

Traditional Malay Architecture: the Use of Space

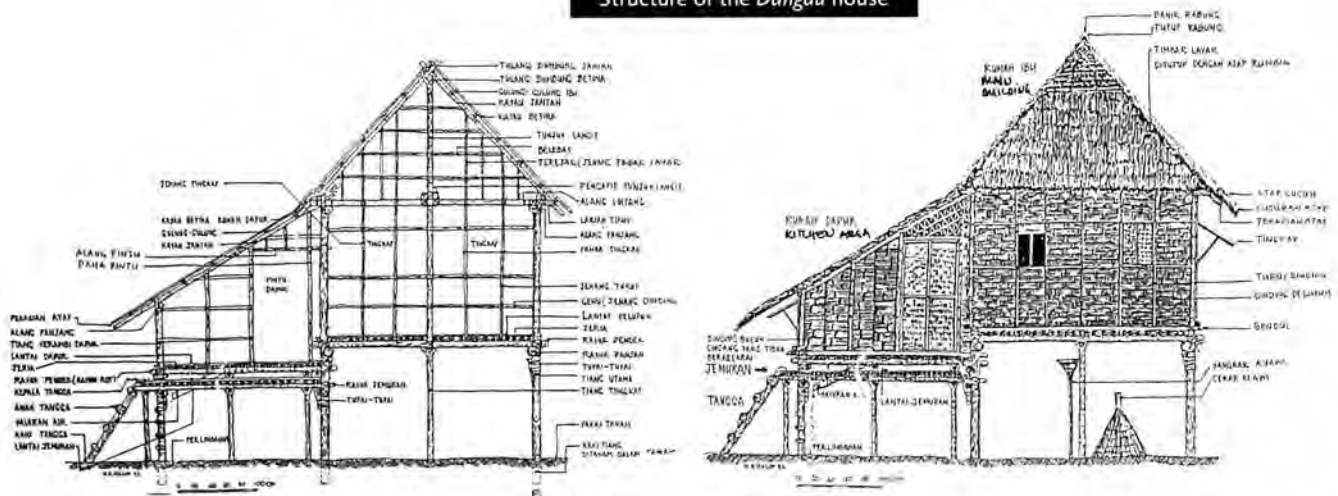
Introduction

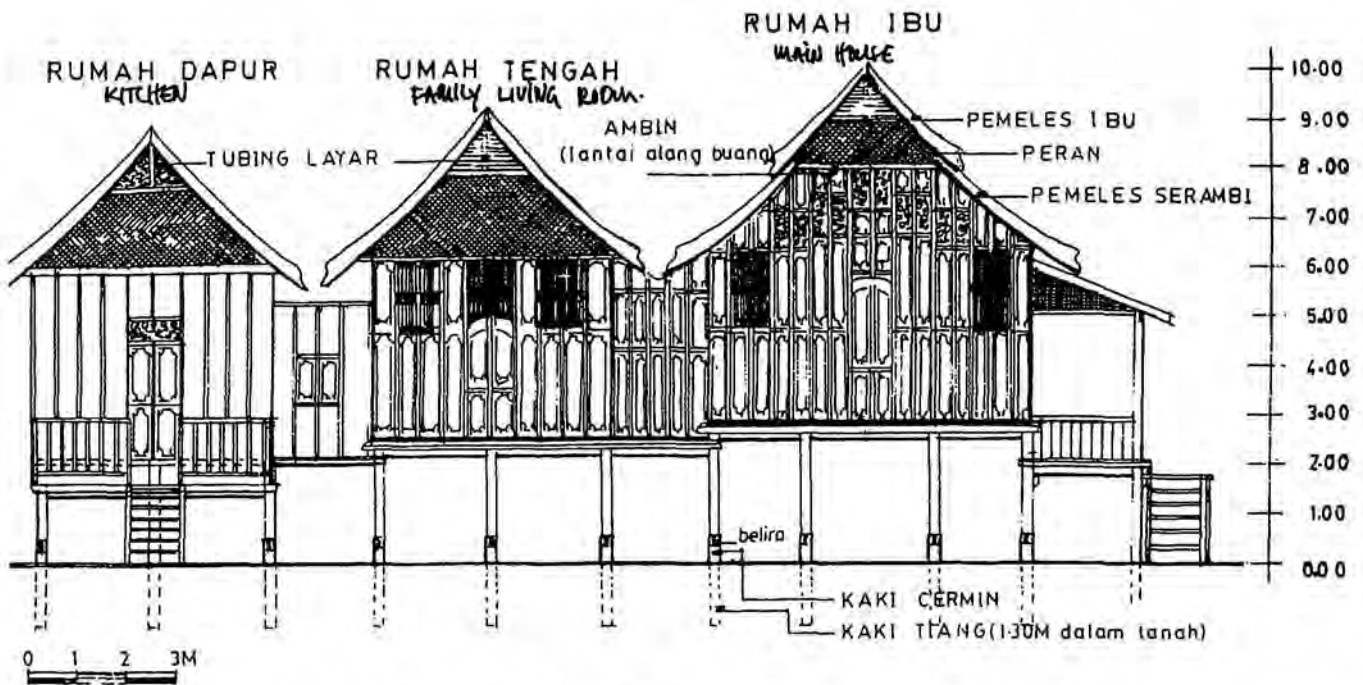
Composed of many ethnic groups, the Malays possess unique and varied cultures. There are many different types of traditional Malay architecture, as distinctive as that in the Malaysian states of Kelantan and Negeri Sembilan.

