Living in Living Rooms: Furniture Arrangement in Apartment-Type Family Housing

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Abstract

This paper presents findings of a study on the living room of apartment-type houses. The aim was to trace the pattern and preferences of furniture arrangement in constrained space at apartment blocks which accommodated families of Malaysian Police personnel located in a Kuala Lumpur suburb. The data show that common items available in each living room are the settees, coffee table, dining table and chairs, small table for the television and shoe rack. Three activity-based zones were identified as “living”, “dining” and “entertainment”. Despite the tight space provided, the families showed their creativity in reflecting their individuality and way of life.

1. Introduction

The living room is considered as the focal point of the house where daily activities take place. In traditional Malaysian families, the family members gather in the living room to discuss or communicate about domestic matters or just to spend time with them. At other time, the living room is the area where guests and visitors are entertained. Indeed, the living room is an important area where “special treatment”
is given compared to other sections within the house. In high rise apartment-type housing, where there are limited outdoor spaces, occupants tend to spend even more of their time in the living room. Furniture is one of the vital items that controls and determines the usage of the living room. Hence, within the space of living room provided, occupants would give a great deal of time and resources to organise the living room furniture depending on their personal preferences, needs and priorities. The selection and arrangement of furniture in a space is strongly influenced by the functional needs and creativity of the users. Within the limited space of the living room of an apartment, families have to maximise the use of space virtually beyond actual dimension and diversify the use of space. To cater for the family living inside the house, furniture inside the living room are arranged in variety of ways to fit the needs of a particular family.

1.1. Aim and objectives of study

The general aim of the study is to identify the response of occupants towards the given environment and how their behaviour translates to the furniture layout of their living rooms. The investigation explores the furniture layout configurations of different families and to map out whether there are similarities and differences. To begin with, the functions of the living room and principle in planning for living as found in the literature were investigated. This was to provide the conceptual framework for the study. Consequently, the study was set with the following objectives:

- To examine the choice of furniture items in the living room space of apartment-type housing environment
- To identify the preference for and pattern of different furniture arrangements in the living room of apartment-type housing units
- To investigate how families do their “home-making” focusing on their living space

2. Concept and functions of the living room

Living room is chiefly used as an area for the family to gather together and communicate to share leisurely activities. It has to provide a physical space where communication of self and with others takes place (Amaturo et al, 1987). Hence, communication and interactions are two main activities that are commonly observed in the living room. Subsequently, this suggests that the atmosphere in the living room can be rather less formal. Arrangement of furniture in the living room reflects the personality and preferences of the family. Based on the study by Mitton & Nystuen (2007), it is arguable that generally today, formal living room is no longer desired by many homeowners.

Research regarding functions of a living room show that this space serves to host and entertain guests (Rechavi, 2009). As it usually is, the first space to enter in a house, living room accommodates guest depending on its size and capacity. Sufficient furniture inside a living room will provide adequate space for the guest and the house owner. Therefore, the interaction and communication between guests and house owners depends on the furniture arrangement of the living room. Living room also creates opportunity to host special occasions within the living room’s capacity and spatial organisation of the spaces. A study by Tsunetsugu et al (2005) found that differences in the designs of living rooms cause different physiological responses. Their findings showed that rooms with a certain arrangement of furniture will result on certain behaviour of the user. Home owners are able to control the perimeter of interaction of guest through certain furniture layout.

Another function of a living room is as a space to mingle and spend time with family. As a main gathering space in the house, living room allows family members to get together and join in a range of activities desirable (Mitton & Nystuen, 2007). Family members have the opportunity to spend quality
time together with variety of activities such as watching television, talking about their day and playing video games. Different activities require different furniture spatial arrangement to suit the needs. As a space for informal time with loved ones, different level of intimacy is provided in a living room (Rechavi, 2009). Intimacy may be created by cluster sitting arrangement. Mitton & Nystuen (2007) stated that within a larger space, conversations cluster may be formed by simply arranging furniture into separate groups.

