

SERAMBI: THE DISTINCTIVE SPATIAL CHARACTERISTIC OF A MALAY TRADITIONAL HOME

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ABSTRACT

The serambi is a pronounced interior space within the Malay traditional home design, particularly for the Negeri Sembilan Malays in Rembau, the context of this exploratory case study research. This paper presents the interpretations of cultural values and socio-cultural viewpoint on the quality of life derived from critical, comprehensive literature reviews within the serambi context. 'Cultural values' concluded to be the infused refinement of the Adat Perpatih, through the inculcation of the custom in all aspects of serambi design. The local Malay community's socio-cultural viewpoint on the quality of life, therefore, theorized as the inclusion of cultural values within their home design.

Keywords: *socio-cultural values; quality of life; home environment; matrilineal Malay*

INTRODUCTION

Serambi is an interior space, commonly known and identified to be one of the distinctive spatial characteristics of the commonly widespread traditional Malay house in the Malay Peninsula of Malaysia, generally and in the Negeri Sembilan (NS) Malay traditional house implicitly (Idrus, 1996; Mursib & Mohamad, 2005). Intriguingly, the activities performed by the users within the spaces in the traditional Malay houses are not only culturally functional but also an inculcation of meanings from life-views being manifested, particularly so for the *serambi*. Moreover, it reflects the creative and aesthetics skills as well as innovativeness of the Malays in meeting their socioeconomic, cultural and environmental needs. Relating to "quality of life", interpreting the terms in the built environment to a certain extent, is inexorably influenced by the knowledge of cultural and built heritage environment.

Research background

In relation to the green building design, Green Building Rating Tools (GBRTs) is the method to assess the building's performance, consequently forming the 'mould' of future home living environment. In Malaysia, it is called the Green Building Index (GBI), and Green Real Estate (GreenRE) is the latest addition.

The cultural and social aspects integration within the indices of the Green Building Rating Systems (GBRTs) frameworks was identified to be of vital importance in improving human quality of life and well-being (Masri, Yunus, & Ahmad, 2015a, 2015b) toward a more holistic implementation in achieving Sustainable Development. Interpreting the “quality of life” in the built environment to a certain extent is influenced by the knowledge of cultural and built heritage environment. Cultural aspects of place involved meanings related to the environment (Wan Ismail, 2012). A person’s perceptions of what entails human quality of life or well-being are shaped by the community’s customs and traditions (Masri et al., 2015a). Social and cultural values are extremely contextual, intertwined with the community’s way of life which constitute their unique customs, traditions, belief and philosophy; in which their spiritual faith or religion is the fundamental determinant of their norms and moral etiquette. Architecture, thus, is a manifestation of a society and its cultural practices (Rashid, 2014).

Research aim

This exploratory research aims at fulfilling the gaps identified towards achieving sustainability holistically by incorporating the cultural aspect as an innovative tool in rating the home environment in Malaysia. One of the objectives of the research is to identify the cultural values inculcated in the design of the interior home environment of the matrilineal custom’s community in a village named Kampung Penajis (local dialect pronunciation: ‘Penajeh’), the identified case study’s research site in the district (among the locals ‘district’ is referred to as ‘*Luak*’) of Rembau, in the state of Negeri Sembilan (NS), Malaysia. The research focuses on the cultural dimensions of the designated Malay community of the village in accordance with their cultural designation of clans. The Malay communities of NS are known to reflect their socio-cultural uniqueness in their traditional built form (Masri, 2012).

Further information on the historical context, social structure, ruling system, historical links to the Minangkabau people, traditional architecture and influence of archipelagic culture refer to Masri, Samadi, and Aziz (2012), Masri (2012, 2013), and Masri, Yunus, Wahab, and Ahmad (2015c). The Malays in Malaysia, historically are inextricably linked to the history of Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) Civilization in South-east Asia.

Paper’s objective

This paper’s objective is to present the derived interpretation of ‘cultural values’ from the deliberations of the literature, limiting to only the interior space named *serambi* as it is not possible to discuss all interior spaces within the scope and length of this paper. In the case of *serambi*, functioning as public space, therefore, exemplifies ‘socio-cultural values’ as well, rather than just the cultural values.

