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# I-CReST 2025:148-110 – Spatial Interpretations of Matrilineal Heritage House in Negeri Sembilan: A Case Study of Rumah Warisan Mak Ani

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the spatial philosophy embedded in Rumah Warisan Mak Ani, located in Parit Istana, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. The house was selected as a case study due to its well-preserved architectural characteristics that represent the traditional Malay house of Negeri Sembilan, shaped by the matrilineal system of Adat Perpatih. Using a qualitative research approach, including site observation, spatial documentation, and literature review, this research investigates how space is organized not only for practical purposes but also to reflect cultural values and the *adat*-based social structure. The findings highlight that the arrangement of key spaces of *serambi* (veranda), rumah ibu (main house), and kitchen demonstrates more than functional zoning; it symbolizes core societal roles and traditional wisdom. The *serambi* is used for communal gatherings, customary ceremonies, and decision-making through consensus, primarily involving male elders. The rumah ibu represents the honor and central role of women as the holders of inheritance and culture, while the kitchen facilitates the transmission of values and domestic knowledge across generations. The study identifies five key principles of spatial philosophy within the context of Adat Perpatih: generational continuity, openness and consensus, symbolic boundaries, spatial hierarchy, and environmental harmony. These principles show how space helps to guide behavior, protect cultural identity, and preserve traditional knowledge and values. Ultimately, Rumah Warisan Mak Ani is not merely a physical structure but a living social institution that educates and sustains the values of the Adat Perpatih community. Its preservation offers valuable insights for heritage conservation and vernacular architectural studies.

**Keywords:** Adat Perpatih; traditional Malay house; spatial philosophy; cultural heritage; matrilineal society

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional Malay house architecture is a valued heritage that serves not only as a form of physical shelter but also reflects deep socio-cultural values and a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural environment [1],[2]. Its thoughtful and adaptive design makes it suitable for the tropical climate and represents the local community's way of life and philosophy [3],[4]. A deep understanding of Malay architectural design is crucial to ensure that the cultural values embedded within it are preserved and can be incorporated into modern residential design. As emphasized by Abdul Halim Nasir (1985), an appreciation of Malay architecture begins with recognizing its fundamental elements particularly space which is closely tied to daily activities and social norms [1].

Spatial elements in traditional Malay houses serve not only physical functions but also carry symbolic meaning within the social structure of the community, including family organization and customary practices [6],[7]. Reinterpreting these elements can strengthen

local architectural identity and provide a culturally rooted direction for contemporary design [8]. However, with the rise of modernization, cultural and social aspects are often overlooked in the development of modern housing. Designs that fail to consider cultural context risk creating living environments that are less comfortable and functionally inadequate for community life [9].

This article focuses on the role and spatial layout of the traditional Malay house through a case study of the Mak Ani Heritage House in Parit Istana, Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. The study aims to examine how each space in the house is shaped by the influence of Adat Perpatih and adapted to the social life and family structure of the local community [10]. The lack of in-depth documentation on traditional house architecture, especially in Negeri Sembilan, poses a challenge in sustaining public understanding of its cultural value. Systematic documentation is a critical step toward the preservation and sustainability of architectural heritage [11]. It is hoped that this study will offer deeper insights for both the general public and professionals in architecture and urban planning regarding the uniqueness of traditional design philosophies. In doing so, cultural values can be integrated into contemporary designs that are more meaningful, culturally grounded, and aligned with Eastern values [12].

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objectives of this study are:

i. To identify the types of primary spaces and the cultural symbolic values embedded within a traditional Negeri Sembilan house, based on the physical layout of the Mak Ani Heritage House.
ii. To analyze how the principles and social structure of Adat Perpatih influence the formation and function of these spaces.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to understand the influence of Adat Perpatih on the spatial layout of traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan. To obtain accurate and in-depth information, three main methods were employed: narrative inquiry, direct observation, and document analysis. Narrative inquiry was conducted through semi-structured interviews with individuals who possess extensive knowledge of Adat Perpatih and traditional architecture. The respondents included Adat Perpatih experts, heirs of the Mak Ani Heritage House, and traditional architecture practitioners in Negeri Sembilan. These interviews aimed to gather their experiences, insights, and understanding regarding the function of space and its relationship to cultural values.

