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# The Development of the Malay Garden Concept

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## Abstract

This study discusses the development of the Malay garden concept using the old Malay manuscripts and site observation to the Malay villages along Peninsular Malaysia. The inherited landscape design concept can offer as a guideline to conserve the integrity and the authenticity of the traditional Malay garden design and the strength of these characters will extensively use in developing the concept of landscape design in Malaysia due to the increasing awareness of design and the quality of life.

Keywords: Malay Garden, Malay Landscape, Cultural Landscape, Quality of Life

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The development of landscape design concept in Malaysia is becoming popular and significant due to the increasing awareness of design, the environment and the quality of life. The traditional Malay landscape design concept is an idea for the landscape design that deals with the characteristics of a traditional private garden of the Malay villages along Peninsular Malaysia. This paper discusses the study of the features of traditional Malay landscape design as the main elements for the development of the Malay garden concept and more importantly to the impact and the response of the global communities regarding traditional Malay landscape garden design. The research also highlights the dependability of the traditional Malay landscape design in generating a sustainable environment and resolve the issues related to the quality of life throughout the decades.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Traditional Malay landscape design, which has evolved in harmony with the natural environment and the rhythms of daily life far removed from industrialized society, is currently inspiring an awakening of interest throughout the world. Landscape architecture scenarios in Malaysia were presently more passionate about the contemporary design or mean of modern culture. According to Noor Hanita et al. (2012), the vernacular architecture has resulted from the merging of both social culture and climate of a place that evolved and developed due to the needs of the society. Referring to Bambang et al. (2012), space in a public territory is for all inhabitants, and no one can declare his territory. It is the legal responsibility of the landscape architect, including municipal council to take action that is responsible to the public while fulfilling the requirements of clients when dealing with the design concept.

### **The concept of the Malay garden design**

The Malay garden design concept is an initiative in establishing the identity of the Malay garden design and the reinstatement of this design concept exclusive to the Malays as the indigenous community of Malaysia. It does not only provide an opportunity to known better but more often for rising and maintain its uniqueness. The Malay garden design is planned circumspectly through harmonious interactions between man, nature and culture, which translated into the house design and compound (Anisa Ani et al. 2012). According to Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi (2003), Malays is known for their philosophy of manufacturing or construction of something as a symbol of symbolism, means that either implicitly or explicitly based on the relationship with God, their environment as well as the human being. The strength of the Malay garden design is plants and landscape furniture along with their composition and the interaction between internal and external spaces. It is unique because it clearly symbolizes the culture of the Malays in the past and shows the Malays have substantial knowledge in term of plant functions in the garden or their environment.

### **Traditional Malay landscape design**

The primary compositions of the traditional Malay landscape design consist of the design concept and their two main components that are soft landscape elements and hard

landscape elements along with the three separate house compound that are front compound, side compound, and rear compound. The placements of landscape furniture as well as plant species are dependent on its role on a different compound. Frequently, traditional Malay people develop their garden to meet the synchronization with the environment that is the concept, activities, and function. Hard landscape element categories as the artificial components (Nur Huzeima Hussain et al. 2010). It is the design of an extra element that complements the design of a garden. Referring to the Ismail Said (2002), the overall design of the traditional Malays garden and its features are partly influenced by ethnicity belief of the resident in general, it consists of vernacular timber houses laid in a garden of fruit trees, edible shrubs, herbs, flowering and fragrant plants in the landscape furniture design.

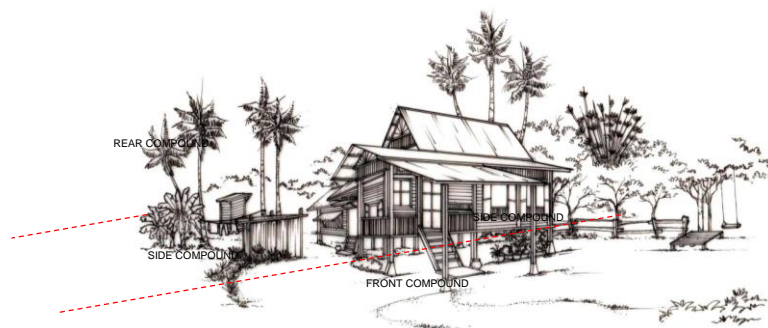


Figure 1: Typical layout of traditional Malay house compound along Peninsula Malaysia. Divided into three primary compounds; (1) Front compound or front yard, (2) Side compound located either on the left or right side and (3) Rear compound.

