Malaysia, like most other developing countries, is faced with massive housing problems. About 40 percent of the population of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, live in slums and squatter settlements. Profiteering and speculation in housing have pushed house prices beyond the means of most Malaysians. A 1982 analysis of the total market demand for housing in Kuala Lumpur revealed 40 percent was for housing stock for investment and speculation. The year before, half of all land converted for housing in Malaysia was held by speculators.

Even government low-cost housing schemes, which are considerably cheaper than houses in the open market because of subsidies and lower land costs, are beyond the means of most people. A study prepared for the Urban Development Authority found that the cheapest Malaysian public low-cost housing unit was beyond the means of at least 80 percent of the lower income group of the urban population — those in most need of affordable housing.

Conventional housing solutions have largely failed to house the majority in the Third World because they are too expensive, inappropriate, or tied to a market controlled by speculators. Traditional housing solutions, however, have continued to serve many in the Third World. Traditional houses are in many ways the antithesis of conventional modern houses: cheap to construct, making intensive use of labour rather than capital; adapted to the individual needs of the occupant; and tending to emphasize use-values rather than market-values.

The traditional Malay house serves the housing needs of the majority of people living in rural areas of Malaysia. It was evolved by the Malays over the generations, and adapted to their own needs, culture, and environment.

Basically a timber house with a post and lintel structure raised on stilts, with wooden, bamboo, or thatched walls and a thatched roof, the house is designed to suit the tropical climate. Ventilation and solar-control devices, and low thermal capacity building materials are part of the building heritage. House construction is highly systematised, like a modern prefabrication system, but with a much higher degree of flexibility and variation. The house components are made on the ground and later assembled on the building site. A very sophisticated addition system, which allows the house to grow with the needs of the user, is an advantage for the poor because it allows them to invest and build gradually,
rather than shouldering one huge initial financial burden.

The traditional Malay housing process is highly autonomous, largely controlled by the user. Guided by building tradition and the village carpenter, the owner-builder designs a house that is uniquely suited to the family’s socioeconomic and cultural situation. Not only does the traditional approach foster a better match of house to user, it keeps the cost down by eliminating the need for professional intermediaries such as architects or developers. Self-help and cooperative labour are the resources upon which the owner-builder relies.

THE HOUSE AND COMPOUND

The kampong (village) environment is generally cool and shady, with lots of greenery. Paths are unpaved, and compounds are kept meticulously clean. Spaces flow into one another freely with few boundaries or obstructions. Unlike the roads of modern housing estates, which tend to segment and disintegrate, the absence of physical barriers in the kampong allows a flexibility in accommodating individual needs that is not available under the imposed order of the modern housing estate.

The traditional Malay house has an open interior, promoting good cross-ventilation and lighting and allowing the space to be used for many purposes depending on the season, occasion, or time of day. Since most activities take place on the floor, the need for furniture is minimal; bedding materials and sleeping mats are rolled up and stored during the day to eliminate the need for separate living and sleeping quarters.

Interior spaces are defined, not by partitions or walls, but rather by changes in floor level; they may be respected or ignored, allowing the house to accommodate larger numbers of people than usual during, for example, feasts. Thus the traditional Malay house exhibits greater versatility and more efficient use of space than does the modern house, where spaces are limited to the specific use determined by furniture and partitions.

The traditional Malay house has, over the years, evolved a very efficient addition system that grows according to the needs of its users. The core unit, or the ibu rumah, is the basic living unit for the small or poor family. The kitchen and toilet are often located on the exterior. From the ibu rumah, many possible additions can be made as the family grows bigger or as it acquires the means to build a bigger house.

Additions are usually done in the spare time available during the agricultural or fishing off-seasons. Building a traditional house is a continual process, often taking months or even years to complete, with the pace of work and quality of construction controlled by the user.

The basic addition possibilities are classified into three different types, but there are infinite variations in sizes and heights, and various combinations of types and quality according to the needs of the user.

CLIMATIC ADAPTATION

The traditional Malay house features a number of adaptive devices to reduce the stress created by high temperatures and humidity. Houses are randomly sited to ensure that the wind has relatively free passage through the community. Moreover, the velocity of wind increases with altitude and the traditional Malay house on stilts makes the most of this phenomenon. Again, to maximize ventilation, the house features many fully-ventilated windows at an appropriate body height. These windows can be left open most of the time thanks to large overhangs which, in addition to offering protection from the driving rain, exclude the open skies from view and reduce the glare.

For religious reasons, most traditional Malay houses are oriented to face Mecca (i.e., in an east-west direction). This orientation minimizes the number of areas exposed to direct solar radiation during the day and, hence, the heat gain in the building. Heat retention is minimized by the lightweight, natural construction materials that have a low thermal capacity and the interior remains cool due to the insulating capability of the attap (thatch) roof.

The traditional Malay house tends to be somewhat dark inside, which has the advantage of giving an impression of coolness; for practical purposes, however, the introduction of artificial lighting would be desirable.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS

One of the main reasons for the massive, unsolved housing problem in the developing countries is that solutions based on western prototypes have been applied to the problem of housing the poor — solutions that are inappropriate, expensive, and alienating, both physically and socially.

The traditional Malay house, on the other hand, demonstrates that the housing problem can be efficiently solved by the users themselves, provided they are given the necessary resources: land, finances, and freedom to build. This may require appropriate government intervention, for example, to ensure that the people have land tenure security — or it may require the removal of inappropriate government intervention, as when new standards, rules, and bureaucracy take the decision-making rights from the people and give them to experts.

One solution to the problem of urban housing could be a prefabricated system that is based on the traditional Malaysian house — an approach that could lead to a more humane, socially and ecologically sound urban environment and one that fosters a strong sense of community. In so doing, we would be building on the positive aspects of our indigenous heritage, strengthening our cultural identity, and developing the confidence for a more self-directed and self-reliant development.

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