

# THE MALAY CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF KUTAI HOUSES

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## ABSTRACT

*The 'Malays cosmology' focuses on principles of belief, the world of thought, and culture. Concerning the Malay landscape, this research is a continuation of previous findings. This study aims to obtain a list of landscape elements and their arrangements in the Kutai house (KH) style compound, located in the Perak Tengah District. On the other hand, the study was conducted to determine each landscape design elements' function, layout, and composition. It exposes the identity of the Malay landscape and indirectly enhances the community's self-esteem. It is possible to broaden the Malay Garden concept (MGC) identity and image. The finding showed a significant result that illustrated this concept is inconsistent as it has been subject to several interpretations and makes it challenging to explore scientifically.*

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**Keywords:** Malay Garden Concept, Kutai House, Cultural Landscape, Vernacular Architecture



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## INTRODUCTION

The landscape can be understood as a dynamic code of symbols that speak of the past, present, and future (Cosgrove, 1989; McDowell, 1994). Globalization has dramatically altered people's views and characteristics, which is the principal cause of local cultural identities loss. The researchers have considered many variables during this study that may challenge the MGC (Zakaria et al., 2017). There are tangible and intangible considerations that researchers have identified as a counter to this idea's potential progress. The study presented valuable data that could be used to explain the MGC. Referring to Zakaria et al. (2015), the MGC includes the same design principles as other garden concepts, such as soft and hard landscape, layout, functional and unique designs. Nasir (2007) said the river was the hub of socio-economic and political activities for the citizens, taking the Perak scenario in ancient times. As we know, the beginning of the garden design started from the palace, and its influence has spread to the people's houses. Therefore, the Perak River is essential in the dissemination of landscape identity. We will often be asked why the old Malay house compound does not have a fishpond (for aesthetics or food sources), like the popular garden concepts globally? The answer to that question is simple, "old Malay settlements are located near the river," which has various functions such as transportation, trading, food, and irrigation. So, it is not significant to have another water element/feature near the river.

Furthermore, in ancient time, at the right shore of the river Perak, each Sultan of Perak opens its 'city of government.' On the left bank of the river was the Aristocrat / Minister of State's residence. It is not just a source of cultural information or knowledge to study the traditional Malay cultural landscape. It is about awareness or understanding that could bring about tangible changes in the restoration of Malaysia's vernacular cultural landscape. Although rapid growth challenges are faced, many areas in Perak continue to demonstrate cultural landscape characteristics and features. In the rural population, especially the older generation, traditional values for natural resources are still preserved. Not to forget, construction activities still influence the socio-economy of local communities (Abdullah, 2011).

## **Problems Statement**

The 'kampung' (village or rural area) natural landscape provides a platform for villagers to perform their lives together by applying unwritten rules and customs that the ancestor has long-established. At the same time, kampung's landscapes are, in turn, influenced or even modified, gradually reflecting the adaptation and development of the Malays. Hilton (1956) claims that the Malay house compound's design should align with the language, religion, and cultural environment. The lack of understanding about the culture of Malays landscape living has resulted in the degeneration of house compounds' design in cultural heritage (Zakaria et al., 2017). The introduction of foreign garden concepts like Balinese and English has also influenced the landscape. The growth of rural areas, such as the tourism industry, has also been instrumental in transforming the conventional residential environment into tourist attractions through the renovation and modification of traditional houses. Due to Perak's reputation as a tourism state, this phenomenon causes threats to the loss of 'Malay character'.

The design of a garden, according to Md Syed et al. (2019), is an art that represents the local Malay community's wisdom. It has also reflected their efforts in the process of biodiversity conservation in the country. The exact concept and definition of the Malay Garden are very much needed, especially as an essential reference for future generations. Besides, the Malay Garden's value can positively reflect the traditional cultural life of the Malays. It is crucial to implement and understand a complete traditional house design model that includes its landscape setting (Zakaria et al., 2019). Therefore, as these villages should undergo gazette intervention by the state or federal government, it is also time to recognize the essential of old settlements as heritage.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Malay Nusantara garden has a history dating back 1400 years, and it is believed that the gardens were inspired by legends and folklores such as the Hikayat (Ninotaziz, 2016). The most direct expression of ethnic, cultural identity is the traditional settlement. The standard features of architecture reinforce the connection between the house's interior and exterior. The house

is the highest privacy for the Malays, and others cannot enter it without being invited. However, the external spaces are mostly for socializing activities. From a psychological point of view, according to Nasir & Wan Teh (1994), the house can offer a variety of instinctive desires, such as a great sense of comfort, fellowship, harmony, a place of inner peace, and many others,. Below are the terminologies that have been highlighted in this study.