(Source: Author, 2015)

### **Traditional Malay revivalism**

The search for national identity seems to be a must for countries which have either newly become independent or leadership that stresses individual groups of race as being 'better' than others (Mohammad Tajuddin, 2005). Besides, he also stated that there are no fewer than three different identities in any national architectural mechanism; a natural identity, a forced identity, and a manufactured identity. Also, Ismail Said (2001) commented that in Malaysia, the cultural landscape as well as the traditional landscape design is widely practiced in rural areas but is lacking in the urban residential communities.

A native identity defined as one which has what the modernist thinkers refer as a 'spirit of the times' and present post-modernist concern of a 'spirit of the place'. The entire design concept supposed to acquire real character if it responds religiously to the idea of both minds. The idea of the strength of mind of the times refers to a straight reaction of the users and builders of the available technology, the structural know-how and the economic consideration of a particular time. The idea of the spirit of the place is less tangible but evokes the sense of local uniqueness derived from natural and cultural features, and personal associations. It has become our responsibility to raise the concept of this tradition as a symbol of national

excellence.

### **Malaysian issues in landscape design and planning**

A village residential environment of the Malays composed of vernacular timber houses laid in a random layout with the simple application of the site plan (Mohammad Rusdi, 2012). Malaysia's historic cities portray unique local cultures, important historical sites, and outstanding heritage buildings. The Cultural City likes Kota Bharu, Kelantan, as well as Bandar Hilir, Malacca regarded as a cultural city for its rich history and the unique local cultures. However, the continual process of adopting Western styles and other design concepts has resulted in buildings structure and landscapes that disregard the environmental, climatic factors and more importantly is about Malay culture of Malaysia, and this has led to problems of identity in the development of the cultural fabric.

According to Watson et al. (2007), Malaysia is among the countries where fast growth trends pose new, challenging questions when it comes to designing a contemporary place-identity. Rapidly growing cities like Kuala Lumpur, for instance, generates high images through development types associated with the globalized world economy, while also raising complex multicultural design issues. Additionally, Mohammad Rusdi (2012) stated that the most challenging issue in building the new Malaysian nation has been the need to involve the country's varied socio-cultural groups. Each is holding strong feelings and perceptions of itself as a uniquely imagined community while at the same time belonging to a modern nation-state with strong beliefs in an overall Malaysian identity. Shuhana et al. (2012) defined that the landscape approach is to conserve, manage as well as to observe the value of the historic areas by considering the original setting, interrelationship of physical form, social, cultural, spatial organization and connection with natural features.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The qualitative methods had been used to determine the components and elements of the traditional Malay landscape design either in physical (tangible) or metaphysical (intangible) form. The symbolism in the Malay landscape design focused on the qualitative method by referring to the Malay cosmology, old manuscripts and through observation to the Malay villages along Peninsular Malaysia.

#### **Traditional Malay literature**

According to Zaharah (1970) in Anisa Ani et al. (2012), the Malay identity could be studied through traditional Malay literature such as old manuscripts, folk tales, and poetry. She also found that these sources are the most excellent method to know the information on the background of the traditional Malay culture in the region due to the limitations of other reliable documentation. There are seven old manuscripts used in this research; The Malay Annals (*Sulalatus Al-Salatin*), The Garden of Kings (*Bustan Al-Salatin*), The Tale of Hang Tuah, The Tale of Merong Mahawangsa, The Tale of Inderaputera, The Tale of Abdullah and Traditional Malay Medicine (*Warisan Perubatan Melayu*). From the manuscript, types of plants are divided into four major groups based on their functions and values; esthetic values, herb and

food plants, fruit plants and big trees or hardwood trees. An example how the landscape elements are cited and recorded in the Tale of Hang Tuah which is *kolam* as a landscape furniture and *kenanga*, *teratai*, *seroja* as well as *bunga tanjung* as soft landscape elements:

*...maka adalah dalam kolam itu pelbagai bunga-bunga dari pada kenanga dan teratai dan seroja dan bunga tanjung; dan ada dalam kolam beberapa ikan, warnanya seperti emas, dan pada sama tengah kolam itu sebuah kolam diturap dengan batu putih, bergelar Pulau Sangka Sembika dan di atasnya suatu batu .....*

(Source: Kasim Ahmad, 1975 from [http://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Tuah\\_bib.html](http://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Tuah_bib.html))

### The traditional Malay living environment nowadays

The observation to the traditional Malay villages along Peninsular Malaysia is conducted based on the differences of geographical aspects, traditional architecture as well as the combination of uses of external and internal space of their houses. The difference regarding evidentiary geography along with topography distribution zones within Peninsular Malaysia. Four zones created which are the Northern zone (Perlis, Kedah, Penang, and Perak), Central zone (Selangor), the Southern zone (Johor, Malacca, and Negeri Sembilan) and the Eastern zone (Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang). It shows that the culture and the living environment of the Malay community of each zone are different and played a significant role in creating their landscape garden design. Refer Figure 2.



Figure 2: (a – c) showing the concept of the traditional Malay landscape design nowadays at the Northern zone; Lorong Tok Imam, Teluk Bagan Tandop, Alor Setar, Kedah.

(Source: Author, 2014)

Table 1: List of landscape furniture and their placement observed by the author from site survey, old manuscripts, and recorded in the research papers done by researchers in the past about the Malay garden in the Malay Archipelago.

Local Name (As be called by local people and mentioned in old manuscripts)	English name	Placement
Ampaian	Suspension	F/S/R
Bangsai / Sulap	Bam	S/R
Buaian	Tree swings	F/S/R
Gerbang	Arch	F
Guri	Guri	F/S
Jamban / Tandas	Latrine	S/R
Jamung andang / Kandil	Torch	F/S/R
Kepok padi / Jelapang	Paddy store	S/R

Kolah	Water tank	S/R
Kolam	Pond	S/R
Pagar	Fence	F/S/R
Pangkin	Resting hut	F/S/R
Pasu bunga	Flower pot	F/S
Pangkin / Pelantar	Open timber platform	F/S/R
Perigi	Well	S/R
Perun	Dump site	R
Reban	Hen coop	R
Tempayan	Water vessel	F/S/R
Titi	Log bridge	F/S/R
Wakaf	Gazebo	F/S

Legend: 1. Front compound (F); 2. Side compound (S);  
 3. Rear compound (R).  
 (Sources: Author, 2015)

#### 4.0 Findings and Discussions

Referring to English Heritage (2014), parks or gardens with more than 30 years old deserves to Gazette as “historic” (English Heritage, 2014). However, looking at the age itself is not enough. In United States (US) for example, the recognition of National Historical Park (NHP) is placed under the management of National Park Service (NPS). Until March 2015, from more than 400 areas, more than 90 sites are listed under the Historic Park or Site categories (National Park Service, 2015). One of the well known NHP is the Mississippi’s National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), Minnesota. This river listed as NHP because of its “unique concentration of nationally significant resources” especially on historical and cultural aspects (National Park Service, 2015).

In Britain, the conservation effort for the heritage park is managed by English Heritage organization. Since 1983, the English Heritage “Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of special historic in England” has identifies more than 1,600 heritage sites (English Heritage, 2015).

Listed Historic Parks and Gardens categorized into three grades:

- Grade I – sites are of exceptional interest;
- Grade II\* – sites are of particular importance, of more than special interest; and
- Grade II – sites are of special interest, warranting every effort to preserve them (English Heritage, 2015).

Based on this merit or band system, sites with most significant historical interest are eligible to register under the National Heritage List for England. The implementation of the value system is very useful in assisting parties involved especially the local planning authorities in the conservation works. Apart from efforts taken by the selected countries, there are also few examples of historic parks conservation involving the international bodies.

Based on listed garden under the UNESCO, most of these historical parks are nominated together with the heritage building. As for ICOMOS, preservation of historic gardens is mentioned in details in the Florence Charter 1982. Under this Charter, a historic garden is defined as “an architectural and horticultural composition of interest to the public from the

historical point of view" (International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), 1982, p. 1).