In addition, direct observation was carried out at the heritage house site to examine the spatial layout, physical structure, and architectural features that have been preserved. Primary data collected through this observation included site sketches and spatial layouts, interview recordings, as well as detailed field notes. The study was also supported by document analysis, which involved reviewing previous literature and written sources related to traditional Negeri Sembilan houses, the social structure of Adat Perpatih, and Malay architecture. All the data obtained were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and connections between spatial design and the principles of Adat Perpatih. This approach enabled the study to provide a clear depiction of how the layout of traditional houses is not only used physically but also carries cultural and social significance for communities practicing Adat Perpatih.

## 4. BACKGROUND OF ADAT PERPATIH

The word *adat* refers to rules or customs practiced and passed down through generations within a community. According to Kamus Dewan, *adat* is defined as a customary practice that has become a norm and must be observed. The term originates from the Arabic word adah, meaning an act that is repeated until it becomes a fixed practice in daily life [13]. For the Malay community, particularly in Negeri Sembilan, *adat* is more than just rituals or ceremonial practices. It encompasses an entire way of life including social systems, beliefs, and laws. In Negeri Sembilan, the community practices a unique customary system known as Adat Perpatih. This custom was introduced by a figure from Minangkabau, Sumatra, known as Dato' Perpatih Nan Sebatang [14].

This system divides society into several clans or suku, such as Biduanda, Seri Lemak, Tiga Batu, Tanah Datar, among others. Each clan is led by customary leaders such as Buapak, Lembaga, and Ibu Soko, who play important roles in resolving disputes, managing marriages, and preserving moral conduct within the clan. Under Adat Perpatih, individuals are prohibited from marrying someone of the same clan, illustrating a well-structured and organized social order. According to Idrus (1996), the *adat* practiced in Negeri Sembilan is a fusion of the Minangkabau culture brought by migrants with local traditions [7]. This integration occurred through intermarriage and kinship ties, as explained by Norazit Selat (1990). Thus, Adat Perpatih represents a unique social system formed by the harmonious blending of two cultures [15].

One of the key features of Adat Perpatih is the matrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance are passed down through the female line. In this system, women hold a central role they inherit houses, land, and determine family lineage. In fact, women also have a say in the appointment and dismissal of customary leaders, from the lowest to the highest levels of administration [16]. Two core values emphasised in communities that follow Adat Perpatih are consensus (muafakat) and courtesy (budi). Muafakat refers to collective decision-making and agreement, especially in important matters, while budi encompasses kindness, gentleness, and wisdom in daily interactions [17].

Therefore, to truly understand the traditional Malay houses in Negeri Sembilan, one must first understand Adat Perpatih. This is because the spatial layout of traditional houses is directly influenced by the principles and values of this custom. It determines who has the right to occupy which spaces, how those spaces are used, and the symbolic meanings behind their arrangement. A house is not merely a place to live, but a cultural emblem and identity marker for communities that uphold their *adat*.

## 5. SPATIAL PHILOSOPHY

The Mak Ani Heritage House, located in Parit Istana, Kuala Pilah, is more than just an old traditional dwelling. It embodies the values and life philosophy of the Minangkabau community in Negeri Sembilan, which practices Adat Perpatih. This custom, inherited from Minangkabau in West Sumatra, emphasizes a matrilineal kinship system, where lineage and inheritance are passed through the female line.



**Fig. 1.** Mak Ani Heritage House in Kampung Parit Istana, Kuala Pilah
Source: KAWANS, Politeknik Port Dickson

The layout of the Mak Ani Heritage House is not only functional but also deeply symbolic. It clearly reflects the close relationship between the house's physical structure and the community's values, beliefs, and customary way of life. Each space is designed for a specific function but also carries underlying meanings related to *adat*, respect, and social hierarchy. The spatial philosophy of this house highlights the profound integration between architecture and the social values of a community practicing Adat Perpatih [18], [19]. The house serves not only as shelter, but also as a medium for education, ritual, and preservation of family dignity and identity.