### **Kutai House (KH)**

‘Kutai’ is a local word meaning old. KH is a traditional house that was built around the 1890s in Perak (Saleh et al., 2018). Nowadays, this type of house is rarely found in Perak, and even if it still exists, it is uninhabited. Abd Rashid et al. (2019) identifies the house as modest with versatile interior space and use and can fit well with the Malay 'kampung' setting. The house has many art structure elements that are very appealing, simple with purposes, such as having a food preparation platform or cooking materials. Since this type of house is very old, most of it is in a dilapidated condition. Now it has been revamped with modern materials. Some were renovated but retained their original design and structure, while others were abandoned. All the Kutai houses found today are in traditional villages that have long existed along the Perak River.

### **The Malay Garden Concept (MGC)**

Zakaria et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of philosophies, taboos, and traditions that are significant to Malays practice today. Malay's ancient philosophy teaches us about discipline, patience, reverence for parents, and knowledge of cultural norms. The explanation is that the Malay ideology is intimately connected to Muslims' way of life. It is an effective form of advocacy that can restore people's conventional feelings against their community and teach people how to perceive their traditional home setting. Today's landscape reflects the harmonization between people and nature. Most inhabitants still follow the traditional values in their land use and lifestyle (Abdullah, 2011). Kruger and Seville (2012) have stated that landscape construction for a garden can be divided into two categories, which are softscape (plants and soil), and hardscape (artificial elements). According to Md Syed et al. (2019), the findings for this type of study should pay attention to the most basic hard landscape elements in most

Malay Garden such as houses, wakaf (Malay's traditional shelter), ponds, pots, and fences.

## **Cultural Landscape**

According to Melnick (1984), the cultural landscape's principles and resources are challenging to recognize because they have affected due rapid growth and global climate change. Ani et al. (2012) define the Malays cultural landscapes from the Malay Archipelago's neighbouring regions, such as Indonesia, one of the Malay Peninsular's earliest settlers. Along with this migration, when the Malays settled on the coasts and countryside while integrating their cultural landscapes, they carried with them their traditional cultural values, lifestyles, and wisdom.

## **Hard Landscape**

The hard landscape may be the human-made elements in the context of the garden design. It is the creation of an additional component that complements the layout of a garden. The observation shows that current society tends to use hard landscape as an attractive part of its landscape setting. Generally, the hard landscape elements are widely used in contemporary Malay society's landscape, including a gazebo as a meeting spot, pergola, concrete pots, water features, fountains, swings, and benches park (Hussain & Ahmad, 2010). Ismail (2003) has recorded eight (8) types of landscape furniture during the 'Cultural Responsive Landscape' study. The list of landscape furniture is tempayan (large earthen water barrel), guri (small water vessel), flowerpot, pangkin (raised platform usually without shelter), perigi (well), perun (dumpsite), reban (chicken coop), and jelapang / kapok padi (paddy store).

## **Soft Landscape**

Referring to Ani et al. (2012), personal connections with nature are much established as man fertilizes the land with plants, while nature contributes to water and food supplies. It allows the man to adapt to the outside environment by providing shades, thermal comfort, and indoor ventilation. These cultural practices have been taught to the Malays from an early age. The idea of 'serving the land' is continuously fed into the minds of younger generations. Hussain and Ahmad (2010) assert that the soft elements

of the landscape are referred to as the components that reflect nature. It is made up of several plant species from different groups or types. Plants that complement the Malay Garden's aesthetics are also a benchmark for advancing and preserving local traditional medicine knowledge (Md Syed et al., 2019). The study found that soft landscape components typically have a high propensity to be used in the Malay house compound. The decorations differ from ornamental plants, herbs/kitchen garden, shaded plants, and palm. Furthermore, water plants, climbing plants, orchid plants, tropical plants, and seasonal plants are also planted in other plant groups.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used in this article. The researchers have chosen this approach because it offers adequate knowledge to address the research questions. As mentioned previously, this study aims to obtain a list of landscape elements and their arrangements in the KH style compound, which is in the Perak Tengah District. The research question for this paper is, "What are the elements and functions of each landscape component present in every selected KH compound?". Besides, the researchers will also answer the second research question, which is, "How do landscape elements and the layout impact house occupants?".

