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Recalling the Transitional Space: City home and Kampung home

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Abstract

The paper explores the importance of transitional spaces or intermediate area between a public area outside of a house and a private area on the inside. Based on ethnographic research involving rural-urban migrants in Kuala Lumpur, the paper follows the narratives of moving and settling experience of Malay women from rural kampung (village) in Kedah who followed their spouse to live in Kuala Lumpur. Themes from a qualitative analysis of the narratives demonstrated the significance of transitional spaces like the halaman in the formation of social ties, protection of privacy, and in providing surveillance and safety.

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Keywords: Rural-urban migrant; transitional space; privacy; social space

1. Introduction

This paper explores the importance of transitional spaces or intermediate area between the public area outside of a house and a private area on the inside. Kisho Kurokawa(1994) emphasized the importance of having intermediating elements and spaces in the built environment. A half-public, or half-private kind of space can be profoundly meaningful to users. The built environment is influenced by culture, belief and past experiences of its inhabitants (Ismail, 2012) and vice versa, they also have impacts on the dweller. The paper is based on a theme that comes out of a bigger research on the meanings of kampung in the lives of Malay rural-urban migrants in the city of Kuala Lumpur. The paper argues that when people migrated from their rural villages, known as 'kampung' to cities, the absence of a positive transitional

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space in their city home have impacts on their life and their adaptation in the urban setting. The transitional space focused in the study is the house compound or the 'halaman'. The paper starts with some definition of kampung and halaman followed by an overview of the methods used and the explanation of issues related to the spaces of urban homes as expressed by participants. The paper is concluded with some recommendations on how to include the halaman elements in the city landscapes.

2. Literature Review

Kampung is a Malay word which literally refers to the villages in Malaysia. It is an ambiguous term with multiple meanings. As a verb, kampung means "to bring together" or "to group", carrying with it a collective and very social idea. As an adjective, kampung means rural, homemade and countrified. In daily conversation, it is also used to describe something that is non-modern or outdated (Kamus Dewan, 2007).

From anthropological, geographical and social science definition, kampung is described as "a series of overlapping neighborhood circles" (Yoshihiro, 2001, p. p.98), which consists of "a collection of dwellings within a family compound" or "a collection of such compounds" (Zaharah Mahmud, 2004, p. 176) which applies in many different scales. Kampung could mean "a village, a sub-village, a compound, and land used, or intended for residence" (Carsten, 1997, p. 161). A kampung is formed through human habitation and routine practices, usually has no clearly demarcated geographical boundaries and their common social, economic and political interactions held the members of the kampung together (Kemp, 1988; S. Husin Ali, 1968).

The English word for halaman, the 'compound' is originated from the word kampung (Yule & Burnell, 1903 (reprint 1990)). The word was adapted by the Portuguese as campon and the Dutch colonials as kampoeng which was later used in English as 'compound' (Yule & Burnell, 1903 (reprint 1990)). Compound in English term meant a building or buildings, especially a residence or group of residences, set off and enclosed by a fence or barrier. In Malaysian English, the area around the house called the halaman is also known as compound, although it could be without barriers. Although the meaning of kampung has been altered in 'compound', it still indicates that the halaman holds similar ideas with kampung.

Halaman, the commonly fenceless compound around a Malay kampung house serves as a multifunctional transitional space outside of the home where the homeowners work and keep their agricultural goods, where fruit trees are planted to provide shade and seasonal fruits, where poultry are kept in the coops, where kitchen plants provide the daily spice and condiments, clotheslines for to dry clothes, and where 'pelenggar', a vernacular bench is placed to be used for work and leisure evenings with family and neighbours. The open compound provides the best playground for children to play in within easy parental and neighbour surveillance and also as a venue for feasts and gatherings. It is an intermediate space between the privacy of a house and the public domain of a kampung. The functions of the spaces in the halaman are changeable according to needs.

Frank Swettenham (1993) described some important elements and spatial character of a Malay kampung and halaman during the colonial years. In a Malay kampung, houses were built within a space not too close and not too far from one another, giving enough space for privacy, yet within a 'sight and call', providing enough indirect surveillance within the kampung. Another significant element in his narrative was the notable fruit and coconut trees around the Malay huts, implying the high interest in productive species. (Swettenham, 1993, pp.171-172).

