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# ENHANCING THE IDENTITY OF MALAY SMALL TOWN THROUGH INTEGRATED SOCIAL SPACE

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## Abstract

Social space is a place where people meet and interact within their community. Understanding the concept of social space integration within the context of a small town is essential to prove that the liveliness of the town is important to show the identity of a Malay town. From the literature study, the character of social space is related to the social behaviour and its response to the environment. This is also related to the use of the spaces within the Malay small town. The main purpose of the study is to develop integrated social spaces which focus on community activities as it promotes good sense of place that will enhance the identity of Malay small town.

From the historical perspective, the development of the Malay small town is unique in the sense that there is a strong connection between the building environments from different eras. However, there is evidence in which these characters are threatened by the ongoing rapid development around them. Some of the threats come from the public behaviour and authorities who are less concern with the cultural importance of the existing community. This study has identified the potential of social space integration based on the physical aspect as well as the non- physical ones which are essential for the survival of a Malay small town's attributes. It is part of the strategy to improve the character of the social spaces in today's development context apart from solving the identity crises faced by several small towns as well bringing back the quality of urban society that is slowly deteriorating.

**Keywords:** Malay towns, Islamic attributes, awareness, conservation of open space, robustness.

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## 1. Introduction

It is important to stress that the identity of a town is not only based on its physical character, but also based on the community's social culture and environment. Every place can have its identity by associating itself with the various activities of its people and its basic physical design to enhance the quality of its environment. Both human activities and their environment interact and are mutually equipped to create a perceptible local character for the town. These interactions could be seen within the social spaces of the town.

Traditionally, the Malay society seems to have a preference for community intimacy, rather than privacy (Yahya, 1998). This preference is reflected in the lack of territorial markings and physical barriers in the traditional Malay compounds. There is no clear delineation of space into public or private domain. Therefore, this preference promotes social interaction and sense of belonging among the residents. The community is a close-knit social entity, with its 'sense of mooring' reinforced by Islamic influence.

The urban outdoor space can be seen to be the only place for the people of the town to meet with each other and generate several activities among them freely. This public meeting place that provides people an opportunity to socialize with each other can be defined as social space. Furthermore, it is also seen as a form of space that gives vitality and a meeting place (Walker, 1982). Therefore, it acts as a source for the community to meet and interact with each other and generate vitality from the activities that take place.

According to Wooley (1993), social space can be referred to as a formal and informal meeting place. Based on this, it clearly stated that the function of a social space is not only referring toward the informal behaviours of the community but can also reflect as a centre for formal activities. Furthermore, the description of the social space as referred to by Ian Bentley (1985) shows that it is always located at the edge of building structures where it becomes places for people to linger and connect with each other. In this case, Sasaki (2002) suggests that social space should be equipped with a variety of structures formed toward the needs of social and environmental elements. The physical environment has been identified as having the potential to influence the activity levels of the community which usually refer to comfort and safety.

In terms of space, most Malay small towns have a lot of potential to integrate the people's activities with existing outdoor spaces. Several spaces created between the buildings still exist to serve these communal purposes.

However, the lesser attraction of these types of spaces somehow discourages utilization by the surrounding community. Even worse, these spaces were left unappreciated by the way they had been use and treated. Therefore, to overcome the issue of declining small town identity; open space revitalization will ensure its vitality and intangible identity enhancement. This effort is important because the lack of responsive environmental elements reduces the quality of comfort and affects the sense of attraction for people to use it.

The urban growth in terms of building use also gives pressure to the social space utilization related to traffic movement where it concentrates mostly within the town area. Furthermore, several building uses such as workshop and wholesale activities also contribute to the lack of social space utilization. The traffic base activities domination somehow disturbs the continuity of informal activities and implicates amenities characteristic of the place. With that being stated, the approach of small town identity enhancement must not just concentrate on physical design but also the non-physical design such as traffic control and building use adaptation.

