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## The Influence of Culture and Religion on Visual Privacy

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### Abstract

This paper examines the influence of culture and religion on the conception of visual privacy, its regulation, and housing design attributes affecting visual privacy of Malay Muslim families living in terrace housing, in Malaysia. The study involves a survey interview of 381 respondents and 11 case studies. Findings indicate that changes in living condition in the urban area, a new paradigm in culture-housing and the lack of consideration for visual privacy in housing design, the conception of visual privacy and its regulation are influenced by both the Malay culture and Islam as a way of life.

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*Keywords:* Visual privacy; privacy regulation; housing design; culture

### 1. Introduction

The conception of privacy is culturally specific (Altman, 1977). Westin (1967) argues that privacy operates at the individual, group and organizational/institutional levels but stressed that his theory of privacy is applicable specifically to Western cultures because it is consistent with the socio-political values of Western democracies. Privacy should be perceived from the perspective of the culture in question. Privacy in different cultures was translated into different physical levels and responses in the design of houses. Privacy need, the use of space and how privacy was regulated is one of the outstanding ways in which cultures differ, resulting in different house forms around the world (Rapoport, 1969). The house is the primary setting for privacy and its associated design attributes act as important privacy

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regulating mechanisms. A house and its associated design attribute not designed according to the culture of its intended inhabitants may not provide a comfortable level of privacy. Architectural and behavioural variables must operate in tandem to control privacy in the built environment, in order to satisfy psychological needs.

Visual privacy is one of the most important aspects of privacy as far as built environment is a concern particularly in the design of houses. It is needed to provide a visual insulation from outside as it allows control of visual exposure and freedom from visual access. Visual exposure is the probability that one's behaviour is seen by sight from one's immediate surroundings. Visual access allows one to look out and to monitor immediate spatial surroundings by sight. In the context of housing providing visual privacy, is needed to control visual exposure of the family members from strangers and allow for freedom of visual access.

Extant literature has indicated the link and relationship between behavior and environment (Wapner, Demick, Yamamoto & Minami, 2000). An appropriate physical setting and behavior influence the definition of privacy and environmental quality as the built environment is a determinant of behavior whereby behavioral adaptation is a spontaneous response to constraints in the environment (Archea, 1977). Altman (1977) posited that the environment is both "a determinant of behavior and as an extension of behavior". Privacy is not an end by itself but is a process of regulation. Successful privacy regulation through both behavioral and environmental mechanisms will provide a comfortable level of visual privacy. The built environment and social behavior, of which privacy is part of, are interdependent and intertwined, where changes in one aspect will have a direct influence on the other. The lack of consideration for privacy in the house design and its attributes may result in less than comfortable level of privacy. However, successful regulation of privacy by means of behavioral and environmental mechanisms within the constraint of the house may still provide a comfortable level of privacy.

## **2. Literature Review**

Visual privacy is pertinent in Islam. The Holy Qu'ran stated very clearly that one's privacy is one's own right and no one should intervene in it without one's permission. The architectural, social, and psychological dimensions of privacy are fundamental to the daily life of the Muslim. Visual privacy influence design attributes of the house such as the specifics of doors, windows and openings, organisation of spaces and positioning of houses in relation to other houses and physical elements such as partitions, walls, blinds, louvres and landscape elements. Provision for visual privacy has always been an important aspect and consideration in the Muslim houses. The need to provide visual privacy to the individual family and community at large resulted in careful location of buildings in relation to one another and the placement of windows as illustrated by Besim (1986). It also influenced the location and specific of the main entrance, the division of spaces into public and private domains and provision of spaces for parents and children of different gender. Visual privacy also influenced architectural design strategies such as the louvre windows, screened panels or mashrabiyyahs, roof terrace, high windows, recessed windows and entrance.

The translation of privacy into the house varies between the cultures that embraced Islam partly due to the strong influence of the culture of origin. This is because privacy is culturally specific (Altman, 1977; Newell, 1994 and Fahey, 1995)). Privacy should be conceived from the perspective of the culture being evaluated. Privacy is not an end by itself but is a process of regulation that changed according to the need and setting. It is a dialectical process that involves the individual's ability to control the permeability of interpersonal boundaries or regulate them (Altman, 1977). Altman also posited that there are two types of privacy regulating mechanisms; behavioural and environmental mechanisms. Behavioural mechanisms include verbal and non-verbal behaviour and are influenced by socio-cultural factors. People in all

cultures engaged in the regulation of social relationship and behavioural mechanisms by which accessibility is controlled and are probably unique to a particular physical, psychological and social circumstance of culture. Successful regulation of privacy is essential in the process of achieving privacy particularly important when the physical environment does not provide the privacy desired.

