

Privacy from Islamic Perspective: Comparison Between the Traditional and Modern Malay House in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The dwelling or housing is part of the basic needs of human life. In Islam, the name of a place as a residency house has its importance. Housing design has evolved dramatically and gradually because of mass manufacturing, technical improvement, and human thoughts, which has resulted in a new interpretation and meaning of privacy among humans. Three main issues were identified which are (1) lack of understanding of the meaning of privacy from the Islamic perspective, (2) indefinite determination of building elements and attributes affecting the privacy of a home, and (3) deficiency of privacy application from traditional to modern house context particularly the terraced house. This research aims to explore the notion of privacy from the Islamic perspective regarding the needs and implementation within the traditional and modern Malay home spatial layout established in Malaysia: traditional Malay houses and modern houses particularly the terraced house. The research is conducted through desk review involving in-depth review of literature and document analysis that correspond to an observation and cross-case synthesis of the two layouts. The findings revealed that Malays prefer to regulate their privacy through flexible attributes anchored in behavioural mechanism of religious and cultural standards, hence providing a certain degree of visual privacy, which is gradually absent in the modern housing context. In conclusion, these attributes may help to revolutionise modern terraced housing layouts in compliance with privacy values that are deemed necessary to negate neighbourhood discomfort and enhance well-being amongst the residents.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian housing has evolved dramatically from Malay traditional house which has been slowly faded (Rashid & Hanafi, 2018) to modern house since the late 1960s, when mass housing in the form of terraced houses, influenced by British housing design and typology. Considering the lower income group's issue also encouraged government to concentrate in providing a better housing design (Soffian et al., 2018) (Zainon et al., 2017). This scenario influenced the current modern housing design in Malaysia that responds to the social and multi-cultural aspects (Ju & Omar, 2010). The home preferences and style are also influenced by the people's mindsets and behaviours that are evolving towards modernity (Farasa & Kusuma, 2018; Khalifah et al., 2015; Malik & Mujahid, 2016). A traditional house is defined as a timber house raised on stilts while a modern house is a house using new materials such as bricks and has several types of houses such as landed houses (bungalow, terraced, etc) and non-landed houses (apartments, condominiums, etc). According to Samra (2017), Malay community treats a house as a pride that provides a specific value to the owner.

The main purpose of a house is to protect from natural factors such as weather and climate, as well as a place to find peace and relaxation of mind, body, and soul. According to Yusuf Al Qaradawi, an Islamic researcher, the definition of a house is a place where each person can shield himself from climatic discomforts while still feeling free and calm about the outside world. In Islam's perspective, a house is defined as the greatest place to enjoy quiet, retreat from the outside world, as a kind of education for the occupants, expressing, resting, happiness, and developing family relationships (Omer, 2010). Rahim (2008) also defined that a house is a place for us to feel comfortable and to worship Allah as well as to propagate the message of Islam. The definition or function of the house is also derived from Quranic texts, such as, 'It is Allah who made your habitations homes of rest and quiet' (Qur'an, Surah An-Nahl 16:80). In terms of housing development, it could be classified as a good development when housing takes place on the physical aspects of design and sensitive to the human needs. Unfortunately, the existing modern housing design in Malaysia has failed to fulfil the needs of the occupants and some of the designs are influenced by Western architectural design (Misnat et al., 2018). One of the human needs' elements other than relevant modern facilities that could enhance the living environment of homes is privacy. As a crucial element in housing design, privacy is a boundary among individuals that influences interaction activities (Manesh & Latifian, 2015). Therefore, the concept of privacy in homes is important. Mass housing has affected some of the privacy aspects that are needed in a home.

This paper aims to explore the notion of privacy from the Islamic perspective concerning the needs and implementation within the traditional and modern Malay home spatial layout. The specific objectives are as follows:

- (i) To understand the meaning of privacy in general, Malay's and Islamic's perspective.
- (ii) To investigate the building elements and attributes that affect the privacy of a home.
- (iii) To determine the aspects and influence of privacy context in Islamic perspectives on
- (iv) traditional housing and modern houses, particularly the terraced house