The paper is presented in four sections. It begins with a review of social space significance in Malay small town that will relate to the awareness of certain aspect of its potentials. It then argues on the importance of social space towards town identity enhancement with related outline between conservation and social sustainability of the Malay small town outdoor spaces. The next section introduces Pekan Parit and demonstrates that different type of spaces have the potential to be used as active communal spaces, thus revitalizing the town as a whole. A number of guidelines are discussed at the end of the paper.

## 2. Malay Small Town

Malay traditional town center's development in Malaysia for the past century still had a village appearance but a few big buildings were built such as king's palace, mosque, government buildings and the other dignitary houses (Ossen et al, 2010). According to him, the attributes that could be seen for an Islamic Malay Town with their functions are formed by palace complex, mosque, 'Padang' (public field), market, village (residential) and river. Referring to basic diagram in Figure 1, it shows the origination and relationship between all the stated attributes. In relation with the Malay small town, some of the basic attributes have been found and distinguished mostly of the Malay identity. However, those identity projections do not implicate the physical character of the town; thus it reflected in the form culture and intangible identity. These are some essential attributes that highlight the communal identity of the Malay small town.

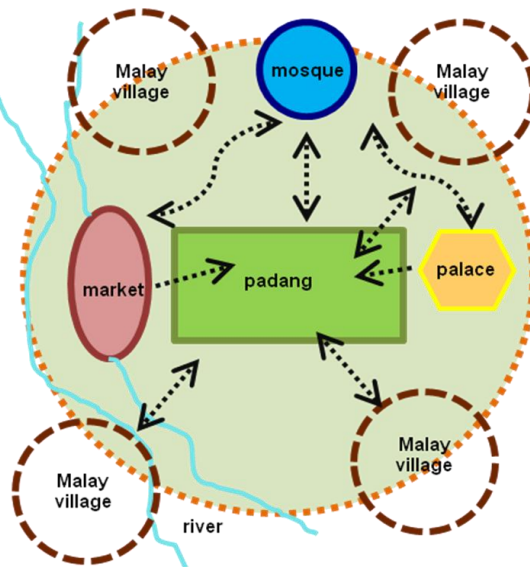


Figure 1: The interrelationship of every elements of Islamic Malay Town. (Source Ossen et al, 2010)

### a. The Mosque as an Islamic Symbol and Religious Center

As Islam is the main religion of the Malays, the function of the mosque is obvious in influencing the social, spiritual and intellectual development of the Malays. The function of a mosque is also closely related to the Sultan as being the head of Islamic religion in his realm. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mosque was an important center for the teaching of Islam in the Malay world, as it functioned also as the center of Islamic education. During that period, Malay traditional towns had gone through an excellent period of Islamic influence through the untiring and dedicated efforts of *ulamas* (religious persons).

### b. The Market as a Commercial Center and Socializing Place

The market place is an important space for people to use for trade and other commercial activities as well as a place to interact, exchange news with each other, and most importantly build a close relationship with other people. Chinese settlers, who are synonymous with trade and commerce, built their settlement in the vicinity of the town. Their area was also close to trading activities and the river. Historically, the commercial center and its market

were usually located on riverbanks, in the vicinity of jetty that makes the accessibility to the area possible (Ossen et al, 2010). The area adjacent to the riverbank was a public space because of the trading activities there. The market was important to the local community for their daily necessities. It brought the local people to meet each other daily to do commerce and socialize.

#### c. The Traditional Malay Villages

The traditional village is the residential area of the local people. The people were the symbol of power for the ruler at those times, therefore, the bigger the settlement area the more prosperous and powerful the ruler was. These villages were located close to one another and usually the locations of the villages surrounded the town center. The location was also near the river in order to be near to the mode of transport. The lifestyle of the Malay community within the villages in the Malay town had not changed much. They were and still are practicing the traditional Malay and Muslim lifestyle similar to the old days. They have a close family relationship that is evident from the lay-out setting of their houses in the village. Most of the houses were built in clusters, with each cluster belonging to members of one family.

