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Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, MALAYSIA



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 16TH REGIONAL
SYMPOSIUM OF THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO
SIMPORA XVI: 2025**

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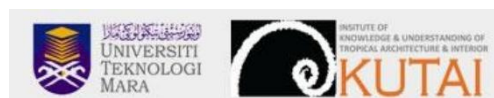
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RETHINKING KAMPONG AUTHENTICITY: THE MALAY LANDSCAPE DEFICIT IN PERAK TENGAH

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Abstract: This paper investigates the emerging condition of authenticity deficit within the Malay landscape, focusing on rural settlements in Perak Tengah, Malaysia. The term refers to the measurable decline of spatial traditions, vernacular architecture, land-use patterns, and communal values that once shaped the Malay kampong as a living cultural landscape. The study objectives are to (1) identify the extent of transformation in the traditional Malay kampong environment, (2) examine the social, cultural, and ecological implications of this transformation, and (3) propose strategies to restore landscape authenticity through sustainable and heritage-based approaches. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research integrates field observations, archival analysis, and demographic data between 1990 and 2020. Findings reveal that more than 45% of traditional timber houses have been replaced or heavily modified, orchards have declined by 35%, and communal spaces are increasingly privatized. These transformations indicate not only physical loss but also a weakening of social cohesion and ecological balance. The paper argues for a holistic rethinking of the kampong as a living heritage system through adaptive reuse, orchard revitalization, and vernacular-friendly design aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Malay kampong; authenticity deficit; cultural landscape; Perak Tengah

INTRODUCTION

The Malay kampong has long symbolized a living cultural landscape, uniting architecture, ecology, and community values. Traditionally, raised timber houses surrounded by orchards and paddy fields represented a self-sustaining ecosystem where built form, environment, and social life coexisted harmoniously (Lim, 1987; Hassan, 2020). Open verandas hosted kenduri, courtyards enabled gotong-royong, and fruit trees provided food, shade, and biodiversity. These tangible and intangible elements collectively reflected Malay identity and ecological wisdom (Abdullah, 2019; Ismail, 2018).

However, modernization and urban migration have profoundly altered this balance. The once distinct kampong environment is now merging into suburban landscapes, diminishing its authenticity and cultural resilience. This study addresses a critical question: *Is the Malay landscape facing an authenticity deficit, and how does this affect cultural identity and*

sustainability in Perak Tengah? The research aims to document the spatial and social transformations of the Malay kampong, analyze their impacts on cultural heritage and ecology, and propose strategies to sustain authenticity amid modernization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity in cultural heritage is a central discourse in heritage studies. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) underscores the integration of tangible and intangible values in managing change. For Malaysia, vernacular architecture is considered a vital expression of cultural sustainability (Abdullah, 2019), while rural landscapes serve as living repositories of identity (Hassan, 2020). Shamsuddin (2017) and Nordin et al. (2019) highlight that urbanization and state-led development programs have accelerated the decline of traditional settlements and communal practices.

The concept of a cultural landscape deficit or more specifically, an authenticity deficit, emerges as both a physical and socio-ecological concern (Farid et al., 2023; Kamarudin et al., 2022). Previous studies emphasize the disappearance of traditional forms (Tajuddin, 2006; Ahmad et al., 2020) but often overlook the interconnectedness between architecture, ecology, and community life. This paper contributes by situating the Malay kampong within this discourse and empirically examining Perak Tengah as a landscape undergoing transformation.

The Malay Landscape: Kampong Life

The kampong is more than just a house or a settlement. It is a living cultural landscape, a reflection of values, traditions, and ways of life. But in Perak Tengah today, this landscape is changing rapidly and with it, the authenticity that once defined Malay rural living is slowly fading.



Figure 1: Kampong life in The Kampong Boy. Lat (2014).

Figure 1 shows the kampong is not just a physical place. It is a way of life. The Malay kampong embodies symbols of heritage: traditional houses, rituals, and craftsmanship. Kampung landscapes were once self-sustaining ecosystems: fruit orchards, paddy fields, water bodies, and shaded compounds. Open compounds, verandas, and community halls nurtured gotong-royong, kenduri, and daily interactions.