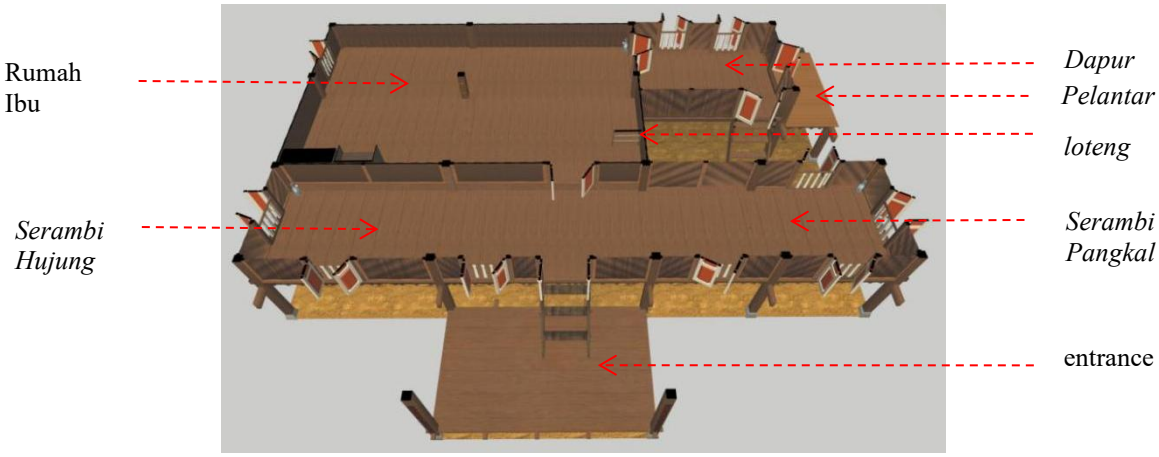


**Fig. 2.** Perspective layout of Mak Ani Heritage House in Kampung Parit Istana, Kuala Pilah
Source: KAWANS, Politeknik Port Dickson

The house is generally divided into three main areas: the verandah *(serambi)* at the front, the main house *(rumah ibu)* in the middle, and the kitchen *(dapur)* at the rear, similar to other traditional Negeri Sembilan houses. Each space has a distinct function that complements the others. The *serambi* serves as a formal and communal area, where men gather during customary events such as feasts, engagement ceremonies, and clan discussions. Its elongated and open-plan design allows for visual and social interaction between residents and guests. Latticed openings and large windows help enhance natural lighting and ventilation, making the space comfortable and multifunctional [20].

The *serambi* is further divided into three symbolic zones: the entrance base *(pangkal)*, middle *(tengah)*, and end *(hujung)*. The *pangkal*, near the entrance, is reserved for ordinary

clan members and visitors. The middle zone functions as the main area for interaction, hosting, and general discussions. The *hujung*, facing upstream, is designated for religious figures and customary leaders such as *buapak* and *Dato' Lembaga*. This elevated end signifies purity and honor, placing leaders in a position of respect, away from general disturbance or public view. This spatial hierarchy aligns with the customary saying: *"Pangkal untuk orang adat, hujung untuk orang alim dan penghulu"* [7].

During ceremonial occasions, the *serambi* is decorated with elements of customary regalia such as *tabir langit-langit* (ceiling cloth), *tikar rompok, tikar langkat, and tabir lingkung*, which mark exclusive areas for dignitaries. These elements are not merely decorative; they symbolize authority, protection, and honor towards esteemed guests. The *sireh junjung*, a traditional betel leaf arrangement, is also displayed as a symbol of respect [12]. These customs elevate the *serambi* as a ceremonial space that reflects the cultural refinement and etiquette of the *adat* society.



**Fig. 3.** Decoration element at the end of *serambi* for ceremonial occasions
Source: Lembaga Muzium Negeri Sembilan

The main house (rumah ibu) holds great significance for women. It is built on a higher level than the *serambi*, reflecting the noble and central role of women within the Adat Perpatih matrilineal system [18]. It functions as the primary living area, a place to keep heirlooms, and the central zone for domestic activities such as raising children and passing down knowledge to the younger generation. It also serves as a place of refuge, symbolizing the woman's role as a cultural custodian and guardian of the family and tradition.

