces according to the patterns of Islamic guidance (Yuan 1987). Division of rooms for men and women is in accordance with Islamic law which restricts any intercommunication between male and female as shown in the table below:-

Table 1 Traditional Malay house spatial relationship

Position	Character	Name of space	Function
Front	Formal (public)	' <i>serambi</i> ' (verandah)	Living room and formal usage, such as a feast, used for male guests.
Middle	Active (semi-public)	' <i>rumah ibu</i> ' (core house)	Lounge for women and close relatives.
	Passive (<i>private</i>)		Living area and bedroom for family members; also for storage area.
Back	Active (<i>semi-private</i>)	kitchen	Women area, used for everyday tasks such as cooking and washing.

'Rumah ibu' (the core house) situated in the middle of the house has the largest space (Figure 1) where most activities are conducted. Features of 'rumah ibu' in terms of position, size and design makes it very practical. The space has diversified usages, not only for family members, but even for close relatives. On a typical day, women use the space for activities such as sewing, weaving mats and as child's place to sleep. This space is also accommodated by a seriously ill member of the household and as a place to bathe the corpse in the event of death. On the left and right of the 'rumah ibu' sometimes attached with bedrooms for spouses. In addition, there is some 'rumah ibu' which has 'peran' (attic with stairs), for daughters. Its position which is separated and higher from other room ensures privacy and security for residents. In an official ceremony, the space is used for female guests, where there is an access from the rear door.



(source: <http://rusdi-hitamputih.blogspot.my/2010/03/rumah-melaka.html>)

Another distinctive feature of traditional house that 'rumah ibu' has is in terms of sustainability. The house is built in separate units in which a totally growth can be achieved with the expansion of members and wealth of the family

(Mohamad Rasdi 2010). The separate compartments of 'rumah ibu' or 'rumah dapur' (kitchen) and even the verandah can be dismantled and given away to newly-weds to become the new 'rumah ibu'. The importance of 'rumah ibu' is not only in terms of functionality, but also in terms of value. The values which influence traditional architecture are spiritual, aesthetic and ethical values (Nasir 1994). These values influence attitudes and mindset of the ancient Malays. The manifestation of the high value of 'rumah ibu' had been translated to the space floor and headroom which are constructed higher (Figure 2). Symbolically, it shows the status of the residents is higher than guests who are honored in the verandah. The height of the space reveals more dominant look, consistent with its status as the main and special space, which is similar with the distinctiveness of a home to them as a 'mansion' for the family and symbol of residents' status.



Figure 2 'Rumah ibu' with higher space floor and headroom than other areas
(Source: <http://teganukita.my/rumah-tradisional-terengganu-dipindah-ke-muzium-warisan-upm>)

The significance of space's influence on lives had been supported by the fact that conducive physical environment will actually bring positive effects to the social environment (Arbi 1995). Winston Churchill (2004) in his point of view has stated that "we shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us", which concludes that an architecture that been designed and developed by men with its surrounding can affect human lives in it. In this context, traditional Malay architecture is an example of how physical aspects and humanity are interrelated where a conducive environment gives a positive impact on the implementation of activities.

Discussion

The aspects to be discussed are based on the outlined objectives of the research in relation to the issues of the modern Malay house.

The basic principles of 'rumah ibu' space

The influence of Islam in the traditional Malay architecture manifested in the spatial arrangement of spaces and components of the house (Nasir 1994). Islam is an ideology in which the values of the Prophet Muhammad SAW are transformed into the living fabric of social and political lives (Rasdi 2010). The impact is buildings with Islamic values may be distinguishable from others and their features may only be discerned by looking closely at how they are planned and how they are used. The spatial planning and design of 'rumah ibu' applies the concept of Islamic house which comprises of three principles, namely '*hablum minallah*' (relation with God, Allah SWT), '*hablum minannas*' (relation with human beings) and '*hablum minal alamin*' (relationship with the environment). These principles integrate both physical elements such as floors, walls, ceilings, doors, windows, etc. and spiritual manners and behavior, belief and worship (Musa et al 2011). The traditional Malay community observes '*adab*' (manners) highly in various stages of their lives.

Their homes are the reflections of their manners, in human relationships, manners of nature, the universe and its natural environment and manners towards spiritual environment. 'Adab' is correct behavior, which demands knowledge and virtue based self-control surveillance, while civilization is the subtlety of decency and nobility of a culture of human society to be apparent in civilized human cultural life of the community. To shove away manners will lead to barbarism (Ismail et al 2012).

The role of space in relation to ancestry identity

The zoning and open plan concept of 'rumah ibu' space make it practical and flexible enough to serve several basic needs and gradients of privacy. The first gradient of privacy is between society and the family (Rasdi 2010). Conducting the space with a variety of family activities ensures the continuity of relations between family members and relatives that will promote noble values such as the spirit of brotherhood, solidarity, mutual respect and mutual assistance. The flexibility of the space which allows diversity of space functions for activities of the individual, family and community shows how big a home's role to the past Malay community.

The implementation of relevant aspects of heritage architecture onto modern Malay house design

Although the Malay community lifestyle has been changed as a result of modernization, their basic needs, including the value of life is still the same. A comfortable living environment is very important whether in the past or now. The difference is in the approach of meeting the needs of life such as security, unity, development, neighborhood, etc. (Kosman 2007). Below are several aspects of 'rumah ibu' that are recommended to be adopted in modern Malay house towards regaining the pride and dignity of national identity.