Verandas where families gather, orchards that feed households, and open spaces where kenduri brings the community together. These spaces are living proof of how culture, ecology, and social bonds are interwoven.

The Living Kampong

Back 30 years ago, in the 1990s, kampung houses in Perak Tengah were predominantly timber on stilts, surrounded by dusun fruit trees. The large compounds provided shade, natural cooling, and space for family and community life (refer Figure 2).

- 80–85% houses on timber stilts
- 70% households had fruit orchards (mango, rambutan, durian)
- Average yard size: 800–1,200 sqm
- Trees as cooling + shading system

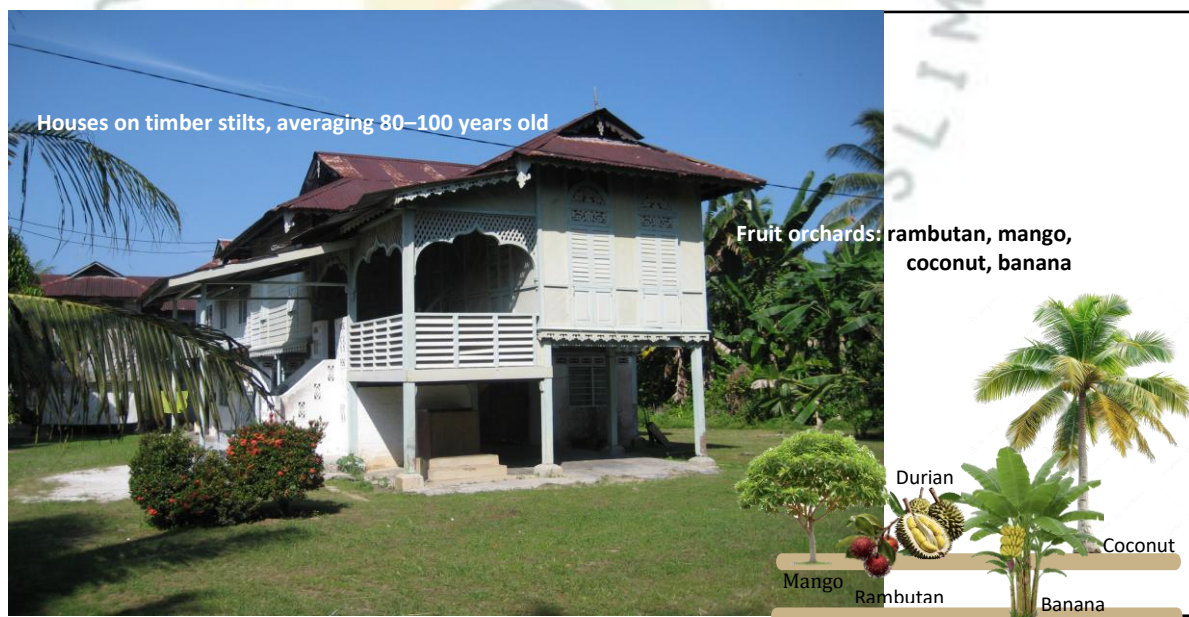


Figure 2: Existing Kampong House in Perak Tengah. Author (2024).

Trends and Transitions

By the 2000s, the kampong starts to gained pressures. Migration led to remittances; money coming back home and this funded renovations. Timber houses were patched with brick walls,

concrete extensions, tiled floors. However, it has slowly shifted the architectural balance (refer Figure 3). These changing trends and transitions are influenced by:

- Economic pressures → migration, remittances funding renovations
- 35% houses modified with concrete
- New needs: indoor toilets, modern kitchens, tiled floors

