

## Modernity and Anthropology: Housing Estate, Media, and Consumption of “Tradition”

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### Introduction:

#### Why anthropologists prefer to investigate vernacular architecture?

This paper begins with a small incident which I came across in the summer of 2010 in Nanjing University.

After finished my anthropological seminar talk about Malaysian housing estate and daily lives of Chinese Malaysian in the housing units, I was somewhat astonished by a casual comment of an undergraduate student who showed his slight disappointment with unexpected modernness and neatness of Malaysian housing I had indicated. He mentioned that “So this is the house of Malaysian Chinese? It was too featureless compared with what I had expected as Malaysian Housing. After all, these houses are not messy nor dirty at all. Rather, it is really neat and modern, but totally featureless. Well, it looks almost same as ours in China!”

I was certainly shocked by his innocent comment; however this experience surely gave me significant questions. Why most people tend to think traditional architectures are academically much worthier object to be studied compared to modern architectures? Why even anthropologists prefer to investigate vernacular architectures?

As seeing or hearing the term such as “Malaysian housing”, I suppose that the questioner may automatically have abstract, but certain images of vernacular architecture in his mind. He might have an image of a tropical small hut in an indigenous village as Malay *kampung*<sup>1</sup>, or indigenous longhouses, unique boathouses and houses on bridges which called *clan jetty*<sup>2</sup>, or a historical building located in the colonial settlements such as Penang, Melaka and Singapore.

Actually, I could understand the disappointment of the questioner. As a student who majors in anthropology, it is natural that he might have an expectation for knowing something totally different from his own culture. Or he might expect to know uniqueness of Malaysian architectures. However, what I indicated was very modern

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<sup>1</sup> Kampung literally means “village” in Malay.

<sup>2</sup> A clan jetty is a fisherman village built on the bridge along Weld Quay of Penang Island since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each jetty is named after surname of the residence as Chew Jetty (周姓橋), Tan jetty (陳姓橋), Yeoh Jetty (葉姓橋) and so on. They worship each jetty’s guardian deity or goddess.

housing environment: rows of modern single and two-storey linked houses on the outskirts of Malaysian towns. This kind of housing estate is ubiquitous in suburban area of Malaysia. Since these landscapes are so ordinary and compatible to any one of suburban housing anywhere in the world, my audience's anthropological curiosity might not have been satisfied with. He might expect to know something indigenous and particular. But then, simple question popped in my mind that what is anthropologically interesting architecture?

I have been writing ethnographies of low-cost housing estates in Malaysia which were planned and constructed under the part of social welfare project of Malaysia. My anthropological interests have been on the relations of dwellers and living environment: a Chinese family who has been living in a housing unit of the estate for over 25 years.

After having achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1957, Malaysia took big steps for being a modern nation-state. Establishing governmentally subsidized low-cost housing estates all over the nation and providing those low-cost housing units for low income families have been a main political project for building a modern harmonious country. Indeed, house ownership became the one of the main objective of the New Economic Policy (NEP) during 1971 to 1990, since urbanization and industrialization of Malaysia had been promoted in order to achieve the status of developed country. Providing an affordable public low-cost housing for satisfying basic need of nation has been one of the most important social objectives called "home-owning democracy" in Malaysia. Therefore, modernization and housing estates have been closely connected in modern Malaysia and it would be quite important for anthropologists to observe how people spend their daily lives in such units and how to be "Malaysians" by living in such government-oriented living environment.

However, strong preference over studying vernacular architectures has been omnipresent among the field of anthropology and ethno-architecture for a long time. There, modern housing estates, high-rising apartments have been considered to be anthropologically worthless subjects to examine, since modern space will not provide any real essence of sense and identity (Fujii and Hatake 2003: 4). In his architectural textbook *Housing Culture of East Asia and Southeast Asia*, Akira Fujii, a Japanese scholar of ethno-architecture declares that "studying vernacular architectures means restoration of our deprived original sense" (ibid 4). He insists that because our original sense has been in crisis due to rapidly expanding universal space, we need to reinvestigate traditional houses to restore our original sense and identity.