### **Sample Criteria**

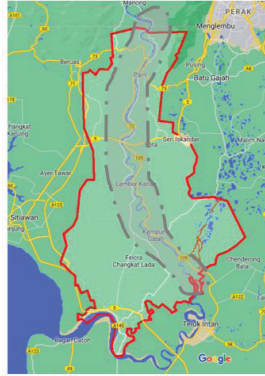
In this study, the researchers have set 17 houses of Kutai type as case study. According to Creswell (2007), "Criterion Sampling" is the researcher's criteria in the sample collection process. The sample shall be chosen accordingly to the following criteria:

1. Traditional Malay Village
2. The Malays house with values of authenticity
3. No occupant or still inhabited

### **The Scope of the Study**

Qualitative methods were analyzed in-depth. All these houses must be in the Perak Tengah District, regardless of their condition/appearance. The house chosen does not necessarily have occupants. Nowadays, Kutai type houses are not many. Thus, the sample can be selected from unoccupied

houses. Researchers have evaluated the exterior of the house in this study. It is a study of the existing cultural landscape in selected houses. The soft and hard landscape elements were identified, along with their functions. Refer to Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Distribution of traditional Malay houses (Kutai type) along the Perak River in Perak Tengah District.**

Source: Google Map Apps.

## **Qualitative Method**

The design of this research was conducted using a "case study" approach. It was chosen because the researchers have set a case study on Kutai type houses in the Perak Tengah District from the beginning. The survey for this topic was conducted for one (1) month, which involved the site visit, observation, interview session, and data analysis.

### **Site visit observation**

From literature, 23 Kutai houses have been found by previous researchers in this area. A total of seventeen (17) house compounds have been studied, and "Simple Random Sampling" was used to conduct site selection. Refer to Figure 2. The observations' findings showed that most of the hard landscape elements are not well maintained. Whether the homeowner is no longer stay there, passed away, or the house has been turned over to his descendants. There was a minor issue in the interview process. It is a limitation that occurred while conducting this study.



**Figure 2. The Traditional Malay Houses (Kutai type) which are used as Case Studies**  
Source: Author

## Interview

Interviews were conducted with the owners/occupants of each house. However, if it was not inhabited, this process was not be carried out, and it resulted a constraint to the working method. The interview process took between 30-45 minutes for each respondent. However, as previously informed, not all houses have occupants. The researchers conducted the interview method on eight (8) houses only. For unoccupied houses, the researchers recorded existing landscape elements and their placement around the house. This study has successfully proven that there are threats to Malay's cultural landscape and identity in this area. It has demonstrated the need for continuity in assessing cultural landscape protection and improvisation to accommodate each sample's specific information. According to Ani et al. (2012), recognizing the importance of maintaining the rural area's social and cultural values is vital for practitioners and national authorities to demand compliance. Positively, this study has succeeded in providing more in-depth information needed to understand the social and cultural identities in term of garden composition.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The measurements of the 'Malay identity' preservation are essential to monitor potential changes in rural areas. For this purpose, the approach that has been used is identifying the social and cultural factors that strongly influence them in preserving their inherited garden. This paper explores the physical characteristics that shape the Malay cultural landscapes.

### Landscape Features

The MGC's softscape and hardscape components are based on the culture of Malays. There has been no consensus about how to make this concept more systematic and realistic. This research has shown that there are an understanding and knowledge of aesthetic values. The information includes shrubs, groundcovers, and even exotic plants in the form of ornamental plants. Most respondents believe that ornamental plants have a significant advantage on their characteristics such as colour, aroma, shape, scale, and texture. Ornamental plants include on-the-ground plants, potted, hanging, and water-grown plants. They usually place herbal plants in the kitchen garden. Herbal plants are grouped as edible plants which serve as food and decorative purposes.