Halaman for each house is generally large enough to cater to the owners' various needs. Even if more space is needed for activities like holding feasts, space sharing is easily done as most houses in the kampung are unfenced. In a kampung, there is a respect for private and public use of spaces without

needing a clearly imposed physical boundaries. Between the houses, boundaries are marked with a small ditch, a row of low hedge, or simply any markings like a fallen tree trunk or cleanly swept space. The minimal use of visually and physically obstructive barriers in kampung suggested that the community have to recognise the 'invisible boundaries' by conforming to cultural rules and norms. In contrast, living spaces and properties in cities have properly defined and demarcated boundaries, which clearly separate one's house and land with the others.

3. Methodology

Based on ethnographic research involving rural-urban migrants in Kuala Lumpur, the paper follows the narratives of moving and settling experience of twelve Malay women from rural kampung in Kedah who followed their spouse to live in Kuala Lumpur. All the participants were living in high rise apartments. The meanings and the importance of halaman as a landscape element and their saliency to the life of rural-urban migrants were unweaved using qualitative research strategies. Multiple ethnographic methods were adopted. The methods include three steps – photo elicitation, in-depth interviews and model mapping.

3.1. Photo elicitation

Photo elicitation method was utilized in the research as an 'ice breaking' for the interviews. Thirty photos showing different physical characters and activities that took place in kampung were used to entice participants to talk about the spaces where they came from.

3.2. In-depth interviewing

In-depth interviews were conducted to get participant's interpretation of the kampung landscape and to have participants reflect on their experiences adapting and living in cities. Particularly focus were given on how they adapt to an urban setting, the way they remembered the physical, social and spatial elements of kampung in their accounts of events, and the meanings they assigned to the kampung elements and characters that they mentioned. Within the interview, participants were also asked to make suggestions on how their life in urban areas can be improved, and what they aspired to see in the urban landscape.

3.3. Model mapping method

Mental mapping technique is a combination of information and interpretation of spatial relationships and environmental characteristics that people have in mind, reflecting not only what they know about places, but also the attitudes, spatial inclination and the attachment they hold towards a place (Johnston, Gregory, & Smith, 1986; Soini, 2001; Whyte, 1977). It is rather tough to connect the social memories of kampung to the physical and spatial elements in a kampung using only words. Therefore, participants were requested to draw a mental map with the help of models to put their stories on kampung into a spatial context. The maps they made provided a general view of how participants perceived their kampung environment.

The images and verbal data from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively by developing common themes and by using landscape framework as a 'lens' to explain the themes. Interviews with rural-urban migrants participants who have experienced the transition from rural to an urban landscape allowed the researcher to understand the layers of meaning through participants' experiences. Thompson (2002)

asserts that migrants are an important source of information and views on urbanity and rurality in Malaysia and also on place and place-based identities.

4. Findings

Participants used kampung ideas and the character of halaman as the basis for a 'critique' of various aspects of their city landscape and living environments. The availability of social and private living spaces outside of their door is one of the most crucial concerns of migrants in the urban areas, which they compare unfavourably with the kampung living. Accounts from female respondents who spend most parts of their day at home show the essentiality of intermediate spaces in urban homes. Their narratives of the adaptation process are strongly related and compared to their earlier experience of living in rural areas and rural spaces. The absence of a transitional space such as the halaman or the house compound in their current homes is described to have affected their life and the early process of adaptation in the city. Hence, requiring them to adjust and negotiate their spaces both physically and socially. The narratives from the women strongly highlight the importance of halaman in the social and spatial setting of a home in a kampung.

The halaman is seen as a connection for users or dwellings of a house to the earth. As a space, it represents an entire domain which is phenomenologically rich and culturally essential to the life of the respondents. Themes from a qualitative analysis of the narratives demonstrated the significance of transitional spaces like the halaman in the formation of social ties, protection of privacy, and in providing surveillance and safety.

Rural-urban migrants showed different levels of spatial constraints that they faced in creating their urban homes. A home is a site of dwelling, which Heidegger (1971) calls the process of making a place into a personal world. The process involves an engagement through using and utilizing the spaces, by reducing the distance between people and things around them. The current design of high rise flats and apartments, especially for the low- cost groups does not give much freedom for dwellers to make changes and to get involved in social interaction with those who live around them. Participants explained the issues they faced in the process of settling in the urban area. These include the issues regarding isolation, privacy, safety and surveillance, and the freedom of spatial use.