Today, the Malays have different types of architecture which are determined by different functions. Traditional architecture, however, continued to be influential. Houses, religious and modern buildings show styles and designs of past architecture.

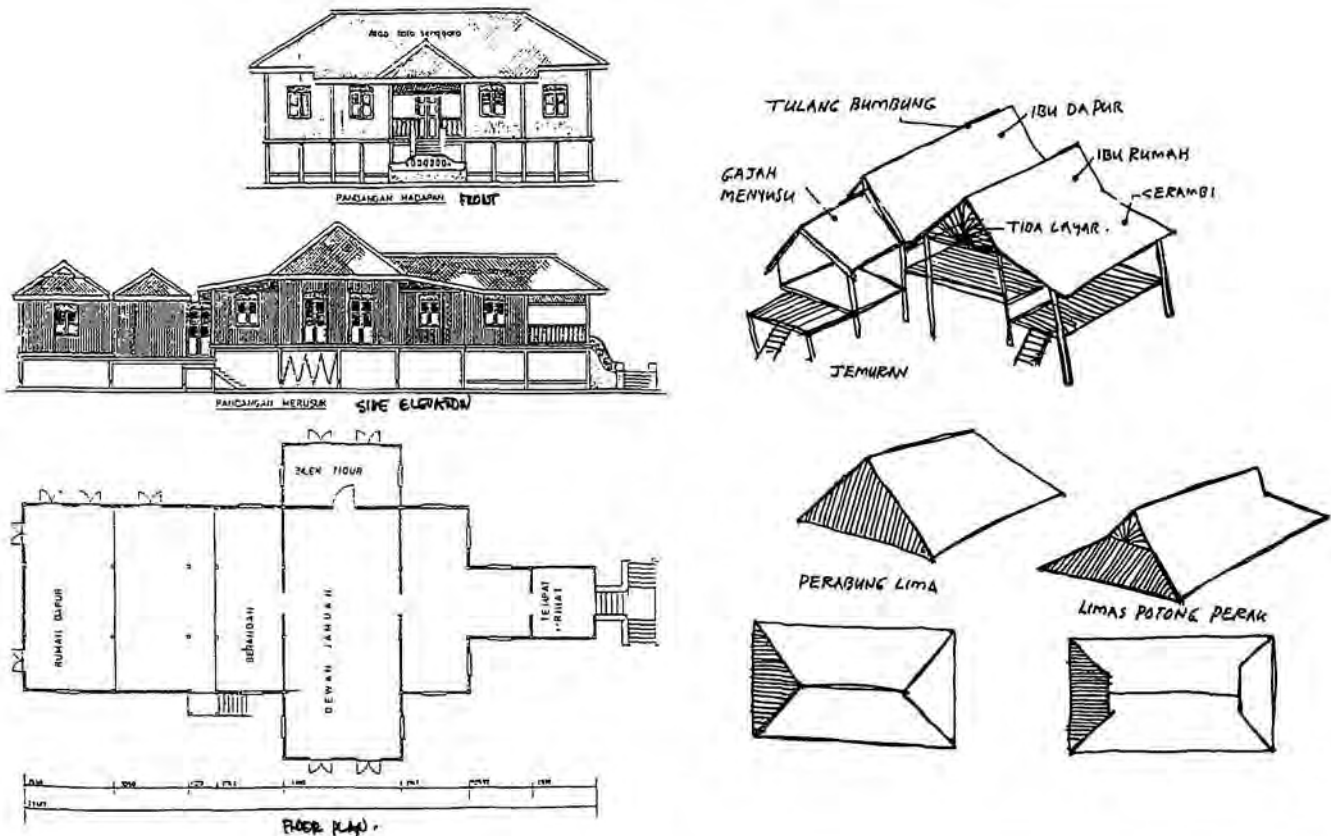
Archaeological research has established that human beings settled in West Malaysia since the pre-historic period. Findings of stone artifacts and food remnants in caves and rock shelters proved that human beings had utilized safe places as their dwellings and protection against dangers and calamities. As they become more advanced, they begin to use local materials found around them in making their dwellings. They made use of twigs, bamboo and leaves. In the early stage, their dwellings were very simple. Their frameworks were made of small branches and the roofs of leaves. These dwellings were in the shape of *bumbung pisang sesikat* or a *lean-to*.

