

# RELOCATION AND PLACE ATTACHMENT: HOUSING DESIGN AS AN ENABLER OF BELONGING

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## INTRODUCTION

Place attachment can be described as an emotional bond between people and places<sup>1</sup>, usually residential, implying securing feelings in the object of attachment, sense of belonging, desire of proximity, and wish to come back when away<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the disruption of place attachment through forced relocation (such as in a context of conflict or natural disaster) can have severe health and psychological effects<sup>3</sup>. Potentially complicated in any context, the need to provide housing becomes very difficult when limited land for a growing number of population forces to relocate from the rural to the urban environment, and it may involve breaking with long established socio-cultural traditions and structures. The aims of this paper are therefore threefold: first, to critically review previous evidence<sup>4</sup> that relates place attachment and unconscious place-specific daily routines, presenting time-space routines as a key element in the development of a sense of belonging; second, to illustrate *spatial sequence* in Malaysian domestic space as an enabler of belonging for those dwellers that relocate from traditional housing to modern apartments. And third, with the results of the aforementioned study, to provide further evidence of the social dimension of place attachment as played out in a residential context. In doing so, this article expands on current literature supporting the need for a perspective on place attachment that reflects its socially constructed nature<sup>5</sup>.

## THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF PLACE ATTACHMENT

Place attachment implies a temporal dimension, connecting past and present and expecting continuity of the relationship with the object of attachment in the future, pointing at memory as a connector between people and places. There is, therefore, a clear connection between place attachment, rootedness and length of residency. However, it has been argued that emotional bonding and sense of continuity can be achieved in places where one has not lived long, at the same time that living in one place for a period of time is not necessarily followed by a sense of belonging to this place. People can bond with new places through various forms of memory<sup>6</sup>, including declarative (explicit) and procedural (implicit).

Although there are not certainties about the exact processes through which people bond with places, it has been argued that six interconnected processes contribute to sustain or erode people's attachment to a particular place<sup>7</sup>. One of them is place interaction. Place interaction involves a more or less regular set of events that unfold through time in a place. Without noticing it, we tend to integrate our actions with the surrounding environment through everyday behaviours, in a pre-reflective corporeal awareness called "body-subject"<sup>8</sup>. Researchers have pointed to body-subject contributing to the experienced dimensions of place, including place attachment rooted in unconscious routines<sup>9</sup>. These regular actions and routines sustain a sense of belonging, at the same time that the sense of belonging strengthens the routines<sup>10</sup>, becoming therefore inextricably linked. Time-space routines are a way of place interaction where individual actions and social encounters merge together as grounded in place<sup>11</sup>. David Seamon (1980) saw them as the basis for a meaningful relationship with place. They are acquired through experiencing a place, and therefore normally develop in time. When we relocate

we break out time-space routines, disrupting habit memory, until new routines are built in the new place.

People whose sense of belonging is mostly grounded in procedural memory (unconscious routines) may respond to relocation in a more negative way<sup>12</sup>. In the context of forced relocation, this paper tries to identify time-space routines supported by spatial sequences as an architectural mechanism through which relocated people may become attached to those places that may be unrelated to their history or long-time residence, or may even be culturally alien.

## **RELOCATION AND PLACE ATTACHMENT: THE CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN MODERN APARTMENTS**

### **Urbanisation and relocation**

Supported by current literature on place attachment, this work examines the particular case study of relocation from traditional to modern housing in Malaysia. The relocation from traditional to high-rise apartments is analyzed through the lens of place interaction as a mechanism of attachment to place.