The living room provides a space of “solitude” to the users and functions as private space for the users (Marshall, 1974). The privacy caters on a variety of activities that includes reading, writing journal, and even meditation. What is the reason for the users to end up choosing private room as a solitude space rather than a more private room in the house? When architectural limitation occurred such as lack of private rooms, users tend to utilize the living room as their solitude area (Rechavi, 2008). According to Rubenstein (1989), comfort is one of the vital reasons for users to physical and psychological experience in their living room. Therefore the arrangement and choice of furniture reveal different levels of comfort for the users. Furniture layout provides a certain relation towards achieving comfort level and users decide their level of comfort based on their own personal preference and experience.

2.1. Influence of culture and beliefs on living

Culture and belief also have strong influence the arrangement of furniture in a living room. According to Rapoport (1969), the act of building a house is a cultural phenomenon, therefore the cultural environment it belongs to deeply influenced the formal organization. Culture is adapted in the living room and the furniture layout as a belief of the owner over the power of nature and energy. Furthermore, cultural behaviour and their inhabitant’s activities are affected by the social and cultural background of their time and region (Choi & Yoon, nd). There were times when the owner arrange their furniture in a space based on culture and belief.

The Chinese Art of placement, known as Feng Shui is the study, examination and understanding of the essential energies of people and places. Helm (2007) stated that it is shaped through the flow and circulation of “Chi” which is an important energy and its relation of Yin and Yang within the five elements which are wood, fire, metal, earth and water. Hence, Feng Shui is associated with the interaction between human and the nature that surrounds us. This creates energy that can play its part on the everyday life and the behaviour of people.

The Indian is popular with Vaastushastra or Vaastu that means dwelling place and it is known today as the ancient Indian science architecture (Das, 2006). Das indicated the five main elements which are earth, water, wind, fire and space that interplay within them through forces of nature to retain equilibrium. Vaastu affect not only human behaviour but also the living being on earth. This belief is adapted to local environment hence spreads to the spatial arrangement of buildings, homes, and gardens.

For the Muslims, the main principle in organising the spaces within the house is the adherence in separation between men and women. For this reason, the living space shall provide a separate area for men and women guests who are not close relatives. It should be noted that is no restriction between men and women to mingle among themselves within the family. Such code had a strong influence on the design of the layout and organisation of space of dwellings in Muslim communities. The planning of the traditional Malay houses is a clear example of spaces that conform to the principle.

2.2. Factors in planning a space for living

Other than considering culture and beliefs as part of a factor on planning a life space, the influence of people, lifestyle and psychology are also vital. The number and relationships of peoples utilising the
space should be a big concern to identify the needs of individual or group of people (Faulkner & Faulkner, 1975b). The living room can be seen as a living organism, dynamic rather than static, where the occupant who makes use of the space rather than vice versa (Magnani, 1978). The organisation of the furniture should responds to the needs and priority of the user. Therefore it proved that owners have the ability to control the usage and function of a living room prior to planning.

Accordingly, Faulkner & Faulkner (1975a) found that daily cycles of the users are strongly related to the planning of space in a living room where the classic nuclear family routine might have a common spatial organisation that includes relaxation, comfort and spending time with family. Despite this common organisation, certain family that work at home might include their workspace in the living room. The space planning should accommodate different priority and daily activities. According to Lam & Thomas (2007), convertible furniture solve the problem with cramped quarters two or more functions are packed in one piece and can be put away. Hence, the furniture is visible only when it is needed and the crowded environment can be reduced. By overlapping certain activities in a space, more than one activity can be done in a certain part of the room and less furniture is required. The living room is illustrated between the conflicting desires for “nest” or “vista” where it differs between people and their psychology (Faulkner & Faulkner, 1975a). The psychological protection of a “nest” describes a small, cosy and snug space, whereas “vista” illustrates open space with lack of confinement. Despite the difference physical aspects, both of these desires would provide the feeling of comfort and protection to different individual.

