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INTRODUCTION

Based on a research study conducted from 2008 to 2011, the least popular design approach undertaken by final year students of the Bachelor of Architecture (LAM Part II) Course at the University of Malaya’s School of Architecture (UM) is Community Architecture or Architecture for the Community.

Even so, every year a few students would be interested in the Community Architecture design approach, which concerns either a small urban district, urban village, or a village-on or next to a waterbody or large urban area. This study necessitates the gathering of social scientific data to be analyzed and interpreted in order to develop an architectural programme for a design thesis project.

One crucial aspect of this approach embraces the need to organize and propose an ‘alternative master-planning or site-planning’ effort, as the area studied would often reveal a lot of issues and problems to be solved. Thus, the designer would need to embark on a cultural mapping of activities and do essential studies based on ethnography methods, such as observation and interviews.

The primary data collected is obtained early in the design process, to determine the location and scope of the problematic areas for intervention.

COMMUNITY ARCHITECTURE AT UM SCHOOL

Community Architecture is more commonly known to be about housing co-operatives based on real-life projects, where the designers would be involved in working to help disadvantaged communities. For example, as quoted from the Asian Community Architects Meeting 2010 held in Thailand, “...the idea is to form a network of architects to support each other and to create a big new space for professionals/architects/planners to work with and provide support for urban poor communities”. Architecture for Humanity, an increasingly popular global endeavour, reveals on its website that, “…a network of more than 40,000 professionals are willing to lend time and expertise to help those who would not otherwise be able to afford their services, thus we bring design, construction and development services where they are most critically needed.” Community Architecture may explore issues on self-help housing, master planning, or even just re-organising the village programmes and addressing needs such as the use of recycling and re-using of existing resources.

Design thesis projects at UM, although currently not based on real-life projects, do however aspire to the ideals of designing for disadvantaged communities. The graduate seeks interesting opportunities involving hands-on projects, designing and building together in groups, and in making some sort of contribution to society. Some issues addressed are alleviating poverty and providing access to water, sanitation, power and essential services; safe shelters in disaster areas; rebuilding communities; creating spaces for elderly and disabled persons; and reducing the footprint of the built environment and addressing climate change (Architecture for Humanity, 2012).

UM has constituted on Sustainability Science as its strength for many years, and is seen as a catalyst for all its future actions, reflected at all levels of the school’s teaching and research programmes. The final year design thesis project is expected to reflect the highest point of Sustainability Science’s collective teaching and learning in the design studios. However, there are views that Community Architecture should not be explored in a

Diagram 1

Diagram 2

design thesis, and that the design thesis should always be about the building type, may it be a museum, institutional, educational or any other easily recognizable building types which has a more predictable design process. Conventional schools focus solely on building types, and develop issues concerning the immediate site planning and those driven from the building type itself. This contrasting views should be regarded as healthy debate, as the design thesis programme at UN needs to continue to be given space and time for ‘experimentation’.
COMMUNITY ARCHITECTURE: INTERPRETED AT UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

"Throughout history, meeting other people has been the most important function and attraction of the city, and the city space has had a central role as a meeting place." - Jan Gehl

Community Architecture is concerned with the understanding of how people behave in context. Therefore, some small scale research is required to be done in real-life settings so that 'real data' is used to start the re-planning of the area studied. The research data, when interpreted, should show a mapping of activities, photographed and documented by using the observation and interview techniques more commonly found in the discipline of Social Sciences.

Ethnography: This data will guide the designer to determine what is needed to be solved for the community. Resultingly, a master plan or site plan is proposed by the student towards establishing an architectural programme and technical layout. The 'clients' are mainly the users, who live and work in the area. This 'bottom-up' approach results in a community-based intervention, although the student must also know about the government's or private developers' plan for the area. The student would still be required to determine the site or sites for intervention, to be proposed from the large area studied, and in our course, schematised and developed to detailed design and special studies stage, like the design thesis projects.