Along with the overall population growth in Malaysia, the proportion of urban population has increased from 26.8% in 1970 to 61.8% in 2000. In particular, Kuala Lumpur and its metropolitan area have seen the most concentrated growth in the past century. To cope with a housing shortage problem in cities, the Malaysian government and local authorities have built affordable houses under the Public Low-Cost Housing Programme (PLCH) from the First Malaysia Plan (1970-75). The main objective of the programme is ‘to improve the quality of life, eradicate poverty among the low-income group and to resettle the urban squatters’.<sup>13</sup> In Kuala Lumpur, however, due to the high land price, the choice of house types has been quite limited. Both the public and private sectors opted for a higher density type: apartment housing. In particular, for the low-cost housing developments, which should comply with the regulation of ‘less than RM 25,000 of unit price’, the high-rise would be the only feasible option. Therefore, the house buyers or renters had no other option but to choose the multi-storey housing which is radically different from their previous residences. The 2010 population and housing census shows that apartment housing occupies 19.9% in the whole country, but when Kuala Lumpur is taken alone, its proportion goes up to 66.6%.<sup>14</sup> Those who were accommodated in the apartments were not only from rural areas outside the city but from squatter settlements within the metropolitan area. In any case, adapting their family life to the new multi-storey dwelling was a significant challenge for them, disrupting their existing routines.



*Figure 1. Low-cost apartment housing in KL (photo by Seo)*

### **Life style in the traditional house**

The traditional way of domestic living in Malaysia was based on the detached house with some typical spatial characteristics. The first and most defining characteristic of Malaysian house was the level distinction. As the house was raised on stilts, the strong distinction between the elevated wooden floor of the house and the lower earthen floor of the yard was generated; furthermore, the elevated house floor was articulated to provide a level difference between rooms as shown in figure 3.



*Figure 2. Traditional Malaysian house (photo by Lim Jee Yuan)*

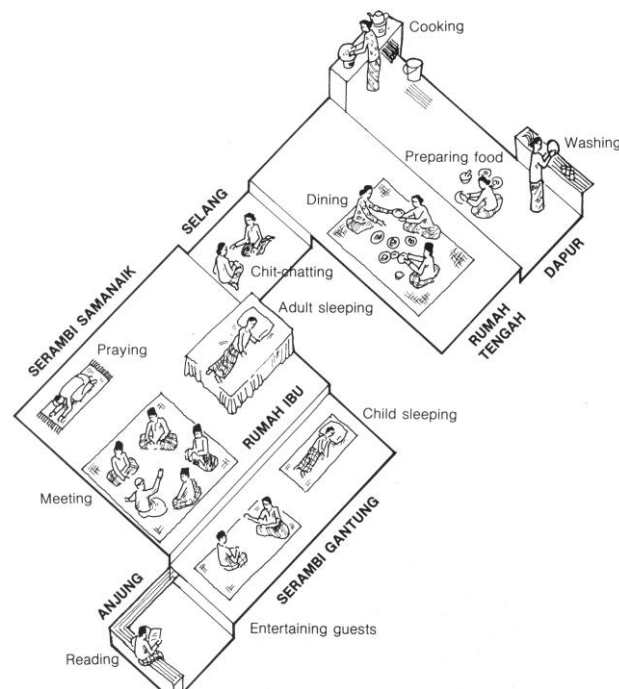


Figure 3. Domestic activities in the traditional Malaysian house (Yuan 1987)

In this indigenous setting, higher levels were allocated to cleaner activities and lower levels to ‘dirty’ activities in a symbolic sense – thus the yard represented the dirtiest outside domain. The second characteristic was the open spatial sequence. The spatial layout of the house was following the linear sequence of order without partitions. This open plan layout enabled better ventilation in the humid tropical climate and better communication between members of a big family. Within this open sequence of space, residents could define each functional space by the structure of the building and articulated floor levels. The third characteristic was the symbolic division between the front space and back space. The front represented the formal male domain while the back related to the informal female domain. It was in the front zone where you could find the formal entrance and guest receiving space which was related to male activities. The back side on the contrary was the area where women cooked and family dined thus producing smells, moisture, and food waste, all related to a counter-concept of clean and dry – thus dirty. In addition, the surrounding yard also acted as an essential field to enable entering and exiting with a front door and a back door, and to support outdoor household chores. The spatial sequence, based on these three characteristics (level distinction, open spatial arrangement, and front-back division) interlinked with each other, was part of traditional rural dwelling in Malaysia. This spatial sequence supported unconscious everyday actions that signified the belonging of the dwellers to a community with a common tradition. The dynamics of family hierarchy, gender division or religion were embedded in the spatial sequence and as such it was a key element in the development of a sense of belonging.