Most scholars see vernacular architecture as suitable subjects to inquire everyday lives of ordinary people and see modern housing environment as an unworthy inhuman space. Then they criticize the modernity itself that has brought uniformity into the heterogeneous world and deplore intolerable disappearance of

vernacular houses and indigenous culture. Now that modernity and uniformity seem to be social enemy for anthropologists.

Indeed, modernization seems to penetrate into every corner of the society. Rapid boom of constructing prefabricated houses and high-rising apartments makes landscapes of cities quite conventional and tasteless. This phenomenon is something human geographers named as “placelessness” of the place (Relph 1976; Lee 2004). Indeed, we are no longer living in the heterogeneous environment, but we are living in an era of unification; bringing both norms and forms into a common frame to produce a healthy, efficient, and productive social order (Rabinow 1989: 11). High pressure of unification, simplification, legibility, straight lines, and central management penetrates into old cities (Scott 1998: 59). In the end, modern landscape, rows of modern houses are so ubiquitous in Malaysia and as well as in China.

However, still most of ethno-architects and anthropologists have consistently tried to focus on “vernacular architecture” as their research subjects. What makes them so persistent? Here comes the very simple research question; why do anthropologists still stick to vernacular architectures culture? In the presentation of the workshop, with this question in mind, I reconsidered the problem of modernity and anthropology by illustrating my projects: housing estates, obituary advertisements in newspapers, and imported “traditional” coffee culture in Malaysia. However, in this paper I will limit my focus on the issue of housing estate in order to consider modernity and anthropology.

### **Discussion of Place and Space**

In his paper discussing the residential neighborhood quality of urban Chinese communities in Malaysia, human geographer Lee Boon Thong wrote:

Geographically the spatial concentration of population would ordinarily provide increased opportunities for the formation of socially-coherent communities, as opposed to communities that are widely dispersed. The question is whether, as the Chinese community moves into the cities, there is a greater sense of “placeness” in their neighborhoods than in their places of origin (Lee 2004: 127).

Lee focuses on Chinese Malaysian’s emotional attachment to a particular place by using the terms “placeness” and “placelessness”, and phenomenological concepts of space and place (Relph 1976; Tuan 1974, 1977). He emphasizes repeatedly in his paper that placeness may be defined in terms of “belonging” to a residential neighborhood that demands reciprocity of identity in terms of behavioral or interactive response. The problem of housing and emotional attachment of place is closely interconnected and always the main topic for human geography and anthropology.

At the same time, place is rather a problem in anthropological discussion, because even though place is too often used as key term of many anthropological studies, the meaning of place seems to go without saying enough (Rodman 2003[1992]). In this section, I would like to briefly review the location of place and space in contemporary anthropological theory.

Margaret Rodman, a social anthropologist of researching the idea of place in Vanuatu had summarized the location of place. She points out that place in anthropological writing have been equated with ethnographic locales. They were just space as dead and fixed. Then, place became the settings, albeit often exotic ones, where things happened. However, insufficient attention has been paid to conceptualizing place in anthropology as something other than a physical setting or a passive target for primordial sentiments of attachment (Rodman 2003[1992]: 204). Rodman's attitude towards place is rather political conjunction with "multilocality and multivocality" borrowing Nancy Munn's concepts<sup>3</sup>. Her discussion neatly guides us to the complex reality of the place; however she seems to avoid making clear-cut distinction between place and space. Then, what is the difference between two?

In the course of exploring the ethnography of modern housing estates, I adopt the terminology prevalent among human geographers, phenomenological philosophers and anthropologists concerned with the notion of place and space (e.g. Casey 1993, 1996; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977 etc.). Of those literatures, I especially follow Edward Casey's discussion of the "Place-World".