The Community Architecture approach, like other design thesis approaches (Building Type, Sustainability Science and issue-driven Projects) at UM (see Diagrams 1 and 2), show that every design thesis project ultimately deals with a building type, as the school curriculum demands that the 'build-ability' aspects must always be addressed. Understandably, the school's emphasis is on the courses' learning outcomes that satisfy that the design thesis project must illustrate build-ability, functionality, and site planning and design complexity at a higher learning taxonomy level.

The Community Architecture approach requires total commitment, and to stick true to the research protocol, while investing time and available resources in order to follow the design thesis programme to ensure good progress. UM follows a set programme where external critics are invited to give opinions and all design thesis projects must be presented accordingly to the schedule. Where their fellow students may have a concept and scheme done at the same stage, the Community Architecture student project may still be struggling to determine the area of intervention, if they are behind schedule.

The studio master's approach and collaboration is therefore essential to help the student stay focused. The exact scope of the project or in other words, the 'architecture' to be developed, is difficult to predict in the early stages. Constant discussion will help the student stay true to the evidence and closer to the real problems of the site. Other design thesis approaches can be steered to the designers preferred ending, but that is not possible with a Community Architecture approach. With the limitations imposed by the school and the expectations in terms of evaluation, the student's challenge is to complete a project that comes closest to the real world problem. External critics, depending on their interest, are often not that interested in such thesis projects, where form takes a 'back-seat' to contextual issues. This reflects on the importance of internal group critique sessions such as 'studio pin-up' where a committee of studio masters and experts would be of great help.

Another aspect to take into consideration is that the Community Architecture design approach straddles between Sustainability Science and Social Science, where imperatively the designer needs to provide an analysis of the users and activities conducted in that area and what spaces a community needs. For example, a safe refuge from fire and smoke, as in the case of a water village built without planning, regulation, or a proper drainage system and 'public street' for the case of fishing villages that were built without public streets in mind. Diagram 2 reflects on the relationship between Community Architecture and the other approaches. Many Community Architecture projects deal with sustainable design, in terms of economic viability, environmental sustainability, and social equity to provide for balanced and sustainable development.

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PROJECT I: KAMPUNG BARU AIR PANAS COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

A project entitled "Kampung Baru Air Panas Community Intervention" was undertaken by Cheryl Quan Hui Teng during the academic calendar year 2009-2010 design thesis course. This project was based on the issues of the Kampung Baru (New Villages) that were built during the Emergency Period of British Malaya in the 1920s, after the Briggs Plan. The villages were planned and built with basic amenities although education, health services and homes with water and electricity were provided.

Kampung Baru Air Panas was home to four generations of mainly ethnic Chinese people since its establishment. After researching about the village, Cheryl presented several core social and cultural issues which are:

1. A lack of social and cultural public facilities at the community were given only basic physical structures to accommodate their community needs such as the standard design of a wet market and a community centre.
2. A lack of sensitivity to the identity and needs of the community as arguably, each new villagers possess their own significant characteristics. When compared to the people in Kampung Baru Jelutong, for example, the people in Kampung Baru Air Panas differ in terms of social structure and needs.
3. A lack of integration in terms of planning where spatial segregation of ethnic communities prevailed.

PROGRAMME AND CONTEXT

In Cheryl’s report, she stated that the thesis is a community oriented project, as opposed to the authorities more commercial oriented society development. The study includes the social, cultural and religious practices in the community. Similar to other Asian cities, Kuala Lumpur is one of the cities that experienced rapid urbanisation and economic growth. This has led to the influx of migrants, who are mostly from rural areas to the urban centre, putting pressure on the government to provide land development and infrastructure for a growing population. Most planning and development are concentrated on housing, industry, commerce, institution and urban infrastructure, with less concern on the community. Basic social amenities for the community may be provided, but do not respond to the social context. As a result, society changes their way of living according to the provided spaces, which slowly segregate the social bond in communities.

