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The Meaning of Home and Its Implications on Alternative Tenures: A Malaysian Perspective

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ABSTRACT The discourse on the meaning of home is largely centred on the Western experiences and perspectives, producing insights into the economic and psycho-social aspects of home, with less attention on the Eastern context. This paper explores the emotive meaning of home from the perspective of Malaysia, a nation of homeowners. Gurney's view of home as an emotional "warehouse" framed this inquiry, supporting the notion of feelings associated with the dwelling being created, deposited and drawn by its occupants. This paper represents part of a larger housing study into an alternative housing tenure for Malaysia that argues that the sense of home can be independent of housing tenure. This paper reports the meaning of home as derived from 10 diarists who have been actively involved in creating the "home" and were therefore capable to describe the process of emotional appropriation of their lived space. Findings suggested that the process of assigning meaning to home was dependent on diarists' feelings, perceptions, attachments and relations regarding their lived space. Diarists mainly associated their emotive construction of home with family-centred activities and space, which took place in both the micro-sense (within the dwelling) and the macro-sense (the neighbourhood).

KEY WORDS: Home, Meaning, Home-ownership, Alternative tenures, Qualitative methodology

Introduction

Home is an elusive concept; attempts to make sense of the relationship between the dwelling space and its occupants often conclude that the physical needs to be considered alongside the social, psychological and emotive aspects of the dwelling place. As mentioned by Forrest (2003), the housing literature has had the tendency for a strong bias towards Europe and North America and underreport housing studies in Asia, particularly South and East Asia. There are obvious differences in context in
terms of Western countries now having solved the issue of basic housing provision, whereas most “Eastern” economies still strive towards housing their people (Forrest 2003). Nonetheless, the social transformation in Asian countries brought upon by education, travel and the Internet has impacted people’s construction of home meaning.

A significant body of literature on the meaning of home has emerged from the Western perspective (see, for instance, Blunt and Dowling 2006; Easthope 2004, 2014; Hiscock et al. 2001; Imrie 2004; Newton 2008; Smith 2008; Steward 2000); yet, there is sparse amount of work that could inform on the “Eastern” sense of home. This study aims to enhance the understanding of the meaning of home from a Malaysian perspective, focusing on the emotional dimension in the appropriation of lived space. From the onset, this paper rejects the notion of a universal explanation of behaviours, attitudes, values and identities associated with home. This paper also observes that most explanations on the meaning of home have come from Western contexts and lacked an “Eastern” viewpoint.

So far, most Malaysian housing studies have concentrated on the economic and physical aspects of dwellings, in terms of its affordability (see, for instance, Wan Abd Aziz, Hanif, and Ahmad 2008), occupant satisfaction (for instance Abdul Karim 2008; Hashim et al. 2006; Teck-Hong 2012) and supply (for instance, Hannah et al. 1989; Malpezzi and Mayo 1997; Wan Abd Aziz and Hanif 2005; Yahaya 1989). Less is known about the construction of the meaning of home among urban Malaysians. This study enables an insight into the conceptualization of home within a context of a society that is experiencing an exponential rate of urbanization. As argued by Easthope, a wider lens should be applied when looking at the meaning of home, which holds “considerable social, psychological and emotive meaning for individuals and for groups” (2004, 135). Certainly, housing studies in the West have long moved from the fixation on the physical dwelling unit of brick and mortar and into its psycho-social feature, i.e. “the world beyond the front door” (Gregson and Lowe 1995, 226).

An examination of the psycho-social construct of home can benefit policy-makers and academicians in emerging economies in seeking solutions to larger housing issues. This paper is part of a larger study that examines the possibility of alternative tenures for the middle-income households in Malaysia. It is argued that the spiralling house prices are partly due to the decades-long owning friendly housing policy in the country, which assumes that everyone wants to own their dwellings. As apparent in recent years, the monolithic system favouring home-ownership has resulted in unaffordable dwellings to own throughout the country due to the prevalent high demand that has been fuelling house price increase. An issue that recently emerged was the housing crisis among the middle-income group, who largely cannot afford the upfront deposit and monthly payments for house purchase. Despite the deficient real effective demand for house purchase as reflected in the Price Income Ratio (Hamzah and Daud 2014), Malaysian housing policy still favours people who want to purchase their dwellings. As such, there are questions of the sustainability of the country’s current binary housing tenure system. Alternative tenures could provide a choice for households who wish to own their dwellings in the future and not pay “dead rent” to the landlords now. Towards this end, a further understanding of the social, psychological and emotional aspects of home can guide Malaysian policy-makers in supporting alternatives to the mainstream housing tenures that could offer similar housing satisfactions to occupants.
Using a qualitative approach, this paper presents findings into the process of attaching meanings, identity and feelings onto spaces and places, applying the theory of place in understanding the phenomenon. Although Malaysia is a multi-cultural country, this paper does not set out to disaggregate the cultural dimension of home according to the different local sub-cultures. The focus of this paper is in understanding the construct of home among middle-income urban households in the country, without claiming generalization, through common themes that could represent a broad view of how home is construed by the group. This paper is valuable in progressing the debate on how the conceptualization of home can be applied in supporting alternative housing tenures in a country deeply entrenched in the homeownership ideology. At a broader level, the study contributes to the theory of place and the literature of home-ownership itself, by venturing into a hitherto unexplored Malaysian context. Also, it is an illustration of the role of emotions in the home construct, promoting the dwelling as a repository of feelings created by its occupants.