At the rear of the house is the kitchen *(dapur)*, which is not just a place for cooking, but also a hub of women's interaction, especially during communal activities like *gotong-royong,* meal preparation, and sewing. The kitchen serves as a social space where women share opinions, coordinate family events, and informally transmit cultural values [22]. Thus, it becomes a daily site for the preservation and continuation of *adat* and lifestyle values.

Besides the interior layout, symbolic architectural features also play an important role. For instance, the low entrance door to the *serambi* and the presence of a high threshold (*bendul*) signify humility and respect. Every guest must bow and step over the threshold with their right foot as a gesture of etiquette and reverence. At the foot of the stairs, a *tempayan air* (water jar) and *batok*/*gayung tempurung* (coconut dipper) are placed for guests to wash their feet, symbolizing physical and spiritual cleansing before entering the sacred family space. These gestures highlight the depth of manners, cleanliness, and honour embedded in the spatial philosophy of the *adat* practicing community [19].

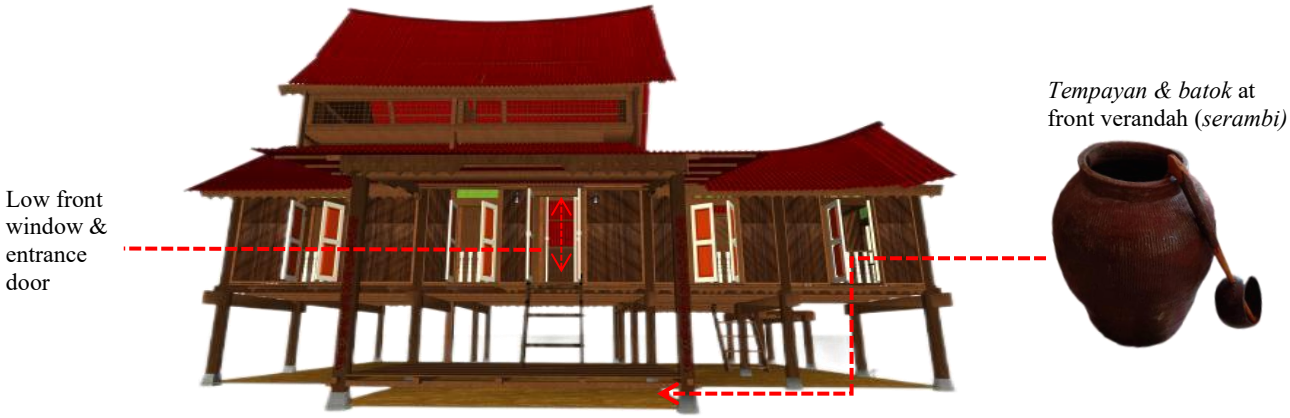


**Fig. 4.** Low entrance door, window, and the presence of the *tempayan and batok* element at front of Rumah Warisan Mak Ani
Source: KAWANS, Politeknik Port Dickson

## 6. PRINCIPLES OF SPATIAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF *ADAT*

Traditional houses in Negeri Sembilan, rooted in Adat Perpatih, function not only as physical shelters but also embody a philosophical system of life that encompasses social structure, spiritual values, and collective identity. In the Mak Ani Heritage House, these spatial principles are implemented clearly and functionally, demonstrating the close relationship between space and *adat* in shaping a culturally rooted society. Several key spatial principles identified are outlined as follows.