**Table 1. Summary of the Dominant Landscape Elements of Kutai House Compound**

House Plot	Dominant Softscape Element	Dominant Hardscape Element
Kutai 1 (Status: Inhabited)	1) <i>Musa acuminata</i> 2) <i>Mangifera indica</i>	1) Picnic Table 2) Flowerpot
Kutai 2 (Status: No occupants)	1) <i>Musa acuminata</i> 2) <i>Manilkara zapota</i>	Nil
Kutai 3 (Status: No occupants)	1) <i>Musa acuminata</i>	1) Pangkin / raised plat-form 2) Well
Kutai 4 (Status: No occupants)	1) <i>Musa acuminata</i> 2) <i>Nephelium lappaceum</i>	1) Suspension 6*
Kutai 5 (Status: Inhabited)	1) <i>Musa acuminata</i>	1) Suspension 2) Well 3) Outdoor Toilet
Kutai 6 (Status: No occupants)	There is no dominant element on this site because it no longer serves as a 'House'. Has been endowed to the Mosque.	
Kutai 7 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Flowering Shrubs 2) <i>Nephelium lappaceum</i>	1) Flowerpot 2) Chicken coop 3) Suspension

Kutai 8 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Nephelium lappaceum 2) Musa acuminata 3) Codiaeum variegatum	1) Suspension
Kutai 8 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Nephelium lappaceum 2) Musa acuminata 3) Codiaeum variegatum	1) Suspension
Kutai 9 (Status: No occupants)	1) Nephelium lappaceum 2) Musa acuminata	1) Suspension 2) Outdoor Toilet 3) Pangkin / raised platform 4) Flowerpot
Kutai 10 (Status: No occupants)	1) Musa acuminata	1) Barn 2) Suspension
Kutai 11 (Status: No occupants)	1) Cocos nucifera 2) Nephelium lappaceum	1) Outdoor Toilet 2) Suspension
Kutai 12 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Musa acuminata 2) Herbs plant	1) Outdoor Toilet 2) Suspension
Kutai 13 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Cocos nucifera	1) Well 2) Chicken coop
Kutai 14 (Status: No occupants)	1) Cocos nucifera 2) Nephelium lappaceum	1) Water Tank
Kutai 15 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Musa acuminata	1) Suspension
Kutai 16 (Status: Inhabited)	1) Musa acuminata 2) Cocos nucifera	1) Well 2) Barn
Kutai 17 (Status: No occupants)	1) Musa acuminata	Nil

Source: Author

Referring to Table 1, a total of 9 out of 17 houses visited were uninhabited. The most dominant soft landscape elements are banana (*Musa acuminata*) and coconut (*Cocos nucifera*), as they are most often found. As for the hardscape elements, the most dominant are suspension and wells. However, hardscape elements are rarely seen, and this is because most of the houses visited are no longer inhabited at this time. The hardscape elements found are mostly damaged, and their placement does not fit the function.

## Landscape Composition

The Malays have adapted and reacted well to the environment, climate, subtly, without causing harmful effects on the landscape's resources. They acclimatize to natural surroundings as well. Learn essential characteristics to suit the weather and environmental conditions when constructing a house that great philosophy was tailored to the conditions of their lives and homes. In the house compound area, edible plants' existence is a piece of

evidence that the idea of a special connection to nature can be defined as the 'Malay Garden.' As usual, the exterior of the house was divided based on the orientation of the building. The MGC layout interpreted to have the courtyard, side yard, and kitchen garden.

### 1. Front compound/courtyard

The front yard is situated in front of the house's compound and is known for its vast space, with aesthetic elements. Children will be able to play with fun and warmth in this front yard. This space is vehicle-free, and only pedestrians (villagers) can walk through it. This compound is also used for entertaining visitors during celebrations, such as a wedding ceremony, circumcision, and others. Today, much of this 'front yard' has been turned into a resident car park as it is an open lawn. The front compound of all Kutai houses studied is practically 90% uniform and is an open area dedicated to social activities. Besides, if observed, the Malay community does not care much about something too detail. It is sufficient to feature a neat and comfortable on the front compound.

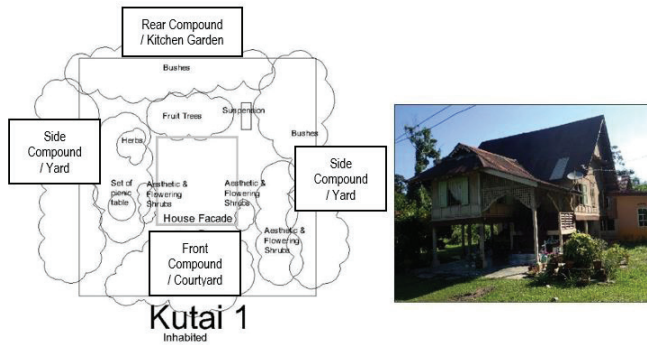
### 2. Side compound/yard

The area acts as an interconnection to the backyard. This compound can become a children's play area, depending on the owner's house's land size. The compound on the right and left side of KH was 'opposite' to the front yard. The house occupants ignored the left and right-side compounds, resulting in unattractive layouts and damage to the element. Common soft landscape elements found in this compound are fruit trees such as banana and rambutan. As for the hardscape element, it is not uniform and can be any element. It is not fixed. Usually, we will find old wells and suspensions.

