



Analysing Malaysian Houses with Discursive Idea

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Abstract

There has been ongoing discourse on contemporary Malaysian architecture; few studies examine design thinking and narratives through analysis of architecture. Taking the "house" as an important archetype, this study analyses eight Malaysian houses completed between the 1980s and the present (Jimmy Lim, Ken Yeang, Lok Wooi, Mike Boon, Tan Loke Mun, d.c.a, WHBC, and CY Chan) to contribute to the current discourse on defining Malaysian architecture. Taking an interpretive stance, this study used a combination of interviews, observations and re-drawing analysis based on the framework of Simon Unwin (2014). The findings imply that to understand contemporary Malaysian architecture, the house (object) should be viewed as a discursive object, integrated within the discourse on contemporary Malaysian architecture instead of solely a product that represents it.

Disciplinary: Architecture, Architecture Education.

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1 Introduction

Although Malaysian architecture is diverse, critical publications that question its intellectual contexts are largely lacking. A large body of publications evolved around books on pioneers of modern Malaysian architecture (Lai, 2007; Malaysian Institute of Architects, 2010; Ngiom, 2010; Ariffin, Hussain & Ng, 2015) and the Malaysian house (Goad & Ngiom, 2007; Beal & Termansen, 2008; Powell, 2008; Lee & Zainal, 2010; McGillick & Kawana, 2017). There are also architect's monographs such as d.c. A's Homes, Issues + Processes (Cheah, 2011) and ATSA Monographs (http://www.atsa.com.my/folio_monograph.html), and exhibitions, books, and magazines, such as Architecture Malaysia, the official magazine of the Malaysian Institute of Architects). These published materials display the breath of Malaysian architecture, yet there are gaps in taking a more critical stance on recent and contemporary Malaysian architecture. Taking this as the premise

of inquiry, the recent book *Theorising Emergent Malaysian Architecture* (Ng, 2016) theorised the selected works of ten practices and argued for plurality and variation in emerging architectural approaches by revealing the underpinnings that led towards such approaches in Malaysian architecture and practice.

2 Literature Review

The rhetoric question on identity and the big question of the direction of Malaysian architecture have been inquired. Such questions have been the basis of Tajuddin (2005), suggesting the Malaysian identity and presented different ways (such as through revivalist approach, primitive regionalism, ethnic symbolism, and tropical heritage) toward identity-making beyond the Malay-centric approach (Tajuddin, 2005, p. 18). Moving away from the documentation approach on Malaysian architecture and the discourse on Malaysian identity, this research seeks to approach Malaysian architecture analytically. It seeks to contribute to contemporary Malaysian architecture by analysing the architects' design thinking and narrative in the generation of architecture. Taking the house as an architectural typology, the study provides alternative views to the current architectural discourse. Taking cues from the positioning of the 'house' within the discourse in architecture, the design thinking and narratives of the house are taken as the premises for study. The significance of the 'house' as a typology is underpinned by the notion that houses form the experimental platform of architectural exploration for architects, for example, Villa Savoye by Corbusier, Farnsworth House by Mies van der Rohe, Venturi House by Robert Venturi and so on. As Unwin (2014; 2015) argued, analysing architecture enables one to make sense of the complex and diverse aspects of architecture. Taking this as a point of departure, this research examines the "house" as an object for analysis. First, this study analysed the architectural construct of context, form, space, tectonics in the production of architecture and subsequently theorised the house as an architectural form that reflects the design thinking and narrative of the architect. It modestly aimed to contribute to the larger contemporary discourse on Malaysian architecture.

3 Method

This study utilised interpretive research through observation, building analyses, and interview with the architecture of eight houses spanning through the 1980s to the present. These houses were: (1) Salinger House (1988) – Jimmy Lim; (2) Roof-Roof House (1991) – Kenneth Yeang, T.R. Hamzah & Yeang; (3) Wooi Residence (2004) – Wooi Lok Kuang, Wooi Architect; (4) M+M House (2009) – Mike Boon, Arkitek JFN; (5) S11 (2013) – Dr Tan Loke Mun, Archicentre; (6) 38Mews (2015) – Chan Mun Inn, design collective architects; (7) Chempenai House (2015) – W.H. and BC Ang, WHBC Architects; (8) Twinkle Villa (2016) – Chan CY, CCY Architect. The selected houses must be those designed by registered architects, recognised through awards and publications, and completed between the 1980s and the present.