PRIVACY, CULTURAL DIMENSION AND SPATIAL CONTEXT IN ISLAM

Privacy in General Perspective View

From a Western interpretation (Hall, 1959), privacy is defined as the ability to have control over one's own space. Other than that, according to (Newell, 1995), privacy is a form of being temporarily separated from the public domain. Privacy has also been defined by (Margulis, 2003) As a delineation between an individual, their surroundings, and an external party. Individual privacy is less important in Eastern cultures than it is in Western cultures, as Eastern culture prioritises the privacy of the family as a unit over individual privacy (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009). Privacy can be defined as an interpersonal relationship that encompasses the porosity of both one's own and others' borders. Define privacy in the context of housing spatial layout, it can be done by marking boundaries or establishing territory. It is the most practical mechanism used in achieving an adequate level of privacy, in comparison to behaviour mechanisms. As emphasised by Zaiton and Ahmad Hariza (2012), most housing renters employed behavioural regulation techniques to enhance their family's privacy and security prior to being able to afford physical improvements to their residences. Behavioural regulation methods or mechanisms such as avoiding direct visual corridors, respecting neighbours by not prying, and seeking permission before entering one's land are used to regulate privacy (Manaf and Rahim, 2021). Other than that, two main elements in a private situation needed to be considered: solidarity and no existence of disturbance. Additionally, in a study by Manaf (2019), an equilibrium between shielding against visual exposure and allowing visual access is required. In fact, such modification related to privacy emphasis motivational act towards spatial layout transformations which resulted to different functional and occupancy related objectives (Obeidat et al., 2022). Note that, apart from spatial context, there are several design considerations involved in privacy such as visibility control (visual privacy), noise transmission (acoustic privacy) (Mortada, 2011), and odour control (olfactory privacy) (Sobh and Belk, 2011; Sobh et al., 2013). Nevertheless, as users' intervention is concern, there seems to be a lack of information in literature regarding the precise methods and strategies employed in standard dwelling spatial layouts to attain privacy. Although literature extensively explores the notion of privacy in various contexts, such as interpersonal connections and cultural disparities, it lacks investigation on the specific implementation and management of privacy within the modern realm of mass housing.

PRIVACY IN MALAY PERSPECTIVE VIEW

Privacy is a universal desire, yet the mechanisms that regulate it differ depending on the culture (Altman, 1975; 1977). A finding by Ahmad Hariza et al., (2009) stated that privacy was not of high importance in traditional Malay society as compared to community intimacy. Moreover, the Malay society's privacy demands are linked to its beliefs, values, and conventions, which are substantially reinforced by Islamic family regulations and are, to a considerable extent, coterminous with their traditions (Zainal, 1995). The statement was supported by Hashim and Rahim (2010), who found out that privacy can be linked to local cultural norms and religious beliefs. Other than that, behavioural norms are one of the key privacy regulating strategies in Malay society. '*Budi*' (etiquette) and '*bahasa*' (language) are the guiding principles that govern the conduct inside the tightly knit traditional Malay community. The term '*budi bahasa*' refers to the kind of proper behaviour that should be displayed both in the privacy of one's own home and in public, such as not prying into other people's private matters, saluting, and asking permission before entering other people's homes, not looking into other people's houses, and the rules on clothing and interaction. The community benefits indirectly from the observance of recognised behavioural norms. The ideas closely align with Islamic teachings on morality, establishing a complete concord between Malay culture and Islam (Zainal, 1995). The idea of optimal visual privacy is crucial since it involves protecting family life and female family members from intrusive gazes while yet promoting close familial and communal bonds. The primary foundation of this notion or concept is Islamic teachings, with Malay culture as a complementing element (Ahmad Hariza et al., 2009). Nonetheless, there is a lack of comprehension of the interconnectedness of these elements and the way they impact the current situation. The literature

recognises the significance of privacy in Malay society and its correlation with cultural and religious beliefs. However, there is a lack of investigation into how these processes intersect with modernity, globalisation, and urbanisation.

Privacy in Islamic Perspective View

According to Ata (1994), in Islam, a residential property must satisfy three primary criteria.; safety (*al-amn*), privacy (*al-khususiyah*) and health (*al-sihhah*). Privacy or *al-khususiyah* is extremely essential in Islam. It is part of a firm principle of Islamic law that is link to three connection elements: man's relationship with Allah, a man with a man, man with nature (Musa et. al., 2021). According to al-Jundiyy (1993), *al-khususiyah* refers to safeguarding one's personal and familial privacy against unwanted intrusion or harassment by those outside of their consent. It is also associated with the notion of '*awrah*' in Islam, which denotes something disgraceful that is both prohibited to display and forbidden to observe (Musa et. al., 2021). Moreover, the right to privacy is considered one of the most precious freedoms, including a wide range of rights, and is highly esteemed in Islam. In Islamic teachings, privacy is not just a matter of personal taste, but a fundamental right that is firmly rooted in the ethical and moral principles of the faith. In Islam, protecting one's privacy at home is essential for maintaining a peaceful and effective family system (Omer, 2010). In the research by Mortada (2003) asserts that it is essential for Muslim families to carefully assess the purpose and layout of their homes, with a particular focus on ensuring the separation of genders, the isolation of females, and the protection of individual privacy. The notion of optimal visual privacy is crucial since it involves protecting family life and female family members from intrusive gazes while yet promoting close familial and communal bonds. Those characteristics and components in the house making Islamic and modern homes have differences and contradict to each other (Bakri, 2021).