The Home Concept

A house as a fundamental to account for the physical and psychological aspects must fulfill the conditions that make it not only as shelter, but also as a stage for shaping the lives of their inhabitants to get peaceful life (Surat et al 2012). Abandonment of aspects such as comfort, environmental, personal needs and the community in designing a house will result in a not peaceful life. The organization of flexible space (open planning), according to the needs of time and use as in 'rumah ibu' might not be applicable in the context of mass-produced modern homes today. Only those who can afford to build their specially designed homes can do so. However, the spatial concept of 'rumah ibu' which reflects the basis of residence in accordance with Islam is relevant and should be encouraged. Enculturation of Islam in terms of physical placement, size and decor of the house will support the humanitarian needs for the continuity of family and religious activities. The space environment which is conducive to the necessary activities to develop the family, establishing a true Muslim, conscience the soul and for relaxation is vital to follow the Islamic teaching. The house's decoration for example should be permitted by religion, with no statues and pictures that interfere with vision during prayer or a similar act of non-Muslims.

The Humanistic Values

The ethics of hygiene, behavior and interactions of the traditional Malay community reflect the image of Islam in themselves and their home. The interaction between family members and the community complies with the requirements of the ethics in the religion. The soul of their homes is where humanistic aspects of life are emphasized and realized through daily activities based on the teachings of religion as prayer, reciting the Quran in groups, discussion and so on towards fostering strong family ties. The space's atmosphere of modern homes should be revived with activities that create harmonious relations among family members, relatives and society and bring blessings to their lives. A house which has a family living area with modern recreational conveniences can be a good place for social interaction in a relaxed atmosphere. In the case where no family living area available due to economic factor, living room can be utilized as family gathering area. The space will be a waste if it is reserved for

guests only. The significant role of ‘ibu’ (mother) in the Malay community and in Islamic teaching commemorate the status of mothers on a very special position especially in family institution. Mother is the most significant agent of socialization and holds the responsibility in educating their children. Despite modern mothers are mostly working women, their roles as housewives and mothers still prevail and shouldn’t be replaced by maid, nanny or other parties. Cordial relationships between neighbors should be encouraged to promote the benefits of living in a community. Religious or social activities such as weddings, *marhabban* ceremony and so on can be held at homes if the house space available. Nowadays, due to limited size of the interiors, such activities take place at community centres or on street in front of the house. Those types of practices will strengthen the neighborhood ties of the community.

The Formation of Malay Identity

According to Nik Rosila (2009), only the nation that has identity and a strong background will be capable in facing the challenges from outside influences which are opposing to the manners and culture. She reckons that there are four pillars that build the identity of the Malay race as shown in the table below:-

Table 2 The Four Pillars of Malay Identity

Pillar	Description
a. Devotion to the One God Core	All the values, norms and culture of the Malay community have to comply with the teachings of Islam. Malaysians will be devastated if they continue to follow the Western stream that does not have any direction (Za’aba 1992).
b. Morals Core	The core is a reflection of one’s deeds and actions which are closely related to the concept of moral knowledge, manners and purity. Excellence parents are noble and able to guide their children’s moral standards (Ismail and Kamsah 1998). Broken family and society will hobble the nation and vice versa.
c. Knowledge Core	Knowledge is the key to success. Therefore, the love of useful knowledge and avoidance any violation of Islamic law should be nurtured in the early growth of children for the sake of personal interests, society, nation and country. Religious knowledge in traditional Malay society is not only taught in the mosque, madrasah, or house, but even on the edge of the well. This situation explains the importance of knowledge as the basis of a nation and civilization.
d. Human Relation Core	Human beings need each other and can’t escape from communication. Malay tradition has always emphasized the principle of brotherhood, love, unity, mutual cooperation, tolerance, consensus and deliberation. Muslims must fulfill both the obligations of personal devotions as well as community responsibilities.

The four pillars described in the table above are in line with the three principles of Islamic house concept as mentioned earlier in sub-section 4.1, namely ‘*hablum minallah*’ (relation with God, Allah SWT), ‘*hablum minannas*’ (relation with human beings) and ‘*hablum minal alamin*’ (relationship with the environment). It is important to adopt

the architectural traditions which comply with these aspects in the contemporary Malay-Muslim house towards regaining reputable national identity.

Conclusions

Indeed, 'rumah ibu' is not only significant in terms of terminology, but also in terms of concept and function in its relation with the Malay identity. It is a precedent from which lessons can be learned to regain the glory and dignity of Malay civilization like in the past. Building an excellent nation begins with strengthening the family institution, since the family is the foundation of society. Therefore, the role of home as a family institution building should not be taken for granted. Emphasis on values based on religious belief in traditional Malay architecture is relevant and practical to be emulated for modern residential design in order to build and develop strong national identity. Only by re-rooting in the Islamic tradition, the Malay-Muslims can build their lives in accordance with the realities of the present and the future. It is hoped that this research will create an awareness of the quality and relevance of the traditional Malay house amongst our policy-makers, professionals, researchers and academics. More importantly, it is hoped that it will provide some source or guidelines on the spatial concept and design of contemporary Malay house that will not only fulfil the needs of the inhabitants but also uphold the pride of our national identity.

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