UM had never experienced before an architectural design thesis in Community Architecture as what Cheryl proposed. In the beginning, including much of the first semester, we were concerned that the student would not get a proper thesis topic based on a building type. We knew her thesis had to do with master planning, but were in a dilemma as to guiding her, as there must be a building type designed at the end. The student, recounting the early days of the project, said, "I don’t know if I should focus on the smaller scale or the big picture. I was not sure… and you (the lecturer) were not sure either."

The student knowingly focused on the relationship between community and context, which she believed to be the only way to get a satisfactorily completed Community Architecture project. "I have to know the cultural aspects of the people. Only after that would I know how to do the building. I must know the ins and outs," said Cheryl, and, "…this is because when I read about other community projects, I don’t really know the place, and as such I am unsure if the architect has done justice or got it totally wrong. So I spent about two months at the site, and got into some routine there. These site visits were crucial for her to unravel the essence of the intervention required. Cheryl further contended that contextual design is the heart of Community Architecture, by stating that, "When I started to focus on the people first before the programme, only then did I know that I had hit the right approach. Community is all about people." This underlines the fundamentals of designing for a community, which starts from the understanding people before the physical context.

Existing programme

CONCEPT, IDEAS AND PROCESS

The design thesis journey, from establishing the "Thesis Idea" into 'architectural design', is often a long drawn out process for students taking the Community Architecture approach. After all, architects are not social programmers. For her project thesis, Cheryl felt that the external critics were far removed from the project by recalling, "During the interim crit, I could tell that the critics did not really know Kampung Baru Air Panas. So, I had to scry the comments I felt was right." The studio master on her part, kept engaging and supporting the student by encouraging her to continue 'designing' to consistently 'force' cut the idea.

Cheryl was inspired by the context of subjects, artefacts and features of the village to aid her exploration on the aesthetics, as she was encouraged to just draw out whatever ideas that she thought best. There were several ideas that were discussed for example, an arts gallery and a mah-jong centre, but none hit

*Architecture for Humanity (accessed July 2012), Website: http://architectureforhumanity.org/about
the mark. Several reminders were made to her to summarise the project whenever possible, as the process could have gone out of control without it. The design breakthrough came late in the first semester when one of the critics remarked to Cheryl that the architecture in her thesis did not have to do everything. He further stated that a 'spare' was needed, upon which everything would change and flow accordingly. This advice proved prophetic. Slowly the germ of an idea emerged – to create a Town Square. The diagram for the architectural programme is essential (as shown in illustrations) and admitted the same critic also made comments that lead her to decide better on what to do when it came to the scale and scope of the community intervention and where the idea could start, "... from the wet market or the green field or the shop houses at the Kepitam row". Then Cheryl decided to start the intervention where the people were, and where there were concentrated activities.

The resulting town square is not only a social space, but a place for festivals, events, speeches and ceremonies. It contributes to people's attachment to their locality and opportunities for mixing with others; that is the place that enables exchange of ideas, friendship, goods and skills. Cheryl devised a conceptual framework based on the needs of the people, focusing on social and cultural practices and putting it logically near the wet market where,"... the people went about with their routines", and reflected again that "... what's interesting in the New Village is the daily routines". The design would change the community's interaction pattern and able to repair the impaired society structure. In this manner, the community bond is strengthened through their daily and ceremonial routines.

PROJECT 2: PULAU KETAM RIVERSIDE REVITALISATION

Pulau Ketam (Crab Island) is famous for its seafood restaurants and the fact that it has no cars on the island. 80% of the population speaks the Chinese dialect of Hokkien, and most are either fishermen or related to the fishing industry. Nurhayati Nordin from the 2010-2011 design thesis cohort had been attracted to a newspaper article on Pulau Ketam, and decided to base her project on the island, even though she does not speak nor understand a word of the Hokkien dialect.