Paper Limitation

The scope of literature reviewed relating to custom, historical and philosophical aspects of the design are only confined to the requirements of this paper. The abundance of all literature available was not able to be included.

METHODOLOGY

The paper’s methodology is an exploratory study, through a critical literature review (which includes analysis of floor plans) that focuses on the aspect of design considerations and

principles of NS Malay traditional home with the specific intent to interpret the cultural values from their perspectives. Refer to Figure 1.

The research design from which this paper is produced adopts an exploratory case study with multi-dimensional strategy in determining research site and in determining the approach for qualitative data collection techniques. The qualitative data collection techniques generate data from multiple sources of evidence such as observations, literature search, interviews, etc., including ethnographic strategy approach. The strategy in determining the research site is through the comprehensive narrative historical review of Southeast Asia and Nusantara (Malay Archipelago).

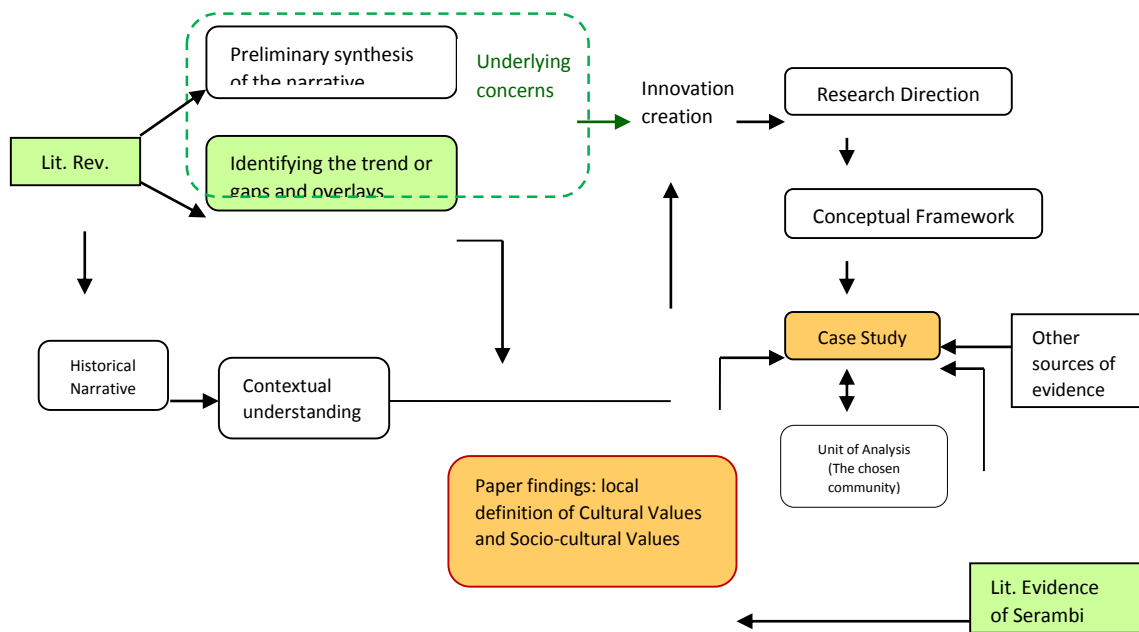


Fig.1. This paper's literature review methodology.

Source: authors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review is contextually from architectural and interior design of sustainability. The literature review will first introduce the issues that produced the research. The rest of the elaboration focuses on the *Serambi* and notion of 'quality of life' from the socio-cultural aspects of the local perspectives, particularly Rembau. Further explanation regarding the underlying concerns of GBRTs; the relationship between the notion of 'sustainability' and 'quality of life' within this research context, may be referred to Masri et al. (2015b).