2.3. Organizing and space planning

Planning the furniture arrangement of a space needs careful considerations. Faulkner & Faulkner (1975) suggests that proper agenda should be drafted in order to produce an efficient planning. The elements of the program include functional goals, equipment needs, and the character of the proposed space. Special functions could consist of the consideration of the small children in the house that require less furniture to be arrange at the middle of the living room. Some furniture with sharp edges or are likely to tips are hazardous to the children (Drury & Czaja, 1998). Appropriate selection of safe furniture should be a priority. Identification of the equipment needs would help to determine the arrangement of certain equipment such as television that needs to be close to a power plug point. The character of the proposed space is related to the emotional impact of the space and their design upon the users of the living room. As a main focus space of the house, the living room should provide safety, comfort and relaxation to the occupants of the house. When minimum space is a concern, the aspect of priority is given to circulation where paths and movement should be short and direct. To achieve that, the spatial organisation of furniture is vital where furniture is arranged to create the circulation in a living room.

Winston Churchill had once said that first, we build our buildings, then our buildings shape our lives. This statement remains relevant and indeed, provides a guide for a functional planning of a space in our homes which also a reflection of our way of living. A house should be representative of the owner and mirror their personal taste (Magnani, 1978). Functional planning started with the study of activities that are being done in a space and the accommodation of space needed to cater to the activities follows (Faulkner & Faulkner, 1975b). Different family might have different activities done in a living room as a priority. For example, certain family prefer to watch the television in the living room while others may prefer a quiet space for relaxation. Despite all the different priority and lifestyle of a space, when minimum space is available, it is vital to open up the space to create more available square footage. The main intent is to turn a tight space into one that appears wider and larger.
2.4. Domestic space and functions

Studies on domestic space commonly focuses on spatial type, physical boundaries that shapes a living space or on the cultural and behavioural code that resolve the way space is used and claimed within the home. Understanding the fundamentals of space is acquired once these factors are taken into consideration for domestic spaces. With sufficient knowledge and understanding to spatial and social activities within a home, a space can easily be accessed through the organisation process with relation to its anthropological and behavioural approach (Asquith, 2007). Accordingly, Asquith suggests that in order to illustrate perceptions and cognitions to establish the usage of space, studies concerning behaviour to the environment are done and special attention is given on space use from an individual perspective or within role. Certain individual that utilise the space will have specific values and standard with respond to the space.

The anthropological approach concerns about the built form and its relation to the space or structure as a symbol of the culture. Cultures are based on values and beliefs of an individual or group of people. With the identified activities, routines and rituals performed by an individual or group of people are not just culture but also context dependent. This proved that the environment of the context has impact on the domestic space.

The behavioural approach related closely to the responses, attachments, perceptions and meanings that individuals within the family structure link with the spaces in their home (Asquith, 2007). For this reason, to illustrate the domestic space of a space inside a home, other spaces should not be neglected and because they are strongly associated between each spaces. Despite having organised space constraints the users, theorganisation of a space may or may not imitate social purpose at certain time. The social purpose of a space can be described by the behavioural approach. Asquith also analysed the behavioural approach of spatial behaviour that not only relate to the spreading of cultural and social importance but also the language, name, religion, behaviour, status, aspiration and social hierarchy. Within a space, reflection of this aspect will be distinguished through their behaviour and thus the arrangement of furniture has to follow.

In sum, the furniture layout of the living room is related to many aspects and elements. The functions of the living room varies through different living room units and serve the purpose of a solitude space, hosting guest and family gathering area. Moreover, the furniture layout is seen to respond to the environment and people’s behaviour, lifestyle and psychology that prompt it to reflect the culture in its surrounding. Feng Shui and Vaastushastra are two of the many cultures and beliefs that influence the furniture layout of a living room. In addition, the Muslims belief system is strict on separating between men and women. Hence, there are several methods on organizing a space through its plan such as space modulation, space organization and functional planning. Living room is one of the most sacred spaces in a house unit and the anthropological approach and behavioural approach can be used as the approach of study.

3. Research method

Observational approach was chosen as the main data gathering which was largely used in some behavioural studies. Employing this technique is considered appropriate for the present study as it involves observation of furniture arrangement on similar layout plan of the living rooms. Generally, it involved taking records of the furniture items in living room of each house visited. The selected area was a housing development known as Kompleks Perumahan Polis in Kelana Jaya. The housing units were built to accommodate the family of Police officers attached to the Petaling Jaya Branch.
There were altogether 13 blocks of apartment-type accommodation consisting 20 housing units in each block. A total of 26 units were randomly selected from four different blocks. The selection was mainly based on familiarity of the researcher with the occupants as well as recommendation by neighbours.