#### d. The River as Dependable Natural Features

Rivers were the main sources of economy and provide transportation for the local community in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. During that time Malay town centres were well-known as Malay trading ports (Lim, 1998). The concentration of trading and economic activities near rivers and sea shores contributed to the local Malays' preponderance for living close to the coast, usually near the mouth of rivers. Apart from being used for trading, the river provided important transportation links to districts in the remote hinterland areas.

In addition to give source of food and water supply, the river was also a main transportation route in the Malay towns because the river was the fastest and easiest way of travel by using boats. It was also a place for trading goods which had been transported from ports or villages to towns.

### 3. The Importance of Social Space in Malay Small Town

According to Litvin (2005), traditional towns are places that have been blessed by its peoples' heritage values that live in them. Its environment can be described as a relic of past events, occupations and ownerships. Furthermore, the urban heritage that had been formed from one generation to the other produced a sense of belonging in continuity towards the existing community.

In the context of the Malay small town, the communal activities that have been inherited for hundreds of years are the source of liveliness. This can be referred to as a reflection of culture, values and nation views resulting in a lifestyle which is the main factor to understand the operative system of the city and the way people respond to behave in it (Michelson and Reid, 1970; Rapoport, 1977). Furthermore, these influences created a rich blend of cultures, sub-cultures, customs, traditions, artworks through the manifestation of folk culture and sub-cultures, creating a juxtaposition of a very unique society and built environment. The interaction of human with the past and the present with its surroundings produces an urban dynamism and creates the spirit of the place (Syed Z.A Idid, 1998).

The daily life practice makes a strong impact on the usage of space. The little plaza, the wall along the street, the space under a family tree, the streets, the spaces under the roof of the house entrance doors, all of the spatial surroundings create the possibility for social life practice. The existence of the place contributes to the development of social life in the community (Dumreicher and Kolb, 2001). So, if there is a possibility to live in an existing spatial environment this affects the feelings and relationship of dwellers to a specific place. The emotional co ownership that refers to strong attachment of a place resulted in an interest from local dwellers in the perpetuation of the valued qualities of the place.

Most of the great cities usually have been known for their abilities to provide place for recreation, natural beauty and space of activities for the citizens. The social space not only will give the benefits economically, but will enhance the identity and quality of life (Roger, 2003). People's activities in the space will generate dynamic

movement of humans and goods. However, it also will include static spaces for dwelling, resting and living. These two forms of space are the elements that contribute to healthy, sustainable living and working environment.

According to Korpela and Hartig (1996), social spaces give several services for the community through the intimate contact with the nature and enhancement of well-being for the people. The character of social spaces plays the main role to generate strong continuity of community activities within the city and will enhance the cultural landscape. These can be identified by looking at the relationship between human and space in a way the social spaces have been used by different social and cultural groups (Cattel et al, 2007). Most importantly, the social activities within the area will give meaning to the place and enhance its identity.

The terminologies of 'place' and 'cultural significant' are important aspects which have been emphasized in the conservation principles to enhance the identity of historic city (Burra Charter, 1997). These aspects go hand to hand with the development planning towards enhancing the identity through human activities and human-environment interaction aspects.

Place does not only refer to monument, site, area, building or structure that remain in one particular area, but also gives influence to the whole surrounding area. There are several places that need to be conserved as it could enrich our life through the understanding of the past and encourage varieties in our new environment. Through the utilization and vitality of social spaces, it will enlighten us with the values of the historic living where communal activities have not being neglected.

