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**Proxemics and its Relationship with Malay Architecture**

Abdul Muati Amad  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Arbai'e Sujud  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Hamisah Zaharah Hasan  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Abdul Muati Amad, Ph.D ,Arbai'e Sujud, Ph.D, and Hamisah Zaharah Hasan are faculty of Modern Languages and Communication in the Communication Department at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Direct all correspondence to: [abmuati@putra.upm.edu.my](mailto:abmuati@putra.upm.edu.my)

**Abstract**

Proxemics refers to the use of physical space in interactions between communicators. Obviously, it is fascinating to see how people use the physical space surrounding them when they communicate or interact in their house. This is especially true since most communication interactions occur in a place where they inhabit. The same goes to the Malays, the predominant inhabitant of Malaysia. Traditional Malay houses were built with distinctive characteristics. The division of the compartments in the house, the arrangement of the furniture and decorations provide huge space for the inhabitants to move. Each space determines the content of communication and who are the participants. For instance what kind of interactions can take place at the porch, the verandah, the living room, the kitchen and the passageway? This paper attempts to discuss the relationship between the space in a Malay house and their proxemics.

## Proxemics and its Relationship with Malay Architecture

### Who are the Malays?

The Malays are ethnic group who inhabit the Malay Archipelago. This region covers the Peninsula of Malaysia, part of Indonesia, South Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, and South of the Philippine. Some sources recorded that the ancestors of the Malays were originally from the lowlands of Cambodia and the Mekong River Delta of South Vietnam, migrated down south due to shortage of cultivation land and natural resources, population overcrowding and opportunity to settle in new lands.

The Malays formed the largest population group of multi-racial Malaysia. Out of the total of 23 million people, the Malays account for about 60 percents, the Chinese 30 percents and the Indians 10 percents.

Malaysia's constitution penned after gaining its independent from the Great Britain in 1957 decrees that all Malays are born Muslim. Thus the Malays are devout Muslims. Even before the formation of Malaysia, Islam has influenced the life of the Malays for a long time. In fact, the history of Islam in the Malay Archipelago goes back to the fourteen century. With such a long influence of the religion in their lives, the traces of Islamic teachings and decrees can be found obviously in their daily routines and activities. This includes their names, foods, language, attire, arts, songs, dances and architecture especially their mosques and houses.

### The traditional Malay houses

Traditional Malay architecture employs relatively sophisticated architectural processes ideally suited to tropical conditions such as wide roof overhangs and high-pitched roofs. Building on stilts allows cross-ventilating breezes beneath the dwelling to cool the mosque or house whilst mitigating the effects of the occasional flood. Additionally this will also ensure safety from possible attack by wild animals such as snakes and insects in the vicinity of the village.



Figure 1: The Traditional Malay house in a village. (Source: Lim Jee Yuan, The traditional Malay house. <http://tcdc.undp.org/sie/experiences/vol4/Malay house.pdf> )

Traditional Malay houses are mainly constructed from natural materials such as various kinds of timber and bamboo and thatched palm-leaves. The Malays often constructed their dwellings without any use of metal including nails. Instead they used pre-cut holes and grooves to fit the timber building elements into one another.

A traditional Malay timber house is almost always in at least two parts: the main house and the kitchen annex. There is also at least one raised veranda attached to the house for seated working or relaxation or where non-intimate visitors would be entertained, thus preserving the privacy of the interior.

For ventilation purposes, the elevation of the house on the stilts and also the wide windows, holed carvings and slatted panels around the walls plus the high thatch or clay tile roofs all contribute to the cooling ambience.

Hitherto, these traditional Malay houses can still be seen forming typical scenery in the rural areas of Malaysia. However, some of these houses in the sub-urban areas have been renovated to suit modern living. Normally, additional annexation has been added to the main structure to get larger built-up area. Thus, more rooms could be added to accommodate bigger and more extended families.

### **Proxemics**

The term proxemics was coined by Edward T. Hall in 1963 (Sheppard, 1996). Proxemics basically refers to the use of space around us. Ickinger noted that Hall has defined proxemics in various ways over the years. For instance, in 1963 Hall regarded proxemics as "... the study of how man unconsciously structures microspace – the distance between men in the conduct of daily transactions, the organization of space in his houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of his towns." Later in 1964, Hall redefined proxemics as "... the study of the ways in which man gains knowledge of the content of other men's minds through judgements of behavior patterns associated with varying degrees of spatial proximity to them". Two years later in 1966 he defined proxemics as "... the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture." Finally in 1974, Hall redefined proxemics as "... the study of man's transactions as he perceives and uses intimate, personal, social and public space in various settings while following out of awareness dictates of cultural paradigms".