3.1. Data collection and analysis procedure

The data set used in this study was obtained and analysed in three stages. Firstly, a pre-drawn sketch of the living room was prepared. This was followed by making calls to certain houses to ask permission on visiting their house for this purpose. Besides, visits were carried out through recommendation of the neighbours over certain houses. The visits and observations took place in February 2011 between 12 pm to 4 pm within a period of three days. It was during the school holiday when the visits were conducted and family members including school going children were seen fully utilising the living room.

The arrangement of furniture layout of every living room was sketched out on the blank plan prepared earlier. The living room floor area is approximately 33 square metres and it is connected to a 7 square metre balcony divided by glass sliding door. Other than the balcony it is also connected to the master bedroom, kitchen and hallway to the other bedrooms. The layout plan of the living room is shown in Figure 1. Based on the configuration, it seems clear that living room space was intended to combine the living, dining and entertainment activities.

![Fig. 1. Pre-drawn sketch plan of the living room of the Kompleks Perumahan Polis Kelana Jaya](image)

Subsequently still-photos of the living rooms were taken with the permission from the occupants. To maintain consistency, photographs were taken from approximately the same point which was near the entrance door into the housing units. In other cases, the photos were taken from different angle to maximise the area captured in photograph. Short notes and important information were taken while observing the room to assist with the analysis later.

The second stage involved the analysis of the sketches, still photographs, observation and data collected. The sketches were redrawn in AutoCad Drawing as accurately as possible, illustrating the approximate size, location and arrangement of the furniture. The photograph of each living room is arranged next to the completed AutoCad Drawing in order to help visualise the actual configuration.
during the process of observation off-site. Further analysis of the plans will attempt to identify similarities and differences of furniture arrangement among the living rooms.

4. Results and findings

All the living rooms visited contained furniture items commonly found in ordinary families. Two main items in all the houses are the lounge set and dining table. In most cases, the three activity zones; living, dining and entertainment are quite easily identified as this is signified by the placement of furniture items. The living zone is where the lounge set with a coffee table; the dining is indicated by the table and chairs; and the entertainment is denoted by the existence of television/video set. Furniture items that were recorded are lounge sets (in various combinations of one, two and three seater sets), dining table with chairs (rectangular or round shape), shoe rack, dedicated television table and desktop computer table. The number of each item available and recorded in all the houses is shown in Figure 2.

Fig. 2. Furniture items recorded in the living rooms (n=26)

A variety of lounge sets of different sizes and designs was revealed in the observation. Lounge sets with modern designs are the most common and found in 15 of the 26 living rooms visited. They are of leather/half leather or fabric finish.

There are also wooden lounge sets with light carvings imported from Indonesia known as “perabot jati” or Indonesian teak furniture (found in six living rooms). Other less common designs found include Italian style lounge sets and sets made of rattan (found in two livings respectively). The lounge sets is of one, two or three seaters configurations and are arranged in parallel, L-shape, U-shape or with no particular organisation. The number of seating ranges from six to maximum ten except for one case where only three single seater set was available. The lounge set is usually complemented with a small rectangular coffee table. Rectangular dining tables are more preferred by families compared to the round shape which were only found in five of the living rooms.

Due to space constraint, having rectangular table could be easier to arrange compared with the round one as it would take up more space. Rectangular table can be tucked to the wall or corners of the living room quite simply if required. It appears shoe rack is an item which is quite important as this was available in almost all the houses. The shoe rack is logically placed near the main door for ease of taking off the shoes once the occupants enter the house. Those without the shoe rack appear to leave their shoes outside of the house unit or arrange them on the floor without using shoe rack. Only a small fraction (seven cases) had a computer located in their living rooms. It was not clear whether the figure comprised
all who owned a computer, or actually occupants might prefer having it in the bedrooms so that they have better concentration while working.