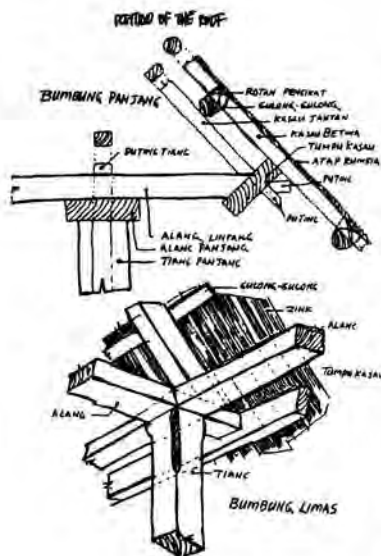
Structure of the *Dangau* house





The Bumbung Panjang House

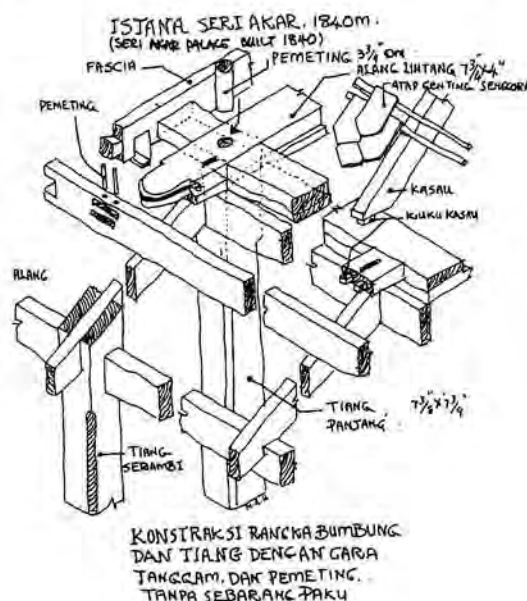
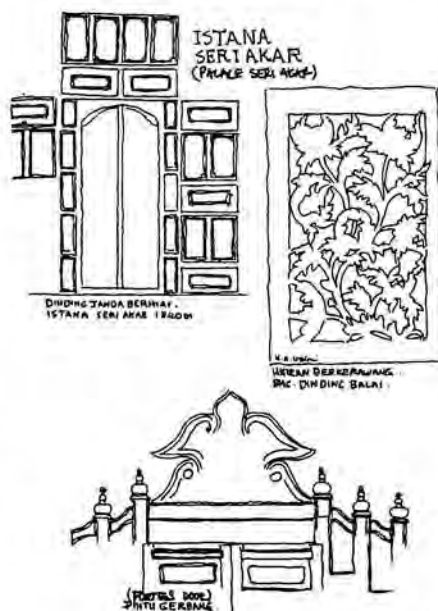