The components of place are based on the activities and events which are dominant to its surrounding. The experience of a particular place refers to personal memories based on their knowledge on its past history of significant events. Furthermore, place also plays a major role as the source of prosperity to an individual and group of people which indicates their identity. To make the statement much more relevant, Relph (1976) explained 'place' indicates several signs that show its significance from other places. He introduced the term 'placelessness' which shows weaknesses of places that fail to give value of experience and identity. It is important to understand the characteristics of social life in a Malay town which are distinctive and essential to the place because this knowledge will help to create sense of place in the context.

The most important significance of social space in a place is because it contains information that cannot be recorded with any photos, writings, drawings, or videos. No matter how high the efficiency that the recording process has been done, the experience through self exposure is irreplaceable (Kyle, 1992). It is essential for us to experience, create and safeguard social spaces and though communal activity that represents the local uniqueness of a town by considering the quality of the place as a whole. This consideration must not just be based on the indication of individual elements such as monuments, buildings and sites. We cannot run away from the fact that an element of cultural significance also plays a great role in determining the quality of the town.

#### **4. Urban Conservation in the Context of Social Space**

Urban conservation provides a set of values and methods by which to preserve and renew the important elements of the city from which it derives its unique sense of place and that often represents the world's multicultural heritage. Planning for urban conservation assures that the cities of the world – with unique structure, places and districts – will be sustained in their irreplaceable role as the realm of vibrant life, culture and civil society (Cohen, 2003).

To guide urban conservation planning, a method for making judgment, while subjective, gives a basis of comparison to other similar sites, as well as, some rationale for aesthetic and historical value assessment. Five criteria and questions to ask in assessing the urban conservation potential of a particular site are:

- Define character of the urban setting and clarity of the border of the site. This is a measure of the extent to which boundary and structure are recognizable as urban elements, such as city squares, parks, side streets and elements of nature;
- Locality and sense of place. This is a measure of the site's regional and local character, atmosphere and its urban spaces, with links to the context of the city;
- Internal space, proportions and relations. This is assessed by the connections of urban space created by the volumes of the built environment, but also internal continuity of function and uses;
- Style and design. This provides a means to record evaluation of the overall design approach, character and style prevalent at the site, comprised of buildings, land and uses;
- Construction methods and materials. This is a measure of the level of performance achieved by an authentic building technology. This environmental assessment should cover the developments likely impact on the

landscape, cultural, and natural heritage and local population. Good design relates to local and historic character, it takes account of people's needs, behaviour, enjoyment, comfort; indeed their very being.

According to Relph (1976), the identity of a place is not only on its appearance but also in observable activities and functions of meanings. Similarly, S.Z.A Idid (1998) urged that the experience through the activities in social spaces is much more significant which could determine the meaning of a place. Moreover, in the context of living town the lifestyle of the people that represents utilization of the surroundings is much more meaningful than the buildings. It shows that the city is alive. Therefore, the methodology of the research concerns on the quality of the Malay small town identity through the observation on townscape character (buildings and urban space). It includes several methods, such as:

- a. Townscape appraisal
- b. Urban space characteristic and function
- c. Landscape element and amenities

The study was carried out by the Rational-Deductive Method. It started with the theoretical and literature review and the analysis of secondary and primary data related to the study area. Analyses of the findings were carried out to develop a design proposal. The observation and discussion with local people were applied. These activities can support to make better design decision and what local people perceived about the Pekan Parit area.

## 5. The Study Area

Malay towns as studied by Hamid (1988) and Ezrin (1985) began as traditional Malay settlements with its own fascinating identity of cultural environment. It can be said that Pekan Parit initially has the qualities of a Malay small town because of its physical and non-physical elements. The physical attributes related to mosque, river, market and Malay villages enhance its identity and implicates communal activities happen within it. (figure 2)

Historically, Pekan Parit was a Malay settlement that operates agriculture as the main source of the economy, this settlement continuously develop due to its strategic location which is situated between Sungai Perak and mining area such as Tronoh and Batu Gajah. Parit was occupied by the influential Malay rulers and operated as a collection center for the agricultural produce for areas within Parit. Regarding the population numbers that is increasing and rapid physical development of Kinta Valley, this town grew tremendously. In the early development stage of the town, a few wooden shop houses were constructed to support the economy activities and a few of the Malay ruler's residences were located there. Subsequently in 1920's, some of the concrete shop houses were built at the main road to replace the old buildings. The aesthetical values were taken into consideration during the construction stage of these buildings and they eventually became the overall development design of Pekan Parit (S.Z.A. Idid, 1995).