As stated by Nurhayati, Pulau Ketam’s physical environment consists of houses built on stilts, pedestrianised pathways and bridges, with bicycles being the main means of transportation. The riverside area had become isolated due to the problem of undesirable and dumping of rubbish, thus the main social and commercial activities are concentrated in the downtown area. The main function of the river is to allow the fishermen to dock their boats at the jetty and as observed, there were also activities related to fishing along the riverside. The focus of Nurhayati’s thesis was to provide solutions to the poor condition of the river’s edge, which had become an eyesore and sanitation problem during low tides. The resulting design solution was to create a better environment and a balanced development on how the river can properly serve the community when revitalised.

PROGRAMME AND CONTEXT

While Nurhayati emphasised on the necessity of interviewing the local population early in the design thesis process, she wished that she had done the interviews with the help of an interpreter. She did manage to stay at Pulau Ketam for a night, but on hindsight proved to be insufficient to get more comprehensive observations and interviews. In hindsight, Nurhayati realised that a Community Architecture project leaves you no time to waste, as several detailed design aspects were needed, such as a proper roof design that follows a constrained budget or a proper toilet design.

As mentioned, Nurhayati first interviewed people she met without an interpreter. Her first semester master plan was based more towards the tourists' needs as Pulau Ketam is an attractive

\(^{1}\)Diagram 1 - The Relationship between Building Type, Issue-driven and Sustainability Sciences projects (Author - Nadzli Mohd. Yasmin, 2012)

\(^{2}\)Diagram 2 - The Relationship between Community Architecture (Under Social Sciences discipline) with the other design thesis approaches (Under Sustainability, Sciences discipline) (Author - Nadzli Mohd. Yasmin, 2012)
place for tourism and there were issues concerning tourism. She interviewed the Malay-speaking policeman, a teacher and the Head of the Village, who is an ethnic Chinese but could communicate with her in Malay. However, it became evident very quickly that in order to get a better and truer picture of the island, the Hokkien-speaking villagers would need to be spoken to.

It may be obvious to a casual observer, but many students of Architecture are not trained on how to interview and observe in the Social Science Ethnography discipline. Case studies in architectural schools were taught to be more on descriptive observations rather than to follow a guided structure when on a site visit or fieldwork study. A few weeks later, Nurhayati visited the site again with a Hokkien-speaking interpreter, where Nurhayati stated that, "For the first time, I managed to see the community’s character revealed at the site. They practised recycling for example, using a canvas as roof, recycled plastic bottles to collect the rain water, and recycled tables as a sun shading device". The second visit with the interpreter revealed so much more as she was able to gain better ideas on how the intervention should be approached.

Nurhayati also realised that the riverside had been inaccessible as the villagers tend to use the street and not the river which was badly maintained and full of rubbish. "I noticed that the riverside fishing activity had been isolated. Hence, the riverside and the street area have no connection between them…as the river is only there for the fisherman to dock their boats, and to load and unload their cargo. The street activities were also based on the fishing products including the commercial activities such as businesses, restaurants, and a wet market."

After this second visit, Nurhayati knew the direction that she had to take, including to reorganise the street activities to the riverside to create a sense of community, thus bringing back the sense of place for the island’s populace.

Collaboration with the studio masters on what to focus on is critical, as often the students get swallowed by the scale of the problems. For Community Architecture, the details are very important to develop, and the attention on the exact area to be developed is vital. The designer focused on developing both sides of the river, where the main components of the master plan resulted in the re-planning of small communal areas, joined together along the new proposed boardwalk, where she also proposed the use of recycling materials plus further proposals on how to clean up the river beds (as shown in the illustrations).

CONCEPT, IDEAS AND PROCESS
Nurhayati felt that the specialty of her project is the boardwalk design, where she stated that "I proposed the use of recycling materials, creating a self-help project to continue maintaining their environment, which they can build themselves without any architect or designer to help them." The designer conceived a design to revitalise the riverside and create a natural centre and activity nodes by introducing the new social and educational programmes such as a library and a recycling centre, and focusing on new social and educational programmes such as using recycled materials and rainwater harvesting. If deemed worthwhile by the villagers, the new programs will help to promote awareness among the settlement and at the same time, will strengthen the community bonds between the young and older folks.