The underlying concerns of GBRT global trends

This section placed the attention on the issues that produce this research. Most researchers critically agree that GBRTs frameworks should move beyond the technicality of 'green' and be more responsive to the non-environmental particularly the social, cultural, heritage and perceptual aspects (Shari, 2013) of sustainability. Poston, Emmanuel, and Thomson's (2010)

comparison of general assessment categories illustrated that social and cultural aspects are among the gaps existed in the Malaysia's Green Building Index (GBI) frameworks in achieving sustainability holistically. Masri et al. (2015a, 2015b) highlighted the unsettling revelation that despite rigorous effort in improving the GBRTs framework indices, countries may be only improving the standards of living instead of the quality of life at the expense of their socio-cultural values. Parallel to Fleming (2013)'s Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) proposing additional fourth experiential bottom line in the sustainability equation emphasizing the focus on 'higher quality of life'. German's DGNB (Deutsches Gutesiegel Nachhaltiges Bauen) certification (Ebert, EBig, & Hauser, 2011), demonstrated that social and cultural values inclusion within the frameworks had been implemented in developed countries. The Ghaffarian Hoseini, Berardi, and Dahlan (2014) study theorized that in enhancing the quality of life in contemporary residential design in Malaysia, the socio-cultural features from the Malay kampong houses are the key factors. The Nunta and Sahachaisaeree (2010) study of cultural landscape revealed that social and behavioural significance of societal identity and way of life in the past are crucial to the explanation of the current cultural and social dynamics. Not only that, the cultural landscape was found to be determined by cultural identity (Nunta & Sahachaisaeree, 2012). The lack of the socio-cultural values was found to have caused the current homeowners in Malaysia altering their residence especially on external aesthetics with some regards to meeting local architecture (Saruwono, Rashdi & Omar, 2012a; 2012b). Hanan stated that despite transformation, a living environment represents cultural values that are shared with ancestors, and passed down to descendants (Hanan, 2012).

The notion of 'quality of life': local cultural perspective

Literature has repeatedly mentioned how the meanings of quality of life shifts when understood in a different part of the world, different economies and differing cultural expectations. The influential parameter derived from elaborated facts simply due to the significantly differing customs and value systems. According to (Ujang, 2010), "home" instead of "house" signifies place attachment, meaning and an association between people and place; a psychological concept (Omar, Endut & Saruwono, 2010). Masri et al. (2015a) stated that "home" environment is fundamentally socio-cultural in origin where Sazally, Omar, Hamdan and Ibrahim Bajunid (2009) found that the occupants' response plays a distinct and contextual role. The occupants' life and world view are nurtured within their home environment, affected by physical and mental (Omar et al., 2012), where tangible and intangible dimensions existed congruently, and inseparable.

Therefore, implicitly, in the case of Rembau, the "life and world view" all encompassing, is their unique and complex matrilineal custom, the '*Adat Perpatih*'. As elaborated countless times by literature, their cultural and socio-cultural practices are denoted by this custom, consequently, their respective values. Ali (1953) wrote that the *Adat Perpatih* of the *Luak* of Rembau stated that a quality life is founded on the *Enam Punca Kata-kata* (The Six Dictation). They are the word of Allah; the word of Rasul (Prophet); the Word of *Pusaka* (legacy verses and words from the ancestors constituting ancient wisdom passed down through generation); *Muafakat* (family or community's collaborative decision making); *Teromba* also known as *Puisi Adat* (history, life principle guidance from the custom's constitution, relayed in the form of poetries and stories of events); *Bersalasilah* (preserving knowledge and recordings of family tree and bloodlines). The adherence prioritizes in the order written, aimed towards not just good but excellent quality of life (Ali, 1953), where people-environment congruence may be achieved as well. Intriguingly, a well-known fact among the community, consistent with the literature is the verse "*Adat bersendikan syarak*", implies firm elemental foundation of Islam within the custom's constitution. Within the literature of *Adat Perpatih* in Rembau, evidentially there are

sections denotes to their traditional Malay homes. Saludin (2009)'s review of the *teromba* evidentially elucidates the custom's placed high regards in the methodology of designing a home. Refer to Table 1. Essentially, the essence constitutes not only their inherited architectural wisdom with invaluable aesthetical values but also the amalgamation of the Malays' esteemed self-value.

Table 1. NS Malay traditional house component addressed in the *Teromba*

Subject Matter	Addressed	Poetry constituents- symbolic and philosophical meanings for/in/of:
1 Columns/Pillars	√	6 types of columns and 8 types of column's cross-sectional shape.
2 Doors	√	3 types of door functions and in designing the main entrance door at the <i>serambi</i> and decorations at the door.
3 Stairs	√	Staircase's construction components and function and philosophical meaning of decorative motif sometimes added below the steps.
4 Windows	√	Underlying philosophy of the concept of window and window screens.
5 Walls	√	wall construction and functional, decorative embellishment along the lower part of the wall that skirts the interior space and plant's decorative motif.
6 Roof	√	4 roof types; decorative motifs at the finial, ridge, 4 corners of the roof eaves.
7 Screen (<i>Bidai/Singap</i>)	√	the forms of name and shape of the carvings; social status and cultural significance in the number of layers.