**Literature Review**

*Placing Home*

The discussion on the meaning of home in this paper begins with the acknowledgement that the concept of home developed in a Western context provides a starting point in framing the current study. “Home” has been associated with different meanings and sense depending on the perspective taken. From a review of the literature, two main perspectives can be discerned: the spatial orientation of home that considers the meaning of home within a bounded construct (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Dayaratne and Kellett 2007; Easthope 2004, 2014; Elliott and Wadley 2013; Gregson and Lowe 1995) and a sociological perspective of home that uses the concept of home as the framework to examine specific phenomena (Elliott and Wadley 2013; Hiscock et al. 2001; Newton 2008; O’Mahony 2013; Parsell 2012; Smith 2008; Steward 2000).

At the forefront of the construct of home are the material settings of home. The most rudimentary assembly of home is the conversion of space as a material which exists into places (Sack 2001 as cited in Easthope 2004). In reviewing articles pertaining to home, Mallett (2004) cited articles from psychology and architecture fields that identified the use of material space – be it through the house itself, its interior design, the decorations and use of space – as expression or symbol of self. As explained in Mallett, architects and historians have studied the effects of design, spatial organization and furnishings on concepts and/or ideologies of home. In a similar but unrelated work in low-income urban settlements, Dayaratne and Kellett (2007) found that occupants cited emotional attachments to the shacks and whatever meagre belongings contained in the dwellings.

It is no longer acceptable to simply conflate home with house, despite evidence that some groups in the society still intuitively equate home with house. For instance, homeless people (Parsell 2012) and illegal squatters (Dayaratne and Kellett 2007) were found to consider home and house as interchangeable. For the general populace however, a useful starting point to define home is by seeing home as “a space loaded with meanings” (Ahmet 2013, 632); for instance, home has been defined as “a lived space with a complex range of symbolic meanings” (Steward 2000, 105). Friedmann (2007) adapted the “lived space” concept introduced by
Lefebvre (1991) as an absolute space that becomes humanized by virtue of being lived in. People often make irrational economic decisions regarding their lived space due to undue influence of their “attachment to specific places” (Easthope 2004, 136). This corresponds with the theory of home as the idea, ideology, sense or meaning of space.

Although useful, the spatial delimitation of home is no longer adequate as the home is also perceived as a status symbol, a personal expression and finally, a working space (Steward 2000). As home can no longer be confined to the physical, “housing” must also shed its traditional brick and mortar confines. Home, and by association housing, is increasingly being regarded as a process which is perpetually being moulded by economic, social, psychological and environmental factors (Easthope 2004). Easthope (2004) associates home, which previously conjures images of a defined smaller physical space to “place”, which can represent a bigger and thus, more sophisticated realm of thinking. The dwelling can be seen as a “home place” or “a particularly significant type of place” (Easthope 2014, 3). Places indicate “spaces of encounter” (Friedmann 2007, 257) in which one “appropriates absolute space” for oneself by interacting, adapting and adjusting with people and objects within the existing space (259).

The de-spatialization of home allows discussions to include “the full range of geographical scales” (Gregson and Lowe 1995, 225) – the micro- (dwelling place or house), the meso- (immediate area outside the house) and the macro- (neighbourhood, suburb, town or city) levels. In effect, this has widened the sense of place linked with one’s identity, security, comfort and status from only the boundaries of his “micro social world” (Newton 2008, 224) to permeate the surrounding areas, for instance, feeling at home at places where same-age peers hang out (Ahmet 2013). As stated by Friedmann, “the form itself needn’t be distinctive … What is important is that the form, the built environment, must be inhabited for some considerable period of time until it acquires its own embedded patterns and rhythms of life” (2007, 260). Ahmet mentioned “imagined home spaces” (2013, 628) where young men created a sense of home in public places where they felt at home. Thus, the assignment and creation of meaning associated with home has extended from the dwelling, i.e. “home-making” (Dayaratne and Kellett 2007; Imrie 2004; Steward 2000) to the larger geographical area, i.e. “place-making” (Ahmet 2013; Easthope 2004, 2014).