In 2011, this area was highlighted under the Entry Point Project (EPP) 7: Creating Iconic Places and Attractions. Under this EPP, a new initiative is known as the "Green Icon of Kuala Lumpur" is introduced (Performance Management & Delivery Unit (PEMANDU), 2011). This "Green Icons" stated in the document is referring to the development of the Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park. Sydney Lake is recognized as one of the gardens that included in the initiatives including six other adjacent gardens; the Orchid Garden, Deer Park, Bird Park, Butterfly Park, ASEAN Sculpture Garden and National Monument. Nine significant buildings are incorporated into the Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park (Figure 7).

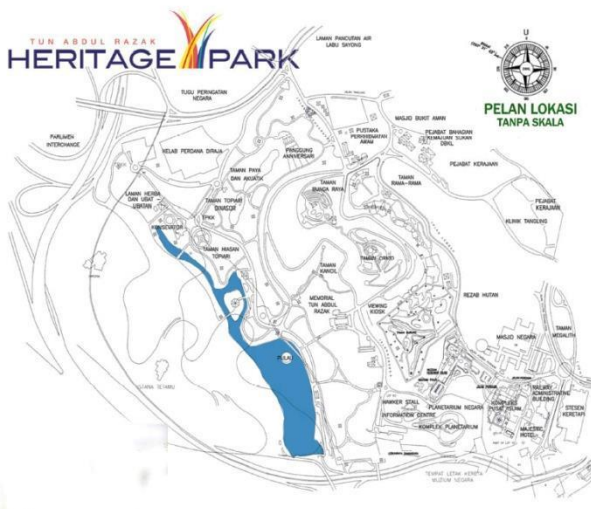


Figure 7: Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park. Highlighted in blue is Sydney Lake area.  
Source: (Adapted from Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2011).

This area also stated in the Prime Minister's speech during the presentation of the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011 – 2015. Under the *Strategic Trust 5.1: Ensuring a Higher Quality of Life in Urban Areas*, "the Government aims to provide an attractive and comfortable living environment for city dwellers to live, work and play. ... [including] the transformation of the Lake Gardens into a botanical garden" (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2011, p. 43).

The details of this positive initiatives included in this Plan in *Chapter 6: Building an Environment that Enhances Quality of Life: Open Spaces and Green Corridors*. The establishment of Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park under the GKL/KV is a good start for Sydney Lake on recognizing it as a historical park. The efforts are taken by Kuala Lumpur City Hall also represented in its *Structure Plan 2020*. Under the *Strategic Zone for City Centre: 17.2.3 (b): Green network and open spaces*. The main attempt is to enhance this

area as the “premier park of the City” (Performance Management & Delivery Unit (PEMANDU), 2011). These actions portrait the Venning’s vision in mid-1890 in transforming Lake Gardens as the “prime site” of Kuala Lumpur (Gullick, 2000, p. 166).

In 2012, Sydney Lake Garden designated as National Heritage under the natural site category. Under the *National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645)*, “natural heritage” is protected under Section 67: *Declaration of National Heritage* (Lembaga Penyelidikan Undang-undang, 2006, p. 133). Thus, any actions or decisions regarding this area need to consult for a particular permission from the Federal Government.

With these efforts given by the government and the local authorities involved, it is possible that one day Sydney Lake will be known as the Historical Park of Kuala Lumpur. However, more actions needed especially to publicize the history and origin of this area and its historical elements to the public. These steps need to be in line with rules and regulations stated and at the same time maintaining the originality of the site. At age 127 years old, Sydney Lake should be the pioneer project as the first historical park in Malaysia. It is not only witnessed in significant events happened in this area but most importantly, it is a place where the “positive cultural identity” is expressed from the various ethnic background of Malaysian (Bakar, 2002, p. 125).

## 5.0 Conclusion

The study of the traditional Malay landscape design is of particular importance given its distinctive contribution to Malay heritage. The concept of the traditional Malay landscape gardens exclusively to the Malaysian Malay community can encourage the expansion of the landscape architecture field in Malaysia, particularly in areas of tourist attraction to showcase Malaysia’s uniqueness. Potentials of each traditional Malay landscape elements need more highlighted. Public parks that display the culture of the local community and conservation of the traditional Malay old houses have shown positive effects in promoting cultural products. The establishment of characterization of the traditional Malay landscape design probably will become a national cultural heritage and is widely used in all landscape development in Malaysia especially for the elaboration of the Malay garden concept.

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