Based on the Islamic guide for housing development, the housing should include two main areas; '*bayt*' and '*maskan*'. '*Bayt*', which word are taken from '*ba-ta, yabitu baytan*', means a place for overnight. While '*maskan*' means a peace area. The word is taken from '*sakan yaskhununusakinah*' showing peacefulness (Musa et al., 2021). Other than that, there are four basic layers of privacy (Bahamman, 1987; Mortada, 2011), that can relate to Islamic guideline and perspectives, which are as follows:

- (i) Privacy between neighbors' dwellings – (change to neighborly privacy)
- (ii) Privacy between males and females – (change to gender-based privacy)
- (iii) Privacy between family members inside a home (can change to Intrafamilial privacy within a household)
- (iv) Individual privacy (can change to – personal privacy)

Character of Islamic Privacy in Home Spatial Layout

The key features that have been highlighted in terms of the characteristics of Islamic privacy are as follows:

Design and Structure

The design and structure of a dwelling also help in defining in terms of representing boundary and territory. Physical and conceptual boundaries have been purposefully constructed by humans to highlight how spaces are separated and linked. A person needs to fulfil the requirement to obtain permission before entering the house. The goal is to avoid any uncomfortable situations, such as observing unpleasantness among the occupants of the house (Musa et.al, 2021). Omer (2010) and Mortada (2003) suggested that the visible privacy of a dwelling can be controlled by four design elements: the entrance door, windows,

openings, and screen height. The conceptual boundaries design is usually interpreted in wall or other physical separator design and the design depends on the user's choice. According to Leach (1976), individuals use spatial and temporal boundaries to highlight the differences between various forms of space. Each culture's use of space is influenced by various factors. The space is separated into rooms, each of which is used for different purposes by various people. External parties are not permitted to expand or intrude beyond the personal area unless specifically requested (Hussayn, 1997, Qur'an; Surah An-Nur 24:27-28). The initial design's insensitivity lacks giving enough privacy led to established standards that contradicted Islamic doctrine (Manaf et al., 2021). Following that, the current construction of a house should not infringe against the privacy norms that have been established for traditional dwelling houses. (Rasdi, 2007). It is critical to have a clear division of space at home (Musa et.al, 2021) particularly when it comes to the modern open-plan concept of today's housing design (Bakri, 2021).

Spaces placement in Home Spatial Layout

The traditional Malay house, influenced by Islamic principles, places significant emphasis on the delineation between public and private areas (Rahim, 2008). Any mentioned spaces need to be separated, especially spaces allocated for daily activities, it needs to be hidden from the neighbour's eye. Public spaces have long been thought of as places where most social activities take place (living areas), and where social integration is facilitated by unrestricted visible, aural, and physical access. The public areas are normally located in the front. It is primarily male-dominated and is characterised by the lack of women. The public spaces are also known as the places where non-mahram guests, such as neighbours, relatives, and friends, are welcomed and entertained (Mortada, 2003). Musa et. al, (2021) suggested, to preserve the dignity and integrity of other family members, it is necessary to establish a physical division between the living room and the family room. Meanwhile, private spaces were more divided based on gender (such as bedrooms being considered feminine domains) and offered greater levels of seclusion, secrecy, concealment, and isolation from public scrutiny. This created limitations in terms of visual, auditory, and physical accessibility. The private space is an area specially created for a family member and female without interference by the non-mahram guests while the living room (family room), kitchen, and bedroom are the most common female spaces. These three locations should be set aside for them, hidden from non-mahram visitors (Mortada, 2003). Females, on the other hand, are frequently linked with private space (Mernissi, 1987; Esposito, 1991; AlMunajjed, 1997).