The Emotional Aspect of Home and Ontological Security

Easthope (2004) in her housing literature review states that home can be surmised to concern social, psychological, emotive and economic aspects of space. Home can be seen not only from socio-spatial and psycho-spatial perspectives but also “emotional warehouse” (Gurney 2000, 34 as cited in Easthope 2004). Other authors have also ventured to refine the concept of the emotional warehouse, e.g. Mallett pictured “a repository for complex, inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people’s relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces and things” (2004, 84). People have “emotional connections” to their dwellings (Easthope 2014, 2), leading to research on the emotional dimension of home to explain, for instance, factors contributing to security for permanent residents in caravan parks (Newton 2008).

At its most primal level, home is said to offer ontological security to occupants (Saunders 1990); people without a lived space will have no identities and tend to feel
unsafe (Parsell 2012). Housing researchers such as Hiscock et al. (2001) and Easthope (2014) have used this definition of ontological security by Giddens:

The confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments. Basic to a feeling of ontological security is a sense if the reliability of persons and things. (Giddens 1991, 92)

As illustrated by Hiscock et al. (2001), ontological security is the feeling of comfort, relief and well-being experienced by people by turning the home as a secure base. Traditionally, the examination of ontological security has been framed within the tenure dimension, with conflicting arguments on whether homeowners derive greater ontological security than renters. Saunders (1990) was an example of a proponent of the first argument, whilst Forrest, Murie, and Williams (1990) opposed the idea of a homogeneous home-ownership experience, with some homeowners experiencing greater benefits than other homeowners and renters or otherwise.

Hiscock et al. (2001) conducted a qualitative study that compares the psychological health of 43 homeowners and renters in the post-industrial West Scotland and summed that the degree of ontological security depended on the location of their dwellings (low crime rate in owner occupied location, but higher crime rate in social housing area), type of house (houses are easier to maintain compared to flats), mortgaged or outright ownership (mortgaged ownership carries fear of repossession) and position at the housing ladder (owners of cheaper housing tend to aim to move house in order to progress in society). The study by Hiscock et al. is a classic case in point whereby tenure is used as an indicator of security, although the study proves that tenure (ownership) was not the only determinant of ontological security.

Other works have also illustrated the difference between the concept of home and home-ownership in ensuring ontological security. Thaden, Greer, and Saegert (2013) discussed the fallacy in the perception of security offered by home-ownership compared to renting, whereas Easthope (2014) further submits that the lack of control over rented dwellings is more to do with undeveloped policy and law on tenancy than the type of tenure. From a legal point of view, there is no absolute ownership to the property, unless the title is held under a freehold interest (Thaden, Greer, and Saegert 2013). Other disadvantages of home-ownership include higher transaction costs, low occupant mobility, management costs, capital erosion and stresses (meeting mortgage payments, possibility of possession, changes in property values and housing market conditions) (Monk and Whitehead 2011).

Besides confidence (by virtue of preservation of self-identity), other emotional factors that contribute to ontological security carried by the home include happiness (Newton 2008), empowerment (Imrie 2004), sense of place (Arifwidodo and Chandrasiri 2013), control (Easthope 2014) and normality (Parsell 2012).

Conceptualizing “Home” Ownership

As the definition of home changes to accommodate a more sophisticated analysis of space (later place), so must the idea of the home-ownership. The literature on home-ownership tends to conflate the abstract (home) and the physical (house) in discussions of home-ownership, making no effort to adopt a more semantically correct terminology. As such, home-ownership is seen as owning both the space/place imbued
with sense, meaning and emotions (Arifwidodo and Chandrasiri 2013) and the legal rights to the space/place (O’Mahony 2013; Thaden, Greer, and Saegert 2013), whether to fulfil personal or familial agenda, business agenda or government agenda (Mallett 2004). Mallett (2004) went further to suggest that the glorification of home-ownership was the business agenda of the real estate market aimed at garnering sale and capitalist ideological agenda aimed at increasing economic efficiency and growth.

A new line of argument has recently emerged from the property law fraternity, that is the feeling of ontological security conferred by home-ownership may be nullified when land title considerations enter the equation. This argument is based on two premises. Firstly, some dwellings are being held as leasehold and not freehold titles, meaning they are not owned indefinitely contrary to the argument of security of tenure for home-ownership against renting (Thaden, Greer, and Saegert 2013). In other words, the highly valued “legitimate control” of the dwelling (Parsell 2012) is not absolute under some home-ownerships; leasehold-title dwellings offer a lower degree of tenure security compared to freehold-title dwellings. Secondly, the security of land title in home-ownership is not unchallengeable. Land title may be affected by the wider operations of the law and economy, for instance, eminent domain activities by the government and mortgage repossessions during economic downturn (O’Mahony 2013). As such, the ownership of “space” or “place” associated with home meanings is not solely based on the type of legal interest carried by the dwelling, but also the quality of the property rights.

Applying the theory of place to home-ownership, ownership can be inferred by the “act of appropriating absolute space”, for instance, by rearranging furniture (or buying new furniture), putting a rug on the floor or putting up pictures in the wall (Friedmann 2007). This argument diminishes the argument of title security in home-ownership. Thus, renters can feel at home in their dwellings (Easthope 2014).

