

MANOEUVERING ORANG SELETAR'S ADAPTATION  
TO MODERN LIFESTYLE WITH HOUSING AS CATALYST

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**MANOEUVERING ORANG SELETAR'S ADAPTATION TO MODERN  
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To my family

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## ABSTRACT

Orang Seletar (the People of Seletar) has played a major role in the historical development of Johor Bahru. The resettlement of this community from the sea to the land due to various development policies during the last few decades has had an impact on their culture and way of life. They are being forced into urbanized dwellings which may lead to a cultural fatality if the appropriate steps are not taken. The current housing scheme allocated to them by the Government in Kampung Bakar Batu is creating further damage to their identity and culture which were not taken into consideration when building those houses. The environment is not conducive for this community to flourish and enhance their identity in the face of development. The aim of this study was to suggest strategies to manoeuvre the Orang Seletars adaptation towards a modern lifestyle without compromising their significant cultural traits; and an effective housing scheme has been identified as a catalyst for that. The research objectives were to identify the significant socio-cultural traits of the Seletar community in relation to their settlement, to identify their physical housing needs in a modernized society, and to suggest design strategies that can help them to adapt their lifestyle that can make their life economically more sustainable without compromising their socio-cultural base. Data was collected through literature, observation, interviews, and case studies. The data was then analysed qualitatively, and further discussed in order to propose design strategies as probable solutions. The findings of this research suggested that the Seletar community prefers to live in a rather informal setting, where they are free from boundaries to limit their activities. Furthermore, water plays a major role in their daily activities and holds a level of sacredness in their perception. Hence, introducing water bodies strategically in their housing scheme will make them more comfortable, and give them a sense of belonging within their dwellings. There is also a need to create a level of permeability in the units to blur the boundary between the indoor and outdoor since they prefer to spend most of their time outdoors so that they can feel closer to nature. This will also be an advantage in responding to the tropical climate of the site. This study may provide Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA) a second thought towards mass scale development in that area, and give a lifeline to the very existence of this nearly extinct Orang Seletar community.

## ABSTRAK

Orang Seletar memainkan peranan yang amat penting dalam sejarah pembangunan di Johor Bahru. Penempatan semula komuniti asalnya dari laut ini kerana akibat pelbagai polisi pembangunan dalam beberapa dekad ini telah memberikan impak kepada budaya serta gaya hidup. Mereka yang terpaksa menetap di dalam kawasan perbandaran yang boleh mengancam budaya jika tiada tindakan yang diambil. Skim perumahan semasa yang diperuntukkan kepada mereka oleh pihak kerajaan di Kampung Bakar Batu hanya memberi kemudahan yang lebih teruk terhadap identiti dan budaya kerana ianya tidak mengambil kira dalam reka bentuk perumahan tersebut. Persekitaran ini adalah tidak kondusif bagi komuniti ini untuk berkembang dan menguatkan identiti mereka dalam menghadapi pembangunan. Matlamat kajian ini adalah untuk mencadangkan strategi untuk gerakan penyesuaian Orang Seletars ke arah gaya hidup yang moden tanpa menjejaskan ciri-ciri budaya yang mereka yang ketara; dan skim perumahan yang berkesan telah dikenal pasti sebagai pemangkin untuk hal ini. Objektif kajian adalah untuk mengenal pasti ciri-ciri sosio-budaya komuniti Orang Seletar yang ketara berhubung dengan penempatan mereka, mengenal pasti keperluan fizikal perumahan dikalangan masyarakat yang moden dan untuk mencadangkan strategi rekabentuk yang mampu membantu mereka untuk menyesuaikan gaya hidup mereka yang boleh membuat hidup mereka dari segi ekonomi yang lebih mampan tanpa menjejaskan asas sosio-budaya mereka. Data dikumpul melalui bahan bacaan, pemerhatian, temu bual dan kajian kes. Data ini kemudiannya di analisis secara kualitatif dan dibincangkan dengan lebih lanjut untuk mencadangkan strategi rekabentuk sebagai kebarangkalian penyelesaian. Hasil kajian ini mencadangkan komuniti Orang Seletar lebih suka untuk hidup dalam suasana yang tidak formal dimana mereka bebas tanpa menghadkan aktiviti-aktiviti mereka. Tambahan pula, air memainkan peranan utama dalam aktiviti harian mereka dan memegang tahap kesucian dalam persepsi mereka. Oleh itu, dengan memperkenalkan elemen air yang strategik di skim perumahan mereka akan menjadikan mereka lebih selesa, dan memupuk rasa kekitaan dalam kawasan tempat tinggal mereka. Terdapat juga keperluan untuk mewujudkan tahap kebolehtelapan dalam setiap unit untuk mengaburkan sempadan antara dalaman dan luaran kerana mereka lebih suka menghabiskan kebanyakan masa mereka di luar dan berasa lebih dekat dengan alam semula jadi. Ini juga akan menjadi satu kelebihan dalam mengambil kira iklim tropika tapak cadangan. Kajian ini dapat membuatkan Pihak Berkuasa Wilayah Pembangunan Iskandar (IRDA) berfikir dua kali ke arah pembangunan skala besar-besaran di kawasan itu, dan memberi bantuan kepada kewujudan masyarakat Orang Seletar yang hampir pupus ini.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IRDA	Iskandar Regional Development Authority
JAKOA	Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli/ Department of Orang Asli Development
PBR	Program Bantuan Rumah/Housing Assitance Program
UTM	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