The women migrants, which are housewives lamented that at the early phase of their migration to the city they feel disconnected, alienated and isolated in their city apartments, a feeling that Edward Relph (1976) called existential outsidership. Without any intermediate spaces outside an apartment unit, the design and orientation of the 'pigeonhole' apartment tend to keep dwellers indoors, oblivious to things happening around them. Thus, denying them the opportunity to be outside and socialize with the people who live around them. The corridors outside their homes became a lifeless connector between boxes of living units. These rigid and inflexible physical environments of city living had a significant impact on the quality of life of the urban migrant housewives.

Rural kampung houses are commonly built separated from one another. Although the separation gives some distance that provides privacy between neighbours, the houses are 'connected' with one another by unobstructed views between clumps of trees. A respondent described the 'closeness with a distance' that she used to have with her neighbours in kampung that she compared with her current life in the city, which, in her words, "we share the same wall now [with our neighbours] but we feel distant." Hence, participants expressed the crucial need of having a halaman-like space outside one's door as a functional extension of their dwelling unit that also act as a social space. Participant further stated that having a 'halaman' outside one's home makes a home feel 'complete'.



Fig. 1 (a & b): Corridors at two respondents' apartments unit. Only the front door links dwellers physically and visually to corridors.

Issues regarding privacy frequently appeared in the participants' narratives. In city apartments, strangers could walk right up to one's door and windows, reducing the privacy of the dwellers. Muslim women had to cover their aurah (Islamic modesty) at all time if they wished to keep their windows and doors open for the purpose of ventilation, light or to have a social interaction with neighbours. On the other hand, the need for greater security and privacy has led to the creation of modern house designs which give adequate privacy but at the same time giving the sense of 'caging' the dwellers indoors and blocking any informal interaction with neighbours.

The existence of halaman as a semi private and private intermediate open space and its integration with vernacular Malay house architecture provide adequate privacy measures for women in kampung. The traditional houses are built on stilts, thus creating a difference between the eye level of people passing on foot on the kampung paths and the house openings, giving adequate privacy for house dwellers. The halaman also acts as a buffer around the house where strangers and visitors coming could be seen from inside the house and women could take their time to properly cover up according to Islamic modesty (aurat). Having family members as neighbours also gives more freedom of spatial use for women in kampung.

Most participants expressed fear of allowing their children to play outdoors. They did not allow their children to go out and play in the playground unless accompanied by adults or teenage siblings. Children need more informal outdoor play that is important for their development. In a city apartment block, the separation between spaces for living, working and playing limits the chance for parents to monitor their children in the play area in their designated playgrounds. In most cases their children were restricted to

playing only on narrow corridors, balconies and lift lobbies on the same floor, creating their own 'halaman'.

In a traditional kampung organisation, there is high familiarity among kampung dwellers. When a child misbehaves, he or she may be corrected by any adult. In such settings, children could be allowed outside in the halaman; within indirect adult surveillance. Huge window openings in the Malay kampung houses provide proper ventilation in the hot and humid climate and at the same time allow dwellers to observe things that happen outside the house. Views towards one's halaman and the neighbour's halaman are usually unblocked, allowing mothers to observe children playing in the compound while they go about handling their daily chores, providing indirect surveillance within the kampung. In the halaman, they could also identify and exchange greetings with people who passes by and even talk to neighbours as they go about handling their daily chores, giving endless opportunity for social interactions.

Freedom in spatial use is deemed vital by participants. Rural-urban migrants asserted that in kampung the people had more control over their life and had a better say in personalizing their spaces. Some participants opted to live in 'illegal' urban kampung when they first move to the city for the benefits of to maintain a kampung-like lifestyle right 'on the ground' rather than living in 'pigeonhole' apartments. Besides the lower cost of the rental, the squatter settlements provide them with organic and changeable spaces of halaman which enabled them to utilize available ground plots for gardening.

5. Discussion

The elements of halaman appear most frequently in participants' narratives of their lives in both kampung and the city. Participants implied that the provision of halaman spaces could be a way of dealing with some of the spatially related issues in their city living.

The importance of having an intermediate space acting as a transition between public and private space around a dwelling unit is time and again expressed by participants. Participants adjusted, adapted and at some points resisted the rules and characters of the urban landscape to suit their needs. Participants made effort to change and connect to the social links of the 'landscape' by making changes and creating their own social spaces outside their dwelling units. Some turned their corridors, balconies and lift lobbies into their version of halaman where they keep their potted kitchen garden, where they rest after work and where they meet, greet and get to know neighbours and strangers while they sit on benches, although it is considered as against the 'house rules' in high rise apartments..