Casey reminds us that to be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place, by quoting James Gibson's famous phrase: "we do not live in 'space'" but instead, *we live in places* (Casey 1993: xiii). It is obvious that compared to place which is regarded with particularity and as a source of the emotional attachment, space has rather been conceptualized as abstract, "thereby requiring concrete and localized expression, as well as being the general condition and source of universals in human experience" (Strathern 2002: 90). Marilyn Strathern declares that "we thus arrive at the naturalistic view of space as the prior background against which we are invited to see individual places 'in' it", however, space is a priori within places (ibid 90-92).

A significant feature of Casey's discussion of place is putting devastating priority on place, but not on space and time. Rodman herself also mentions time-space relations concerning to space by referring David Harvey, a Marxist urban geographer<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In Munn's article, space is only a frame for the action and place is taken more seriously as a setting allowing formation of experience (Munn 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Rodman quotes Harvey's following lines "The priority given to time over space is not in itself misplaced. Indeed, it mirrors the evolution of social practices in important ways. What is missing, however, is an appreciation of the practices that underlie the priority. Only in such a light can we understand those situations in which location, place, and spatiality reassert themselves as seemingly powerful and autonomous forces in human affairs. And such situations are legion (Harvey 1989: 175)" in her paper (Rodman

However, her perspective is not on differentiating the meaning of place and space.

Casey further notes that we are in place because we are in our bodies. This concreteness is phenomenological prior, and “space and time are contained in places rather than places in them” (Casey 1996: 44). Casey’s perspective has been consistent with championing the importance and priority of the place. This perspective is significant in his work, *Getting Back into Place*:

On my interpretation—as ancient as the Pythagoreans and as contemporary as postmodernism—the priority belongs to Place, not to Mind. Place comes first: before Space and Time (those fellow travelers of Mind) and before Mind and Body (the other regnant modern pair). Yet the priority of place is neither logical nor metaphysical. It is descriptive and phenomenological. It is felt: felt bodily first of all. For we feel the presence of places by and in our bodies even more than we see or think or recollect them. Places are not so much the direct objects of sight or thought or recollection as what we feel *with* and *around*, *under* and *above*, *before* and *behind* our lived bodies. (1996: 313).

To summarize Casey’s view on place: place is phenomenological and ontological, and characterized by emphasizing on human body. There is no being except being in place. “To be a sentient bodily being at all is to be place-bound, bound to *be* in a place, bounded and bound therein” (ibid 313). As Casey insists lived body is the principal locator agent of implacement. As quotation above clearly shows that “while Kant situated the a priori of human experience squarely in the mind”, Casey has attempted to relocate it resolutely in the body, especially when place is on the agenda—and place is always on the agenda at the first level of human experience (ibid 110). Now it is clear that Casey’s perspective is high-lightening human body which lets us experience the place.

Deferring to this Casey’s in-depth discussion of the phenomenological relations of body and place, I would argue the process of place making practices of Chinese Malaysian lived body and lives with empirical data in following part of this paper. Main focus will be set on the modern housing environment of suburban Malaysia, housing estates called *taman*<sup>5</sup>. In the course of the discussion, after an examination of the brief history of modern housing estates and socio-cultural situation of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic nation, I would indicate that a housing unit as an open space becomes a particular place with historicity and sense of belonging, full of intimacy.

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2003[1992]: 207).

<sup>5</sup> *Taman* literally means “park” in Malay.

### Modernity, State and Housing Policy

My starting point of specific discussion is sketching a brief history of “home as a battlefield<sup>6</sup>” in order to illuminate the gap between ideals of city planners and social reformers, and social realities of inhabitants, especially of a working class.

In his paper about urbanity and lives of ordinary people in France in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Japanese historian of European architectures, Takao Nakano (2010) presents four types of social actor affecting on housing and residential space.

1. Social thinkers who produce ideology of housing,
2. Professionals who embody ideology as housing form,
3. Inhabitants who dwell, and
4. Nation-states or political bodies which construct institutions about housing and exercise housing policies.