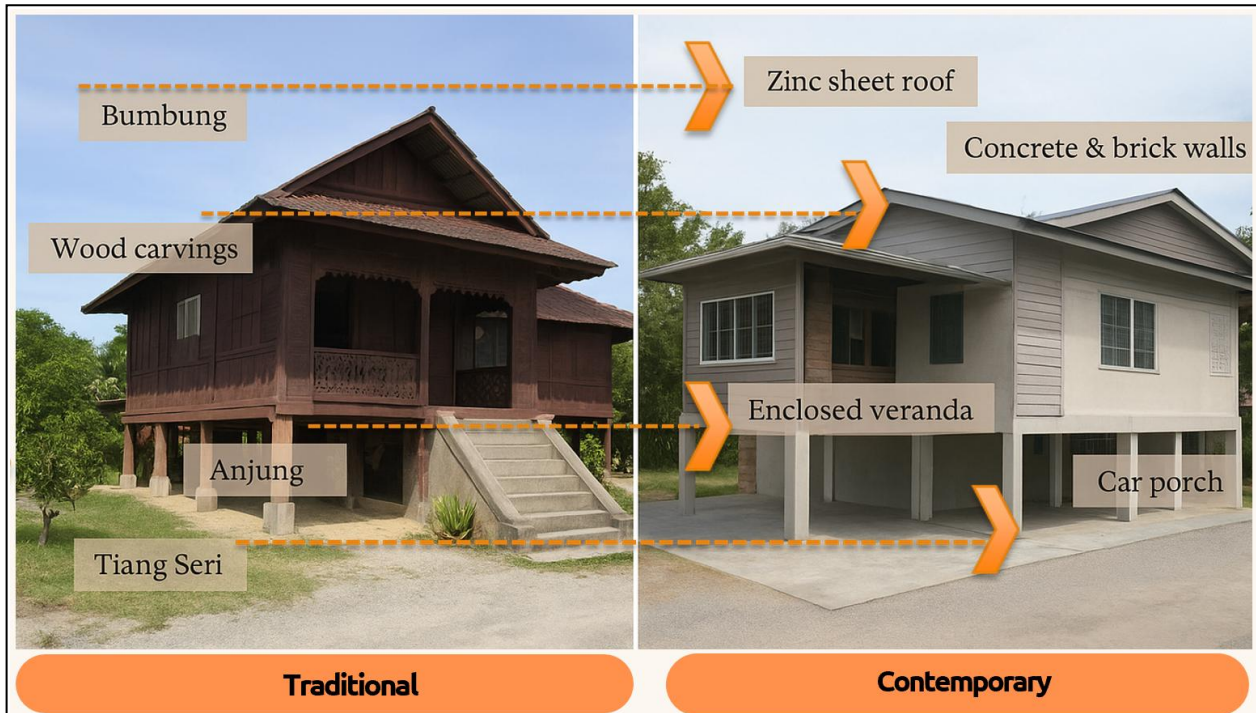


Figure 3: Changes in trends and transition of kampong house. Author illustration (2025).

Element	Traditional (Before)	Contemporary (After)	Deficit Observed
Roof	Attap/nipah, steep pitch, cool	Zinc/metal sheets, hotter interior	Climate-adaptive function lost
Veranda (Serambi)	Open, social gatherings	Closed, grills/walls	Social space reduced
Carvings & Symbolism	Abundant, symbolic motifs	Minimal, plain concrete	Cultural loss
Materials	Timber, bamboo, natural finishes	Concrete, ceramic tiles	Local craft decline
Landscape (Surrounding Yard)	Orchards, herbs, edible plants	Parking lots, ornamental plants	Ecological + food culture loss

Table 1: Changes of elements between Traditional and Contemporary kampong house

Fast forward to today. Almost half of the houses are either replaced or so heavily renovated that their traditional identity is lost. Verandas once open for community life are now walled up. Timber stilts are filled in, creating slab houses.

- 45% of traditional houses replaced or heavily renovated
- Enclosed verandas with brick/concrete
- Timber stilts filled in → single-storey slab
- 60% of yards paved for parking; trees removed

Details of changes in elements and dimension of kampong house can be refer to Table 1 and 2.

