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Research paper

The Altered Landscape in Urban Low - Cost Terrace Housing: an Expression of the Cultural Landscape Authenticy

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Abstract

Provision of adequate housing was the major concern of Malaysian housing policy before independence and it is still, continue to be an important development entities. This paper discusses on the findings of a research that investigates and interprets the alteration to the landscape made by the urban low-cost housing residents. The study adopted a post-occupancy evaluation method (POE), a research approach that aimed at understanding the end-users satisfaction with regard to the provided living environment. The research involving residents with low socio-economic backgrounds. Research finding informs that the altered landscape created by community can be considered as a genuine expression of their cultural landscape authenticity and way of life. This findings may help relevant Malaysia government agencies and industry players to better understand the community everyday landscape issues and the community needs for each of these housing schemes, rather than providing the current 'one design fits all' in a low-cost terrace housing.

Keywords: *Altered Landscape, Terrace Housing, Authenticity, Low-Cost Terrace Housing*

1. Introduction

Historically, Malaysian housing policy was established during the British Colonial Period (1795-1957). The Malaysian government initiated public housing, known as 'institutional quarters' for British employees who worked in the public sector. The British administration was forced to introduce a public housing programme known as 'new village', throughout Malaysia during the Communist insurgencies in the mid-1950s. The intention of this initiative by the British was to weaken the Chinese community support for the Communists (Agus, 2002). Malaysian Five Year National Plans were introduced after independence in 1957, starting with the First Malaysian Plan (1966-1970) and extending to the most recent Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010). These plans prioritized the housing sector as a major strategic concern with the mission of "promoting a home-owning democracy, a vision for the housing of all sections of society" (Agus, 2002). Consistent with this policy, various housing development programmes have been established through the joint efforts of both the government and private sectors.

At independence, the provision of the low-cost housing programme gave priority to those who lived under the poverty level earning below 300.00RM a month. Current Government agencies are directly responsible for providing housing for the poor in urban areas through the establishment of the State Economic Development Corporations and various urban development agencies. At present, in order to ensure that the private sector constructs low-cost housing, the government, through local municipal authorities, imposes a 30% quota provision of low-cost housing in every residential development. This policy is enforced to ensure adequate housing supply to approximately 50% of the Malaysian population categorized as low income group . However, despite such enforcement, the private sector in Malaysia is more inclined towards developing medium and high-cost residential areas in order to maximize their profits (Ezeanya, 2004; Malaysia, 2000). Developers compete among themselves to provide attractive landscaping in the residential developments.

2. Landscape Design for Housing Areas in Malaysia

Provision of adequate housing was the major concern of Malaysian housing policy before independence until the early stage of independence. The New Economic Policy (1971-1990) introduced a 'human settlement concept' with the intention of building a better living environment in which people could live, prosper and develop. Landscape design for residential areas is one of the ways that enable people to live in a pleasing environment. The establishment of the National Landscape Department of Malaysia in 1996, with the mission of "landscaping the nation" led to the provision of a green policy for public spaces in urban residential landscape developments (Sreetheran et al., 2006). These public spaces comprise of road medians, neighbourhood parks, parking spaces, children's playgrounds and green buffer zones. In general practice, the landscape design of these housing schemes includes medium size trees, small and medium shrubs and turf planted along the roads and public parks to provide shade and to enhance aesthetic pleasure in the neighbourhoods (Sreetheran et al., 2006). In accordance with this policy, developers are responsible for providing landscape designs for these public spaces.

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Municipal Councils in Malaysia do not regulate developers' landscaping costs in the housing schemes. Landscape submission approval is obtained on condition that developers manage to fulfil their landscape submission requirements. The author learned during an interview with the landscape architect of the Subang Jaya Municipal Council that landscape alteration in the semi-public spaces adjacent to the house was lawful as long as it only involved soft landscape changes during a post-occupancy period. These landscape changes were permitted as long as they were not potentially hazardous to the public (Azhar, 2008). The author through her pilot study interview was told that the residents were allowed to make changes which would enhance their living settings - provided they were not using any utilitarian species such as the Cymbopogon citratus (Lemongrass). Residents were likely to be penalized for planting utilitarian species in semi-public spaces as that was seen as replicating the rural cultural landscape . The local authority perceived rural cultural landscapes as messy and unorganized, in contrast to the idea of properly planned modern landscape design. On the other hand, providing residents applied to the local authority to alter their plant species, they were encouraged to enhance their living settings by utilizing good compositions of ornamental plants. A condition of making such landscape alteration was the prohibition on removing existing trees planted by developers.