Usage of Physical Separator

The usage of physical separators in a home is to achieve two main components which are defined as the visual and acoustic privacy as stated by (Rahim, 2008). Physical separator design that acts and functions as a barrier such as walls, floors, roofs, and curtains. The materials used are universal; usually, walls and floors are wood, brick, reinforced concrete beams, and slabs. While for the roof, it could be zinc or metal deck. Textile or fabric materials are usually used for curtains. Other than that, there is also a physical separator for outdoor elements, such as gates, boundary wall, tree and wedges (Manaf, 2009). The usage of outdoor physical separators has discouraged interaction between neighbours, different from the tight community relationship of the traditional Malay villages (Farah, 2010).

Number of Rooms

Based on (Mubarak, 2002), it is indicated that the minimum number of bedrooms in a house should be three, which is the parents' room, boys' room, and girls' room. It is included in the requirements of the number of toilets or bathrooms, which should follow the number of rooms provided in the house. The separation of bedrooms is important as a form of training and as an early education for the children (al-Zuhayli, 1991). It will help them to learn about gender segregation and bed separation from their siblings and parents. This strategy also protected the privacy of occupants as Islam prioritised women's *awrah*

(Rahim, 2008). The idea of bed separation will occur when there is a physically separated area or space in the house (Musa et.al, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Aiming to analyse the compliance of privacy in specific layouts, the research methodology is based on desk review involving literature review and document analysis which correspond to an observation and cross-case synthesis between traditional and typical modern Malay house layouts. In detail, this research applied a literature review to decode and classify the privacy aspects embedded within the Malay and Islamic contexts. These aspects of privacy are later observed through the selected housing type to understand its application and fulfilment. It is vital to note that the selected type only represents a similar culture (in this context Malay culture) and can demonstrate different characteristics through the occupancy period, construction, material, daily routine, and special ritual. From our study, these parameters of housing type selection allow for a better indication of privacy physically and spiritually.

The traditional Malay house (Fig. 1) shows a different spatial hierarchy from the ‘Anjung’ or porch, Serambi’ or living, Rumah Ibu’ or main house, Selang’ or a transition area, and ‘Dapur’ or kitchen at the rear end. Although there are multiple variations of a traditional type, this layout is the most common, which is found throughout Peninsular Malaysia. For the modern context, we choose to study the terraced house (Fig. 2), as this is another common example occupied by the Malays in the urban area. The selected house represents an intermediate double-story unit, with a set of living, dining, and kitchen at ground level and bedrooms with additional family areas on the first floor. Each of the units is equipped with a two-car porch at the entrance with a small backyard abutting the kitchen.