In this section, by following Nakano’s first, second and fourth classification of social actor of housing above mentioned, I am going to sketch the transitional process of housing ideology and form in modern history. Particularly, in the first part I am going to deal with the episodes of Western thinkers, social reformers and professionals of housing matter to figure out what was the problem considered to be cured and to be reformed. Then, in the latter part of this section, I am dealt with welfare-based Malaysian housing policy as a social actor. Malaysian housing policy will be discussed as an actor of introducing *rationality* and *modernity* into pre-industrializing Malaysia<sup>7</sup>.

### Hygiene and Scientific Notions of Domestic Order

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as European cities such as Paris and London had confronted with serious problem; how to evade the fear of cholera epidemic, public health was a big issue of the time. Also in British colonial settlements, keeping good environment and hygiene was the priority for the colonial administrations. The search for new explanations of pathology was literally forced on the administration. This is quite “a beginning of an invigorated, ‘modern’ set of welfare practices” (Rabinow 1989:31).

Thus, human bodies were going to be controlled within the administrative domain, and problem of health condition was to be considered with city planning. After 1874, Health Office was found for the purpose of controlling public health of the

<sup>6</sup> I owe this term to Orvar Löfgren. Löfgren wrote as “home became a cultural battlefield ..., an arena where different value systems and different cultural priorities crashed” (Löfgren 2003[1984]: 155).

<sup>7</sup> Nakano’s third classification of social actor: inhabitants will be discussed in the next section in detail.

population in Kuala Lumpur, Sanitary Board which found in 1890s was not only succeeded Health Office's main role of keeping public health of colonial settlements, but also undertaken roles of constructing cities, such as repairing and establishing roads, canals, bridges, markets, and buildings. Even though its title was Health Office, it deeply concerned with city planning. In 1913, Committee of City Planning was organized in Kuala Lumpur and the New Zealand urbanist Charles Compton Reade was hired as Town Planner for city planning of British Malaya.

In British colonial settlements, ideologies such as "keeping reasonable senses as Puritans", "keeping public hygiene" and "keeping faith in family life" were highly cherished norms as in English suburban societies. Of those ideologies, hygiene was always highly emphasized by the colonial administrators. In the course of bringing clean environment into "disorganized" colonial settlements, slum and over-populated urban condition was the main problem to be cured immediately. In the report of the housing committee of Singapore published in 1947, outline of problem was clearly stated.

Singapore, as the inevitable focal point of South-East Asia, has always tended to grow in population faster than in accommodation for its population. For many years, however the resultant over-crowding was not intensive, as a majority of the inhabitants were immigrants who did not bring their womenfolk with them. In pre-war years however, not only was there an increase from immigration as a result of trade prosperity resulting principally from the development of the rubber and tin industries in Malaya...There was then not only a steadily increasing demand for accommodation for individuals, but an increased need, much harder to satisfy for homes for families instead of rooms or cubicles for single persons.

[as Slum Conditions]... cubicles cut off from direct light and air which are completely dark at mid-day, a tuberculosis death rate of about 235 per 100,000 in 1947 as compared with a rate in London 63 per 100,000 in 1946. About one sixth of the deaths in Singapore are due to tuberculosis and one third to diseases of the chest. We have no figures of the numbers living in dark and unventilated cubicles but inspection shows that they are undoubtedly very large (Government of Singapore 1947: 1).

As seen in the report, the more immigrant labors from British India and Southern China came to sustain colonial economy system by engaging labors in tin mines and rubber plantations, the more difficult to solve the housing problems due to absolute lack of accommodation. Absolute lack of accommodations and high death rate

of tuberculosis caused by over-crowded residential conditions was regarded as two-side of same problem. Then, the solution was providing healthy residential condition with enough space, air and sunlight.