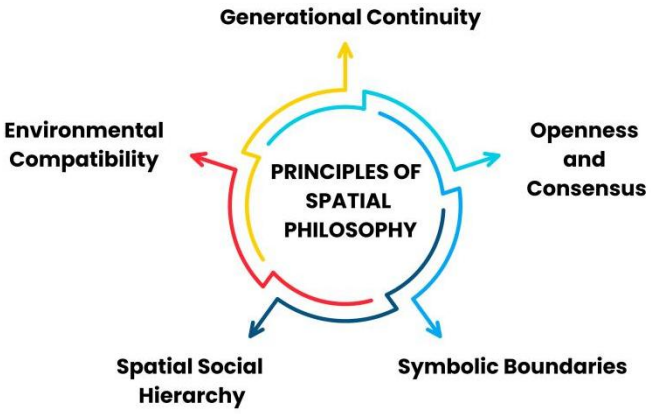


**Fig. 5.** Principles of spatial philosophy in the context of *adat*

### 6.1 Generational Continuity

Residential spaces such as the *rumah ibu* (main house) and the kitchen play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and clan identity. In the Adat Perpatih structure, the house is not merely physical property but an informal educational institution that shapes character and identity. The *rumah ibu* is inhabited by adult women who serve as custodians of *adat* and transmitters of values, especially to daughters. Here, customary knowledge, traditional skills like cooking and weaving, and life philosophies are passed down orally and practically aligned with the matrilineal system. This process ensures not only the physical continuity of the inherited home but also the transmission of cultural values and community norms. The house

becomes a living space where knowledge, experience, and beliefs are transferred across generations, maintaining the strength of Adat Perpatih's female-centered social structure [20].



**Fig. 6.** The photo show how *adat* was passed down orally and practically by the matrilineal community in traditional house

### 6.2 Openness and Consensus

The open-plan *serambi* (verandah) in the Mak Ani Heritage House reflects the value of openness within the *adat* community. Physically, this space allows for free interaction and visual access among family members, neighbors, and guests. It serves as the main gathering area for receiving visitors, holding meetings, and conducting cultural activities. Socially, the *serambi* symbolizes a culture of deliberation *(musyawarah)* and consensus *(muafakat)*, which underpins customary governance. Important decisions within the family or clan are made through open discussions that emphasize collective agreement rather than individual dominance. As a semi-public space, the *serambi* fosters social participation and nurtures values such as respect, empathy, and communal responsibility. This strengthens community unity and positions the house as a symbol of harmony and togetherness. As supported by Othman Mohd Nor et al. (2014), the open-plan design of heritage houses indirectly promotes social involvement and openness of opinion in the community [ 21].

### 6.3 Symbolic Boundaries

Spatial boundaries in the Mak Ani Heritage House serve not only functional purposes but are rich in symbolic meaning tied to moral and spiritual values. Elements such as the threshold *(bendul)*, low door entrances, and transition corridors *(selang)* act as markers between the outside world and private space. For instance, the *bendul* is not just a structural beam but a symbol of etiquette, visitors must bow when stepping over it, demonstrating respect for the homeowner and the sacred family space. It also serves as a subtle reminder for guests to enter the house respectfully and not rush in or risk stumbling. The interior, especially the *rumah ibu*, is considered noble and protected, requiring courtesy and proper manners upon entry. This spatial division educates the community about concepts such as dignity, modesty, and the protection of privacy, particularly for women. It also reflects the worldview of *adat* communities that believe in safeguarding inhabited spaces from negative influences and sanctifying them. These boundaries protect the institution of the family and form the foundation of honour in Adat Perpatih society. As Hardono (2015) notes, they also represent the community's belief in the protection of women and the sanctity of domestic life [18].




**Fig. 7.** *Bendul* element apply at below of doorway
Source: KAWANS, Politeknik Port Dickson

## 6.4 Spatial Social Hierarchy

Each space within the Mak Ani Heritage House is not solely defined by its physical function, but also by the social structure and customary roles it represents. The spatial organisation, particularly in the *serambi*, illustrates a structured and symbolic social hierarchy. The *serambi hujung* (end of the verandah) is reserved for *adat* leaders, dignitaries, and religious figures; the middle section serves as a transitional space; and the *pangkal* (entry base) is designated for ordinary clan members or those of lower social standing. This arrangement not only organizes seating but also reflects respect and recognition for one's role and status within the community. Meanwhile, the rumah ibu serves as the main domain for women providing residence and protection for female family members while the kitchen becomes a centre for domestic activity and food preparation, also dominated by women. This spatial hierarchy subtly conveys values of respect, responsibility, and social boundaries set by *adat*. It also trains younger generations to understand family structure, leadership roles, and social order. The spatial structuring based on hierarchy ensures smooth social interaction within the house and serves as a medium for value education and daily moral practice [7],[19].