Methodology

To the researchers’ knowledge, no other Malaysian housing studies have employed diary-keeping to obtain primary data from occupants. As an exploratory study, this study was designed to elicit rich experiential data from participants who could describe the impressions, experiences and perceptions that are attached to their living space. The aim of the data collection was to make explicit the emotions embodied in both the active and passive “home-making” of participants. The qualitative approach adopts diary-keeping as the main data collection method to draw out emotions related to the lived space. Data include write-ups, drawings and photos. Both physical and electronic diaries were allowed. The usage of diaries has been successfully used in housing studies to provide “a rich narrative” of respondents’ experiences (Ahmet 2013, 625). The current research allows for visual representation of housing consumption, which words may not be able to capture in some cases.

Using convenience sampling, 10 diarists were approached and recruited for this research. The researchers identified suitable candidates from a network of friends and colleagues, together with people who responded to advertisements posted around the researchers’ institution. Table 1 shows the living situations of all the diarists. The diarists must fulfil several criteria, i.e. middle-income households in Klang Valley – the more developed part of Peninsular Malaysia – living in an owned house, have lived in the current dwelling more than six months because a recent occupier could
still be settling down and may have no attached meanings to the place and finally he/she should be the person who actively contributes to making the “home” as he/she is the best person to describe the meanings, experiences and thoughts attached to their lived space. For instance, the housewife who is immersed with the daily “home-making” process is a more suitable participant compared to her husband who was just involved in choosing the house due to budgets, location, etc. In the context of this study, “home-making” was defined as those activities undertaken to make the dwelling clean, comfortable, inviting and familiar, e.g. vacuuming, arranging the furniture and deciding on decorative objects for the dwelling. The researchers ascertained that the diarists were the main “home-maker” of the dwelling by interviewing them before accepting them for the study. Since the economic angle is not being examined, the type of ownership (with or without mortgage) was not a main consideration of the diarists.

Due to the emotional and cultural angles of the research, more female diarists were recruited as they would be more hands-on with home-making. This is representative of the Malaysian culture in which the home-maker role still belongs to the female gender. Another reason for the overwhelming majority of female diarists was based on the anecdotal belief that females are more patient, consistent and verbose in diary-keeping. The only male diarist somewhat confirmed this supposition based on his sparse diary entries. Only two diarists were housewives, reflecting the recent socio-economic trend of two-income households in the country. Six diarists lived in landed properties (terraced and semi-detached houses) whilst four lived in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diarist</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Living arrangement and type of dwelling space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female, mid-20s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in a three-bedroom apartment with her mother and brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female, mid-20s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house with her parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female, late 30-s, housewife</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house with her husband and three children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female, early 20s, student</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house with her parents and two siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female, early 40s, housewife</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house with her husband and three children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female, mid-40s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house with her husband and two children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female, early 40s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in an apartment with her husband and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female, mid-40s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in a single-storey terraced house with her husband and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male, mid-20s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female, late 20s, professional</td>
<td>Lived in a double-storey terraced house with her husband</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
apartments. All diarists live in single-family households, again a norm in most major cities in Malaysia.

In the diary-keeping stage, the diarists had an option of either keeping a physical or an electronic diary for three months. The diarists were given three months to record their thoughts, activities and habits pertaining to their lived space. Instructions were given for the diarists to express events, thoughts and emotions in detail in matters related to their home such as what made them feel at home, issues with the dwelling and home-making activities. During the diary-keeping period, the diarists were contacted a few times to ask if they need clarification on any matters and also were asked to produce some sample of their entries to ensure that they were providing the required information.

At the end of the three-month period, the diaries were collected from the diarists for analysis.

The small sample in this study should not be a problem “for the aim in qualitative research is extrapolate on theoretical grounds, not on the basis of statistical inference” (McKee 2011, 3405). Textual and visual data from homeowners’ diaries were transcribed and coded manually through content analysis looking for topics that emerged. The topical coding exercise yielded several themes which were subsequently collapsed into four final themes namely feeling, perception, attachment and relation as shown in Table 2. The inductive approach in theme construction was guided especially by discussions in Mallett (2004) and Easthope (2004). These works were found to have influenced a substantial number of subsequent studies; Mallett was cited over 600 times whilst Easthope was cited over 200 times. Table 2 provides a description of each theme together with the keywords associated with the theme. The descriptions can be traced back to Mallet and Easthope. Finally, an analytical coding was undertaken to identify recurring patterns in each theme, assigning keywords to those identified patterns, establishing key patterns and merging redundant keywords and comments, and drawing conclusions of the key findings.