Taking a qualitative stance, the study combined interviews with selected architects, observations of the houses, and investigating the architectural ideas through drawing form part of the analytical process through re-drawing on the selected houses based on Simon Unwin's

framework of analysing architecture (2014; 2015). The conceptual framework of analysis that follows: identification of place; basic elements; modifying elements; primitive place types; temples and cottages; geometries of being; ideal geometry; stratification; space and structure; parallel walls, transition, hierarchy, heart; and others. In addition to the interview and site visit, the analytical approach offers formal and experiential means of understanding where the architect's design thinking (where do ideas) come from and how are they executed into tangible built forms and environments. Subsequently, the analyses of the eight houses will be compared to identify themes. These themes will be discussed, and relationships will be drawn to identify an alternative approach to understanding Malaysian architecture.

4 Result and Discussion

The findings of the eight houses based on the re-drawing analyses and observations of the houses and interviews with the architects are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Findings from the analyses of the eight houses.

Salinger House	Roof Roof House	Wooi Residence	M+M House
 <p>Modern Vernacularism With deviation from familiar architectural language acquainted to the local context, the Salinger House transcended the cultural dimension of a vernacular architecture concept to keeping up with the contemporary living environment. A house is a modern form constructed with traditional craftsmanship of the Malays draws an example of trans-culturalism and establishing relevancy with its time and context. Superimposing triangular spaces of indoor and outdoor over the small, simple house, the interplay of the man-made ecosystem and natural environment creates a symbiotic relationship between the living space and its bigger picture of the surrounding. It becomes an illustration of the architect Jimmy Lim's manifestos toward tropical architecture, whereby he suggested the approaches such as "Rites of the Tropics" – in which the house celebrates the beauty and appreciation of nature; "Architecture of Humiliation" – in which the</p>	 <p>A Modern Language of Tropical Living Roof-Roof House is an adaptation of modernist architecture into local climatic conditions. A house that responds to its environment presents an unfamiliar appearance compared to a local vernacular house and is more like a Corbusian villa while still considering the environmental aspects. Whereas a typical vernacular architecture is designed by taking the climatic behaviours into account, Roof-Roof House takes a step further by having the design interact and manipulate them to fit into the desirable performances. By extracting the climatic functions of vernacular buildings, bioclimatic architecture is essentially the learning from the vernacular incorporated into another architecture style. The formation of the house serves as a fundamental ecological design framework for a bigger-scale project such as high-rises. A climate-responsive architecture enables effective low energy design. Not having the sensitivity could result in a</p>	 <p>Mnemonic Representation of Life Apart from its roof profile and material palette that makes the house stood out amongst the neighbourhood, it is the compilation of various relationships that Wooi Residence had in its design strategies that creates an unconventional house. As a combination of living space for the family and home office for the architect, the house accumulates important work, life, and play programs. It has to be a healthy and easily maintained place for family living while at the same time a showcase to visitors or even potential clients about the architect's belief in architecture. With this in mind, an approach of learning from the past is given to bring the house to life, reflecting upon the architect's personal life experience from a more personal perspective of memories and family to a more professional perspective of materiality and construction reconciled under one big roof. Wooi's childhood reminiscences of village living are reimagined into his architectural language</p>	 <p>Drawing Influence from the Past In conjunction with the architect, Mike Boon's upbringing and his strong ties to Sarawak's local heritage and culture, the prevailing sense of communal living becomes his foremost manifestation onto his own living space, the M+M House. Drawing influence from the tradition, a house becomes the reminiscence of the past, translated into a modern context. As the past is something that we had experienced before, it can be used to form a solid cue in architecture – a predicted one on what is desire, what to expect, and what should be brought forward into the future. It can be represented as a form of learning by building upon the memories. Rather than juxtaposition, reinterpretation of traditional architecture elements becomes critical for better fit into the current context, and this cannot be done without a great prior understanding of the culture, such is the case of the relationship between M+M House and Mike. By knitting the idea of communal living and tradition together in the form of a contemporary residential, the</p>