The revitalising master plan (along the riverside and downtown area) is to create a sense of unity to the area by creating a covered walkway along the main street and riverside, building a shelf system, redesigning the first bridge, forming communal pocket spaces, platforms, adding a second bridge, and street furniture. The riverside is linked to the downtown area by the first bridge. Most of the proposed community areas are created around the first bridge as it has the potential to become a main node that accommodates various kinds of community activities, thus creating

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a village 'centre'. The detailed design of the river's edge in terms of material and construction focused on using recycled materials and a rainwater harvesting system. Nurhayati concluded that, the architectural and technical design of the first bridge connecting to the two nodes (at the centre of the village), and the interpretation of translating the vernacular in a modern way (aesthetic aspects) for the buildings was her special study as well.

CONCLUSION

Two important findings derived from the Community Architecture experience by students of architecture consists of: (1) experience of doing a very precise method to design following a set protocol; and (2) design intervention at a 'community-scale' level which involves a lot of detailed design of components.

Students who choose the Community Architecture approach felt it was a fulfilling exercise as a design thesis project, albeit one that they could have done better in hindsight. That is to be expected, because such design thesis projects are as close as possible to embarking on 'real projects'. Therefore, to design purely based on community needs is almost impossible, unless the student is involved with the real-world project meetings with the community for briefing and debriefing. This would take too much time and impede on the design process expected in the studio pin-ups and external critique.

The second finding is best illustrated as follows. As stated in her report, Cheryl stressed about the traditional meeting places in a community, which are basically the wet markets, streets or coffee shops. This is in contrast to the general approach to development, which is to provide new, bigger and cleaner public spaces, but at the cost of dramatically downgrading the importance of traditional public spaces. She further emphasised that the changes in the provided public spaces have influenced society's interaction. Thus, the purpose of her thesis, like many other Community Architecture thesis, is to restore the 'community scale' of these public spaces.

In conclusion, the types of project in an architectural school can be as diverse as the type of research done anywhere. Some researchers prefer a more experimental project done in a laboratory setting (similar to simulated study using computer software), and some researchers prefer to explore human activities in their contextual setting. The latter describes how similar Community Architecture is with the Ethnography research discipline. Therefore, projects done under the approach of Sustainability Science in the studio started out to be more experimental than the approach of Community Architecture projects, which are more embedded in real life. The latter requires the student to conduct a field-work type of research usually in the form of observation and interviews as mentioned earlier.

Every creative process should include the quest for an original solution. Evidence and facts garnered from a study of a group of people will result in more knowledge about them in certain context. From the evidence, you can then propose the needs and requirements that are needed to address the facts, which may include identified problems. This can take the form of a physical need to provide a bridge from one part of the river to the other to solve the problem of access, or to create a need for better social interaction amongst the villagers by creating new communal spaces. The proposition came directly from the study, but the complexity comes from the comprehensive study of the place, its people, events, activities, surroundings, context and even ecology.

Community Architecture facilitates a process that is so logical and pure, thus it is so very necessary to do this approach. We see that a community has many problems in terms of the physical environment and surely, a thesis dealing with this very complex set of problems is at the design thesis level and more. Having three years to reflect, we see a pattern of how, if a student who is unsure, or has doubts with this approach, and may even start with these doubts in his or her mind. These doubts will eventually resolve to just focus on a site or building type thereafter. Only a capable student is able to handle this approach. If a student for some reason refuses to study about the people who live and work in the community, and then come up with a lack of studies in terms of place and social context, then it will not work. It would be best for this student to follow the normal design process, is not Community Architecture.

*The Design Thesis Course consists of Special Semester (7 weeks), First Semester (14 weeks) and Second Semester (14 weeks) in an academic calendar year.

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