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Long-roofed houses of northeastern peninsular Malaysia: sustainability of its identity in the built environment

Zumahiran Kamarudin*

Assistant Prof. Dr., Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design,
International Islamic University Malaysia, P.O. Box 10, 50728, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

Rumah bujang berselasar (single terraced house berselasar) and *rumah tiang dua belas* (twelve-pillared house) are the earliest and commonest house forms built among the old traditional houses of Kelantan and Terengganu in the northeastern part of Peninsular Malaysia. These long-roofed houses exhibit the distinctive form and the principal building components which contribute to their architectural identity. The houses in which the architectural form differs from the other Malay traditional house also give their distinctive distributions of ornate wood carvings. These houses are considered as the heritage of traditional Malay architecture originated from the region. Their survival and visibility in the past and present built environment reflect several changes in their architectural features. This paper aims to explore and elaborate the distinct characteristics and the features of the house architectural form that suggest the sustainability to preserve its identity within the existence of heterogeneous language and boundary. A few methods used to study this dimension of the house architecture include document review, face to face interviews with experts and on-site surveys and observation. The findings of research elucidate different patterns in continuing the existence of the house architecture since the 19th century until today. This includes: (1) modification or extension of the old structures, (2) adaptation/reuse of an old building, (3) reconstruction of the old structure, and (4) adoption of the architectural form in modern materials and construction. These preservation efforts are made by the descendant's initiatives, government agencies and individual or private patrons which exemplify the diversified modes in safeguarding the regional identity of the built form through the passage of time. The findings of this research illustrate a valuable spectrum on the meanings of long-roofed house in the traditional and modern environments which serve as a direction in developing the understanding and awareness of its heritage values.

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* Zumahiran Kamarudin.

E-mail address: zumahiran@iiu.edu.my

1. Introduction

Since the Second World War, hardly any Malay craftsmen had built long-roofed Malay houses simply because there was no demand for them from prospective owners [1]. Few old long-roofed houses are still found in Malaysia, for example in states of Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, Selangor and Melaka, but they are not discernible due to two main reasons. First, the number of the houses is rather too small because they are lost to development pressures. Second, the houses have been abandoned and being threatened to demolition in some places since they are regarded as outdated and unsafe dwelling structure. Furthermore, there are houses that have been modified beyond recognition. Although the long-roofed house remains as the unpopular choice by modern Malays, its distinctive feature has been popular and discernible in the traditional Malay community of old periods. In view of its sustaining endurance in the old traditional architecture, the traditional house has long survival due to the wealth of timbers and plant-forms in nature [2]. During the old periods, the organic material like wood was abundantly found and became one of the earliest building materials that has significant properties [3]. However, the timber house is vulnerable for deterioration because timber is decayed by the effects of adverse environmental condition in tropical climate country like Malaysia. The preservation of this vernacular building remains a serious issue. Therefore, detail studies on the old traditional houses and their heritage identity can ensure that their cultural values are protected and sustained even though their individual building could not be preserved due to their extinction.

This type of traditional heritage has been an important object of studies since the last three decades. Many previous studies of local and international scholars have emphasis on exploring the preservation of traditional architectures and their cultural heritage through either theoretical or technical research. Among the major concerns are on preservation of historical buildings (e.g. Vatan [4]; Arazi et al. [5]), issues on socio-cultural and architectural heritage (e.g. Harding [6]; Vecco [7]), and re-adaptation of old house (e.g. Nur Hidayatul Jamilah, [8]; Amir and Nur Dalilah [9]). So far, research identifying the heritage of old traditional house and its influence on buildings and modification in the present built environment is few and receives the least attention. Other studies are focusing on heritage and conservation of traditional houses and issues on its socio-cultural and architectural heritage. A little of similar research, which can fill the gaps; is carried out to study the meanings of its existence in the past and present built environment. Thus, the focus of this study is to look at the aspects on a collection of the old timber houses built in the years of 1800s to 1920s. The detail studies on these houses and their heritage identity can ensure that their cultural values are protected and sustained even though the individual buildings could not be preserved due to their extinction. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore and investigate the distinct characteristics and features of the house architectural form suggesting the sustainability in the preservation of its identity within the past and present built environment. This includes the reinterpretation of the long roofed houses' heritage identity in present or modern buildings, which reflects several changes in their architectural features. The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyse the state of existence of old long-roofed houses in Kelantan and Terengganu during the periods of 19th to 20th centuries that reflect their regional identity, and (2) to determine the patterns of continued existence and visibility of the houses heritage identity in the present architecture.

2. The Background

2.1. *The Malay traditional house*

Malay traditional house in the Peninsula of Malaysia is typological with variation of regional styles. Mohamad Tajuddin et al. [10] posit that Malay traditional house embraces a range of regional styles including Perak, Malaccan, Kedah and east coast styles. Each of them, as shown in Fig 1, is clearly distinguishable but corresponds to the ethnic milieu. Every province has its own masters and traditions for the artistic design of this wooden architecture. The house is the building built by the locals and not a product of the professional architects [11]. The house is a reflection of Malays' way of living [12, 13, and 10] and their worldviews [14]. It is a result of a skillful understanding of beliefs and culture, and efficient use of natural resources for protection. This wooden architecture provides evidence of high building craftsmanship, artistic skills and subtle taste of folk craftsmen [15]. The tropical environment reflects on the lightness of timber construction. To grace the nature, it is added with open woodwork decorations that adorned the upper sections of window, door and walls.

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