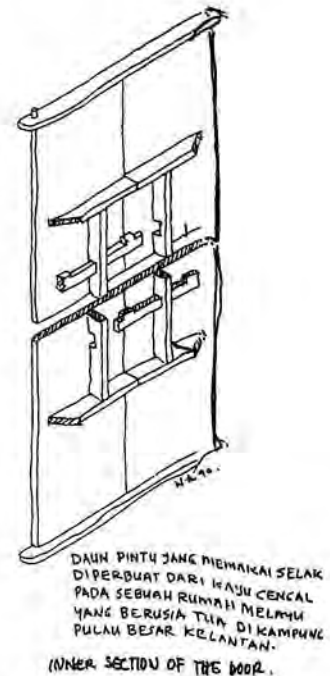
From this humble start, there emerged the *rumah berpanggung* hut – with raised floor on stilts, containing spaces and walled compartments, and better roof shape – that provided more effective protection against sun and rain, as compared to their *lean-to* dwellings of earlier period. The type of roofing designed at this time was two roof covers in the shape of an inverted “V”. The point where the two top roof covers met was separated by roof-beam (*tulang rebung* or *tulang bumbung*). This type of roofing is called long-beam roofing (*bumbung panjang* or *bumbung lipat kajang*). Originating from this point, traditional Malay houses have developed greatly to become recognized as national heritage today.

The advent of external influences, such as Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism – introduced by the Indians – has indirectly prompted changes to the local traditional architecture. Skills in building temples were honed in the centres of Malay administration, leading to the construction of houses in the Malay settlement areas, where the architecture shows the combination of local and external designs and characteristics.

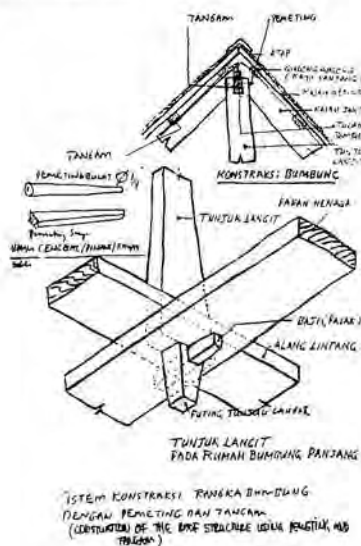
Hinduism and Buddhism brought about more effective craftsmanship in the use of tools such as saws, hammers, chisels, etc.. During the earlier period, house frames were tied to each other; now drilling is carried out to put up the structure for buildings. Modern building tools and materials have enabled house builders to build



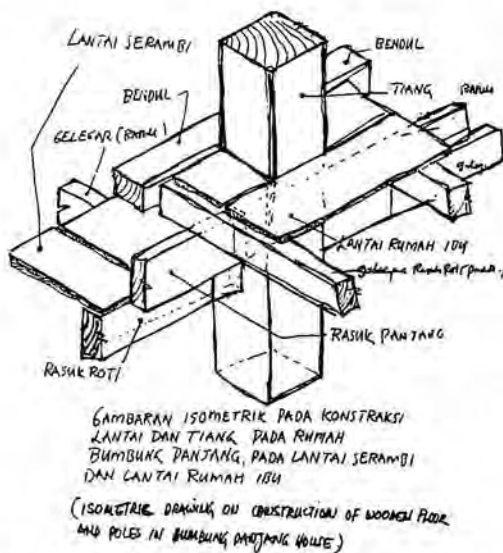
The spread of Islam led to major changes in the arrangement and use of space in Malay houses, in line with the needs of the religion. For example, there has to be different rooms for the males and females respectively. The architecture of the Malay houses experienced great changes with the coming of the Western colonists to the Malay world. The Dutch were responsible for introducing the "Dutch roof", which, together with the traditional Malay houses, formed a new design.