4.1. *Layout arrangement of furniture*

The analysis of the plans has shown that occupants have unlimited number of ways in arranging their furniture. Figure 3 and 3d display the various configurations of furniture layout of all the houses where none of the samples are identical. The data show that the majority had their furniture arranged in “clusters” where items are grouped according to activity zones within the living room space Fig 4(a).
Fig. 3. Clustered furniture (sample units 1 – 19) and centralised furniture arrangements along the four sides of the wall and the living, dining and entertaining zones are combined (sample units 20 – 25).

Thus, the lounge sets and the television area are arranged to obtain optimum relaxation at one area while the dining is by and large at the opposite corner. The placement of each furniture item was decided mainly for functional reasons. This perhaps shows that families intended to divide each space virtually so that activities can take place at the same time with little interference. For instance, a member of the family may watch the television while another is having a meal.

It was also observed that a small number of cases had their living room furniture arranged centrally Fig 4(b). By this it means the occupants prefer to have “open space” in the middle of the room with the furniture arranged around it and backing the four walls. This arrangement may be considered as what commonly known as “open planning”. The assumed advantage of such planning is a sense of spaciousness and direct passage for circulation. Another advantage for having a centralised furniture layout with open planning is that it will minimize the cleaning process where occupants can easily sweep or mop the floor with less obstruction of the furniture. However, such an arrangement is not considered as too straight-forward and less challenging and less attractive. It is also probably for this reason that occupants seem to prefer clustered layout as compared to centralised arrangement in home-making.

4.2. Activity zoning within the living room

The focal point of the living room is the lounge set and as previously shown, is arranged at the most central area of the space. This is logical because the lounge set which usually consists of 1+2+3 plus a coffee table at the centre uses more space compared to other furniture items. In the clustered arrangement, the lounge units are closely placed to each other creating a rather confined feeling of space Fig 5(a) and (b). On the other hand, the feeling of spaciousness is generated in centralised setting Fig 6(a) and (b). However, other factors such as the choice of furniture type play a role in making the ambience.

The location of the dining area is seen to be fixed and adjacent to the location of the kitchen. This planning is more convenient to serve the purpose of the connection between dining area and kitchen. It
also gives the impression that most of the occupants arranged their furniture based on its functions compared to concept or creativity.

From the observation it is interesting to note that the television area is usually fixed at either end of the room. This occurs because of the location of the power switch at that particular corner of the living room. However, some of the occupants locate their television at the opposite wall of the power switch location. It is quite surprising that these occupants had the initiative to connect their power cable all the way across the living room. Closer observation found that most families arranged their furniture that they block a large part of the sliding door to the balcony. Within the tight space given, they had to fit in all of the furniture needed thus, creating obstruction of circulation in the living room. The sliding door that was supposed to provide occupants with outside view is blocked by seats and coffee table. Hence, the balcony is not fully utilised as a viewing deck but in many instances, is used as storage space instead. Perhaps also that family prefers to block the sliding door to prevent their children from freely accessing playing at the balcony which can be dangerous.

Fig. 5. (a) and (b) Clustered arrangement creates a confined feeling of space

Fig. 6. (a) and (b) Centralised arrangement creates a feeling of spaciousness

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis showed that most of the furniture items available in the living rooms of all the houses are typically similar but of variety of designs. The three main items include the lounge set, dining table and television table/holder. The choice of each item differs between houses although it is apparent that the modern-style of living of all the families is apparent. The furniture items are of common design and style, perhaps were purchased from shops on the high street.

Arrangement of furniture items vary greatly between houses. It was possible to categorise the arrangement simply into clustered and centralised. The clustered arrangement outnumbered the
centralised layout by three to one indicating the preference of the families to segregate space according to activity zones. Despite the practicality and feeling of spaciousness, the centralised configuration did not seem preferred by the families in home-making.

The study shows that the furniture arrangement is very much dictated by the restrict space of the living room. With the minimal space provided, occupants should be aware of the types and size of furniture they are buying. Despite the tight space provided, occupants should take control of the furniture layout and arrangement since it should reflect the individuality of the occupants and respond to their daily lifestyle rather than following others.

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