

THE INFLUENCE OF PRIVACY REGULATION ON URBAN MALAY FAMILIES LIVING IN TERRACE HOUSING

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Abstract

This paper reports on behavioral norms and territoriality as part of behavioral and environmental mechanisms used to regulate privacy among urban Malay families living in terrace housing. In-depth interview was employed involving 11 case studies of Malay families living in three-bedroom two-storey terrace housings in the urban areas. Findings indicate that while most of the behavioral norms employed to regulate privacy are consistent with Malay cultural norms and religious belief, there are a few which are not consistent due to the constraint of terrace housing. Defined territory and the need to respect the neighbors' privacy are found to indirectly affect community intimacy among Malay families living in terrace housings.

Keywords:

Privacy; regulating mechanisms; cultural norms; terrace housing, Malaysia

Introduction

Privacy is a two-way process involving the permeability of boundaries between oneself and others. It is an on-going process which involves the process of regulation. Successful regulation is important in the process of achieving privacy. Two types of privacy regulating mechanisms as posited by Altman (1977) are behavioral and environmental mechanisms. Behavioral mechanisms include verbal and non-verbal behavior and are influenced by socio-cultural factors. People in all cultures engaged in the regulation of social interaction through behavioral mechanisms by which accessibility is controlled and are probably unique to the particular physical, psychological and social circumstances of a culture.

Altman (1977) described three environmental mechanisms, namely, territoriality, clothing and personal space. There are three types of territory depending to how central a territory is to a person or group or how close it is to their everyday lives namely primary, secondary, and public territories. Primary territories are owned and used exclusively by individuals or groups,

are clearly identified as theirs by others, are controlled on a relatively permanent basis, and are central to the day-to-day lives of the occupants. The exclusivity of primary territory is emphasized by Brower (1965) who refers to primary territory as personal territory. In terms of Altman's framework, primary territories are powerful privacy regulation mechanisms.

Privacy regulation mechanisms do not always involve environmental manipulation, but often depend on general styles of behaviour. Social and cultural norms are more often than not used to regulate privacy. Some cultures may appear to have little privacy by Western standards. Canter & Canter (1971) argue that this is probably due to a traditional view of privacy as solely a physical-environment process and not a complex behavioural system that draws on many levels of functioning. The need for privacy is universal and occurs in all cultures, but the regulating mechanisms utilized can vary considerably across cultures (Altman, 1977; Altman & Chemers, 1980; Gauvain, Altman & Fahim, 1983; Fahey, 1995). Privacy can be regulated through behavioural mechanisms such as behavioural patterns such as rules, manners and hierarchies, psychological means such as internal withdrawal and depersonalisation, and behavioural cues by structuring activities in time, spatial separation and the act of using physical elements (Gifford, 1997).

Abu-Gazze (1996) stated that the use of space is not isomorphic among cultures; each culture has specific variables that influence its use of space. The housing design in Malaysia especially in the urban area has changed significantly from late 1960s with the introduction of mass housing in the form of terrace housing

which is influenced by the British housing design and typology, where to some extent there are houses built with a chimney. One of the weaknesses in the housing design introduced is the lack of social and cultural considerations including privacy. Also, as pointed out by Salama (2006) when he discusses the issues in relation to providing affordable housing in Saudi Arabia. He stated that Saudi environmental and socio-cultural contexts demand that affordable housing should not aim at merely providing affordable shelters, it should also offer design solutions that are sensitive to the local contexts such as privacy, social cohesion, and perceptions on residential density, preferences, and the lifestyles of the target populations. Therefore this paper examines the Malaysian housing experience especially on the privacy regulating mechanisms among urban Malay families living in terrace housing and also to examine the influence of privacy regulation on community intimacy among Malay families living in terrace housing

Background

In the traditional Malay society, behavioural norms are important privacy regulating mechanisms. The traditional values of *budi* (etiquette) and *bahasa* (language) regulate the behaviour in the close-knit traditional Malay society. The term *budi bahasa* sum up the kind of proper behaviour an individual should display both in the privacy of family life and in public such as not prying into the private matters of others, giving the salutation and asking for permission before one enters other people's house, not looking into other people's houses, the rules on clothing and interaction. The observation of accepted behavioural patterns

indirectly provides privacy to the community at large. These norms are much in line with morality in Islamic teachings and to this extent, the Malay customs and Islam are in complete agreement (Zainal, 1995). Privacy is very important in Islam and the right to privacy is one of the most precious freedoms, the most comprehensive of rights and the most valued by Islam (Berween, 2002). In the Holy Qur'an, it is stated very clearly that one's privacy is one's own right and no one should intervene in it without one's permission.