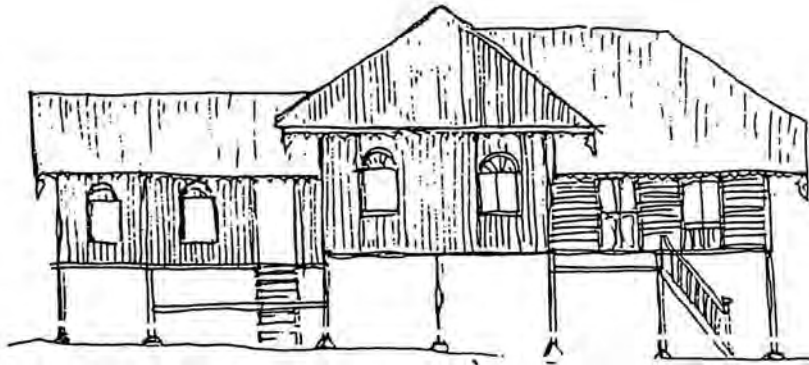
Malay architecture can be divided into three phases, i.e. traditional, colonial and post-independence. The traditional in the context of Malay architecture covers the period before Western colonisation. During the early part of this period, before the arrival of Buddhism, animistic practice and beliefs were part of Malay culture, which was also under the influence of dynamism. Statues from solid rocks, called *menhir*, and also an architecture called *punden berundak*, appeared. Proofs of early Malay architecture in the practice of animism and dynamism are statues of *batu pedang* (sword statues), *batu kemudi* (propeller statues) and *batu sudu* (spoon statues) found in the Historical Complex at Pengkalan Kempas.



Construction of roof structure

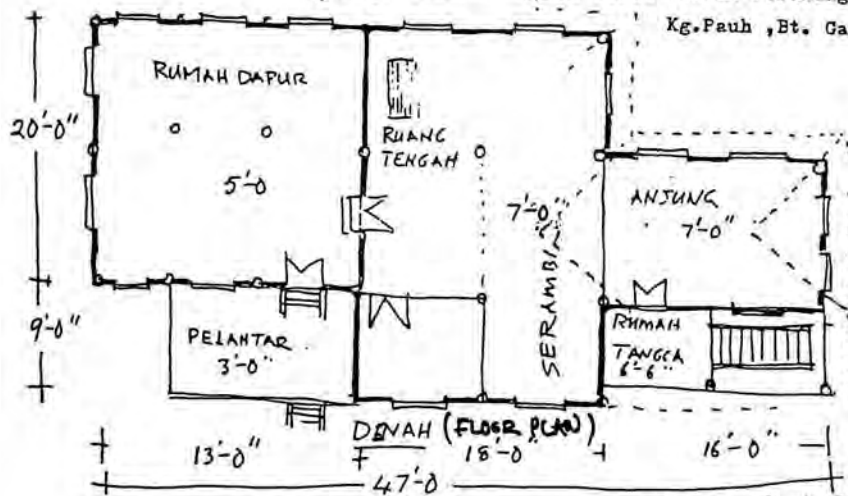


Isometric drawing on construction of wooden floor and poles in *Bumbung Panjang* house



TAMPAK SAMPUL
(SIDE ELEVATION)

Rumah Limas bentuk Perabung Lima
Kg. Pauh, Bt. Gantang.