Table 2. Sub-themes of emotional aspect of the dwelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Keywords/key concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>How the diarists feel about their lived space</td>
<td>Comfort, shelter, safe, security, love, familiar, warmth, haven, privacy, excitement, happiness, thankfulness, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>How the diarists compare their lived space with those of other peoples</td>
<td>Owning vs. renting (rootedness, control, pride, etc.), landed vs. strata and single family vs. extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>How the diarists relate objects to their lived space</td>
<td>Space (kitchen, bedroom, living room, outside, neighbourhood, etc.), things (fixtures and fittings, furniture, utensils, gadgets, decorative items, etc.) and lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation</td>
<td>How the diarists relate other people to their lived space</td>
<td>Family members, friends, neighbours, visitors and housing management company for strata properties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

This study frames the emotional aspect of the lived space by proposing home as an “emotional warehouse” for the occupants, where emotions are created and maintained by the dwellers. These emotional elements shape the meanings assigned to the lived space within the current cultural environment in Malaysia, in which urban dwellings are represented by single-family households with the female parent or eldest daughter being the home-maker, strata-living replacing the preferred landed living due to high land prices in urban areas and a strong family institution that is tempered by a growing sense of individualism and materialism. As mentioned above, the emotional aspect of the diarists’ lived space can be themed into feeling, perception, attachment and relation.

Feelings of Lived Space

Affirming earlier works that cited ontological security as a major psychological benefit of home (Hiscock et al. 2001; Saunders 1990), the feeling of security derived from the lived space is generally reported by all diarists using words such as “safe”, “comfort”, “secure”, “warm”, “shelter”, “familiar”, “haven”, “independence” and “peaceful”. Sample entries include:

“Home” is somewhere you come back to for all the reasons; safety, shelter, love, familiar faces, warmth. (Diarist 2)

We moved in on 31 August 2012, Merdeka Day¹. Min (husband) said the day symbolised our independence too. (Diarist 3)

The excitement whenever I drove home is just- unexplainable. (Diarist 4)

What that apartment means to me, on the most basic level, it represents a place for me to rest, to be comfortable, to be with my husband and my kids. It’s a house, it’s a shelter. (Diarist 7)

Home is my world. I relate to my world means it everything for me (sic) because I feel very comfortable when I am home, I feel safe, I feel like I just want to go back home. I enjoyed the safe environment at my home. I got a beautiful house, peaceful environment, so I really enjoy (sic) when I got back home. (Diarist 8)

Home evoked all the above sentiments in the diarists. A closer look at the entries revealed that the feelings were associated with the lived space itself, and not with owning the lived space. This corresponds with earlier work (see, for instance, Hiscock et al. 2001; Newton 2008; Parsell 2012) and indicated a universality of a sense of confidence brought upon the evidence of self in the lived space, regardless of the context.

Nonetheless, the feelings of security, safety, peacefulness and comfort were not total among homeowners. Previous works have shown how heterogeneity on the home-ownership experience may be affected by mortgage status, location, position at the housing ladder and type of house (Cairney and Boyle 2004; Hiscock et al. 2001; Newton 2008; Parsell 2012).
2001), especially in the current risk society context (Elliott and Wadley 2013). Findings from the diaries supported this tendency, as illustrated by this sample comment:

I don’t feel particularly secure because one; we still owe the bank a lot of money for the apartment and we still have many, many years of payment left that my husband has to service. I don’t think I can afford to pay for (sic) on my salaries (Diarist 7)

The respondents also indicated that the environment had tempered with their enjoyment of the dwelling. Inputs from neighbours and visitors, the management company, house design and others had all been cited as environmental factors that influence how the diarists felt about their home.

Yesterday, my neighbour had a party at their house, a lot of friends came over, many smoke and their motorcycles were parked at other owners’ parking lot. They are so noisy, we have no right to complain or interfere, and we just kept quiet. All the boys ran here and there. The housing management shouldn’t allow this kind of visitor to come in … the security guard should have better restriction (sic), otherwise the security and peacefulness of the housing area will be disturbed. (Diarist 1)

My apartment is a bit hot because I renovated it and I didn’t really realize the closing of the balcony and turning it into part of living room will actually cut off air circulation, so our apartment is warm. (Diarist 7)

The influence of environmental factors on feelings associated with lived space – whether the natural, physical or societal environment – has been documented in Western housing literature. For instance, Newton examined the “sociality, belonging and community” among permanent residents that could indicate “belonging, emotional attachment, home and sociality” (2008, 223). However, a closer inspection of the causes that led to the negative feelings revealed the role of culture in dictating the emotional outcomes. Urban living in Malaysia is characterized by occupants who may have become too individualistic to observe neighbourliness, the management company who are less than willing to enforce seemingly insignificant by-laws and the local authority who are inundated with other matters to pursue breaches of building codes. These observations are true to any Malaysian housing researchers who have done fieldwork at on the ground level.

