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COMMUNITY DESIGN: CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL VALUES IN THE COASTAL ENVIRONMENT OF SARAWAK FROM A SPACE UTILIZATION PERSPECTIVE**Julaihi b. Wahid**

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to show that urban communities in Malaysia should be designed with its own identity, not borrowed from a foreign source. It will also try, based on a study of several traditional communities in the coastal area of East Malaysia, to prove that there are major differences in space awareness and manipulation in the traditional culture as opposed to the cultures from which current urban design in Malaysia is derived from. This difference is most distinct in the concept of informal space and subtleness in identity, two elements which this paper will suggest to be part of the factors needed to design communities based on the traditional experience of space.

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INTRODUCTION

It is the contention of community designers that design layouts, community facilities, as well as the necessary infrastructures must not only provide for the efficient management (or maintenance) of the community, it must also assist in keeping the community alive, allowing it to grow, as well as achieving an identity of its own.

Manipulation of urban space in the developing countries, especially for the purpose of community building, has always relied on ideas and theories on design to be found in the literature of modern planning, architecture (as well as landscape architecture), and urban design, well established in the developed countries. Perhaps it is the admiration for the level of modernisation in the developed countries, coupled with strong advancements in technology and economy, together with the belief that developing countries are merely what the developed countries were once before, that led to this copious attitude.

Whatever the reason, the pattern is clear. Urban communities in many developing countries are simply slightly altered replicas of past communities in the developed nations. However, to simply adopt any theory or idea because it has worked elsewhere, or even because it is popular is not only naive but also potentially dangerous for the growth of the community.

The case for Malaysia is typical of many developing countries. In the past 20 years Malaysia was and is still facing rapid growth in its urban sectors, both economic and social. By and large development of the economy follows the history of current developed nations which is from totally primary products to manufacturing and moving towards a service oriented economy. Although faced with a recent hard recession period, the faith of looking for answers in the developed world has not faltered (although the major inspirational sources have changed from the Western countries of Europe and North America to the oriental countries of Japan, Korea and Taiwan).

With the relatively successful story in the economic sector it is perhaps understandable that urban problems that arise in the social sector are also given 'remedies' from the developed world. An important issue that arises out of the urbanisation process is the creation of new urban communities molded from the same cast as was the economy. It seems natural to have a community setting which is of the same 'origin' as the economy.

COMMUNITY PLANNING IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a fast developing southeast Asian nation with all the potentials and problems that accompany rapid development. Sarawak, the largest state in Malaysia is also facing the pressures of urbanization. One of these pressures is the need to maintain its identity while at the same time moving forward with development. The problem manifests itself most clearly in the design of modern urban communities. The population of Malaysia in general, and Sarawak in particular, is a tapestry of cultures and lifestyles. Each segment has its own experience of space and form of expression with regards to the built environment.

The physical areas of Sarawak itself can be divided into at least five categories:

1. Coastal
2. Hillside
3. Valley
4. Forest
5. Interior Swamp

Designing a community environment in Sarawak, thus, requires not only the consideration of these five categories, but that also of a combination environ-