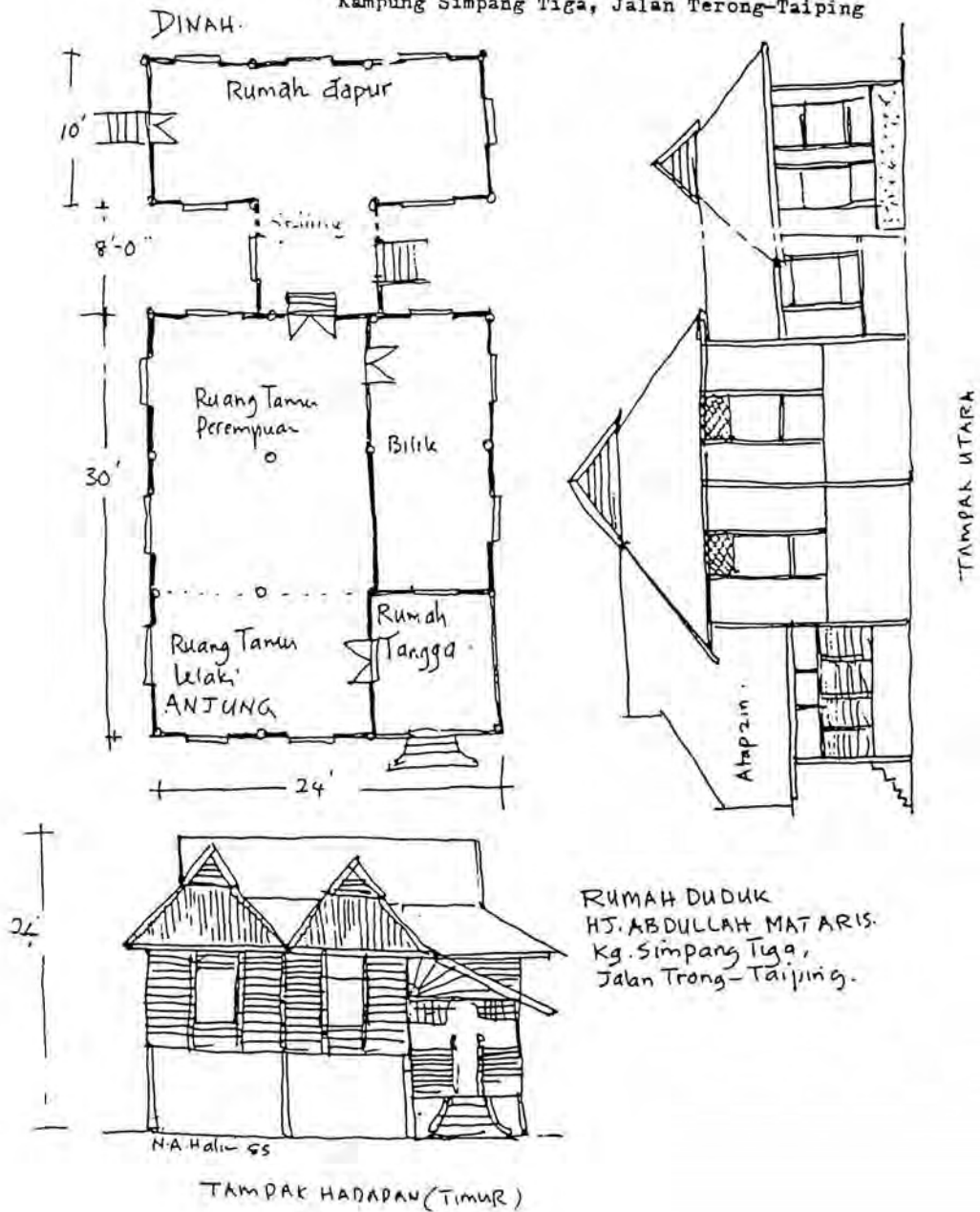
Kampung Pauh, Bukit Gantang
dibina oleh Abdul Rahman 18-



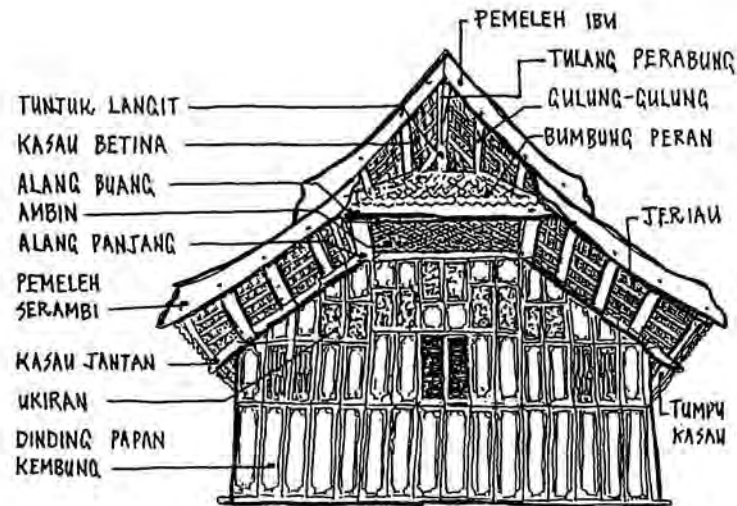
TAMPAK HADAPAN (UTARA)
(FRONT ELEVATION (NORTH))

The house of Haji Abdullah Mat Aris

Rumah duduk Haji Abdullah Mat Aris
Kampung Simpang Tiga, Jalan Terong-Taiping



RUMAH DUDUK
HJ. ABDULLAH MAT ARIS.
Kg. Simpang Tiga,
Jalan Terong-Taiping.