Dimension	Traditional Malay Landscape	Contemporary Landscape	Authenticity Deficit
Spatial Organisation	Organic, clustered villages around rivers, mosques, and communal halls. Shared paths encourage social cohesion.	Grid-like layouts, suburban housing, road-oriented. Communal spaces reduced.	Loss of communal bonds, weakening of kampong identity.
Architecture	Timber stilt houses, pitched roofs, verandahs. Local materials, cultural symbolism, passive cooling.	Standardised brick/concrete houses. Modern aesthetics, convenience, but culturally detached.	Decline of vernacular forms → erosion of architectural identity and craft knowledge.
Land-Use Practices	Mixed agriculture: padi fields, orchards, gardens integrated with dwellings. Self-sufficiency.	Agricultural land converted to residential/commercial zones. Minimal edible landscapes.	Disconnection from agrarian heritage; reduced multifunctionality of rural landscapes.
Socio-Cultural Values	Strong communal practices: gotong-royong, kenduri, collective farming, intergenerational ties.	More individualised lifestyles. Youth migration, reliance on markets, fewer communal rituals.	Decline in intangible heritage; weakening of social fabric and shared identity.
Relationship with Nature	Harmony with rivers, forests, and fields. Seasonal practices align with ecological cycles.	Segregated housing, infrastructure separates life from ecological systems.	Reduced ecological embeddedness; loss of symbolic meaning of landscape.

Table 2: Changes of dimension between Traditional and Contemporary kampong house

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, combining field observation, archival analysis, and demographic data review (Creswell, 2013). The case of Perak Tengah was selected because it remains one of the regions where traditional Malay kampong life was once widespread but is now under visible transformation. Field surveys were conducted between 2020 and 2022 to document changes in housing forms, compound use, and orchard coverage. Archival records from the 1990s provided baseline data on traditional kampong layouts and practices. Demographic information was drawn from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020). Four domains were identified as indicators of authenticity deficit: (1) spatial traditions, (2) vernacular architecture, (3) land-use patterns, and (4) communal values. The findings from

each domain were triangulated to provide a comprehensive picture of the transformation occurring in Perak Tengah.

CASE STUDY: PERAK TENGAH, PERAK

Perak Tengah, situated in central Perak, is a district characterised by traditional kampong settlements surrounded by orchards, rivers, and paddy fields. In the 1990s, kampong houses were predominantly timber structures raised on stilts. Field records indicate that approximately 80 - 85 percent of houses followed this typology, and around 70 percent of households-maintained orchards of fruit trees such as rambutan, mango, and coconut. Compounds were large, typically between 800 and 1,200 square metres, providing shade and multifunctional spaces for family and community gatherings (refer Figure 4). Communal values were embedded in spatial design: verandas were open, compounds unfenced, and daily life intertwined across households. By the 2000s, socio-economic change began to alter this equilibrium. Migration of youth to urban centres generated remittances that funded home renovations. About 35 percent of kampong houses were modified with concrete walls, tiled floors, and indoor plumbing, reflecting modern needs but disrupting traditional architectural balance. By the 2020s, almost 45 percent of timber houses had either been replaced or heavily renovated, orchards declined by 35 percent, and 60 percent of compounds were paved to accommodate vehicles (refer Table 3). At the same time, nearly half of the younger population migrated (48%) to towns such as Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur (DOSM, 2020), leaving behind ageing residents and further weakening the social vibrancy of kampong life.

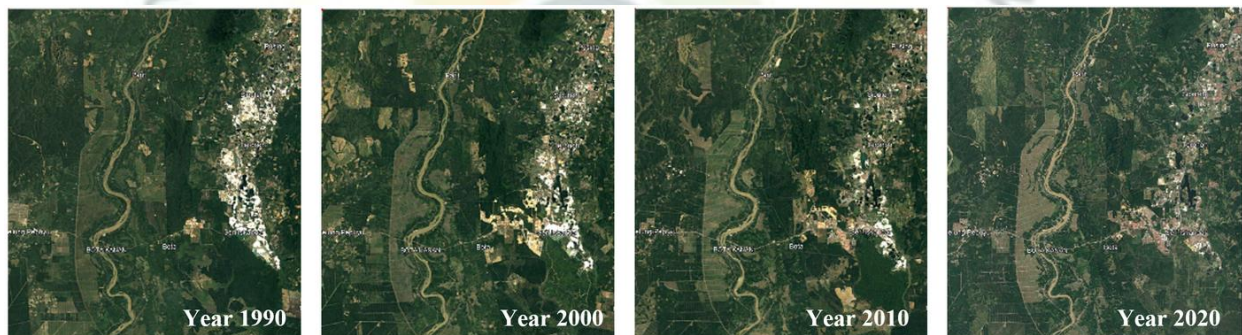


Figure 4: Spatial changes in Perak Tengah between year 1990 to 2020.