In Islam, privacy and good manners in public contribute to the highest virtues, and are part of a Muslim's duties. The subject of sex ethics and manners is the determining factor in the segregation of males and females in the Islamic society. Therefore, the concept of privacy is introduced, perceived, and judged accordingly. In physical terms, privacy refers to the personal clothing and the private domain of the house (Hakim, 1986). In the context of housing, providing visual privacy and family intimacy is required. Privacy in the house is needed for the concealment of inter-family life from strangers, separation between men and women in sitting arrangements during social interaction but not for those of the same family, separate sleeping areas for male and female family members, for parents and children, and for normal functioning of daily activities. The architectural, social, and psychological dimensions of privacy are fundamental to the daily life of a Muslim. To control privacy in the built environment, architectural and behavioural variables must operate in tandem in order to satisfy the psychological needs of its residents (Abu-Gazze, 1996).

Privacy in the Muslim house is directed towards

the insulation of the household from outside and non-kin exposure (Tentokali and Howell, 1988). However, the translation of this principal varies between the Muslim's societies. The traditional Malay society emphasizes more on community intimacy than individual privacy. The territory of the traditional Malay house is not strictly defined and external spaces are shared and trespassing is allowed. Territory is loosely defined by trees and hedges and there is no strict rule on trespassing (see figure 1, showing the division of domains in the traditional Malay house and figure 2, showing the external environment of then Malay traditional house). Sharing of external spaces encourages interaction among the communities as these spaces act as the social place for meeting and interaction among the people which eventually strengthens the community bond. Within the accessibility and permeability of the traditional Malay house and setting, privacy of the family is provided within the individual house supported by accepted privacy behaviour. The lack of defined territory should not be seen as a lack of privacy as privacy in the traditional Malay society is not bounded by physical environment, but more importantly shared societal values that govern privacy behaviour among the homogeneous society.

The National Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1971 to solve economic, ethnic and regional imbalances among the multiracial Malaysians, resulted in rural-urban migration among the Malays. By the late 1970s, the Malays formed the majority (68.3%) of the urban migrants (Malaysia, 1979). Urbanization has resulted in changes in the way of life of the Malays and their housing environment. The housing design in the urban areas in Malaysia changed significantly from

the 1960s to cater the increasing population with the introduction of mass housing in the form of terrace housing, a direct influence from the British.

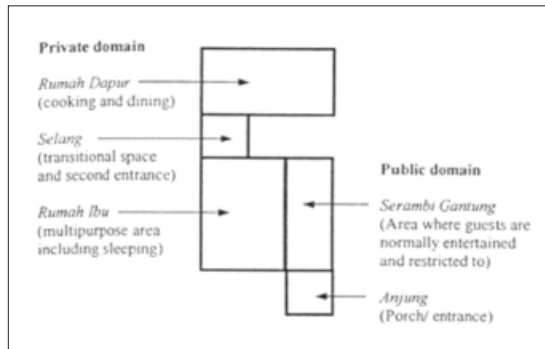


Figure 1: The Division of Domains in the Malay Traditional House. (Source: Authors).

Terrace housing was developed based on the 'efficient' use of set-backs and building-to-building distances for the purpose of natural lighting, wind flow, fire breaks and sanitary services, without much consideration to the local culture (Mohamad Tajuddin, 2003). By the 1970s, terrace housing had become a common sight in the urban areas made up of rows and rows of identical terrace houses along the rigid lines of the gridiron. The terrace housing units vary in floor area, design, and price which made it affordable to people from different income groups. Unlike the traditional Malay houses which are located randomly and spaced between each other, the terrace housing units are densely located in mirror image arrangement with defined boundaries. The housing design of the units in a housing development is monotonous. It is arranged next to each other in rows to maximize the number of units per acre.

In high density housing developments, most of the units are intermediate units facing other units (figure 3 shows a typical layout of terrace housing which can be found in the urban area in Malaysia). In terms of design perspective, these arrangements affect the visual privacy of the family due to direct visual exposure between fronting neighbouring units (see figures 4 and 5, showing the front and back alley of a typical terrace housing in Malaysia). A review of the two-storey housing indicates variation in floor area, design, and price. Available records and information from the authorities, developers, and field visits indicate that the lot size varies from 14' x 55' to 20' x 70'. The older housing units appear to be bigger in floor area than the new housing units.

The concept of life in a community as an extension of the family prevalent in the traditional Malay society gives way to the anonymous living of housing estates, which has persisted until now. Given the changes in the way of life and housing environment, privacy regulation is expected to influence some of the cultural norms among the Malay families living in terrace housing in the urban areas.

Methodology

This study adopted an in-depth interview because of the exploratory nature that allows the researcher to observe how people become conscious of, giving meaning to, and relate to the built environment particularly their housing and its surrounding (Tipple and Willis, 1991). An in-depth interview is particularly useful as it allows fluid interaction between people and the built environment and interprets the built environment as a symbol of cultural values and

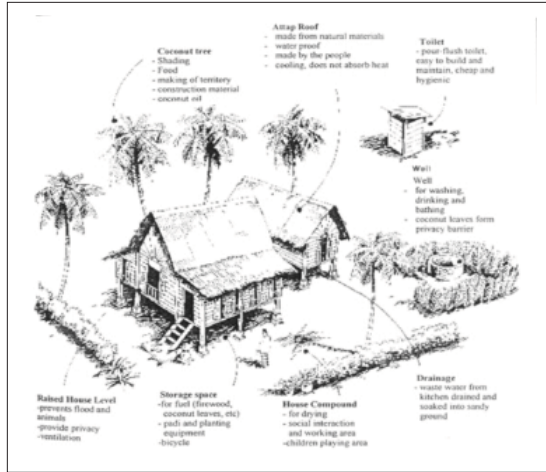


Figure 2: The External Environment of the Malay Traditional House (Source: Lim, 1987: p. 92).