### **Housing Policy in Malaysia after Independence**

After independence from British colonial rule in 1957, government of Malaysia had strived to industrialize nation by relocating “economically inferior” Malays into cities such as Kuala Lumpur. In the colonial times, British administrators had arranged labors of Tamils and Chinese in tin mines and rubber plantations. Those plantations were mainly located in the central area of peninsula Malaysia, therefore after independence; Chinese could have benefitted from urbanization and easily taken off economically, compared to Malays who had been forced to engage in rice farming in northeastern area of peninsula by colonial government. In this way, relocating village populations into urban centers in order to achieve industrialization was the centerpiece of the national policy after independence in Malaysia.

House ownership became part of the objective of the New Economic Policy (NEP) during 1971 to 1990 since urbanization and industrialization had been promoted and to providing an affordable public low-cost housing satisfying basic need of citizens has been one of the most important social objective called “home-owning democracy” (Mohd Razali Agus 1997: 30).

Since 1981, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government has introduced and implemented a concept of low-cost housing with following characteristics:

- ✓ Selling price: not exceeding RM25,000<sup>8</sup> per unit;
- ✓ Target groups: households with a monthly income not exceeding RM750;
- ✓ House types: flats, single-storey terrace or detached houses; and
- ✓ Minimum design: standard built-up area of 550-600 square feet, two bedrooms, living room, a kitchen and a bathroom-cum-toilet (ibid 39).

Low cost housing is defined as houses sold only at a price not exceeding RM 25,000. This ceiling set in 1982 has been a contentious issue for developers and consumers alike because the cost of construction of the low cost houses is typically higher than its selling price. It is obvious that the policy expects some form of cross-subsidy.

Buyers of the low cost units must have a combined household income not exceeding RM750 (RMB1616) per month. About 60% of urban households in Malaysia in 1980 fell within this income group (Ghani and Lee 1997: 24).

<sup>8</sup> According to the exchange rate of 20 May 2011, 1 Renminbi (RMB) equals to 0.463 Ringgit Malaysia (RM). According to the exchange rate of 12 Oct 2011, 1 RM equals to 24.73 Yen (JPY). RM25,000 is about to RMB53,888 and about to JPY 618,250.

The policy specifies that each low cost housing must have a minimum built-up area of 550 to 600 sq ft comprising 2 bedrooms, a living-room, a kitchen and a bathroom. The house may be of any type including flats, terrace or even detached houses. Generally, developers have to opt for high density developments (such as flats or cluster houses) in order to achieve economies of scale or to reduce the amount of land used for the low cost component (ibid 26).

It is obvious that a housing unit of *taman* is a politically-oriented universal space for citizens of Malaysia. Here, we should pay attention to the fact that this residential space is designed to be totally detached from multi-cultural/ethnic backgrounds of Malaysian citizens. And this is a political attempt to produce *Bangsa Malaysia*, Malaysian Nation to build a harmonious society.

Next section, I will sketch a particular life of Chinese Malaysian family in Low Cost Housing estates.

### **Ethnography of Everyday lives of Modern Housing Estates**

In this section I would like to unfold the brief description of everyday practices of Chinese Malaysian in a modern housing environment. My ethnographic material has been presented elsewhere but in this paper I would concentrate on exploring following these two aspects: 1) relation of life cycle and renovation of the house, and 2) an emerging social order and bringing historicity and continuity in the house. Firstly I am going to sketch the outline of the field site, then moving on the detailed descriptions.

### **The Outline of the Field Site**

This study is mainly based on a 15-month-long fieldwork during December 2004 to March 2006 and additional a week to one month long fieldworks in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011 respectively for further investigations.