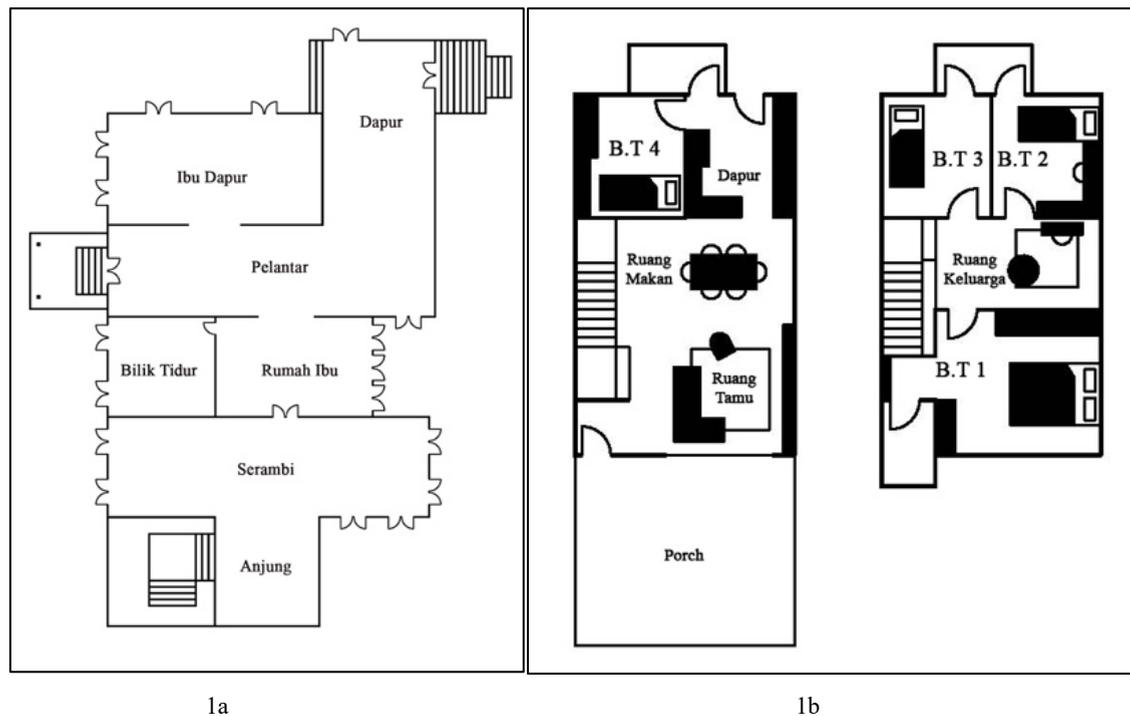


Fig. 1. (1a) demonstrate Traditional Long-Roofed Malay House, Source: Hariza et al., (2009); (1b) show typical modern terraced house in Puncak Alam, Selangor

Source: Kholid et al., (2021)

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

In the area of housing, it is necessary to ensure visible and physical privacy to protect the intimacy of family life and keep it hidden from external individuals and unfamiliar people. To maintain privacy for family members during social interaction, bedrooms for parents and children of various genders must be provided, as well as the organisation of areas with a significant separation between areas designated for public use and those intended for private use. Meanwhile, spaces are organised to give convenience while also considering other cultural factors such as privacy, separation, and social contact, as well as the position of women in the home, as women require more seclusion than males. As a result, the factors are considered while designing the space organisation and the overall shape of the house as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cross-Case Synthesis between Traditional Malay House and Modern Malay House Context

Type	Traditional Malay House	Modern Malay House (Terraced House)	
Socio-Religious Requirement	(1) Gender Segregation	The zoning of places involves the separation of men and women, with a visitor zone designated as the public domain, predominantly occupied by males, and a family zone designated as the private domain, typically associated with females.	Public space (living area) is connected directly with private space (kitchen), making the separation not indicated in the modern home spatial layout.
	(2) Visual Privacy	The threshold from 'Anjung' or porch is in an offset position which limits direct visual and gives more privacy to the occupants. All thresholds are separated based on gender domain.	The exposed porch and parking area primarily hinder visual privacy; people from the outside can directly see the occupants of the house. The position of the main entrance is directly exposed to the front porch.
Multipurpose Spatial Program	(1) Hierarchy of spaces	Spaces that are not designated or customised for a specific use can be utilised for a multitude of purposes during various periods of the day and year. It can also be an area for resting (open shared bedroom for occupants' families).	Balcony area – as a drying area for washing and opening for ventilation to homes. Usually designed to be exposed towards the road; strangers or public people can directly see the activity of the occupants in the house.
	(2) Provision of Services Area	Back of house remains enclosed from public view.	Identified and classified; each space in the house has a specified function. Due to the limited and small design of homes, the spaces can't easily be converted into another space for another usage.
Physical Segregation & Territory	(1) Number of rooms	Separate sleeping rooms for male and female family members and for parents, as well as for everyday fundamental activities	Well-distributed room for controlling privacy. Consisting of three bedrooms (upstairs) for the parent and children (male and female area). There is a ground-level room for visitors.
	(2) Provision of Services Area	The bath and restrooms are located apart from the main residence; usually located outside and at the back of the house.	The bathroom and toilet are incorporated into the overall design of the residence. The ensuite bathroom is provided for the master bedroom (main bedroom), but not for the other bedroom. The toilet and bathroom placement are located whether merging with the other bedroom (shared bathroom that is accessed from each bedroom easily) or located individually (not specifically for the bedroom's occupant usage). This strategy is used to control 'awrah' of the occupants.

(3) Transition Zone	Other spaces serve as a link between the main house and the kitchen. Each of the transition zones represents a different gender domain. It gives different connotations of semi-public and semi-private space.	No specific transition zone. However, there is a provision for a family area as an informal gathering space on the first floor. The living area remains an entertaining space for guests. The front porch acts as a semi-public area.
(4) Physical Separator	Used of the curtain, wooden handrail (special detail attached to the window) and ornaments to control privacy. All windows are divided into solid wood panel, with inner wooden grill layer for ventilation.	All spaces (at ground floor) are open. The use of curtains, internal sliding door or additional wall are well used to create more privacy. Huge upper floor window (at Master Bedroom) is covered with aluminium louvres to secure privacy.