### 3. Rear compound/kitchen garden

The KH rear compound is a space that links the occupant's activities such as baths, washing, and cooking. Often, during festivals and other social events, this space is utilized by women. The backyard is the most privately owned location, and for outsiders, it is not recommended. There are bushes all over this compound. Too many plants have made the back area unattractive, either planted with intent or unplanted (growing by itself). Not all Kutai houses have a back compound with an unattractive scenery. However, most of them are not in good condition. Some are neatly managed and have hard landscape elements such as livestock barns and sheds. They

are present only in a small portion (not the majority) of the houses studied. It shows that occupants are less sensitive from a design standpoint or do not care about aesthetics in the backyard. There is only a focus on the function of the elements and their living needs, not aesthetic purposes.



**Figure 3. The Example of Kutai House Landscape Layout**

Source: Author

Referring to Figure 3, in the left, right, and back compounds one can see the bush as its background. It is not a forest because if it is cut down or cleared. Also, on the front is an open lawn or open space. The front compound is the researchers' favourite area, as it looks peaceful, albeit with only a few landscaping elements. The presence of fruit trees planted around the house shows that the Malay community loves plants which can bear fruit. It is better than growing plants that can only provide aesthetic value alone. If observed, there are also flowering plants that are planted in pots. Various species of flowering plants are planted, and they are not uniform in terms of their arrangement. The interviews conducted found that the Malays do not care what kind of flowering plants to be grown. As long as it is a flowering plant, they 'prefer' to plant it in the home compound as to beautify the compound. At the front of the house will be a "public" area that guests and friends can access. The house front area is not dense with plants or hard landscape elements because social and community activities will often use this space.

## Cultural Traditions

With the connection to memory, nostalgia, and sense of place,

the landscape merges with cultural values that define a place's identity. Therefore, we should create a specific national level list of significant elements for the MGC. It should be accompanied by guidelines and landscape management actions capable of protecting and managing these developed cultural landscapes. It is crucial to suit a Malay house compound to fulfil its function as a social component. It is intended to deliver a feeling of warm hospitality. A humble and modest compound layout and spatial arrangement welcome a close bond and friendship between neighbours, including the village's community. Annual ceremonies and festive events in a compound area are high-impact practices that impose close connections between community members. The group promotes these customs to make this compound composition pleasant and connect. The landscape elements composition is versatile and multifunctional. It caters to shifts in activities at various times, whether day or night. The traditional Malay village is a physical manifestation of Malay's cultural patterns, with Malay traditions, preferences, motives, feelings, and appreciation on what the physical environment gave them.

### *Symbolism in Design*

The 'symbolism in design' for the traditional house compound landscape, in general, can be defined by understanding Malays' cultural background. The symbolism will also suit and match the Malays house compound by itself. Social interaction is an essential thing in the life of Malays. The old Malay house old elements often invite us to remember earlier childhood memories that signify significant events or provide the owner with nostalgic values. The allocation of plants within the compound sector can include the meaning or symbolism of significant past events. The compound of a Malay house is rich in cultural customs. It must be full of essential heritage elements and must be driven by traditions, customs, and religious teachings. Other attractive features of the 'Malay identity' in the garden design are the symbolic significance of a component and its placement.

### **Potential for Development**

There is a potential development resulted from the application of

old traditional houses using the concept of "Adaptive Re-use".. It is to maintain the aesthetic and cultural values of an old house. This effort indirectly becomes a living museum for future generations' knowledge and understanding of the Malays community's culture. Here are some examples of a traditional Malay house in Peninsular Malaysia's 'relocation' initiative:

1. 'Keriang Hill' and 'Taman Rimba' in Alor Setar, Kedah (collecting traditional houses throughout the state of Kedah to be used as tourist attractions).
2. 'Malay Heritage Museum' at Universiti Putra Malaysia and 'Perak Traditional House conservation and relocation project' by International Islamic University (an excellent initiative to preserve the Malays community's cultural arts. Meanwhile, the design and method of re-installation are carried out academically).
3. 'Terrapuri Village' in Penarik, Terengganu and 'Bon Ton Resort Langkawi' (an exclusive private resort and collects old Malay traditional houses to make a luxurious development).