Sources: Saludin (2009)

SERAMBI: THE DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Literature repeatedly defines "*Serambi*" as a longitudinal space, attached to the *rumah ibu* (main house), however, there are exception in certain region of Malaysia. In other regions, it is also called '*selasar*' or '*beranda*' (DBP, 2008 - 2016). In Terengganu, North-East of Malay Peninsula and Riau it is called *Selasar* whereas, in Melaka, certain places called *Sengkuap*. Notably, three physical attributes contribute to physical characteristics of *Serambi*: plan shape of the *serambi* space, inter-relativity of *serambi* to the main house based on principles of adjacency and spatial hierarchy using floor levels differentiation. Significantly, the name designated to the type of *serambi* is indicative of this inter-relativity. In NS, *Rumah ibu* is called *Rumah Tengah* (Middle House) (Idrus, 1996; Masri, 2012, 2013). Table 2(i) demonstrated the main spaces within the Malay traditional houses in Malay Peninsula, *Serambi* existed in all. Table 2(ii) however demonstrate the main spaces within traditional houses in central Sumatera, Indonesia.

Table 2(i). Showing the existence of the spaces within a Malay traditional home

Region in Malay Peninsula, Malaysia	States in Malay Peninsula, Malaysia	Serambi (selasar)	Main Entrance with rumah tangga or roofed	Rumah Tengah (Rumah ibu)	Second Rumah tengah	Gajah Menyusu space	Female guest room	Anak (selang)	Rumah dapur	Pelantar (attached to rumah dapur)	Kolong (spaces below - exterior)
Central	Negeri Sembilan	√	√ (Not all)	√				√	√	√	√
	Melaka	√	√	√				√	√		√
	Selangor	√	√	√	√				√		√
	Perak	√	√	√				√	√	√	√
Northern	Perlis	√		√	√		√	√	√	√	√
	Kedah	√		√					√		√
	Pulau Pinang	√	√	√		√		√	√		√
East	Terengganu	√		√				√	√		√
	Pahang	√		√					√		√
	Kelantan	√		√	√			√	√	√	√
Southern	Johor	√	√	√				√	√	√	√

Sources: Nasir (1985); Idrus (1996); Masri (2012, 2013);(Monir, 2007).

Table 2(ii). Showing the existence of the spaces within a Malay traditional home in Sumatera Island

Region in Sumatra Island, Indonesia	Places in the region	Selasar (serambi)	Main Entrance with rumah tangga or roofed	Rumah Induk (Rumah Tengah/ibu)	Second Rumah tengah	Gajah Menyusu space	Female guest room	Anak (selang)	Rumah dapur	Pelantar (attached to rumah dapur)	Kolong (spaces below)
Central East Sumatra	Riau Daratan	√		√				√ Sulo Pandan		√	√
West Sumatra	Rumah Asli Padang	√		√							

Rumah
Gadang
Minangkabau

√

√

√

Sources: Idrus (1996); (Widya, 2005).

THE SERAMBI

From the above inferences, the quality home environment for the NS, Rembau Malays, may be summarized as the environment where the custom (*adat*) understanding and practices is nurtured through the amalgamation of the socio-cultural values within the home design that denotes the occupant's daily life activities.