Translation of visual privacy into the Muslims' houses vary between the cultures partly because Islam gives freedom to the people embracing the religion to maintain aspects of local culture that does not deviate from its principles. Islam did not attempt to undo the local culture. The translation of visual privacy in Muslim houses reflects the need to balance between privacy and other needs such as geography, climate and the local culture of the people such as in the traditional Malay house. However, many authors are in the opinion that privacy was given low priority in the traditional Malay culture as reflected by the openness of the house layout, plentiful windows and minimal bedrooms, among others. This opinion can be challenged as privacy is perceived from the Western perspective which emphasises on individualism and not from the perspective of the Malay culture. Privacy in Malay society is related to the community as compared to individual privacy. The ability to create physical boundaries that exclude others can hardly define privacy in the traditional Malay society as behavioural norms according to the traditional culture played an important role in providing privacy to the Malay family. Privacy in the Malay society existed with different boundary, coverage and realization. The provision of privacy in the traditional house was achieved through the indigenous ways which responded to climate, geography and culture of the people; i.e. the positioning of the house on stilt higher from the ground level, high windows with decorative panels, careful location of doors or internal openings indirectly to each other and arrangement of spaces according to public and private domains (Figure 1). Curtain, screen and partition were used to provide visual privacy in the house.

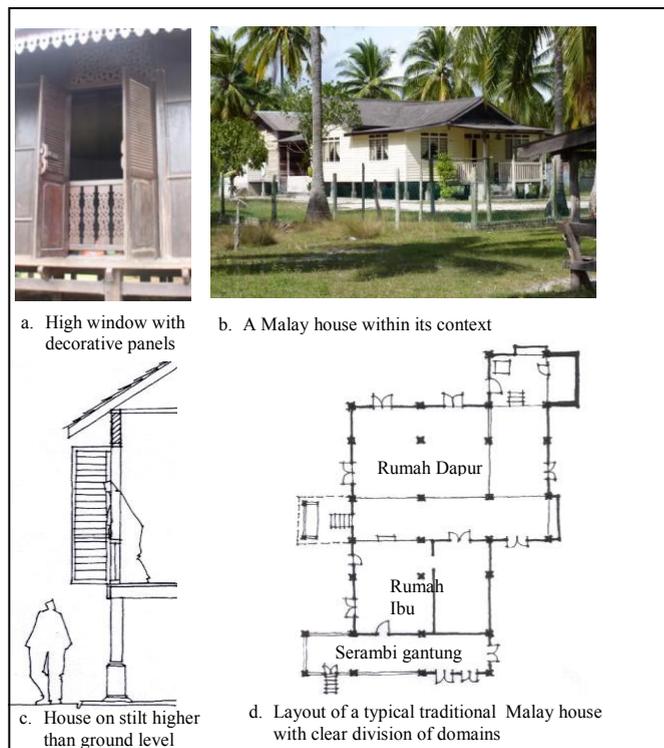


Fig.1. The traditional Malay house

The concept of privacy in the traditional Malay society was based on gender roles, the position of women and separation of genders. Provision and arrangement of spaces according to domains allow the female family members carrying out their daily routines in privacy even in the presence of male guests in the house. Spaces were not defined by a specific purpose but interchangeable. The importance of togetherness as a family compare to individualism means that there was no needs for individual bedrooms for each family members. The Malay custom, values, tradition and etiquette, regulated the behavioural norm in the traditional Malay society. The term 'budibahasa' sum up the kind of proper behaviour an individual should display both in the privacy of family life and in public, i.e. not prying into the private matters of others, not looking into other people's houses, giving salutation and entering the house only after given permission, etc. These behavioural norms alone reflect the importance of visual privacy in the traditional Malay society. Noorul Huda & Anuar (2013) found that religious beliefs cultural norms, way of life, social interaction and behavioural norms of the Malays remain to be important aspects in regulating the privacy in the families. According to Zainal (1995), the behavioural norms in Malay society are much in line with morality in Islamic teachings and to this extent, the Malay customs and Islam are in complete agreement. The observation of proper behaviour acts as an important privacy regulating mechanism in traditional Malay society as compared to physical barriers. Visual privacy is required for concealment of inter-family relationship and preserving the modesty of female family members.