‘Orang Seletar’ is a community which forms part of the Malaysian Aborigines’ group of Orang Asli. Within the Orang Asli there is a subgroup which is named Orang Laut or People of the Sea which comprises mainly of Orang Seletar and Orang Kuala. As their name suggest, the Orang Seletar used to live by the sea and their main source of income was sea products. Over time and with the political situation of the country and the world, the Seletar Community has been forced inland where they were given temporary habitats and then forgotten by the authorities. On the other hand, the city of Johor Bahru is undergoing major transformation with the Iskandar Malaysia project and multi-million dollar towers. It goes without saying that there is no mention of the predicament of the Seletar Community in the overall masterplan of Iskandar Malaysia and what can be done to help them or even protect them from further cultural fatality.

Hence this research attempts to find a comprehensive solution to address the socio-economic issues of the Seletar Community and help them adapt to the modern lifestyle while still retaining some of their main cultural beliefs, values and elements they are attached to.



## 1.2 Background of Study

Orang Seletar being one of the minority ethnic races in Malaysia often find themselves vulnerable to exploitation, marginalisation and domination by the people in power or those who are of higher status. This has led to this community being recognised and protected under international laws by the United Nations. However, their plight started quite some time back when the country started to develop the coastal area. They have always been sea nomads and earned their living through water-based economic activities. However, with the rapid development of the country and the changing political scene, their living conditions has changed considerably.

Based on their lifestyle, they are very much still primitive people who used to live on boats and huts in the mangrove swamps. The sea water was their main means of earning an income. They are trained to swim and be comfortable with the ocean at a very young age. Very few of them are able to have access to formal education due to their living conditions. Even those few are often bullied out of school due to their accent and different appearance. Hence there is a need to improve their lifestyle for them to survive in the modern society. The Government of Johor has made an attempt by giving them houses at Kampung Bakar Batu. However, there was no consideration on their lifestyle, their needs and their culture. They are being forced to stay there due to a lack of options.

On the other hand, a proper and well thought solution for this Seletar community could help enhance their daily life and help them adapt to life in the modern society. They do not have a choice of reverting back to their primitive lifestyle since the water they used to depend on is now polluted and the mangrove swamps where they used to live has disappeared. Therefore, the optimum solution for the Seletar Community would be to help them integrate the modern society where they can sustain their life socially as well as economically.

### **1.3 Statement of Problem**

The rapid development of Iskandar Malaysia has had a negative impact on the lives of the Orang Seletar who finds themselves on the verge of a cultural fatality should they be ignored in this proposed development. Therefore, a long term and viable solution is needed in order to protect and preserve the culture and traditions of this group of Orang Laut so that they do not become extinct.

### **1.4 Research Aim, Research Questions and Objectives**

The aim of the research is to study the Seletar Community in order to derive means of empowering the community and create a sense of belonging in the rapidly urbanising region of Iskandar Malaysia through housing.

Consequently, the research questions that arise are:

- i. What are the cultural aspects of the Seletar People's lifestyle in the face of the modern society?
- ii. What are the factors in the current housing scheme which are causing issues to the Orang Seletar's way of living?
- iii. What are the factors that can improve the economic and social fabric of the Orang Seletar and make their life sustainable?

Responding to these questions, three research objectives were formulated as follows: ;

1. To identify the socio-cultural traits of the Seletar People in relation to their settlement.

2. To identify the physical housing needs of the Seletar Community in a modernised society.
3. To establish design principles of adapting the lifestyle of the Orang Seletar through a mixed-use development to make them economically sustainable.