### Enculturation of Modern apartment houses

Apartment houses in Malaysia appeared from the 1970s onwards, when low-cost housing was built by the public sector to deal with the growing number of urban population. The booming of this multi-storey housing in urban areas implied a radical departure from the traditional domestic culture. This was mainly due to the lack of connection with a yard which played an essential role in the old way of living. Although it was not possible to replicate the old time-space routines onto the new collective dwelling, through the trial and error process in the 1970s and 80s, the apartment housing in Malaysia

has gradually transformed to make a culturally adapted solution for local residents. Those three spatial characteristics of the traditional house had supported individual and social routine encounters for centuries, but now they had to be adapted to a new architectural typology of high-rise apartments.



Figure 4. Low-cost apartment units (1970s and 90s) and mid-cost unit (1990s)

First, the old characteristic of level distinction was applied to the floor levels of the unit plan. From the public corridor or staircase, the floor of the entrance hall was raised up a few inches. From here, the same level of floor was maintained to the living area of dining and living room. What is so unusual in Malaysian apartments was that the floor level of the kitchen was often dropped a few inches from the living area. Without exception, the kitchen was served by an adjacent auxiliary room called a drying yard. This space supports the kitchen with cooking, storing, laundry and drying – thus drying yard. Accessing this room from the kitchen, one experienced another dropping down of floor levels. In a sense, the hierarchical stepping down of floor levels from the living-dining area to the kitchen and then to the drying yard was following the order of ‘clean to dirty’ which resembled the same order in the traditional house (figure 5). Other ‘dirty’ areas such as bathrooms and balconies also had their floor levels lowered (figure 6). It can be observed that those with lowered floors are the rooms potentially exposed to water, whether it is from rain, cooking, washing, or laundry. As in the traditional house, those rooms with more formal and clean activities were given a higher level of floor.



Figure 5. Floor-level lowering from living room to kitchen and to drying yard (photo by Seo)



*Figure 6. Floor-level lowering of the bathroom (photo by Seo)*

Second, we can find the trace of open spatial sequence of the traditional house in the open family gathering area of living room and dining room. In most of the plans, this gathering area was directly connected from the entrance hall and ended with a balcony in the open front side of the building. What was unique in Malaysian plans was that this open sequence was almost always visually noticeable when entering the house. For this, other smaller rooms such as bedrooms, bathrooms, and drying yards were pushed to the further side of the unit plan, making another cluster. Although these rooms were now partitioned and segmented, by putting them together on one side, the plan successfully generated the feeling of the old ‘open sequence’.

Third, the old characteristic of front-back division had to be re-arranged. There was a confusion in the early days of apartment design on which side was meant to represent the front and which the back. It was mainly because the apartment dwelling had only one entrance, unlike the traditional house which had two, one in the front and one in the back. If the unit entrance was to be considered as a formal front, then the living room ought to be linked to it in the old sense. However, as an informal back door, the kitchen would be a suitable space to come in first. In some of the earlier plans, the kitchen and dining room appeared in the further end of the unit from the entrance as shown in the first plan in figure 4. In later plans, however, the living room was mostly located at the end of the sequence, which was the actual front side when considering the whole building block, and the kitchen near the entrance (figure 7). This solution could be interpreted in two ways. It could be said that the most important formal space, the living room, needed to be in the most favourable spot for better sunlight and ventilation, thus in the further end from the entrance and communal access corridor. On the other hand, it would be equally arguable that modern family life in the apartment dwelling was getting more secluded from the neighbours and thus the symbolic meaning of entrance became more informal, rendering it as if a back entrance in the traditional house. In any case, the advancements in home technology has rendered possible that the kitchen can be displayed near the entrance with its clean modern appliances, thus becoming an integrated part of the open living area.