Image Google Earth (2025)

Year	1990	2000	2010	2020
Built-up Area	Sparse development (10%), primarily traditional Malay kampung settlements.	Moderate increase (30%) in development, especially around Seri Iskandar.	Rapid expansion (60%) of urban and institutional zones.	Significant urban sprawl (80%), large portions converted to housing and industry.
Traditional Kampung Houses	Majority (90%) intact, scattered across rural settings.	Beginning signs (70%) of renovation using concrete materials.	More kampung houses (40%) replaced or extended with modern materials.	Only 20% remain liveable in original form; many abandoned or deteriorated.
Agricultural Land	Extensive paddy fields and mixed rural agriculture.	Still dominant, but beginning to reduce around new developments.	Rapid conversion to mixed-use land.	Highly fragmented; some replaced by urban and commercial use.
Natural Landscape & Forests	Forested regions and river systems largely undisturbed.	Some deforestation around Seri Iskandar and Tronoh.	Noticeable fragmentation and degradation of green belts.	Significant loss due to mining, urbanisation, and infrastructure projects.
Infrastructure Development	Minimal roads and connectivity.	Major roads expanding toward Seri Iskandar and educational institutions.	Road networks densified, connecting towns and satellite settlements.	Full road networks, commercial areas, and residential grids established.
Cultural Landscape Integrity	High integrity of spatial, social, and architectural traditions.	Gradual decline due to structural and social modernisation.	Fragmentation increases; authenticity begins to diminish.	Severe deficit in authenticity and continuity of Malay cultural landscape.

Table 3: Spatial changes in Perak Tengah between year 1990 to 2020.

In summary, Perak Tengah, orchard lands have shrunk by more than a third. Almost half the youth have migrated, leaving elderly residents behind. The study observation show a strong preference for modern brick houses over traditional timber ones.

- Rural households: 16,000+ (Dept. Statistics Malaysia, 2020)
- 48% youth migrated to towns (Ipoh, Seri Iskandar, KL)
- Kampung orchard land reduced by 35% in last two decades
- Increasing preference for brick/concrete housing (survey 2022)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings from Perak Tengah confirm that the kampung landscape is undergoing a profound transformation that can be characterised as an authenticity deficit. The first dimension concerns the **loss of spatial traditions**. Verandas, once open and central to household and community interaction, have increasingly been enclosed with brick and concrete. This shift reduces natural ventilation and diminishes opportunities for informal encounters, undermining the permeability that defined kampung sociability. Similarly, open compounds that once hosted *kenduri* and *permainan rakyat* are increasingly fenced or paved, restricting social gatherings and daily interaction.

The second dimension relates to **disappearing orchards**. Orchards, which once covered large parts of kampong land, have declined by more than a third over the past two decades. Trees that provided shade, biodiversity, and food security have been replaced by ornamental species or removed altogether for vehicle parking. This ecological deficit contributes to hotter compounds, increased flood risks due to paved surfaces, and the erosion of food heritage associated with traditional fruit trees.

The third dimension is the decline of **communal values**. Practices such as *gotong-royong*, *kenduri*, and *permainan rakyat* are less frequent as fences privatize spaces and younger generations migrate away. The *balai raya*, once a hub of community life, is less central as villagers increasingly use modern venues. Refer Figure 5.