In the case of social spaces, there are several patterns of outdoor spaces that have the potential to create integration between Pekan Parit communal spaces. The purpose of discussing these patterns of outdoor space here is to emphasize the need for conserving and enhancing such spaces, not only with regards to conserving the physical entities of this Malay town, but also conserving local lifestyles. These social spaces can be described as streets, linear spaces, semi-nodal spaces, and nodal spaces.

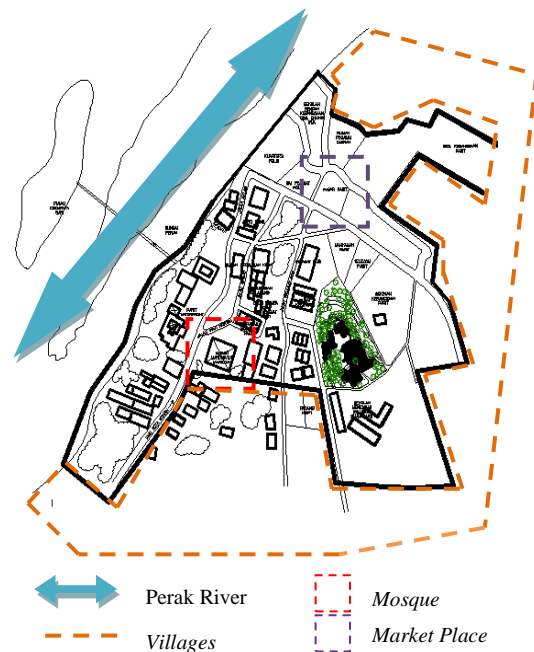


Figure 2 : Malay Small town attributes in Pekan Parit

### a. Streets

Streets were public spaces, which served not only as connectors to various other localities within the town centre, but also acted as intermediate spaces connecting the fronts of one neighbour house to the other. In Pekan Parit, children played on the streets, while old folks would sit by the front of their houses chatting with neighbours. Even now most of these streets cater not only to vehicular movements, but are generally shared between pedestrians and other forms of street- centered activities. As we refer to Figure 3, from time to time certain traffic- pedestrian conflict creates discomfort toward its utilization. Therefore, crucial traffic control should help in enhancing human activities along the streets.



Figure 3 : Street vendors that create informal activities

### b. Linear Space

In the study area, linear spaces include the spaces along the riverfront of the Perak River that stretches along Pekan Parit. This space is the essential component in connecting people to the Perak River, which itself is another significant character of the Malay town (Figure 4). Linear spaces also include those spaces behind the shop houses and the back lanes between the blocks of buildings. Although these spaces can be seen as simple interconnected passages, they should also function as meeting places for individuals and communities.



Figure 4: Linear spaces related to Perak river which can be a potential recreational space for the community.

### c. Semi-nodal Space

Semi-nodal spaces are vacant spaces along the route or path or river within Pekan Parit. Most of these spaces are pocket spaces and are generally neglected or converted into parking spaces (Figure 5). They have the potential to be used as communal spaces within the town centre. The linear spaces, especially the back lanes, can be interlinked with these semi-nodal spaces to facilitate better utilization and connectivity.



Figure 5: Abandon space that could become a connector to communal activities

#### d. Nodal Space

These free-standing types of spaces offer opportunities to create organised public spaces within the Malay small town. They also have the potential to become important elements that provide robust and attractive spaces and activity venues to the people of Pekan Parit. One example of such space is located in front of Pekan Parit mosques that creates a sense of centralization and define the buildings around it. The robustness of this nodal space is crucial since it will implicate the activities around it and hopefully will generate vitality in the town center.