Perceptions of Lived Space

Another discerned theme was how diarists compared their dwelling with “the others” with regard to tenure and house types. Diarists generally expressed a sentiment that owning the dwelling is better than renting. Rootedness, control and pride were indicated as reasons for the preference, as evidenced by these entries:

It is good to own the house rather than rent because you can decorate your house as you wish, you live permanently at the same address, build your network with the neighbour. It is long term. (Diarist 1)
I do not regret buying a house, I do not mind paying more because it will still be my own home and I am proud of it. (Diarist 8)

I am happy to tell them that I live in my own house at this young age, in modest way. Some of my friends are impressed and shocked once they spot that I live in my own house. (Diarist 9)

The positive perception on their immediate lived space is reinforced by their positive opinion of the wider lived space, i.e. the space outside their dwelling unit. Diarist 6, who held a management position and was in her mid-40s, had a positive assessment of her neighbourhood and neighbours.

It is a quiet neighbourhood with great neighbours. No problem at all with neighbours although majority of them are of different race (Chinese). I also love my neighbourhood because the surau (mini mosque), schools and community hall are within walking distance; the playgrounds are big with badminton and basketball courts apart from the normal kids’ playground equipment. There are also wakaf/gazebos at the open space/playgrounds. Walking/jogging trails are also provided.

However, some occupants whose ideals of the lived space were challenged by the reality did write negatively about their experience. Some diarists had some preconceived ideas about how their living experiences should be in their dwellings, based on their expectations and standards. Their perceptions on their living place can be said to have been biased by expectations and standards, as shown in these quotations.

Now which silly architect designed the kitchen layout? The kitchen installer came to the house to do some measuring. That’s when I found that the design was a tad… Now what’s the word?? Hmmm … Still thinking for the right word. The kitchen layout plan was not ergonomic? Can I use ergonomic for a kitchen? (Diarist 3)

One thing I don’t like about apartments and condos and stuff is that they have this really inconvenient and eerie parking either in the basement or in the rooftop or a floor dedicated just for parking … I don’t like it. It’s scary. It’s eerie. (Diarist 7)

Owning is seen as giving a stronger sense of home compared to renting, whereby owners are thought to care more about their dwelling place compared to renters. However, whilst owning confers a general sense of pride and belonging, there is perception of different classes of satisfactions when comparing between landed and strata properties. As stated by Diarist 1:

There are different (sic) with owning landed property and strata property. Landed property provide more space for gardening, individual private parking space, have own boundary however for strata property we need to share the common place and everyday open door facing neighbour (sic) which makes it embarrassing. (Diarist 1)
Diarist 7, a female lecturer in her late 30s, gave her opinions about living conditions and arrangements that are not ideal for “the others” as compared to her lived space.

I’m lucky that I live in a pretty nice area and the apartment is pretty big and comfortable. I can’t imagine what life is like for elderly parents living in small flat with the children and get in their in-laws. It must be very disempowering and very disheartened.

… PPR (low-cost housing schemes), places like that, the flats, with a really cramped single bedroom or tiny two bedrooms flats …

Finally, contrary to the general perception of owning being superior to renting, there were situations where renting was seen to be more desirable, especially when linked to proximity to workplace. As explained by Diarist 10, an executive in her early 30s, based on her previous experience as a renter before becoming a homeowner:

It is not a burden for me if I am able to rent at a strategic location whereby the good accessibility and network are available for me.

In general, diarists showed positive perceptions about living in owned home, but to varying degrees depending on their idealized living. Perhaps lacking in the knowledge of tenure matters, none of the diarists mentioned tenure security as a factor. In Malaysia, the National Land Code has provided that land disposal by the State Authority shall be made under leasehold except for very limited circumstances, meaning that the titles for most houses are now under the typical 99-year lease. It is interesting to explore if this knowledge would affect homeowners’ perceptions on the security of their current tenure type.

Attachments to Lived Space

Diarists assigned meanings to their lived space through objects. The objects could be personal, functional or decorative in nature, but each had meanings that were assigned and reinforced through constant usage or contact.

Diarist 1 elaborated on how giving a personal touch to home decorations had affected her sense of home. Each family member had added their own effort in decorating the home.

My home are meaningful in the sense that is was decorated (sic). My mum put some effort to decorate the main entrance; my brother decorated the living hall. (Diarist 1)

As Diarist 2 put it, the amount of effort put into making the home presentable was worth it when the outcome was noticed and acknowledged by other people. This sense of pride further reinforced her attachment to certain areas of her home.

One of my friends commented that my room looks so immaculate. While another told me how much she loves my home. I was pleased to hear that. I remembered on another occasion that people that visited my home loved my kitchen. They loved the “industrial” feel to it, with stainless steel sinks, racks,
table tops and others. I have no doubt that the kitchen that I have is one of my most liked areas at home. (Diarist 2)

Budget permitting, the items chosen should be something that reflected their taste and style. The selection process was deliberate and time-consuming, but they would know what they wanted once they see it:

Upon our many searches for our bedroom cabinet, we came across this company. I fell in love straight away with their wardrobe system. It was smooth. Excellent quality. And I love the corner of the L-shaped wardrobe. Unlike any other wardrobes I’ve seen before, this one was made into a mini walk in closet. Super genius! (Diarist 3)

Diarist 3’s material attachment was not confined only to expensive items, as was similarly indicated by other diarists. Sentimental or emotional value was assigned to objects that could enhance the happiness associated with home. For instance, Diarist 3 hung a picture that was drawn by her seven year-old autistic son (Figure 1). The fact that her son captured the happy feel of their home stirred something in her:

Somehow, the picture touched me deeply. I sensed that even my autistic son liked the new house. It began to sink in that I didn’t have to put up expensive pictures on the wall to make the house feels like home. I didn’t have to buy expensive rug to brighten up the room. It didn’t matter anymore what paint you want to splash on your walls. It was when you were able to make your little ones happy in the house.