In short from Hall's definitions, we can conclude that proxemics bring together the concept of use of space around us and the cultural influence of such usage. Hence different culture will have different manifestations of proxemics.

Nevertheless, there are two types of proxemics, i.e. physical territory and personal territory. Physical territory refers to any area controlled and defended by an individual or group of individuals with emphasis on physical possession (Leather, 1978 and Vargas, 1986). Public territories are places that anybody can enter such as restaurants and libraries. Home territories are premises that can be entered only by members such as family members and affiliates of a club or organization. Physical territory also includes how a boundary is set around a space and the way furniture is arranged in the space.

On the other hand, personal territory refers to "... an area with invisible boundaries surrounding a person's body into which intruders may not come" (Sommer, 1979:26). Gershaw (1986) quoted Hall's four divisions of personal territories. The four areas are public space, social space, personal space and intimate space. Public space ranges from 12 to 25 feet. This space is suitable for formal speeches, lectures and

business meetings. Social space refers to distance from 4 to 12 feet, and is used for communication amongst business associates. This space is also meant for social gatherings and separating strangers in public areas such as beaches and bus stops (Sheppard, 1996). Personal space ranges between 1.5 to 4 feet. We normally use this space to talk to friends and family members. Queuing up at banks and post-office counters are normally done in this distance. Intimate space however refers to distance within 1.5 feet. This close range involves a high probability for touching. Thus, the distance is reserved for telling secrets, whispering, embracing, comforting others and lovemaking (Gershaw, 1986 and Sheppard, 1996).

Note that physical territory come with visible boundaries whereas personal territory come with the invisible one.

### Proxemics and the Malay Architecture

Researches found that different cultures will have different use of space. One of the most frequent used of space is definitely in a person's house. Matela stated that some cultures believe that space inside the house is important. A house is not only a private place for the house owner and his family but also more often than not they receive guests. Thus there is the consideration of social zones within a personal environment in a house. Therefore in various cultures, the houses will have various designs to produce such zones. Hence there are rooms for public gatherings, rooms for close friend and relatives, and private rooms that are even preserved for certain family members only. The same goes to the Malays. In constructing their houses, the Malays took into considerations the various compartments and their functions. A sketch below shows rooms or sections in a typical traditional Malay house and its functions.