My field site, a small township located in the northern part of the Malaysian state of Johor, pseudonymously referred to as *Tawar* in this paper, has approximately 35,000 residences. *Tawar* is a typical community on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, which is characterized by a comparatively large Chinese Malaysian population<sup>9</sup>. While Malays prefer to have spacious housing with their private orchards and farm fields in the outskirts of *Tawar kampung*, Chinese populations prefer to inhabit around the administrative center and expanding suburban residential area. While the foundation of the central residential area called "*Kampung Baru*" (New village) traces back to the 1940s; expanding housing estates have appeared since the

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<sup>9</sup> By comparison, in the state of Johor, Malay (Bumiputera) make up 57.1%, Chinese Malaysians make up 35.4%, and Indian Malaysians make up 6.9% of the total population (DSM 2000), Tawar's Chinese Malaysian population is approximately 56.5% (Sin Chew Jit Poh, March 3, 2008).

1980s mirroring housing policy in the 1980s.

*Taman Tawar Jaya*, my field site is the one of the oldest housing estates in the area. As shown below, *Taman Tawar Jaya* consists of several zone characterized by three cost strata: the low cost housing areas (LCH), the medium cost housing areas (MCH), the high cost housing areas (HCH). Two lanes (Jalan A and Jalan B) are main area of my research.

Jalan A<sup>10</sup> is composed of two lanes of single-storey housing (Jalan A-1) and two-storey housing (Jalan A-2). On the other hand, Jalan B is composed of two lanes of single-storey housing (Jalan B-1 and Jalan B-2). Each lane consists of 29 to 31 residential units. After some years, some units were linked for adjacent unit for remodeling and home improvement. Thus house number and unit number is not discord with each other.

**Table 1: Housing Number of Jalan A and B in 2009**

	Unit Number	House Number	Empty Unit
Jalan A-1 Lane of Two-storey House	29	28	2
Jalan A-2 Lane of Single-storey House	30	28	1
Jalan B-1 Lane of Single-storey House	31	31	2
Jalan B-2 Lane of Single-storey House	31	30	2

In February 2009, original unit number of Jalan A is 59 and number of house was 56 and empty unit was 3. Also original unit number of Jalan B is 62 and number of house was 61 and empty unit was 4 (see Table 1 above).

As indicated previous section, housing units of estates are simple structure and not intended to accord with each inhabitant's taste and style. Housing unit, especially low cost housing unit is designed to be fit for lives of anyone. Provided with the least facilities, purchasers are expected to install extra facilities and apply remodeling conversions by themselves. The house of *Tan*, where I have been doing my participating observation has also been in the long process of remodeling and changes.

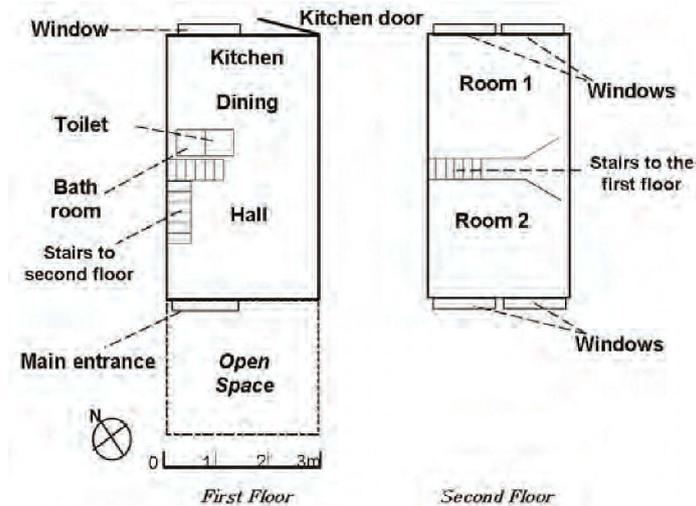
### **A Story of the *Tans Family* and the House**

The householder of the house of *Tan*, a father of three children in his 60s was the third generation of immigrant from Fujian, China. His wife was the fourth generation of Fujian immigrant. Their ancestors came from same village in Yong Chun of Fujian to Peninsular Malaysia in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The father had worked as a tapper in rubber plantation in Melaka and changed his job to a lorry driver and moved to *Tawar*, wife's hometown. After having their first daughter in 1971, a son in