### **1.5 Research Methodology**

A research framework is designed in order to achieve the aims and objectives of this research. The framework is divided into four main components in order to gather data to achieve the research aim. These main components are literature review, field survey, case studies and site visit. The literature review helps in studying and understanding the past behaviour and lifestyle of the Seletar Community based on previous studies and interviews. The field survey allows primary data to be collected directly from the target users themselves. Case studies gives an insight on how different housing projects derive strategies in order to solve their socio-economic and socio-environmental issues. As for the site visit, it gives an overview of the current living conditions and daily routine of the targeted community. Through these methods, data can be collected and analysed in order to achieve the objectives set out for this research.

### **1.6 Significance of Study**

The Orang Seletar, being a sub-group of the Orang Laut, has been living on the sea for a relatively long period and they since adopted boathouses as their homes. Therefore, this poses a challenge for architects who need to design housing for the Orang Seletar as compared to designing for other groups of Orang Asli whose habitat is the jungle. It has been noted through previous studies that the aborigines

who used to live in the jungle have a better response towards relocation and adapting their lifestyle to the current society. However, for the Orang Laut the issue of relocation and adaptation to new settlements is more sensitive and complicated at the same time. Until now there has been no proper study or effective solution which can address the needs of this community. Therefore, this study will help gain a better insight and understanding on the issue and possible solutions or strategies when designing for the Orang Laut and Orang Seletar.

Furthermore, this study is expected to be a reference when designing housing for a marginalised community, especially in a modern or urbanised setting. It is also aimed to trigger a more comprehensive approach in making design decisions with regards to the different design strategies to be used. This will then help in better understanding the different relationships between the strategies and how to efficiently implement in the overall scheme of the design. The design process in such a scheme is multi-layered based on the different patterns of social, economic and environmental layers. Therefore, this comprehensive study will help to get a more in-depth understanding of these layers. The issues of the targeted community are based on these layers but at a different level. The attachment and emotions of this community is of paramount importance. Hence the general housing which is a mere protective shell or living cell may not be appropriate to solve their issues.

Housing is the starting point at the micro level of economic and social fabric of a community as indicated by Chokor (1993) and Podger (1982). Hence it is important to get a proper understanding of the different aspects of housing for this specific community. Nakib (2010) also identified the three major aspects that need to be considered when considering the adaptability and flexibility of housing, namely: economical, environmental and social. Thus, this study has a huge potential to contribute to the existing body of knowledge around design considerations for specific communities and also open up avenues for future research.

### **1.7 Expected Findings**

At this stage, it is expected that this study will lead to possible solutions in enhancing the lifestyle of the Seletar community so that they are able to integrate the modern society. The solutions are expected to in terms of design strategies through a housing community that will help improve the life of this community. The strategies are also expected to help make the lives of the Seletar community sustainable in terms of social, economic and environmental aspects. Hence, it is expected that at the end of this study, there will be proper guidelines derived when designing a housing for the Seletar Community and help them adapt into the modern society.

### **1.8 Scope of study**

The scope of study for this research is more focused on the adaptability and the characteristics of the physical environment which makes Kampung Bakar Batu a unique place for the Seletar Community. The research will also give a better understanding on the role of Kampung Bakar Batu in the overall development currently happening in the area. The different issues being faced by the Seletar Community will be identified in this study and various design principles will be established so that an effective design solution can be proposed for the neighbourhood. For this study, data is gathered through literature review, user observation, case studies and interviews. These collected data will contribute in identifying the issues and in establishing the design principles.

## **1.9 Structure of Dissertation**

This thesis consists of five main chapters. These chapters may be further broken down into sub-chapters when there is a need for it. The five main chapters' breakdown is as follows:

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter introduces the subject matter of the research and provides a brief overview of the research. The chapter outlines the framework of the research through the problem statement, the research aim, research questions, objectives, significance of the research and the research scope.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review.**

This chapter provides data and is a key support of the dissertation. It gives a comprehensive insight of the issue and the principles being studied in order to propose a viable solution. In this case, it gives an overview of topics such as the Orang Seletar, housing and place attachment theory.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

The methodology used for the research is discussed in this chapter. It is based on the objectives of the research and the methods are designed to achieve those objectives. The methodologies used are literature review, case studies, user observation and interviews. A research framework is also produced to give a clear idea of how the research will be conducted.

### **Chapter 4: Analysis, Findings and Discussion.**

The collected data is presented and analysed in this chapter. The data is then further discussed and leads to the findings of the research. These findings are based on design strategies which achieve the objectives outlined at the beginning of the research.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Lastly, this chapter concludes the research with a summary of findings in relation to the objectives. The limitations of the study are also listed and further recommendations are outlined to help future researchers.

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