In the initial development of the residential areas, landscape consultants were required to follow the landscape submission requirements of the Subang Jaya Municipal Council. One of the regulations was to include their official plants, namely Mesua ferrea (Ceylon Ironwood), Psidium guajava (Guava) as structural trees and Cananga fructicosa (Cananga) and Codiaum variegatum (Croton) to be planted in the Selangor urban areas.

Literature search together with extensive personal involvement in the field of landscape architecture in Malaysia, enabled the author to analyse landscape design plans implemented by developers in low -cost residential developments. Typically, the landscape design of low-cost housing aims primarily to fulfil the landscape plan submission requirements. In some cases, developers have appealed to Municipal Council to minimize or compromise the landscape submission requirements due to the minimal profit returns for this type of development. For example, developers have requested a reduction in playground equipment and in number of trees and shrubs to be planted in the public areas. As a result, the low income residents may experience inadequate green spaces and landscape facilities surrounding their housing areas (Nurizan & Hashim, 2001; Said, 2001a).

3. Post-Occupancy Evaluation in Urban Housing Landscape

The study on landscape alteration in urban residential areas adopts the post-occupancy method because this approach helps the researcher to understand the user's needs, and to uncover their feelings about the existing (provided by developer) and altered (changes made by residents) landscapes. This method allows this research to undertake a systematic evaluation of opinions and preferences relating to the responsive residential landscape settings.

The aim of this study is to understand landscape alteration process and outcomes. The author adopted a qualitative research approach because this enabled me to interact with respondents and investigate human events and activities in their natural settings.

Qualitative research is characterised by sets of research questions, issues and a search for patterns, in contrast to the hypothetical-deductive approach requiring the specification of main variables and a research hypothesis. Qualitative research in my study comprises structured interviews, case studies and analysis of archival material. These techniques enabled me to discuss with residents the reasons for, and processes surrounding, the changed landscape. At the same time, this process enabled the author to understand the meanings of tangible elements embedded in the residents' gardens and to read the intangible experiences involving feelings and emotions belonging to garden owners.

4. Low-Cost Housing: The Utilitarian Garden

Findings of this study indicated that the changes made in the existing landscape in the low-cost residential areas generated a 'utilitarian landscape'. "Utilitarian – usefulness rather than beauty" (Said, 2001b) was the reason why residents selected special plant species that were meaningful on social, cultural and religious levels. The utilitarian landscape was one of their ways of reinforcing their close relationship with the village environment - a repository of their life experiences. The residents informed that it was their habit to bring back a few plant species when they returned for the Eid celebration in the villages. Sometimes, the plants were gifts from their parents, plant cuttings taken from gardens that belong to their family members or exchanged among friends in the village. As a result, residents' altered gardens were dominated by indigenous and native plants alongside exotic species, reflecting authentic cultural expressions of their communities. These findings suggest that the residents' altered landscapes can be understood as an interpretation of familiar rural landscapes that are consciously, carefully and constantly developed in the urban settings.

It was found that these utilitarian landscapes were characterized by the use of Mangifera indica (Mango). This was the first step taken by the residents in making structural changes to the existing landscape. The author have identified that the Mango tree was favoured especially by the Malay and the Indian communities. The Chinese residents prefer Cyrtostachys lakka (Red Palm or Sealing Wax Palm) with red trunks, believed to bring good fortune for the home owner and also reflecting their Taoist beliefs. The Malays favoured the sweet and sour Mango fruits and used them in their cooking or ate them fresh from the trees. The Indians enjoyed not only its delicious fruits, but also utilized its leaves as a religious symbol - protection from spirits. After planting and securing the Mango trees the residents would then add other utilitarian and exotic species. This suggested that the Mango trees were the major structural species in the gardens, while other shrubs and groundcovers around it - subjected to dynamic changes from time to time - reflected the tastes and preferences of the house owners. On the whole, the plant combinations supported the residents in preparing their traditional cuisine and, represented their culture, beliefs and religion. My study has also shown that there was little use of hard landscape elements due to the limited space in the semi-public areas. A few residents however, enhanced the liveliness of this space by placing benches and keeping cages for poultry there.