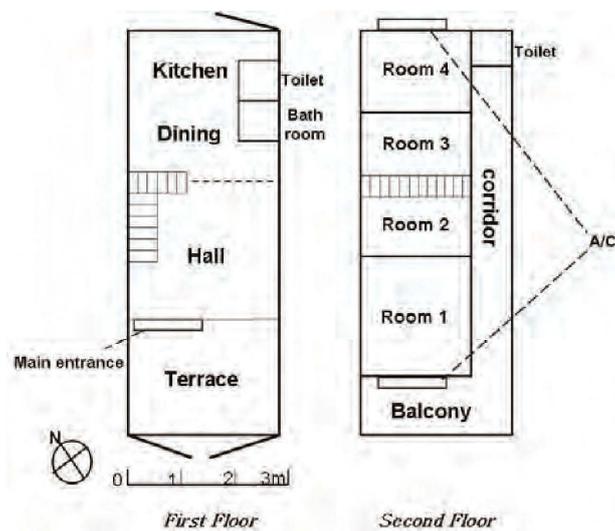
<sup>10</sup> *Jalan* means street in Malay.

1975 and the second daughter in 1979, the couple bought a unit of *Taman Tawar Jaya* at RM 22,000 (RMB 47,422) in 1986.

After finished his schooling in 1993, the eldest son moved to Singapore to gain well paid job. He has sent his earning to his father every month. And father had saved remittance from his son to renovate their house. The renovation had been taken place in 1997. Their primary condition of the house (see figure 1) had been renovated as figure 2 shown below.



**Figure 1: Floor Plan of Primary Phase in 1986**

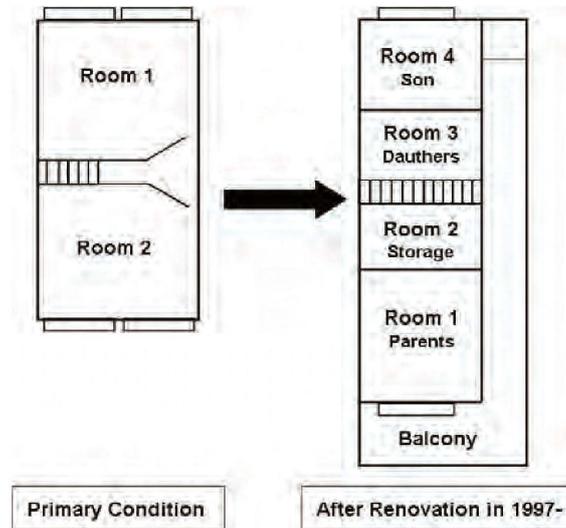


**Figure 2: New Floor Plan of Renovated House in 1997**

The renovation of the house in 1997 was summarized as follows:

1. *Open Space* (see figure 1) of the first floor was transformed as a terrace (see figure 2)
2. Expanding floor space of the second floor and increasing room number from 2 to 4
  - Room 1: the largest room of the house for the parents with air-con
  - Room 4: the second largest room of the house for son with air-con

- Room 2: storage without windows
- Room 3: same size as Room 2 and room for the second daughter



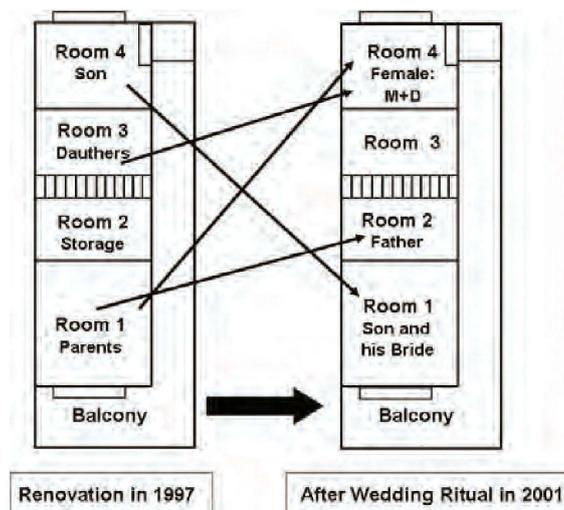
**Figure 3: The Change of the Room Usage after Renovation**