Urban migration in Malaysia in the 1970s has resulted in many Malays migrated to the urban areas and adapted to the new way of life and living environment. Most lived in the terrace housing (Figure 2) which dominated housing in the urban areas, introduced by the British in the 1960s. Within the context of mass housing, the home constitutes a continuous transactional process of establishing oneself within his physical and, most notably, social contexts or settings. However, the originality of terrace housing in its purpose and adoption, from the age of colonialism in young Malaya to its continuing implementation in modern Malaysia remained to be questionable (Salehaton, Erdayu, Hazlina & Anniz Fazli, 2009). Many authors are in the opinion that the design was not based on the local culture. Finding by Ahmad Hariza, Zaiton, Syarifah Nurazizan and Nurizan (2006) indicated the contradiction between cultures and built environment have affected some aspect of the Malay culture. Zaiton and Ahmad Hariza (2012) found that the lack of social and cultural consideration in terms of privacy, activity system and social interaction resulted in behavioural adaptation at least until physical adaptation in the form of housing modification can be afforded. Finding by Erdayu, Esmawee & Masran (2009) indicated territorial expression through personalisation of terrace housing modification not only to express the occupants' self-identity or image, but also has improved privacy and security as well. Addition of bedrooms in terrace houses was found to improve privacy of the family (Erdayu, Esmawee & Masran (2010). Behavioural adaptation and housing modifications of terrace houses became a Malaysian culture; a manifestation of the inconsistency between housing design and culture. A study by Ahmad Hariza et. al (2006) on low cost housing suggested that some aspect of the Malay culture have been changed during the process of adaptation due to the inconsistency between the physical built environment and culture.

The perception of visual privacy and its regulation among the Malays living in the urban areas may change over time due to a change in the way of life and the physical living environment as changes in the built environment influenced changes in culture. The changes may not be consistent with the Malay culture and Islam as an accepted way of life. Constraints imposed by the physical housing environment may cause psychological stress and impinge on one's felt sense of privacy due to the behavioural adaptations that they necessitate, affecting all of those living in it. Based on the discussion presented, the aim of this paper is to examine issues related to visual privacy of the Malay Muslim families in the context of terrace housing in the urban areas, in Malaysia. Specifically the objectives are:

- To examine the perception on visual privacy from the perspective of the Malay culture and Islam
- To examine regulation of visual privacy in terrace houses

- To identify terrace housing design attributes influencing visual privacy

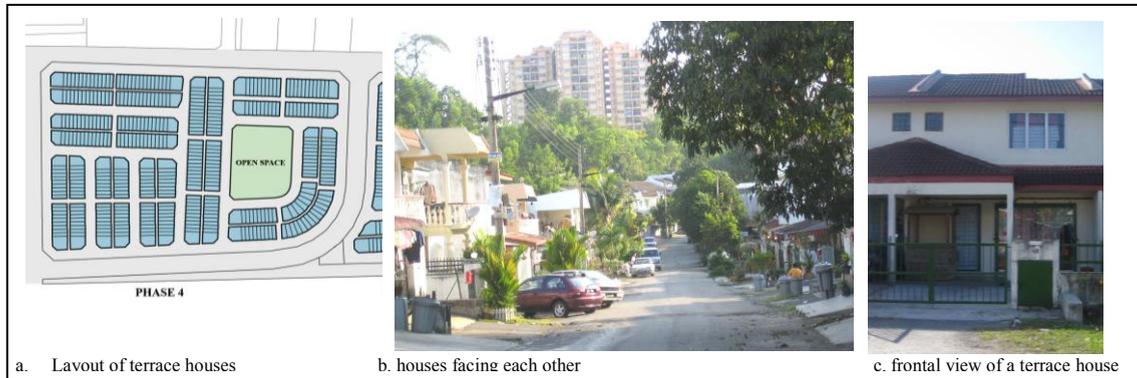


Fig. 2. A typical terrace housing in the urban areas

### 3. Methodology

The study employs survey interview and case study of Malay families living in two locations in the urban area of Klang Valley. The survey interview involves 374 respondents living in two-storey three-bedroom terrace houses. There are 11 case studies in the study that were identified and selected during survey interview phase based on the willingness of the respondents to be interviewed. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to provide more insight into the issues of visual privacy that is not possible to examine through the survey interview alone. The logic of the case study is to demonstrate a causal argument about how general social forces shape and produce results in particular settings. In this study, the case study helps to link privacy at the micro level to the macro level, or large-scale social structures and processes.