Figure 3: A Typical Layout of Terrace Housing in Urban Area, Malaysia. (Source: Authors).

social order of the inhabitants. It also allows the study to examine the specifics of the design attributes and their effects on the privacy of the respondents and their family members. Therefore in this research, 11 respondents living in terrace housings in three locations in Selangor, the most urbanized and populous state in Malaysia were interviewed. The selection of respondents was based on their willingness to participate in the study. Each of the interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. The interview was unstructured but based on a list of questions.

Results and Discussion

Results from the in-depth interview indicates that behavioural norms according to culture and religious belief of the Malays remain to be important behavioural mechanisms in

regulating privacy among Malay families living in terrace housings which provide privacy to the family and community at large. Some of the behavioural norms appear to be common among the respondents and are more important in ensuring privacy to the community such as:

- i. Respecting the neighbours' privacy by controlling noise in one's house;
- ii. Avoiding looking into the neighbour's house particularly when the house is directly facing another house;
- iii. Restricting interaction with the neighbours during certain period of time; and,
- iv. Tolerating occasional intrusion within the neighbourhood

The following verbatim responses illustrate the use of behavioural pattern and expected norms used to regulate privacy at home among

Malay families living in terrace housings:

"The only people passing in front of our house are neighbours. I don't think they would be looking into our house when they passed by. We don't do that (looking into the neighbour's house)".

"My house faces another terrace housing unit. We would not look into my neighbour's house. As much as we respect their privacy, we feel that our neighbours have the same feeling too. It would be embarrassing if we accidentally see our neighbours in their house when they are inappropriately clothed".

"The children normally play in front of the house in the evening. We come to accept the noise as part of living in terrace housing. They are not an intrusion of privacy".

My neighbours would not interact with us when the family sits together at the terrace in the evening. They understand that given the time that we have

nowadays, there are times when we want to limit our interactions with each other".

The results also indicate that there are privacy behaviours that are not consistent with the cultural norms and religious belief of the Malays due to the constraint of terrace housing environment pertaining to receiving and accommodating guests, and community intimacy. A number of respondents indicated that the privacy of the family is affected if they have relatives spending the night in their houses or having male guests in the house. To maintain privacy, the families seldom accommodate their relatives. In a number of cases, male guests especially neighbours and friends are entertained in the porch areas. Findings also indicate that the majority of the respondents have minimal interaction with their neighbours partly due to the minimal time for interaction



Figure 4: Frontal Image of a Terrace Housing Project.. (Source: Authors).

due to work and family commitment and the need to respect the neighbours' privacy when they are at home. The space between the boundary of the housing units and the road are found to be a common socialization place among male residents.

Territoriality is found to be an important environmental mechanism in terrace housing mainly to limit unwanted interaction and intrusion by unknown outsiders particularly salesmen and unknown strangers. The fence around the housing unit defined the territory of the housing unit. In all the case studies, the respondents indicated it is necessary to close and lock the gate for both privacy and safety. The defined territory also discourages interaction with the neighbors.

Conclusion

Privacy behaviors according to cultural norms and religious belief are important regulating mechanisms among Malay families living in terrace housing. However, some of the behavioural norms are not consistent with the traditional cultural values and religious belief due to the constraints of terrace housing and housing environment. The inclusion of a porch as a place for guests and interaction and the provision of external shared spaces can provide both privacy and promoting community ties among neighbours.

The incorporation of privacy rules within the terrace housing environment in space planning and designs which accommodate communal socialization can enhance the role of housing design in providing a more secure residential environment in terrace housing. The study

also shows that the meaning, the needs, and regulations are influenced by socio-religious and cultural norms of the society. Therefore, a larger scale study on the privacy meanings, needs, and practices of the Malays and also other ethnic groups, the Chinese and Indians which have a different set of cultural norms need to be done in order to help generate a more conclusive housing designs ideas and solutions which can accepted by all. A longitudinal research on the privacy needs and adopting other methods of research could be done, where the findings would allow for conclusive guidelines and criteria which are sensitive to the differences and changes in privacy needs and their influence in housing modification.

People, especially those who lived in the urban area, are actually competing for space because space as a commodity is becoming expensive every day. With this limitation and in trying to come with affordable housing for the people and with all the complexities of socio-psychological elements, it is a challenge to the designers, policy makers, and also developers to come out with conducive living arrangements and designs which could fulfil borrowing Abu-Gazzeah's terms, "the cultural schemata of the people".

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