<p>house rejects stylistic influence and corresponds with project requirements and contextual cues; and "Taichi of Architecture" – in which the house works together with the environment to establish a harmony coexistence. More than a shelter, the Salinger House becomes a symbolic union between modernity and tradition and a model for positioning vernacular architecture within the modern world.</p>	<p>non-efficient building that requires higher energy to maintain; the house creates a new way of sustainable living for the occupants. After all, "a house is a place for a happy family life" – as defined by architect Ken Yeang, it offers the opportunity to understand the users' dreams and find ways to accommodate them into built form. Thus, for Yeang, the house becomes a model to his approach in architecture; for his family, the house creates high efficiency and comfortable living space within the tropical climate.</p>	<p>of the house, both nostalgic and functional. It balances the comfortability of open tropical living and a sense of domestic security through the use of timber and brick, and the articulation between these two materials allows him the opportunity to express his architectural expertise. Overall, the Wooi Residence is indeed storytelling of the architect Wooi Lok Kuang itself.</p>	<p>house offers two new ways of looking into architecture: First, the preservation of local identity and culture can be done by reinterpreting their meanings into modern living; Second, by viewing a house as a place of interactions: between families, friends and communities, the presence and expression of architectural elements is perhaps not that crucial. In keeping the design simple, the activities become the celebrated element here.</p>
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S11	38 Mews	Chempennai House	Twinkle Villa
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<p>House as an Exemplar A testbed in its nature and experimentation in its initial conception, the S11 House quickly becomes a precedent when discussing regionalism architecture within a modern context. Maximising the idea of green architecture, the house demonstrates hedonistic sustainability for contemporary living – an example of reinterpreting the misconception of being environmental-friendly as associated with compromised living quality. A house as the most intimate space to the occupants, which is the architect Dr Tan himself, becomes a good opportunity and a convincing means of displaying his belief in tropical architecture through his living environment. The house is often utilised as an educational tool of conducted visits, having in the architect's mind that the others can learn through the house about the work he had done and its benefits of sustainable living. Going back to the shelter and machine analogy, the architect's view of eco-friendly living as sensitive and understanding nature works put forth new thinking about a house. It should function by letting its surrounding works</p>	<p>Accumulation of Contents A house that celebrates the coexistence of its human occupants with their pets, 38 Mews is formed by intertwining the architect Chan Mun Inn's lifestyle with that of the cats into the design brief. With the architect upholding the belief of content over form, the result – a highly meaningful living environment that resonates with all the occupants' characteristics and behaviours becomes an interpretive cue to architecture on the importance of understanding its context and its users. Despite the scale nature of the house for two, the small single residential displays an expanded complexity and depth in celebrating the ideology of content-driven design by the accumulation of multiple design perspectives before being translated holistically into the architecture of a house. As much as it is reflected upon various precedents and attentions, form is a by-product of deeper design thinking. A house is less about how it looks but how it feels living inside. Amidst its highly distinguished form, 38 Mews is fundamentally a content-driven design – an exemplary architecture of form follows function.</p>	<p>Context Becoming the Architecture A house of raw concrete surfaces with voids of various sizes all other it, penetrated by trees and partially covered by foliage, from the exterior Chempennai House looks as if it is an unoccupied structure between the forest. The sculptural aesthetic of its brutalist external profile emits calmness that resonates with the surrounding landscape. The unambiguous presence of the monolithic concrete is made hidden by the trees overgrowing all around it and the light shining through over. On the interior, a sense of connection to the immediate environment is always present. Surrounding landscapes are framed into interior space, and the spaces are opened directly to the surrounding. Intertwining interiority and exteriority together, the architecture seems to disappear into the landscape effortlessly. A masculine-looking house exerts rather introverted characters – it is an escape from the urban context, a house that does not want to be found. For a house that has the privilege to sit on such a beautiful sloping forest site, the objective of Chempennai</p>	<p>House as a Transition and Versatile Space Packed within the size of a house, a diversity of spatial experiences and architecture elements occurred at the same place, drawing a complex relationship between the occupants, the spaces, and the environments. The natural palette of Twinkle Villa harmonised its context yet creates versatility for the spaces within: a variety of spatial qualities offering flexibility for the occupants to interpret the spaces themselves and establish their unique connection to the site. Elaborating on the explanation of architect C.Y.Chan on the role of a house as an interrelationship between man and space, each defining one another, the house elevates both the experience of the living space and the forest, adding a new layer onto the meaning of escape. In the case of Twinkle Villa, a house becomes more than just a shelter. Instead, it contributes to a bigger picture as a transition space that weaves two distinctive worlds together. In another perspective, the house serves a wider context rather than a simple family retreat, falling back in line with the architect's preference of building user groups.</p>
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<p>seamlessly throughout the whole space. The house becomes the engine, and the environment becomes the fuel to powering up to achieve maximum efficiency.</p> <p>On a more detailed level, the S11 House also becomes a manifestation of the architect's interest in tropical living – reflecting the "golden module" of Balinese villa architecture. Working in hand with the sustainable strategies that the house is equipped with, it expanded a new consideration of designing for pleasure and new spatial experience that otherwise only exist in holiday resorts. With such experience brought closer to everyday life, the S11 House is an uncommon relaxing tropical villa within a bustling urban context, setting an example and new possibility to the local architecture scene.</p>		<p>House is clear: it focuses on nothing but the surrounding landscape. The atmosphere created in the house is an obvious make-use of its unique opportunity, manifesting the architect WHBC's belief in responding to the inconsistency of every design context rather than a prescribed style which may lead to egoistic architecture.</p>	
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The themes emerging from the findings of the eight houses allude to three important implications. Firstly, the house is an architectural construct that is informed by basic principles of understanding architecture. The findings echo the position of Unwin (2015, p. 269), who ascertained that a building is a physical, sensual, psychological, social and emotional medium. Thus, although the outcome of the house is different in terms of space and material form, there are consistent principles by which architecture can be read. Secondly, consistent spatial grammar emerges from the analyses that define the cultural and contextual conditions that shape Malaysian houses (architecture). For example, there are tangible grammars such as large roof overhangs, verandah spaces, extended spaces, and trees; and intangible grammars such as spaces in between, the tapestry of light, shade, wind and rain, consistent with current literature on tropical Malaysian houses.