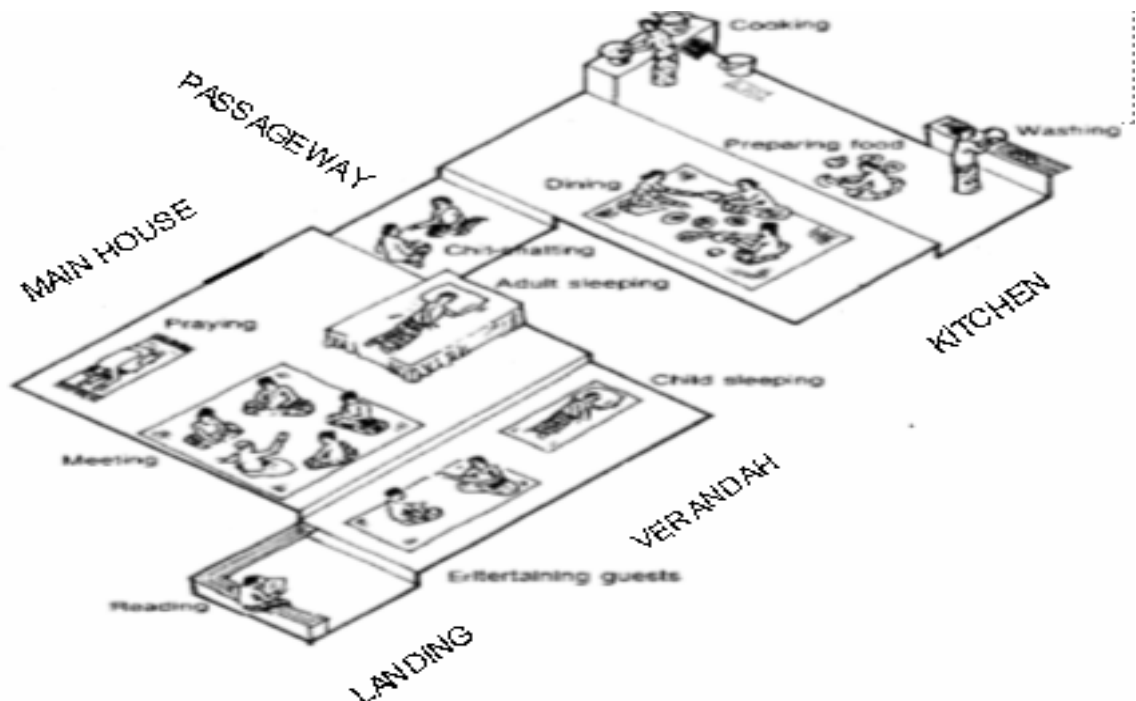


Figure 2: A layout of a typical traditional Malay house. (Source: Lim Jee Yuan, The traditional Malay house. [http://tcdc.undp.org/sie/experiences/vol4/Malay house.pdf](http://tcdc.undp.org/sie/experiences/vol4/Malay%20house.pdf) )

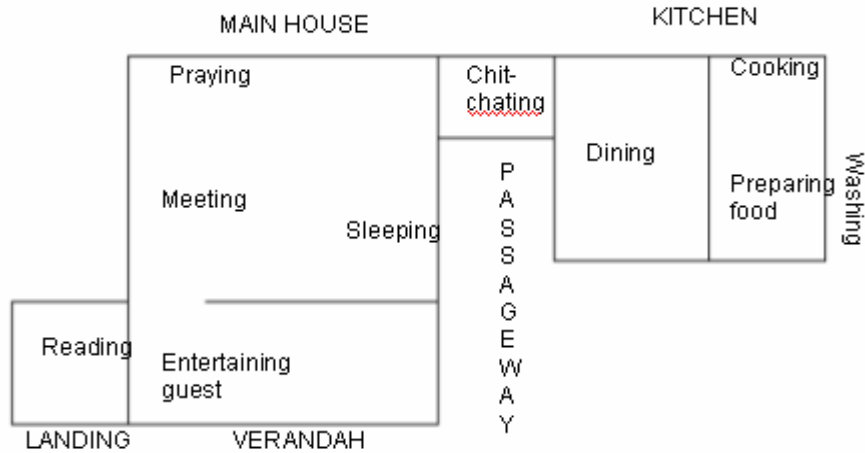
From the layout we can see that a Malay house can be divided into two main parts, namely the main house and the kitchen annex. The main house is the most important building block. It consists of the main room, the verandah and the landing. Activities wise, the main room is used for congregation. Since the Malays are devout Muslim, they normally pray together in the house. Muslims must offer prayer five times a day. Besides praying, the main room is also used for meeting and discussions with family members or relatives, feasts, and adult sleeping. The Malays normally have several feasts a year like ushering new Muslim year, paddy harvesting, wedding, circumcision etc. All these important occasion are held in the main room. However, the verandah, normally attached to the main house is used for entertaining guests and child (boy) sleeping. Landing, the outer most section of a house is used for relaxing and also entertaining strangers.

Since the Malays like to sit on the floor and pray in their house, the floor of their houses must be kept exceptionally clean. Therefore, they must take off their shoes before getting into the landing area. Shoes are normally left at the staircase. The main house is mainly for men.



**Figure 3: A traditional Malay house showing a main house, a kitchen annex and a washing place.**

The kitchen annex is a place strictly for women. Activities taken place in this section are like preparing food, cooking and family dining. Guests will be served at the main house. Kitchen is a restricted area for men. Even the house owner cannot enter the kitchen when there are women guests in the kitchen. When a couple (husband and wife) come for a visit, the husband will enter the house from the main entrance at the landing and be entertained at the verandah by the husband or the eldest son of the house owner. The wife however will enter the house through the kitchen and be entertained by the wife of the house owner or the eldest daughter in the family.