Source: Authors (2024)

DISCUSSION

The modern Malay terraced home layout has undergone significant modifications to align with the global standard housing plans. However, the typical terraced plan should consider the elements applied in the traditional house to achieve privacy as to the Islamic approach outlined by Hariza et al. (2009). This is because the components and elements that are prescribed for traditional dwellings adhere to the Islamic worldview, as they ensure the privacy and isolation of the occupants. In line with the findings discussed by Manaf et al. (2021), it is evident that most of the residents' privacy in modern Malay houses, particularly terraced houses, has been compromised by the changing of location, types of spaces, and programs in the layout itself; as an example, the combination of private and public space particularly in the integration of living, dining, and kitchen area at ground floor (Fig. 1b). Interestingly, despite privacy deficiency, the notion of 'compromise' propagates into an integrated spatial organisation that is capable of transforming the notion of "no one bothering me" into a "management of social interaction" (Ioannidis, 2005) regards as 'budi bahasa' (Hashim & Rahim, 2010), hence a new conception of 'Islamic integrated privacy'. If one notices, the temporality of traditional house elements is crucial for such an act, which has been rendered in the new modular housing typology but not in the terraced house. As such, flexibility arguably allowed for temporal behavioural mechanisms, which enhanced better privacy than any enclosed and fixed attribute spaces.

It is recommended that the layout of the modern Malay terraced house be flexibly adapted to Islamic principles. The spatial planning in the dwelling should be able to divide and integrate spaces according to the public, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces suggested by Obeidat et al. (2022). Note that the semi-public-private zone, represented by the transitional area, should be emphasised as this is the obscure privacy zone in which boundaries are adjusted. As such, consideration needs to be taken on the four main elements of design as physical separators (Rahim, 2008) that can temporarily control the visual privacy of the dwelling, which involves the entrance door, windows, opening and screen elements either inside or outside the house. Note that, as conveyed by Mortada (2003), the aim is predominantly to be hidden from non-mahram sight. Thus, as flexibility is concerned, opening design elements and main doors could be designed indirectly from the neighbouring view. Meanwhile, window elements should be built away from eye level, indicating the unique range of size and height depending on the exposure and viewing axis to maintain internal privacy. Furthermore, the reduction of transmission voices of female households can be addressed by utilising walls, floors, and roofs of high-quality materials and construction methods, including thickness factors. Moreover, the ensuite bathroom must always be a choice of preference for a decent 'awrah control.

This study primarily depends on a literature review and comparative analysis of current layouts concerning traditional and modern Malay houses. However, it may not encompass the complete range of viewpoints and experiences associated with privacy in dwelling design. Further study initiatives may explore the Islamic comprehension of privacy in greater detail, encompassing meticulous examination of pertinent Quranic passages and Hadiths that provide a more refined comprehension of privacy principles in housing construction. Moreover, future improvements should investigate feasible methods of incorporating these conventional mechanisms into contemporary dwelling designs, namely terraced buildings, to guarantee the preservation of privacy values in the face of urbanisation and modernisation. Future research initiatives could also explore the societal and psychological effects of housing designs prioritising privacy. This could include examining how such designs impact community unity, neighbourly interactions, and well-being. By gathering empirical data, these investigations can provide evidence to support the inclusion of privacy considerations in urban planning and housing policies.

CONCLUSION

The study found that modern housing architecture had a more significant impact on the Malay family's privacy at the public level than at the private level. Although the architecture of openings affects visual privacy, the capacity to apply temporal physical features and the behavioural mechanism has potentially secured better privacy. The layout of spaces, which ignores the requirement to clearly distinguish public and private zoning, particularly the semi-domain zoning, had caused discomfort to the residents. In this context, housing modification should emphasise flexibility in its layout as a means of privacy regulation, which is adaptive to any specific situation, just like the traditional Malay house. This phenomenon justified that a new modern design could be reinvented out of the typical terraced configuration, which conforms to the Islamic privacy practice and the Malay notion of 'budi bahasa'.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Introduction and conceptualisation, A.F.M.F., M.F., M.H.M.Z.; methodology, A.F.M.K and M.F.; investigation, A.F.M.K. and M.F.; data curation, A.F.M.K., M.F., M.H.M.Z., N.H.M., and M.Z.A.R.; writing—original draft preparation, A.F.M.K., M.F., M.H.M.Z; writing—review and editing, M.F., M.H.M.Z., N.H.M., and M.Z.A.R.; supervision, M.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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