Thirdly, there are seminal differences in theorising the house, underpinned by the interrelation between the architect, the practice and the house as a material form. The architect's design thinking and narrative anchors the conception of the house, where their standpoints emerged from typological, psychological, space and person, explorative, methodological perspectives. In addition, as the external factors are varied and discursive by nature, the product and production of architecture differ. This finding extends the knowledge presented in current publications and monographs on Malaysian houses (Goad & Ngiom, 2007; Beal & Termansen, 2008; Powell, 2008; Lee & Zainal, 2010; McGillick & Kawana, 2017), positioning the house as a representation of 'idea' and 'practice. Within this web of relations, the house becomes more than a

material form. Its role is discursive, positioned within the broader discourse on contemporary Malaysian architecture illustrated in Figure 1.

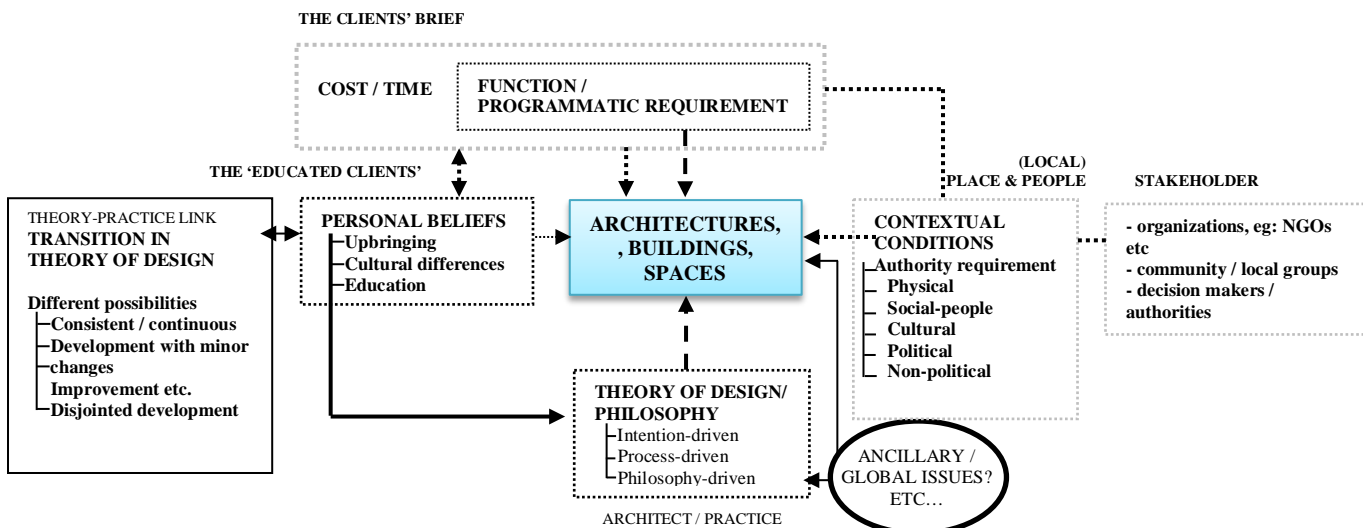


Figure 1: The discursive nature of the house (architecture).

5 Conclusion

This study contributes to the discourse on houses in Malaysian architecture, illustrating that there are myriad approaches to architecture, but there are underlying principles and spatial grammar in architecture reflective of local culture and context. Based on the selected houses that closely relate to the architect's body of works from the 1980s to contemporary times, consistent yet diverse themes of typological, psychological, space and person, explorative, methodological design thinking and narratives emerged. The themes inter-relate between the material form, the architect and his practice.

The findings from this study extend the understanding of contemporary Malaysian architecture. It highlights the need to form a critical stance on understanding architecture beyond a physical material form. Architecture as a built form is not only descriptive, and rather it is discursive. This suggests the re-positioning of how architecture is viewed, perceived and interpreted. Rather than merely defining architecture as a built form, it should be defined by the intangible conditions, particularly of the architect as an agent to the production of architecture. It means when we study architecture, we should study the discursive relationships rather than the material form. Moving forward, further research may position itself on this basis to unravel the deeper and richer definition, direction and expression of Malaysian architecture.

6 Availability of Data and Material

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

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