The selection of respondents for the case studies was made based on their background gathered from survey interviews such as family size, gender and age of children, family life cycle and housing design that may influence the conception of privacy at home. It is their relevance to the research topic rather than their representative-ness, which determines the ways in which the people to be studied are selected in qualitative research (Flick, 1998). This study uses the second rule proposed by Lonner and Berry (1986), whereby one does the best one can under the circumstances to appropriate sample, which permits the proper execution of the research.

### 4. Findings

The following sections provide the findings on the background of the respondents, conception of visual privacy, its regulation and terrace housing attributes affecting visual privacy.

#### 4.1. Background of respondents

There are 374 respondents in the survey interview and 11 case studies living in different terrace housing designs. Female respondents constitute 59.1% and male respondents constitute 40.9% of the total respondents. The age of the respondents is between 22 years and 70 years old and the average age is 42 years. The average household size is 5.3. The education levels among the respondents are divided almost

equally between those who completed tertiary education (48.7%) and those with high school education (51.3%).

#### 4.2. *Conception of visual privacy*

In the survey interview, visual privacy is measured based on a total of 6 items validated with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.727. Finding indicates that the majority of the respondents (89.6%) feel that the control of visual exposure is important. There is no significant difference for perception on control of visual exposure at  $p = 0.05$  between genders, education, age and family income. Findings show visual privacy is needed mostly for three reasons; to allow for freedom of clothing (78.0%), freedom in activities (74.2%) and control of information in the house (77.6%), consistent with the review of the literature. Result shows a significant difference ( $p$  avoid interaction with strangers and freedom from visual access regulates unwanted interaction. Visual access is also important to allow a sense of visibility of what happened outside the house.

The notion of visual privacy as control of visual exposure and freedom from visual access correspond to the idea of shame and modesty, discomfort and embarrassment in the Malay culture and Islam. In physical terms, visual privacy in Islam is based on the need to preserve modesty and to preserve the inter-family life from strangers, and to conceal information about the family (Besim, 1996). However, visual privacy in Malay culture differs in its boundaries from Islamic perspectives and in some cases not consistent with the religion. The concept of modesty is strongly related to the idea of clothing. What is considered as inappropriate clothing differs between respondents, seen either from the perspective of Islamic or Malay culture. Inappropriate clothing to respondents who observe Islam strictly implies a clothing which did not properly cover oneself as required when public observation is effective, regardless of whether one is inside or outside the house. However, from the perspective of Malay culture, the same term implies that one is in clothing that is not acceptable to be seen by others at public level or something to be worn only in the house.

Control of visual exposure is also associated with the freedom of action, behavioural pattern and activity system for normal functioning of daily activities and to conceal information that indirectly communicates the values and beliefs of the family to others. The idea of shame is not only applicable to how one should wear when seen by others, but also how one sits, sleeps, eat and other acts. Control of visual exposure provides the family the freedom to act and to behave spontaneously without worrying their acts and behaviours are being observed by others. It is also important to control the at private level in the house, in the presence of guests and, therefore observation of the physical condition of the house is effective as only certain information about the family being communicated to others. Visual exposure concerns with the act of looking directly or observing one's house. Findings indicate that visual exposure from a passing car in front of the terrace houses is not a concern to some respondents, but not to those who strictly follow Islamic observance on covering their *aurat* (the part of the body that should not be seen by others based on Islamic principle). Findings also indicate that in the context of housing, visual privacy is mainly needed for three reasons; to allow for freedom of clothing, freedom in activities and control of information about the house. The case studies indicate that visual privacy is particularly important to maintain modesty of the female family members particularly to those who follow strict observance of Islam as a way of life.