Using kampung and halaman ideas to enhance and shape the spaces of modern city landscapes does not suggest a reverse approach or a revival of the traditional and nostalgic image of the landscape; instead the ideas could actively be integrated to shape the modern landscape in the city and benefit urban dwellers in general.

The need of getting in touch with the land, 'nature' and agriculture came out clearly in the discourse of the rural-urban migrants in my study. Those who lived in high-rise housing, did not have the same opportunities to replicate a "kampung-like" halaman. Hence, it would be beneficial for resident associations, housing management and city councils to work together to allow and support the use of any unused land space around apartment buildings to create community gardens as their shared halaman.

For certain sections of the society, aesthetic value is important, but for others, like most of working class rural-urban migrant participants in the study, elements that are functional and provide them with the simple basic needs are more important than 'aesthetics'. Some participants viewed trees in the city that provided only shade and serve as ornamental purpose are of little value compared to trees that bear fruits, high utility and have cultural significance. Having functional, and meaningful soft scapes that cater for user's needs are as important as keeping the city beautiful.

Common lower medium to low cost modern housing in Malaysia cities has a similar design that either provides very little privacy or the total opposite - a total closure that blocks people off, allowing for few opportunities for dwellers to socialise when they want to. By providing some space and basic facilities in the semi-public circulation areas on each floor of apartment buildings, there would be opportunities for dwellers to engage with others. Utilising the access ways such as corridors, lift lobby and stairs landings would enable residents to be outside of their 'walled' units, and use the access way as their intermediate or semi private spaces. Taking into account the examples found in respondents' flats, placing of public furniture at access ways could act as nodes where urban dwellers could sit and socialize with their neighbours.

There is also an urgency to design spaces that will accommodate children's needs to spend time outside their homes, while their mothers at home can still monitor them to maintain surveillance and sense of security. Multifunctional spatial character in rural Malay houses and halaman allow flexibility for mothers to work and let children play within their surroundings. Provision of social spaces for women and children within the same floor in the apartment is needed where women of the house could multi-task. A design that takes into consideration the needs of children and their parents should be considered. A shared space that can provide co-supervision for children among neighbour would be useful.

Privacy issues are one of the tricky subjects in city living. Some architectural resolutions could include providing setbacks to create transitional spaces in front of apartments or redesign in ways that openings are not directly exposed to access ways. Openings could be designed to allow an insider to see areas outside their house without being clearly visible to outsiders.

This study of intermediate space of halaman element in the memories of rural-urban migrants has shown that vernacular ideas, an approach that is closer to people, would better suit the cultural and social needs of users. Everyday needs of the users in a city landscape deserve attention especially for those in the lower income group. A designed urban landscape requires more than just function and aesthetics. It has to be also able to help develop a good and healthy lifestyle, promote good social networking and provide opportunities of use for every level of the society. In conclusion, we would like to suggest a paradigm shift in the landscape and urban design, especially in Malaysia: to have more focus on the humanistic and social aspects of the design.

Looking back on ideas of kampung and halaman could be a good platform to start recovering a Malaysian landscape. Kampung halaman is a pervasive idea in Malaysia, be it in rural or urban areas. It embodied the Malay cultural and social customs, and expressed in spatial practices. Vernacular practices and the kampung ideas are brought across from kampung to a city environment to enhance their life and the living spaces and help them adapt and be 'at home' in the city setting. The multifunctionality and versatility of halaman enable the concept to be translated and adapted in an urban condition. If given the chance and space, the halaman element could promote a sense of place among the rural-urban migrants and also to city dwellers. These landscapes represent a way of living which was brought from a rural setting to an urban setting, a symbol of adaptiveness of a vernacular and sustainable way of living.

6. Conclusion

This paper has described the themes that appeared from the narratives by urban migrants concerning 'transitional spaces' and how they go about creating their 'place' and lives in a city environment with their former rural village as their point of reference. The issues they faced are mainly due to the differences of spatial characters that they used to have in kampung and the ones that they have in the city. The character of the urban landscape spaces restrained them in doing their daily activities according to what they feel culturally and socially acceptable. The ways respondents go about creating and negotiating the spaces in the urban landscape to suit their cultural practices were also shown. On the whole, this paper

has shown that respondents were involved in adjusting, adapting and at some points resisting the urban lifestyle and characters of the urban landscape by positioning kampung transitional space as a point of reference to their current urban spaces.

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