Figure 7. The dining room and the kitchen near the entrance door (photo by Seo)

The unique feature in the apartment planning in Malaysia is the drying yard. This multi-unit housing has the most constraining brief compared to other housing types in terms of its incapability to replace the function of the yard on the ground. In the traditional house, the yard was the outdoor space where all sorts of house chores such as body washing, laundry, drying, big scale cooking and stockbreeding took place. The drying yard in apartment dwellings was a reduced version of the old yard. Always connected to the kitchen, it accommodated various functions including cooking, washing and drying (figure 8). It worked as a semi-open backup space to replace the old yard in the traditional house; thus it seemed natural that its floor was the lowest level within the apartment dwelling.



Figure 8. The multi-purpose drying yard for cooking, laundry and drying (photo by Seo)

### **Problems remaining: detachment from neighbourhood**

Although Malaysian apartment dwellings have evolved to adapt to vernacular characteristics of dwelling in many unique ways, high-rise apartments are still considered as the least desirable choice

amongst all housing types. In fact, dissatisfaction in the high-rise apartments is a common response in many countries, but in Malaysian cases, it is a more complex response. First of all, the unit plan is provided in a smaller size than what is necessary. In average, there are 4.3 persons per occupied housing unit in Malaysia as of 2012,<sup>15</sup> and it has been repeatedly reported that the size of the unit is too small.<sup>16</sup> However, due to the high price of housing developments, it is not easy to buy a house in the city that has enough room for family life. In addition, unlike in the case of detached houses, there is no possibility of expanding the given built area in the future.

Apart from dissatisfaction with the unit plan, a more serious problem can be found within the structure of the neighbourhood. Malaysia is a multi-racial country, consisting mainly of Malays, Chinese and Indians; but people living in the rural area or urban squatter settlements used to live within a homogeneous racial group. Relocated to new apartment dwellings, their neighbourhood needs to be re-structured in a very short period of time – in the context of mixed races from all different regions. Lacking mutual understanding, residents tend to lose their previous sense of belonging to the community. This often leads to an ongoing conflict between groups especially for those people forced to move from the squatter settlement to the low-income public housing.<sup>17</sup>

### CONCLUSION: HOUSING DESIGN AS ENABLER OF BELONGING

This paper has specific focus on the disruption of place attachment when limited land for a growing number of population forces to relocate from the rural to the urban environment in Malaysia. Malaysian urban dwellers, especially those with lower income, have been housed by their 'choice', but in the broad perspective of social change, they are housed by economic 'force'. Since they are subject to relocation processes that may involve breaking with long established socio-cultural traditions and structures that play an important role in developing a sense of rootedness, this work aims at examining *spatial sequence* in Malaysian domestic space as an enabler of belonging for dwellers relocating from traditional to modern housing.

First, this paper examines a body of literature that identifies place interaction as one of the processes that contribute to sustain a sense of attachment to place, involving a series of regular events that unfold through time in a particular place. Time-space routines, a type of place interaction, allow individual and social actions to merge together in place, contributing to a sense of belonging. Although when we relocate we break out time-space routines, disrupting habit memory, this work defends that spatial sequences help build new routines in the new place.

Secondly, the paper examines the particular case study of relocation from traditional to modern housing in Malaysia through the lens of place interaction as a mechanism of attachment to place. The particular case of Malaysian traditional rural housing shows evidence that time-space routines that become unconscious in time can sustain a sense of belonging to a particular community, given the social aspects supported by these (family hierarchy, gender division, religion, community). Research shows that when relocation involves breaking out these routines, as in the case of dwellers that moved from traditional rural settings to multi-storey apartment housing in Malaysia, the sense of belonging can be replaced by dissatisfaction, sense of alienation or even conflict. The previously studied evolution of Malaysian apartment housing shows how the architectural typologies developed through time. Typologies with spatial arrangements or sequences that allowed time-space routines present in traditional housing were favoured as a response to users' dissatisfaction and lack of rootedness. This paper presents *spatial sequence* in Malaysian domestic space as a factor that helps enabling belonging. What this particular case shows also, is that considering indoor spatial sequences is not sufficient if other social aspects are not taken into consideration, such as those that relate the dwelling to its context within a community (interaction, gathering, support, security, etc). So third, with the results of the aforementioned study, this paper provides further evidence of the social dimension of place attachment as played out in a residential context.



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