Most literature discussed the typical plan layout of a Malay traditional house according to zones, the inhabitants' interactions through daily activities (functional components), domains that are gender-related, age-related and guest-related. Abidin (1981 cited in Ghaffarian Hoseini et al., 2014) divided the zones into four, the Front Zone, Main (Middle) House Zone, Kitchen Zone and Rear Zone. Many other works of literature, on the other hand, zoned the interior spaces into public and private spaces or in accordance to functional elements. Almost all related literature consistently illustrated *serambi* in NS Malay traditional (NSMT) house as the front and public zone, subsequently forming a constituent of the house façade, functioning as the male domain and guest area. The Middle Zone, the *rumah ibu*, is the highest in regards in comparison to other interior spaces. The Kitchen and Rear Zone designated as the female domain and the places for cooking activities (Idrus, 1996; Monir, 2007; Nasir, 1985). Table 3 lists not only the activities occurred in *serambi* but significantly the cultural manner in which they are managed and executed, into their norms and moral etiquette. Two most significant socio-cultural values inculcated within the design of *serambi* are the positioning of the main entrance and the sequencing of future extension for *serambi* space. Essentially, the porch (*rumah tangga*) acts as an open space prior to the main entrance at the *serambi* designated for male guest (Idrus, 1996; Masri, 2012). Refer to Fig. 2 (a)-(f) and Fig. 3(a)-(d). The main entrance, by design is purposively positioned asymmetrically to the overall *serambi* façade. As most NSMT houses in Rembau are built on stilts, the main entrance door is reached by a staircase covered by the porch, traditionally also housed an external seating platform called *pangkin*. The positioning of the main entrance is to ensure that it is recognisable to the guest which part of the interior zoning is the culturally designated principal zone (*Pangkal*), Middle (*Tengah*) zone and End (*Hujung*) zone of the *serambi*. Table 4 demonstrates the necessity of this knowledge. Idrus illustrated using sketch, *Pangkal Serambi* is on the side where the staircase is asymmetrically positioned. The protruded extensions are called *anjung*, added sequentially to the *pangkal*, *hujung* and perpendicular to the *serambi* towards the frontage of the house. The front extension maintained the name *Anjung*, but the other extension on the sides often uses the same name of the original space being extended.

The resulted typology signifies the owner's status within the social structure of the community's social organization and ruling system.

Ghaffarian Hoseini et al. (2014) in view of the issues in contemporary Malaysian housing design, critically divided the Malay traditional house composition, principles of spatial features and functional components into socio-cultural and environmental values. The socio-cultural values deliberated, however, had not taken the local custom practices (*Adat Temenggung* or *Adat Perpatih*) dimensions into consideration as it generalizes for all the Malaysia's Malay 'kampong' houses. Critically, the socio-cultural values were translated as socio-cultural

features. Jani and Hussain (2014) on the other hand, concluded that it is important to materialize the intangible characters into tangible manner. Idrus's elucidation of NSMT houses however placed high regards of the *Adat Perpatih* perspectives and described the serambi from eight aspects: cosmological; functional; psychological and philosophical aspects; custom; interior spatial organization (physical and conceptual); spiritual; symbolic; and orientation. The cultural values infusion, according to Idrus (1996) felt by the guests psychologically, evidentially, are the reflection of how refine are the moral etiquette and code of conduct or manners in the norms the Malays. Table 4 exemplified the infusion of the custom-based designation of space within the interior spatial organization. Cosmologically, Idrus emphasized *serambi* as the 'face' of the house, befitting to be given maximum attention aesthetically, with beautiful embellishments, usually in the form of decorative woodcarvings. Mohamad Rasdi, Mohd Ali, Syed Ariffin, Mohamad, and Mursib (2005) stated that the each of the interior spaces in NS Malay traditional house was differentiated with changes in levels, created in accordance to the social and cultural values of the people.