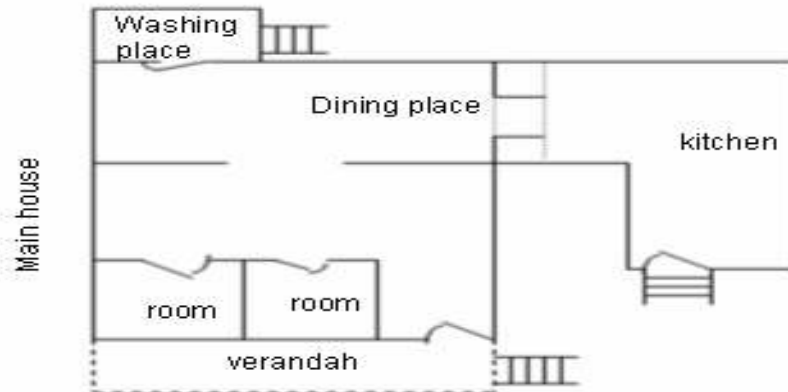


**Figure 4: A floor plan of a typical Malay house.**

The main house is connected to the kitchen by a passage way. This passageway is used by the ladies for chit-chatting or for some casual discussions between husband and wife. More often than not this small section of the house is also a place for kids to play indoor games.

The Malay houses in different areas in Malaysia will have slightly different design. Nevertheless, the functions of every section remain the same. These differences even though are not so significant have formed some sort of uniqueness and created special identity to the regional architecture.

The houses from the northern region for instance have elevated floors and partitioned hallways to mark the boundaries of certain sections. Nonetheless, the hallway partitions are opened without any doors, except for the private rooms.



**Figure 5: A floor plan of a Malay house from the northern region.**

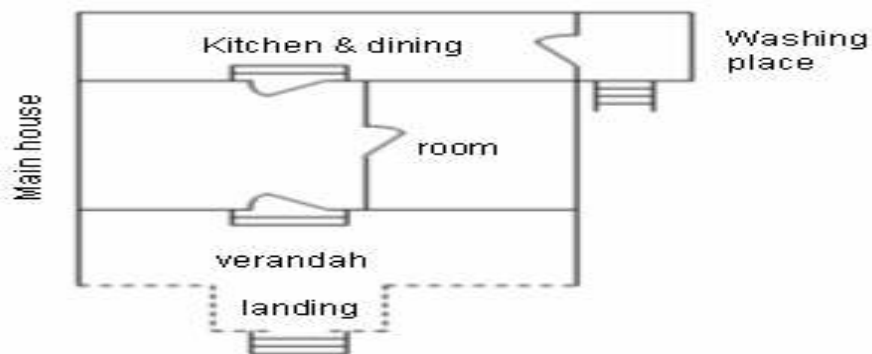


**Figure 6: A typical Malay house from the northern region.**



**Figure 7: A dining place in a Malay house from the northern region. Note the hallways without doors leading to another section of the house.**

However, Malay houses in the eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia were built with more apparent elevated floors and partitioned with wall and doors. It is noted that the people from this part of the country are considered more close minded, conservative and tend to be more closed communities. Thus they prefer to have more privacy in their



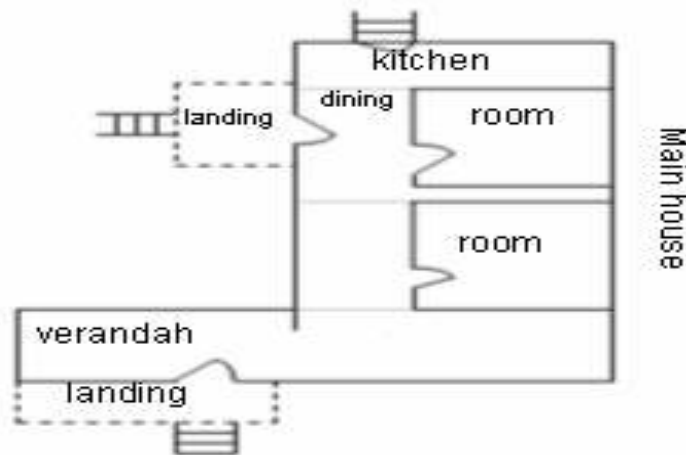
**Figure 8: A floor plan of a Malay house from the eastern region.**

own homes. Nevertheless the houses in this region have a kitchen annex combined to the main house and seemed like formed of only one block.