**Figure 6:** Vast nodal space has potential to inject a sense of robustness in the town centre.

### 6. Enhancing Pekan Parit Identity

In the context of study area, the function and quality of the spaces were found to be related with the surrounding built environment. They are not only related to building use but also the movement of people in the town. In terms of social space connectivity conflict can happen in terms of integration between visual and physical connectivity.

The potential of these social spaces can be highlighted when there are elements that bond the overall connectivity. In Parit, most of the social space are oriented to the relationship between the building and street character. However, there is lack of nodal spaces that function as robust spaces. These types of spaces are the main catalysts to ensure the integration of the social spaces and activities within them can happen. Due to this phenomenon, there exists free-standing space (refer to Figure 6) which have no specific use that have potential as the 'core social space'. The existing spaces in the city are supporting spaces which may integrate the overall social space within the town. The integration of social space in the Malay small town not only enlivens the existing activities, but also encourages the local residence to utilize the space with their own communal activities. Therefore, the integration of the social space can not only be for the public use, but also for private users.

Based on the findings of potentials, there are two types of approaches that could enhance the identity of Pekan Parit. It will include the physical approach that overcomes aesthetic and visual issues which will lead to better condition of social spaces. In later discussion, part of the strategy will concentrate on environmental and amenities' quality. Besides that, it is also essential to form an intangible design strategy that will cover the importance of intangible identity enhancement.

### 7. Proposed Strategy toward Identity Enhancement

This section will highlight the proposal of integrated social space which includes general strategies that contribute to the Malay small town identity enhancement. The proposed strategy includes general guidelines to promote a good sense of place to the study area based on human interaction with the surrounding environment. These proposals of strategies are connected with each other as it focuses on the study area setting and intangible elements around it.

The strategy is stressed on suitability of existing activities with urban spaces to promote a good environment for the surrounding setting that could enhance liveliness in the study area. This action includes several approaches referring to Pekan Parit as the Malay small town centre which are conservation and maintenance, adaptive reuse and redesign in proper manner.



Table 1 (Based on S1 and S2) indicates the importance of suitable building use application in Pekan Parit to ensure liveliness of communal activities within the integrated social spaces.

- S1 Preserving activities that contribute to cultural significance that is related to religion, history, culture and community.
- S2 Change of building use towards social space revitalization that contributes to social activities must refer to the local character.

<i>Description/Implications</i>	
<p><b>Buildings that need to be maintained:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residential</li> <li>• Vendor activity</li> <li>• Services</li> <li>• Religious places: mosques, temples and churches</li> <li>• Sundry shops</li> <li>• Craft shops</li> <li>• Old restaurants</li> <li>• Institutions</li> </ul>	<p>These building uses can encourage pedestrian generation at open spaces and small scale housing</p> <p>Allow infill development for vacant buildings and spaces</p> <p>Allow adaptive reuse for old, abandoned or underutilized buildings to create a more living environment.</p>
<p><b>Types of building use encouraged</b></p> <p>Residential purpose upper levels</p> <p>Art gallery and antiques</p> <p>Particularly at the upper levels art gallery, antique shop, boarding house, café, and restaurant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Residential purpose, vendor and services.</li> <li>- Residential purpose and vendor.</li> <li>- Office and vendor.</li> </ul>	<p>Allow infill development for vacant buildings and spaces</p> <p>Allow adaptive reuse for old, abandoned or underutilized buildings</p>

**Table 1:** Building uses that encourage integration of social space

The urge to provide social space that could cater important activities to the locals is essential to the Malay small town liveliness. However, several activities that give implication to traffic regeneration such as wholesaling activity and workshop give bad impact to the development of social space. The connections between these social spaces need a better use of surrounding buildings.