The monetary value of the objects with special meanings was conspicuously absent from the diaries. Rather, the objects were held valuable in terms of quality, thought and personal touch of the occupants.

Figure 1. Picture of home drawn by Diarist 3’s son.
Interestingly, the Internet was mentioned as a must have in the dwelling. The Internet and Wi-Fi had influenced the way information and entertainment were conveyed and consumed by the masses. ICT advancements also affect how people communicate with each other. From the diaries, these quotations evidenced the reduction of the intrinsic value of a dwelling without the Internet.

I envision as one household, we would share a lot of things like the internet which we do. (Diarist 7)

The new house was lacking a lot of things. We could live we that. But this one thing missing was a major turn off. There was no INTERNET in the house. Nobody could function like a normal person in the house. And that’s why we went back to my parents’ house. (Diarist 3)

The ubiquitous Internet has impacted the living experiences of some the diarists insofar as its absence was associated with a poorly living place.

Relations to Lived Space

Diarists assigned or created meaning in their lived space by relating it with other people, including family members, friends and neighbours. The Eastern culture puts a strong emphasis on family ties, which was reflected in the diaries. Diarist 4 even equated “home” with “family”. The following entries are illustrative of how home is associated with family.

The people at home or family members (including the dogs) are also important because they are part of the memory building process. There might be ups of downs but a home will always be there to tell a story. Therefore, there is no other place quite like our own homes. (Diarist 2)

Maybe this is why I love to be at home. I never feel lonely, left out, forgotten. No. Each one of us are one- no secrets, no boundaries, no walls separating us. This is what I call “home”: family. (Diarist 4)

It is because my family is there. I love to see my children grow up in front of me and one more thing I like to see all my family members in the house. It is complete (sic). (Diarist 5)

I describe home as the heaven on earth. I spend my quality time at home, doing things that I love. Usually, my family will gather at the house, we will do some family activities such as family gathering to tighten up (sic) the relationship among the family members. (Diarist 10)

The above quotations also reflected how relationship dynamics with other household members shape the meaning of home for diarists. Diarist 4 was a single female living with her parents, Diarist 5 was a mother who lived with her husband and three children and Diarist 10 was a female partner of a childless married couple. As mentioned by Mallett (2004), the sense of home includes relationships forged among households, especially family. Regardless of the actors in the relationship – whether
between children and parents or among siblings – the connection between relatives can help anchor the diarists to the place.

Besides relatives, neighbours also enhanced the sense of home outside of the physical abode. Sharing common interests with the neighbours seemed to facilitate the claim of home space in the neighbourhood. Diarist 3 narrated how common interests connected them with the neighbours:

Kayak and BBQ brought us closer to our neighbours. Our immediate neighbours have similar interests. BBQ and kayak and outdoor activities. (Diarist 3)

The place of gathering for the above-mentioned activities was a spot on the lake reserve located outside the legal boundaries of the housing scheme. In Figure 2, it can be seen that the gazebo built by the group of residents was actually outside the fence (legal marking of the house). The sense of community was enhanced by the existence of the meeting place, as neighbours come together to join in leisure activities. The structure of the meeting place was transient and illegal in nature, compared to formal social gathering places, i.e. places of worship, the playground or the community hall, that was required by and provided under planning. The pragmatism of the residents of the housing scheme, comprising middle-income households, indicated how the sense of community can facilitate the appropriation of home space outside the physical home.

Nonetheless, other people had been shown to also negatively affect the lived space of the diarists. Family members can impose and the Eastern culture demands respect for the elders and also guests. These diarists described how they had to sacrifice their own lived space to accommodate older family members or guests:

I watched TV with my brother yesterday night and at the same time his office files were scattered around. He brought his office work back to the house as he needed to update the sales he did every end of the month. Well, he did his work on the coffee table and on the floor. (Diarist 1)

Figure 2. The area outside Diarist 3’s house being used as a social gathering place.
It’s Saturday and this is the day when my aunty, uncles, cousins visit. I have a pretty big family and all of them have to cramp them into the kitchen (sic). Some of them even sit on the floor! Today I felt as if my home isn’t guest-friendly. There are too many things, too cluttered (at certain areas) and spacious at other areas. I really hope one day I’ll find a balance to this space madness. (Diarist 2)

Diarist 7 rationalized how the household composition and dynamics can influence the home.