#### 4.3. *Regulation of visual privacy*

Visual privacy regulating mechanisms identified from the survey and case studies include physical elements and behavioural norms. Result indicates that curtains, screens and blinds, architectural

components such as doors and window are important visual privacy regulating mechanism. Curtains, screens and blinds are the most important regulating mechanisms for visual privacy identified by 89.5% of the respondents as compared to the closing the window (65.1%) and closing the main door (58.7%). There is no significance difference between genders, age, education or family income in the use of physical mechanisms in regulating visual privacy. Case studies indicate that windows and doors were normally left opened partially to balance between the need for visual privacy and thermal comfort. Respondents who conceptualise visual privacy according to Islamic perspective are more likely to regulate visual privacy by closing the windows and doors. Curtain were found to be an important physical mechanism in providing visual control as it allows the family to see out but not being seen. Landscape elements are not found to be important privacy regulating mechanism among the respondents.

Behavioural norm was an important regulating visual privacy in the traditional Malay society. Some of the behavioural norms appear to be more important in the context of terrace housing in providing privacy to the family and the neighbourhood such as avoiding looking into the neighbour's house particularly when the house faces another unit and as one passes other houses. Findings on behavioural norm and expectation of specific behavioural norm from others provide visual privacy to the family consistent with the traditional Malay culture and Islam. Behavioural norms such as not looking into one's house, appropriate clothing, and limiting visual exposure of oneself in the presence of male guests and consideration for preserving privacy of others within the neighbourhood were observed. However, the idea of 'appropriate clothing' differs between individuals depending on their acceptance of Islam as a way of life.

#### *4.4. Terrace housing design attributes influencing visual privacy*

The characteristic, location and position of windows and doors can hinder or promote privacy (Besim, 1986). The position of windows and doors in terrace houses are located directly facing each other in a mirror image arrangement. The respondents living in terrace houses located directly facing each other are more likely to indicate the position of the main door affects their visual privacy as compare to those who live in units not facing another unit i.e. facing open space, road, playground, etc. However, findings from case studies show that despite its characteristic, majority of the respondents are satisfied with the design and position of doors and windows because these two building elements can be regulated.

The translucent louvre windows which were commonly used in the kitchen, bedrooms (except for main bedroom) and bathrooms in terrace housings were preferred for ventilation and because it can be adjusted to control the view. The position of the kitchen door which directly facing the neighbour's kitchen door is found to affect visual privacy of the family as it allows direct view of the kitchen and other areas of the ground floor. The door is usually left opened or partially opened during cooking. In conclusion, despite its characteristics, the position and location of windows are not seen as a major hindrance of visual privacy as these elements can be regulated. However, the lack of external wall or physical barriers dividing the houses gives rise to potential overlooking into the neighbour's houses.

The external elements in the terrace housing environment are part of the factors influencing the privacy of the family and community at large. Privacy in the house cannot be seen in isolation of the terrace housing environment. Literature review has shown that the proximity of terrace houses, position of windows and doors, walls and external elements such as road, trees and hedges influenced the privacy of individual families. Finding indicates the location and position of terrace houses in relation to external elements contributed to the satisfaction and perception on privacy achieved. Respondents whose terrace houses face open spaces, located higher than their neighbours' houses, faces an open space such as the green area, a road or a playground feel they achieved a higher level of visual privacy as compared to their neighbours living in houses that face other terrace houses.

## 5. Conclusion

Conception of visual privacy is influenced by both the Malay culture and Islam. However, there is some disparity in the conception according to the acceptance and practice of Islam as a way of life, an indication that the culture of origin is still dominant and overrules some aspects of religion in defining visual privacy and its regulation. The different perception on what is ‘appropriate clothing’ which is related to the need for freedom of visual access, suggested the complexity of visual privacy as a concept due to its many influences. Behavioural norms and physical mechanisms are found to be important regulation mechanisms of visual privacy among the Malay Muslim families. Behavioural norms are consistent with the traditional Malay culture and Islam such as not looking into another house and appropriate clothing. Physical elements such as internal and external wall, partition, curtain and blinds are important elements in providing visual privacy to the families. Successful regulation of visual privacy through behavioural norms and physical elements provided the required visual privacy despite the lack of consideration for visual privacy in the terrace house design.

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