This study shows that the altered landscapes were enjoyed for their healing and medicinal advantages as well. The author described the garden elements that helped to enhance residents' physical and emotional health and well-being, reinforcing Holmes et. al's (2008, p. 223) proposition that "the creation of a garden and the activity of gardening are a reflection of oneself, a healthy, grounding occupation to help us cope with the stresses of life". It was found that the restorative experiences (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1987) in the garden were

achieved especially when the residents constructed outdoor seating areas underneath the Mango trees, replicating the pelenggar (timber bench) of the rural setting. These hard landscape elements helped them to relax while keeping an eye on their children playing around the neighbourhood areas, especially in the afternoon. This time was also used to tend and nurture their garden - witnessing new shoots, flowers starting to bloom and anticipating fresh fruits produced by plants in the garden. This gardening activity provided relaxation and exercise in addition to the 'satisfaction' of creating their preferred outdoor environment. Helphand (2006, p. 13) explained that gardening satisfaction can be achieved even with a single plant in a small garden which is able to provide "a mental distraction from our usual routine – a sense of being away". The prominent environmental psychologists, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan argued that "[t]he greatest is a sense of tranquillity, followed by the fascination with nature and the pleasure of garden's sensory experience" (cited in Helphand, 2006, p. 13).

The study found that the residents themselves were productive gardeners and well equipped with knowledge about plants and gardening practices, acquired through their life experiences in the villages. They planted plants in the gardens not only for their physical function, but also for their medicinal properties. Some of the residents were keen to continue to practise the traditional procedures in curing certain illnesses using plant and natural materials, without totally rejecting conventional medicinal practices. This was a ways of sustaining their traditional methods of curing sickness which they were very proud of. In short, the residents' altered garden can be considered as an alternative pharmacy with the house owner himself acting as the pharmacist. The residents managed to explain the distinct characteristics of each of the medicinal plants, the method of preparing the remedies and their application emphasizing their detailed understanding of those natural elements that helped to relieve human pain and discomfort. The residents' defiant garden was also a garden of symbolic representations. This was a platform of personal expression. Tuan (1979, p. 98) describes the power of the everyday landscape in portraying characteristics of the house owner as "they are abstract rather than concrete symbols and hence they can be used to reveal the dark and offensive sides of life without overpowering the listener or reader".

Another insight from this study is the suggestion that different landscape tastes and preferences among the low-cost residents most likely represented their status. For example, residents who were earning higher incomes (represented by comprehensive house and garden alteration) preferred fewer 'kitchen' or utilitarian plants, focussing more on the exotics species and vice-versa. At the same time, the author identified the appearance of the "anthropogenic landscape or a landscape replication" in this residential area (Julien & Zmyslony, 2001, p. 338). The anthropogenic landscape is the idea of replicating elements from one garden in another and was practiced by the residents when they exchanged their plant material among the three ethnicities, the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities. This process strengthened neighbourhood relationships and illustrated ethnic trans-cultural values in the residential area.

A few residents in the low and medium-cost housing grew plants that related to spiritual and mystical values in their altered landscape. Following Bunnell's (2002) idea on kampong conduct in urban living areas, this suggests that these rituals were still followed by some of the residents - evidence that belief in supernatural powers did not only belong in the rural and orthodox communities in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the case studies showed that the utilitarian landscapes possessed distinct similarities to the soft landscape elements in the rural areas thus expressing the authentic cultural values of the low and medium residents in urban terrace housing. The process of changing and improving a garden through time has been termed by Giuliani (2003) and Riger and Lavrakas (1981) as "involvement and rootedness" – a practice that accentuates residents' sense of belonging to their living environment.

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