Every home is different. The spaces within the home, the activities that take place within the home, differs from family to family because of the different types of family dynamics you would find … in some households, you would have sons-in-law, and mothers-in-law, living as one family unit. (Diarist 7)

Having the experience of living next door to her mother, Diarist 7 observed how her husband altered his behaviour when her mother came to visit, which occurred quite often as she lived alone in her next-door unit. Tying this experience with Diarist 2’s account of the visit by her extended family, the Eastern extended family structure can be said to significantly and constantly influence the sense of home among the diarists.

Discussion

This paper reinforces findings from previous work in the Western context that the sense of home can be divorced from home-ownership (Easthope 2014; Newton 2008; Smith 2008). In the context of a rapidly developing economy that is facing critical housing affordability issue, this study serves as a starting point to advocate for alternative housing tenures besides owning. As indicated by the diarists, and as supported by the theory of place-making, the creation home has less to do with the type of tenure (ownership) but more with the emotional meanings arising from interactions, adaptations and adjustments with people and objects in the lived space. Occupants’ attachment to their lived space, by way of creating and maintaining meanings associated with the dwelling, seems to somewhat diminish the argument of people’s innate “desire to own” (Saunders 1990) as the main justification for home-ownership.

True to the observation made by Dayaratne and Kellett that “the most fundamental acts of home-making are universal, despite significant cultural specificities” (Dayaratne and Kellett 2007, 68), emotional meanings have shaped the ontological securities observed among diarists. However, it is argued that those “cultural specificities” merit a closer examination as it could prevent the pendulum of policy from swaying too far from the targeted objectives. For instance, Western literature proposes that ontological security is one of the emotional aspects that crystallizes the meaning of home. This was also suggested by the findings of this study, except that strata occupants enjoyed less control of their surroundings compared to landed occupants. More importantly, other factors besides tenure were expressed as contributors to their feeling of comfort, peacefulness and safety. Parallel to the findings in Easthope (2014), non-ownership tenures can be made more attractive through the enhancement of the legal framework and strengthening the sense of place by supporting community activities.
Combined, the analysis of the above entries shows the various types of emotions that were evoked and kept in the home by its occupants and shaped by meanings attached to space, objects or people. In creating and maintaining the meanings, ownership is only one of the many other influencing factors besides house and household types, neighbourhood, personal norms and values and material attachment. Importantly, these emotions went beyond the immediate four walls of the physical dwelling unit, permeating areas outside the house from the corridor, front lawn and back yard to the neighbourhood. The idea of home that extends beyond the private property into the macro-lived space seems to concur with the sense of community that still exists in modern multi-cultural Malaysia, as was observed in another Eastern culture, i.e. China by Friedmann (2007). Nonetheless, it is premature to conclude that the Eastern culture alone is responsible for the macro-outlook on the sense of home. Interestingly, technological advancements were shown to pose a challenge to the family unit, but paradoxically have improved community building as informal resident groups, linked by common interests, crystallize their relationships on cyber space. Thus, it could be surmised that the sense of place has truly ascended beyond the physical realm to the intangible or virtual domain.

Conclusion

The accounts by diarists in this study revealed how the meanings attached to lived space can differ due to many factors, thus confirming the “differentiation and segmentation” paradigm within home-ownership put forth by Forrest, Murie, and Williams (1990). As home is being shaped by the way it is being lived in, there should be a noticeable difference in meanings attachment across different cultures. Most housing literature on home assumes a Western perspective and has taken place in the Western context, whereas this paper had examined the emotional definition of home within an Eastern context. Using only homeowner diarists would suit the current study’s aim at exploring the meaning of home among urban middle-income households, as Malaysia is a home-owning nation. Future examination into renters’ construction of the meaning of home is proposed to enable a deeper discussion on the topic.

In this study, the examination of the meaning of home through a cultural lens revealed a multi-layered emotional construct. Despite the seemingly opaque qualitative data, family and community appeared to be the common denominators across the entries upon a close examination. Similar with reports from Western literature, the wider community in the context of this study also has an impact on people’s sense of home (see, for instance, Ahmet 2013; Gregson and Lowe 1995). For Malaysian policy-makers, the above findings could guide the formulation and implementation of alternative housing tenures for the middle-income households in Malaysia. Based on the current cultural landscape, intermediate tenures that support community and familial involvement in the home-making should be well received among the younger generation, who are characterized as more open to change and paradigm shifts. Malaysian policy-makers could introduce and support intermediate housing tenures that offer the benefits of ownership and rental to complement the generally unaffordable home-ownership and unattractive private rental. For intermediate tenures to be introduced, the state must be prepared to provide institutional support in terms of appropriate legal framework, training and education facilities and knowledge conveyance for the market actors.
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1. “Merdeka Day” is the Independence Day of Malaysia.

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