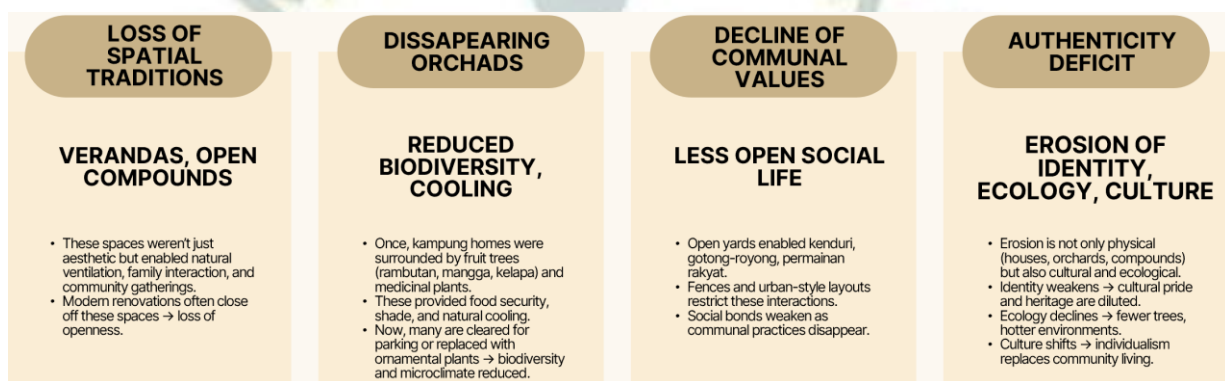


Figure 5: The Authenticity deficit dimension

The weakening of these social bonds contributes to cultural homogenisation, making kampong life resemble suburban neighbourhoods. Altogether, these findings suggest that the authenticity deficit is not merely a physical change but a broader erosion of identity, culture, and ecological balance.

These findings align with Shamsuddin (2017) and Hussein (2008), who observed similar transformations across rural Malaysia. The kampong's transformation is not merely architectural but represents an erosion of its socio-ecological system. The result is a homogenized rural landscape resembling suburban settlements, detached from cultural and ecological identity.

The Malay landscape, were not just looking as houses and land. It covers a whole system of traditions. In Perak Tengah, land once served multiple functions; food, medicine, and community gatherings. Houses were timber masterpieces, raised on stilts, with carved panels

telling stories of nature and faith. Yards were open, neighbours were family, and every detail from woven mats to floral carvings that spoke of heritage. However, today, yards are paved, zinc roofs replace carved panels, and fences mark privatization. The implications is more than just physical change it's a loss of authenticity in culture, identity, and spirit. Refer changes in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Physical, Social and Cultural changes in kampong areas, Author (2025)

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The implications of the authenticity deficit in Perak Tengah extend across cultural, ecological, and identity dimensions. Culturally, the kampong risks homogenisation into suburban housing estates, losing its distinctive identity rooted in vernacular traditions. Ecologically, the removal of trees and paving of compounds create hotter environments and higher risks of flooding. Identity wise, the dilution of communal practices weakens intergenerational transmission of cultural values. These transformations raise important concerns for planning and heritage conservation, as they illustrate how modernization, if left unchecked, undermines both tangible and intangible heritage. Without intervention, future kampong spaces may no longer represent Malay cultural identity, but rather generic rural settlements detached from their historical roots.

To address the authenticity deficit, several strategies are proposed. First, adaptive reuse of kampong houses should be encouraged. Rather than demolition, traditional houses can be modernised with utilities and insulation while retaining their cultural forms and architectural identity. Second, orchard preservation and replanting initiatives should be promoted through government grants, community-led planting schemes, and agro-tourism projects that make orchards economically viable. Third, community design guidelines should be developed to

guide renovations in ways that respect vernacular principles such as roof pitch, natural ventilation, and timber detailing. Finally, these approaches should be integrated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Preserving kampong authenticity supports SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). It also contributes to SDG 4 and SDG 8 by promoting education and heritage-based economic opportunities (refer Figure7).



Figure 7: Implications and Future Recommendations with SDG

CONCLUSION

The Malay kampong in Perak Tengah is experiencing a clear authenticity deficit marked by the loss of spatial traditions, ecological decline, and weakening communal values. This deficit represents not only physical change but also the erosion of identity, ecology, and cultural heritage. To safeguard the kampong as a living cultural landscape, planning approaches must balance modernization with cultural preservation. If interventions such as adaptive reuse, orchard preservation, and vernacular-friendly guidelines are implemented, kampongs can remain resilient spaces that embody both tradition and transition. The challenge is not merely to conserve houses or landscapes, but to sustain a way of life that connects past, present, and future generations. In conclusion, the Malay landscape in Perak Tengah is experiencing a clear authenticity deficit. The findings highlight the urgent need for culturally sensitive planning and policy frameworks that balance modernization with heritage conservation. Sustaining the kampong as a living cultural landscape requires more than preserving buildings; it calls for revitalizing the interconnected systems of space, ecology, and community that define Malay identity. To address this, planning must be culturally sensitive, valuing heritage as much as

modern needs. Only then the future can create kampong landscapes that are both resilient and authentic.

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