- S3 The urban space needs to be revitalized and utilized that create robustness with the informal activity as the main focus.

Referring to the observation, the study area is the everyday focal point of traffic movement which has been implicated by the surrounding land use. It needs a proper measure to provide harmonious streets that should give comfort to the people and on other hand encourage human movement in Pekan Parit. It has to consider the activities around the area that becomes the generator to traffic movement (prohibited buildings in Table 2). Therefore:

- S4 Remove activities that generate traffic movement such as warehouses, automobile workshop and wholesale which are not appropriate in context of conservation area.
- S5 Provide pedestrian mall design to reduce traffic conflict with pedestrian and pollution to the historical living city surrounding. This approach can be applied through traffic diversion that could provide better surrounding to several streets and junctions.

<i>Description/Implications</i>	
<p><b>Types of building use with certain control</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Traditional wholesale</li>   <li>▪ Workshops</li>   <li>▪ Cultural Market</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulate loading activities after peak hours (6.00 p.m.).</li> <li>• Prohibit the storage of heavy items on the upper storage of the shop building. Only current wholesale activities are allowed.</li> </ul> <p>Prohibit workshops along main roads. The corridor area is not allowed for the purpose of repair work and must be clean.</p> <p>The number is limited on any particular road. Only allowed along roads with commercial orientation.</p> <p>Limiting the activities of the cultural market only to those related to the local culture and avoiding those that are generally common night market business.</p> <p>Must be located in areas that have no conflict of vehicles and pedestrians</p>
<p><b>Building use which is strictly prohibited</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supermarket, emporium and shopping complex.</li> <li>• Wholesale building use.</li> <li>• Workshop and light industry.</li> <li>• No large scale agglomerations of activities are allowed.</li> </ul>	<p>Not allowed because it has many adverse effects on the area.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agglomeration of trade disallows small grain and special focus of activities in the study area to operate</li> <li>- Pollution of sound, smell and sight.</li> </ul>

**Table 2** : Building uses that threaten integration of social space

The people's comfort in terms of physical and visual connection within the integrated social spaces needs amenity revitalization and urban aesthetic in Pekan Parit. This also increases the quality of the surrounding through providing better condition of spaces and linkages. However, the design criteria of the amenity elements must compliment the surrounding setting of the study area. Therefore:

S6 The design of hard landscape and soft landscape elements must portray and respect Pekan Parit as a Malay Small Town.

S7 The landscape design of social spaces must show the local aesthetic values and create balance in the environmental quality.

Design criteria in landscape design must be sensitive to the local belief such as *Feng Shui* that prohibits any structures or trees to be put directly in front of buildings' frontage. Besides that, ornamentals, materials and pattern must be synchronized with the local character.

## CONCLUSION

The Malay small town is a place that contains its Islamic and Malay heritage that is reflected throughout the centuries in the physical, social and cultural forms. From the case study in Pekan Parit, the town cannot show its true identity without the presence of local people's activity around it. A good town identity can only be clarified through the everyday life of the people. The people involvement in terms of social value enhancement cannot be done without providing places to do it. Therefore the main issue in terms of social interaction within the Malay small town is much related to provide suitable social spaces for the people.

This paper emphasized more on the visual and physical connectivity which encourage the movement of people through the integration of social space as well as the supporting spaces. It can be more interesting, if there are studies which focus on the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces toward the liveliness of these social spaces. Other than that, studies on the economic liveability from the enhanced identity of Malay small town can also be viable for study. This is because the effect of development of social space to economic sustainability is important in terms of contributing to the liveability of the town itself.

Finally it is also recommended to study the effect of the community involvement in the development of social spaces, such as the programs that can be provided within these spaces by the local residents. This is because proposals on design can only function when there is community involvement in the implementation of the design itself. More importantly, the evolving lifestyle must be taken into consideration to ensure that liveliness can continue.

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