**Figure 9: A verandah of a Malay house from the eastern region. Note the elevated floor and wall with doors to separate sections.**

On the other hand, the Malay house from the central region shares more or less the same layout with the houses in the north. The different sections in the house were separated only by elevated floors and in some cases partitioned hallways. Similar to those from the northern region, the partitioned hallways are left open without doors except for the private rooms such as the bedrooms. However houses in this part of the country have the kitchen annex attached to the main house. Thus the main house and the kitchen annex looked like one unit.

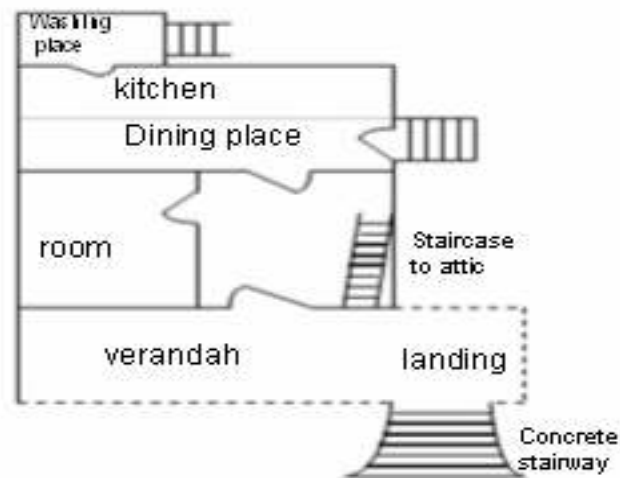


**Figure 10: A floor plan of a Malay house from the central region.**



**Figure 11: A hallway leading to a free area from a verandah in a Malay house from the central region. This is an example of a hallway without door or partition separating sections in the house.**

Nonetheless, the Malay houses in the south show some notable differences from those in the north and central peninsular. In fact the houses in the south are more similar to those in the eastern peninsular when come to separation of sections. The houses in the south use walled partitions with doors to separate sections in the main house. However elevated floors are used to separate sections in the kitchen. The kitchen annex is also attached to the main house, thus made the two sections integrated.



**Figure 12: A floor plan of a Malay house from the southern region.**



**Figure 13: A Malay house from the southern region. Note the grand stairway to the house.**

Most of the houses in the south are equipped with an attic. The attics were used to store foods and other household necessities. At times girls were asked to ‘hide’ in the attic when the family was having feasts. This is because in the past girls were supposed to be less social and should not be seen mingling around with the guests especially strangers and outsiders.



**Figure 14: A staircase leading to the attic.**

Another distinct feature of a Malay house from the south is the concrete main stairway. The stairways are normally constructed with bricks and cements and decorated with clay tiles. In the past, some rich house owners even imported the tiles from China. Thus the main stairway served as a symbol status. The richer the house owner, the bigger and more elaborate the stairway of his residence.

At any rate, when a person visits a Malay house, he must realize his status. If he is a stranger to the house owner, he can only be at the landing section. If he is a friend to the house owner, he can advance up to the verandah. If he has some family ties with the house owner, he can enter the main room. At any rate, the kitchen remains as a restricted area unless he is a family member to the house owner or join the family as a son-in-law.

A stranger visiting a Malay house will be entertained in the landing area. If he is alone, he will be sitting cross legged on the floor facing the house owner. If the strangers come in a group of three or more, they will be sitting in a circle. They can even sit next to the house owner, close enough until their knees touches each others' knees. For the Westerners especially Americans this probably has violated their intimate space. But for the Malays sitting cross legged this close even with strangers are acceptable. This shows the Malay's hospitality as Islam urges Muslims to respect and be kind to their visitors and to treat their guests openhandedly. But still the boundary is the landing area.



**Figure 15: The Malays sit cross legs on the floor in their house.**

### Conclusion

Observably people from different culture communicate differently. The Malays are not spared from this uniqueness. The Malays has shaped their culture since the past thousand years, incorporating several influences such as the Hindus during the Sri Vijaya and Majapahit Era, the Muslims from the Arab world and India, the Chinese from mainland China, and finally the Europeans from the West. These cultural influences can be obviously evidenced in their verbal and non-verbal communication, including their proxemics. Since most of their communication interactions occur in their living place, the Malays have their own way of setting up rules and norms patented by the architectural designs of their houses. Understanding the designs will lead us to appreciating the way the Malays communicate.

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