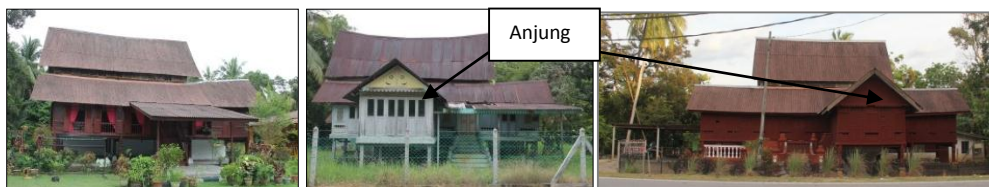
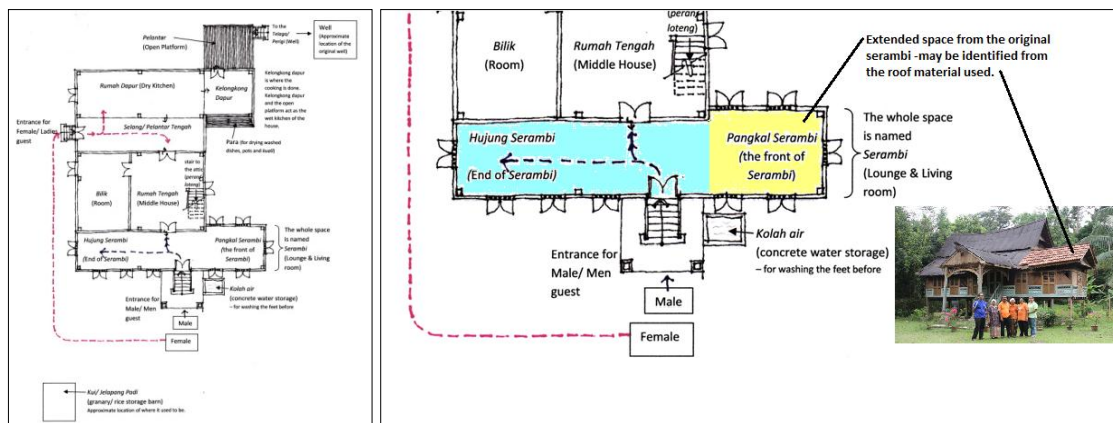


Fig. 2. (a) a typical layout plan of a traditional house in Kampung Penajis, Rembau; (b) (c), (d), (e) showed the variation of Serambi extension in Kampung Penajis, Rembau, NS.



Fig. 3. (a), (c) view of Pangkal Serambi; (b), (d) view of hujung Serambi.

Table 3. Activities in Serambi and their execution Cultural Manner

Category	Activities
(a) Formal events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> formal events were/are always held in the <i>serambi</i> according to the required time and situation Space where the wedding ceremonial vow (<i>istiadat Akad Nikah</i>) by the groom is held. Space for <i>Pelamin</i> (a decorated sitting place for the bride and groom, for the relatives and guests to give blessings and view them for recognition. Male Domain Male invitees' eating space during ceremonial and family gatherings functions such as weddings, <i>kenduri doa selamat</i>, <i>kenduri arwah</i>, etc. <i>Upacara Berkhatan</i> (Circumcision ceremony)
(b) Family daily life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sleeping place for the young unmarried males (<i>anak-anak bujang</i>). Praying area - alone or in group (<i>berjemaah</i>) Reading, leisure seating and chatting with the male guest. A place for the sick family members (<i>tempat sakit</i>) – though this is quite seldom as it is usually in the <i>Rumah Ibu</i>.
(c) Family event	formal Family Meeting Hall at particular times.
(d) The manner in entering the main entrance	<p>Upon ascending to the <i>serambi</i> space a person (owners or guest):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Wash their feet at the <i>pangkal tangga</i> (the start of the stair that meets the ground) and take off (<i>tanggalkan</i>) their shoes there. Ascending the steps by beginning with the right foot first, the steps are usually in the number of 5. Upon reaching the top steps of the stair (<i>anak tangga bongsu</i>), the person stands with both feet on it. Similar to the act of ascending the steps at <i>pangkal tangga</i>, stepping into the serambi space must start with the right foot and bow slightly while crossing over the bendul (the construction components at the bottom of the door frame) into the <i>serambi</i>.
(e) The manner in seating arrangements for receiving guest, ceremonial event and family meetings	<p>“<i>Pangkal untuk orang adat, hujung untuk orang syarak dan penghulu</i>” as dictated in <i>perbilangn adat</i> in the Adat Perpatih. Refer to Table 4 for further explanation.</p>

- (f) The cultural manner in establishing status within the social organization Extension of the *Pangkal serambi*, *Hujung serambi* or *Anjung*. The *Anjung* signify higher influential and status than the other two extended Serambi space.

Sources: Idrus (1996); Nasir (1985); Masri (2012, 2013)

Table 4. Placement of persons in a typical Serambi accorded to the Adat Perpatih.