Before renovation in 1997, each room was not given any specific function or not connected to any member of the house. Previous Room 1 and Room 2 were used freely by family members. When children were small, they could use either room to sleep. Any room could be used by anybody. However, after renovation, rooms of the house were differentiated by size. Furthermore, each room was given a specific meaning, and relations of each room reflect relationship of the family member. The best, largest room was reserved for parents and the second best was always reserved for the eldest son who has been working in Singapore and away from home, a successor of the house.

The renovation of 1997 made the fact that the eldest son's role as a successor of the house and confirmed the relationship of the family member.

In 2001, the eldest son and his girl friend had their traditional wedding rituals in *Tawar*. Though they already got legally married in 1999, their relationship was not considered to be official. Even they were legally admitted husband and wife, the wife was not allowed to enter into second floor of the groom's house. She was not officially prohibited to enter; however, she always hesitated to go upstairs by herself and stayed in the first floor. This is all because this relationship of husband and wife was not the official relationship admitted by the house. In order to be official couple, they needed to practice traditional wedding ritual in the house.

After finished wedding rituals at hall of the house, a bride is officially welcomed to the house and she happily and naturally went up to the second floor where couple's new room and her new place of belonging is located.



*Figure 4: The Change of the Room Usage after Wedding Ritual in 2001*

As seen in Figure 4, changes of the life cycle have brought structural change into the house. Emerging new relationship of the family shapes the structure and form of the house. And most important norm of the house is “do not enter young couple’s new room without their permission”. New social order of the family is clearly experienced and recognized by human body, not violating the norm. In this way, body itself promotes crystallizing new relationship of the family and making particular place for family.

### **Conclusion**

In this short paper, I consider the possibility of anthropology of modern housing estates. Modern space had been disregarded as anthropological subject for a long time. However, as discussed above, modern space neglected by anthropologist will be experienced by human body each day and an accumulation of everyday lives made open space into particular place, intimate living world for family.

A case family, pseudonymously referred as *Tan* in this paper, bought a unit for RM 22,000 in 1986. Subsequently: (1) In 1997, they rebuilt the house by extending second floor to make additional two rooms and adding up a terrace in front of their house, correspondent with the eldest son’s emigration to work in Singapore (sojourned in Johor Bahru). (2) In 2001, parents offered their bedroom to exchange (the biggest and the best room in the house) with son’s room (the second room in the house) for him and his newly wife, consequently new hierarchy of its members based on the usage of rooms were co-recognized among members of the house and renewed relationships between the house and its members, correspondent with the eldest son’s performing of traditional wedding ritual in the house.

In my ethnography of low cost housing estate, at the first phase of living, house was quite an open space. Each unit shows cookie-cuttered simple uniformity. This simplicity and uniformity of the house is a reasonable solution for multiethnic

nation-state since each unit is designed to accept anyone, as Malays, Indians or Chinese. However, tasteless ordinary space will be experienced and lived by individuals and the unit would be a unique place for each family.

Houses are much more than static structures. Indeed they are not just physical structures for members to live in, but dynamic entities in the process of expanding, growing, shrinking and dying all along with members of the houses. By showing a detailed case study of multiple relationships of the family and the house, this paper discusses how the eldest son's economic independence and marriage are interrelated with renovations of the house and how those factors change the usage of the rooms, in order to maintain the house. The house, which has experienced the change of relationships, declares who is a successor of the house. It is to be concluded that the patrilineal descent ideology is not a single factor to affect behavior of members to organize the house as a social structure, but rather the flexible daily experience and practices of members do affect generating the entity of the house. The Body is the key element of locating person in certain place, and making the place certain.

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