These traditional houses are eye-catching, but visitors and researchers find it difficult to appreciate them in a position that can portray 'Sense of Place' characters. The architecture of a building alone cannot have a good impact if not included landscape elements. In this context, the houses must display features of the traditional Malay Garden as well. Through some of the projects that have been highlighted above, the researchers believe that the beautiful traditional houses alone, is not a factor can attract tourists or visitors (if purposely for a tourism product). The explanation is that the house failed to emphasize its authenticity if did not apply the original Malay traditional garden concept. Kutai houses located in the villages can also implement an attractive layout and use plant related to the Malay community's culture. However, much effort needs to be carried out because almost all the Kutai houses sampled are not in a good condition (both building and outdoor space).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Malay landscape is not designed; it is natural; we still adhere to the concept. There is a lack of coherence between the various meanings. It is caused by general aspects that outline can quickly identify landscape

identity. For instance, landscape identity is related to an area/region's character, a historical event, or understanding of a particular community of people, among the natural designs such as placing the landscape in front of the house with beautiful, colourful, and fragrant flowering plants. The Malays do not mind putting any flowering plant species in their house compound. It is because one of the concept characteristics is the flowering plants' element. They can accept it and placed many species of plants in the house compound's vicinity. The weather, climate and cultural factors must be considered in the selection of plant. The unoccupied house is among the limitation of this study. However, these unoccupied houses can still be used as part of a case study. This is because the researchers need information on the house compound's condition and the landscape elements that are still there/existed.

As expected, in all case studies, there is a basic layout of the MGC. On the left, right, and rear compound of the house it is planted with fruit trees. These fruits are eaten by the host and can also be used as a souvenir for their guests. They like to reserve space for herbs and other plants near the kitchen. It is the Malay Garden's typical layout, and it shows the community did not design it. The idea is close to a natural conceptual approach.

Nowadays, in landscape design scenarios, shrubs like pandanus species (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*) will look beautiful, chilli plants (*Capsicum* spp.) also is appealing if it was properly arranged attractively. The previous Malay community is seen as not applying art-based on landscape design. However, they emphasized something that characterized the informal logic (imitating of the natural environment). For general knowledge, the plants were chosen to be planted in the Malay house yard sometimes involve superstitious/mystical beliefs passed down from generation to generation. After observing all the case studies, most house occupants (current generation) do not believe in such things. It has been proven by the presence of tree species such as Ciku (*Manilkara zapota*), Asam Jawa (*Tamarindus indica*), and Kekabu (*Ceiba pentandra*) grown in some house compounds. Apart from that, there are also shrubs planted, such as Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), which is believed to repel evil spirits. Although the Malays today do not deem such things, the mystical stories about plants are still spreading.

Until now, this process is still occurring, and it is noticeable. We

spotted that Malay architecture's image would only display an appearance and not done to create an attractive environment. In terms of space, the past landscape design does not focus on a single essential thing. Most designers have incorporated both art and architectural features. Recently, they have not only focused on fundamental design alone. Some attention has been given to landscape design that includes culture, spatial and function. Thus, this will reveal that Malay architecture's spirit becomes more noticeable and is not confined to its design if it depends only on the Malay landscape alone. Without linking to the architectural background, it will not include the environment's design. For instance, landscape design's softscape features need to associate with accessories such as jars and lamps. So, softscape cannot stand alone. It needs to be combined with garden accessories, consolidating the building's architecture, and then seeing a Malay Garden design.

In conclusion, the study on "The Landscape Elements Layout" has succeeded in proving that many traditional houses in Perak Tengah District are left unmanaged by their heirs. The researchers observed from this study they had successfully proven that the Malays community housing compound tailored an "Environment-based concept". It is not thoroughly planned but effectively fitted to the conditions of their environment. The Malay community has used many resources that are close to them and adapt them to their lifestyle. The design was emphasizing an 'informal style' layout and arrangement for each element. It does not show a fixed guideline because it will vary according to the homeowner or the person living in the house. Without any outside interference, it is an entirely natural beauty.

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