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The Influence of Culture and Religion on Visual Privacy

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of culture and religion on the conception of visual privacy, its regulation, and housing design attributes affecting visual privacy of Malay Muslim families living in terrace housing, in Malaysia. The study involves a survey interview of 381 respondents and 11 case studies. Findings indicate that changes in living condition in the urban area, a new paradigm in culture-housing and the lack of consideration for visual privacy in housing design, the conception of visual privacy and its regulation are influenced by both the Malay culture and Islam as a way of life.

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Keywords: Visual privacy; privacy regulation; housing design; culture

1. Introduction

The conception of privacy is culturally specific (Altman, 1977). Westin (1967) argues that privacy operates at the individual, group and organizational/institutional levels but stressed that his theory of privacy is applicable specifically to Western cultures because it is consistent with the socio-political values of Western democracies. Privacy should be perceived from the perspective of the culture in question. Privacy in different cultures was translated into different physical levels and responses in the design of houses. Privacy need, the use of space and how privacy was regulated is one of the outstanding ways in which cultures differ, resulting in different house forms around the world (Rapoport, 1969). The house is the primary setting for privacy and its associated design attributes act as important privacy

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regulating mechanisms. A house and its associated design attribute not designed according to the culture of its intended inhabitants may not provide a comfortable level of privacy. Architectural and behavioural variables must operate in tandem to control privacy in the built environment, in order to satisfy psychological needs.

Visual privacy is one of the most important aspects of privacy as far as built environment is a concern particularly in the design of houses. It is needed to provide a visual insulation from outside as it allows control of visual exposure and freedom from visual access. Visual exposure is the probability that one's behaviour is seen by sight from one's immediate surroundings. Visual access allows one to look out and to monitor immediate spatial surroundings by sight. In the context of housing providing visual privacy, is needed to control visual exposure of the family members from strangers and allow for freedom of visual access.

Extant literature has indicated the link and relationship between behavior and environment (Wapner, Demick, Yamamoto & Minami, 2000). An appropriate physical setting and behavior influence the definition of privacy and environmental quality as the built environment is a determinant of behavior whereby behavioral adaptation is a spontaneous response to constraints in the environment (Archea, 1977). Altman (1977) posited that the environment is both "a determinant of behavior and as an extension of behavior". Privacy is not an end by itself but is a process of regulation. Successful privacy regulation through both behavioral and environmental mechanisms will provide a comfortable level of visual privacy. The built environment and social behavior, of which privacy is part of, are interdependent and intertwined, where changes in one aspect will have a direct influence on the other. The lack of consideration for privacy in the house design and its attributes may result in less than comfortable level of privacy. However, successful regulation of privacy by means of behavioral and environmental mechanisms within the constraint of the house may still provide a comfortable level of privacy.

2. Literature Review

Visual privacy is pertinent in Islam. The Holy Qu'ran stated very clearly that one's privacy is one's own right and no one should intervene in it without one's permission. The architectural, social, and psychological dimensions of privacy are fundamental to the daily life of the Muslim. Visual privacy influence design attributes of the house such as the specifics of doors, windows and openings, organisation of spaces and positioning of houses in relation to other houses and physical elements such as partitions, walls, blinds, louvres and landscape elements. Provision for visual privacy has always been an important aspect and consideration in the Muslim houses. The need to provide visual privacy to the individual family and community at large resulted in careful location of buildings in relation to one another and the placement of windows as illustrated by Besim (1986). It also influenced the location and specific of the main entrance, the division of spaces into public and private domains and provision of spaces for parents and children of different gender. Visual privacy also influenced architectural design strategies such as the louvre windows, screened panels or mashrabiyyahs, roof terrace, high windows, recessed windows and entrance.

The translation of privacy into the house varies between the cultures that embraced Islam partly due to the strong influence of the culture of origin. This is because privacy is culturally specific (Altman, 1977; Newell, 1994 and Fahey, 1995)). Privacy should be conceived from the perspective of the culture being evaluated. Privacy is not an end by itself but is a process of regulation that changed according to the need and setting. It is a dialectical process that involves the individual's ability to control the permeability of interpersonal boundaries or regulate them (Altman, 1977). Altman also posited that there are two types of privacy regulating mechanisms; behavioural and environmental mechanisms. Behavioural mechanisms include verbal and non-verbal behaviour and are influenced by socio-cultural factors. People in all

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