Interior space	Interior Zoning	Spatial status culturally	Placement of people category accorded by the Adat Perpatih	The people within the category
Serambi	Pangkal	Lowest	Orang Adat (persons with higher ranking as denoted by the clans' custom ruling systems)	Buapak (family leader) and Lembaga (clan's leader) seats at the <i>Pangkal</i> or on occasions at the middle (<i>Tengah</i>) of the <i>Serambi</i> during a discussion of family matters or <i>adat istiadat</i> (ceremonial matters related to <i>adat</i>).
	<i>Tengah</i>	Neutral		Women (female) family members (sometimes when needed) during family consultation meetings
	<i>Hujung</i>	Most pious	Orang syarak and Penghulu (Pious persons of the religion and village's leader)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pious persons (<i>orang-orang alim</i>), religious teachers (<i>lebai-lebai</i>) as well as <i>dato-dato</i> (culturally ranks persons) seats at the <i>Hujung serambi</i>. The groom (<i>pengantin lelaki</i>) that is to be wedded in the <i>Serambi</i>.

Sources: Idrus (1996); (Ali, 1953)

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Interpreting the theoretical inferences and findings, the *serambi* design considerations is a reflection of proper communication between occupants and environments, representing the efficiency in design. The elaborated reviews revealed that the design layout of NSMT homes scrutinizes the *Adat Perpatih's* viewpoints (an explicit amalgamation of culture and religion) while efficiently responding to the local environment. From the socio-cultural perspectives, perceivable in the space arrangement design concept, the NS Malays observed cultural diplomacy and subtlety in the manner of showing respect in receiving guests, acknowledgment of guest status or rank within their social organization structure and communicating socio-

cultural boundary based on the concept of *mahram* (unmarriageable kin) (Wahab, Ahmad, Masri, & Hamid, 2014) guidance in Islam. Not only that, the design inculcated and ensure any persons is to be of *adab* (appropriate manners parallel with cultural norms and/or moral etiquette) as percept by the local community's custom. In addition, the space arrangement inter-relativity instilled the safeguarding of Islamic viewpoints of socio-cultural interaction (*menjaga batas-batas syarak*) and privacy through defining domains for male and female (Jani & Hussain, 2014). The design ingenuity of the *serambi* in NSMT house is the fact that the space, regardless of its sizes is "design-ready" for the homeowners to receive all level of guest within their social structure, from the family leader up to the *Undang* (the ruler of the *luak*). Indeed, they are designed with high level of congruity between functional space design and custom (socio-cultural and religious background).

Literature proves that *serambi* is a prominent space in all of the Malay traditional houses from different states and types. Refer to Table 2. Despite particular differences with other types of Malay traditional houses, nevertheless, the essence, relationships between *serambi* and other spaces in terms of assigned functions, space adjacencies, spatial hierarchy and arrangement of spaces are constant in comparison with the basic layout of the Malay traditional house.

FINDINGS

Indisputably pronounced, the findings indicated that the design of *serambi* is encoded in the local custom, consequently pre-determined by their cultural and socio-cultural values. From NS Malay's design point of view, based on the literature reviews "Cultural Values" therefore concluded to be the infused refinement of the *Adat Perpatih*, accommodative for the inculcation of their code of conduct and refine moral etiquette as denoted by the custom in all aspect of design. Malay socio-cultural viewpoint on quality of life therefore is the inclusion of cultural values within the home design. "Home" instead of "house" in this context therefore signifies people-environment existence in congruence with their cultural values. The aim of the *adat's* conformity in design was found to be identical with sustainability in design that is to achieve excellence in quality of life despite the differing cultural and social values. In fact, it is postulated that, the NS Malays viewpoints of home design, *serambi* in particular, are civilizational in nature.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings indicate that the *Serambi* embodies culturally-responsive functional space design which contains substantial influence on the quality of life of occupants, consequently the well-being of the community or clan. The study theorizes that inclusion of cultural and socio-cultural values within the assessment criteria in rating the contemporary residential living environment would positively enhance the quality of life. This action would bring back the meanings, place-root association and attachment despite the evolutionary lifestyle changes. Moreover, it is the essence of the NS Malays well-being and, in general, for Malays as a whole. In regards to quality of life, the study also highlights the importance of culturally-responsive environment and the necessity of further research into the role of cultural values as the influential parameters of quality of life in contemporary living environments. Despite being outside the scope of this paper's deliberations, it is equally essential to study the embodied environmental values of NSMT house in view of the human quality of life or well-being.

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