

Rediscovering kampung life

Discovering the innovative use of traditional Malay architecture in modern houses



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One of the most memorable scenes that greeted me during a recent road holiday to the East Coast was that of charming, rustic kampung houses lining the federal trunk roads. While some may take the setting for granted, to city slickers such as yours truly, it reawakened a time when air was fresh, space was in abundance and

everything was right with the world.

Besides their aesthetic appeal, what also attracted me to the houses was the suitability of their designs to the Malaysian climate and lifestyle. It is an aspect of architecture we appear to have forgotten in our quest to chase all things hip and modern.

Early versions of the kampung house were built on stilts and made of materials such as timber, bamboo, rattan, tree roots and leaves, which are easily available in our tropical forests.

They usually had pitched roofs, verandas or porches in front, high ceilings and

numerous large openings for ventilation.

The passing of time and the migration of other people to our shores as well as the country's colonisation by various powers saw the Malay vernacular architectural language becoming influenced by Indonesians, Thais, British, Arabs, Indians, Portuguese, Dutch and southern Chinese.

These influences aroused my interest, and, as I found out upon returning home, I was in good company.

Architect Almaz Rahim also sees the advantages of Malay architecture, and is an advocate who decries the present-day preoccupation with Western styles.

"Some of the designs we see in our development landscape today are suitable only for the Western world," she said. "Designers and architects should place priority on climate, terrain and client's needs... not just on what's fashionable!"

"The principles used for kampung houses can be adapted for today's accommodation," said Almaz, who practises what she preaches and has incorporated traditional Malay elements into her bungalow in an elite part of Damansara in Selangor.

Her home has been gradually renovated over the years to accommodate her growing family. The latest job saw the addition of a huge bedroom and a 907sq ft loft, which was built for one of her four daughters.

Almaz said the loft was originally intended to be a study area for the girls and was linked to their bedroom via a spiral staircase. But as her eldest child grew, she wanted a room of her own, and it was converted into a small bedroom-cum-study for her.

For the windows, railings and high ceiling, Almaz drew inspiration from Malay house designs.

"The railings and the windows were very much influenced by Perak's kampung houses as my in-laws are from there, while the loft is prevalent in many kampung houses in Malacca," she said.

Following the Malay design style of incorporating plenty of windows and large openings to provide ventilation because of high humidity, Almaz ordered especially large seven feet stained glass windows for the bedroom. Louvred windows were installed in the loft for added ventilation.

Another person with a love

for ethnic Malay house styles is Steven Goh, who has turned his double-storey terrace in Sri Hartamas, Kuala Lumpur, into a showpiece. Compared with its brick-and-mortar neighbours, it stands out distinctly in wooden splendour.

While the ground floor remains relatively untouched, except for the extra large windows in the dining area, the first floor has been given a facelift with the extension of the family room by eight feet all the way to the balcony.

This enlargement makes it look like an indoor veranda. Made entirely of *cengal* wood, including the floorboards and walls, there are three floor-to-ceiling glass windows with louvres at the top and bottom.

This area is topped by a high pitched roof for added ventilation.

Goh said the first floor used to be stuffy, especially during hot and balmy days. A 200sq ft attic, also with lots of windows, was added above the first floor to serve as a study.

"Initially, I was reluctant to renovate the house, but one day, I saw a unit in the Klang Valley that was tastefully done with lots of timber. That's when I got inspired," he said.

Goh explained that the idea to renovate the house he and his family have lived in since 1989 came about as a result of his personal interest in design and landscaping. During his several trips abroad, he would take time to appreciate the local architecture and their themes.

"My interest began five years ago, when I started to think about giving the house a facelift. It was a slow process of blending what I observed to come up with my own set of requirements on what the façade should be like," Goh said.

His main priority was to have better ventilation - hence the wider windows reminiscent of turn-of-the-century architecture seen in old shop-houses - and the high Malay roof.

He hired freelance Indonesian workers who are experts in carpentry, woodwork and masonry at RM100 per person per day to build the extension. The result - an ethnic-looking house with a contemporary touch.

Goh has also done other renovations to the house, such as add a *koi* pond at the back and turn the porch into a sunken Balinese garden pool.



Ethnic beauty:

Goh's double-storey terrace stands out distinctly in wooden splendour.



Beauty and function: The walls, windows and floors are made of *cengal*, a beautiful, durable wood.



Enchanting sleep: Almaz's daughters' bedroom looks spacious and bright because of the large windows.



Rest 'n relax: This family room reminds one of an indoor veranda of old, where the family gathers.



Traditional: The railings and the windows of this house in Damansara are influenced by traditional Perak kampung houses.