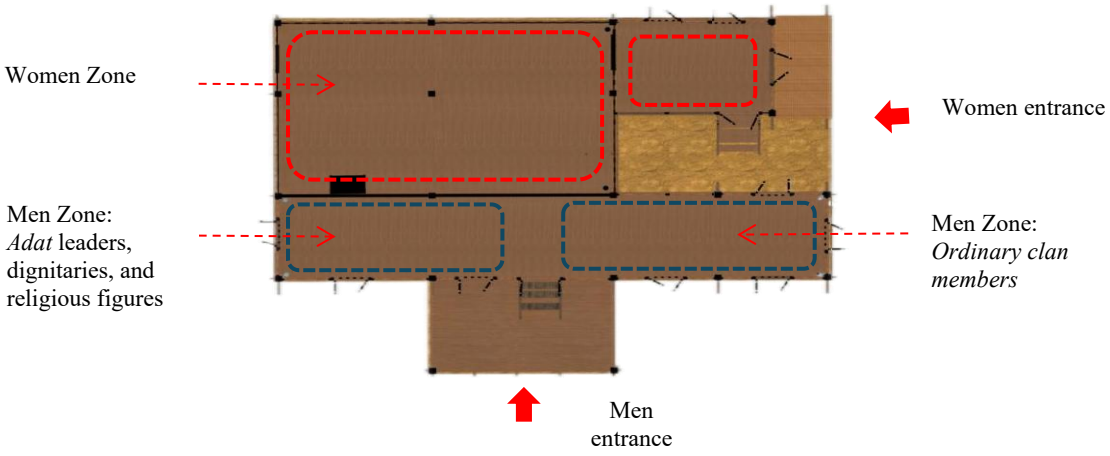


**Fig. 8.** Spatial social hierarchy in a matrilineal community
Source: KAWANS, Politeknik Port Dickson

### 6.5 Environmental Compatibility

The spatial philosophy of the Mak Ani Heritage House clearly demonstrates sensitivity to the environment and tropical climate. The house is constructed using local materials such as *merbau* and *meranti* hardwood, which are durable and naturally treated minimizing environmental impact. The use of traditional timber joinery without nails also reflects an environmentally friendly and sustainable construction method. Architecturally, the house is oriented to optimize cross ventilation and natural lighting, featuring high-pitched roofs, open walls, and raised flooring to prevent flooding and humidity. This design showcases the community's deep understanding of tropical weather and local ecological needs. Overall, the spatial philosophy embodies a form of vernacular sustainability, a sustainable approach rooted in local traditions, ancestral environmental knowledge, and minimal dependence on modern technology. The house is not only eco-friendly in its use of materials and energy but is also culturally responsive, reflecting the lifestyle, daily practices, and values of Negeri Sembilan society. This principle should be embraced as a model in contemporary architecture, particularly in advancing tropical design that is sustainable and culturally rooted.

## 7. CONCLUSION

These five spatial principles form an integrated system that not only meets daily functional needs but also plays a vital role in transmitting values, maintaining social decorum, and reinforcing the structure of customary society. The Mak Ani Heritage House, with its layout and design grounded in Adat Perpatih, stands as a manifestation of architecture that is rich in cultural and social meaning. It is not merely a physical heritage, but an active living space that educates, protects, and sustains the legacy of Negeri Sembilan society. This house deserves to be preserved and continuously studied as a valuable source of knowledge and inspiration for sustaining traditional architecture rooted in local philosophy. The core principles identified generational continuity, openness and consensus (*muafakat*), symbolic spatial boundaries, social spatial hierarchy, and environmental harmony together form a framework that highlights how traditional Negeri Sembilan houses are far more than empty physical shells. They are, instead, embedded with profound values that guide communal life and uphold cultural identity.

It is hoped that this research will raise awareness among the public of the uniqueness of spatial design influenced by both *adat* and Islamic values in Negeri Sembilan's traditional Malay houses. Furthermore, it aims to instill a shared sense of responsibility among the younger generation to preserve, document, and adapt these architectural and cultural traditions within contemporary contexts. In doing so, the invaluable legacy of our ancestors will not be lost to time, but will continue to serve as a meaningful reference and source of inspiration in shaping a dignified and culturally grounded future.

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