RUMAH TIANG 12, TAMPILAN TEPI
(THE 12 POLES HOUSE. SIDE ELEVATION)

The practices of the Malays, based on animism and dynamism, which produced the *menhir* and *punden berundak* architecture, came to an end with the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Malay archipelago. These two religions brought major changes to the life and the outlook of the Malays. In the context of architecture, the houses of the Malays, that of their rulers and chieftains and their temples and places of worships, were to some extent affected by the architecture influenced by the two religions. An area of Lembah Bujang, Kedah has been identified as the centre of early Hindu and Buddhist cultures in West Malaysia. It is difficult to envisage the shape of the Malay houses then. This is because the houses were made of wood, and no longer exist.

Traditional Malay architecture continued to develop and flourish after the Malays embraced Islam. In the early period, many palaces of Malay kings were made of wood, the most outstanding amongst them are Istana Balai Besar and Istana Seri Akar in Kota Bahru, Kelantan; and Istana Ampang Tinggi and Istana Lama Seri Menanti in Negeri Sembilan. As an institutional monarchy, the Malay kings also built forts to complete the palace architecture. An example is the fort called Kota Batu Johor Lama, at Kampung Johor Lama, on the banks of Sungai Johor. This fort, together with a few others, now forms the heritage of traditional Malay architecture.

The Concept of Space

To the primitive Malays, the concept of space began from the concept of a hut (*pundung*), comprising four pillars, four walls, raised floor from the ground, and long-beam roofing (*bumbung panjang*). If there was a need to increase the space requirements, the area could be expanded by adding two more pillars.

When the number of pillars has become six, it is known as a bachelor's house (*rumah bujang*). This house is fit for a widow or widower. Part of the house is for the "lounge" (where cooking may be done and also for receiving guests), and the other part for sleeping, separated from the lounge by a curtain. The stairs are in front of the lounge. A house of six pillars is the basic structure – a main house (*ibu rumah*).

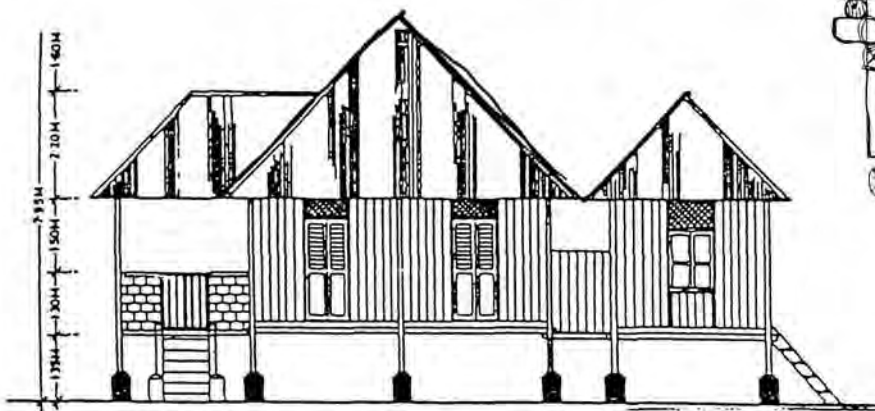
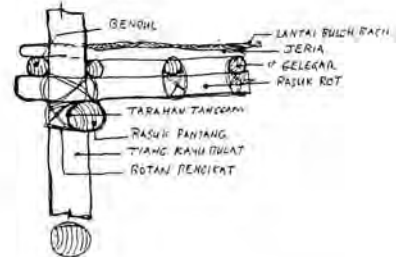
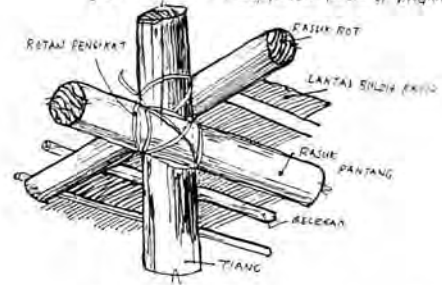
If more space is required, three more pillars will be added toward the back, making it nine pillars all together. However, these three pillars are shorter than the earlier six, to suit the steepness of the roof. This new additional space is called *kelek anak*. It is originally the space for cooking and for the ladies, and it may be walled or not.

One pillar will stand in the centre of the house. This central pillar is called *tiang tengah* (centre pillar) in Negeri Sembilan and Malacca, or *tiang seri* (outsanding pillar) in other parts of Malaysia. In Malay culture, this *tiang tengah* is of special importance; it is considered the centre or backbone of the house.

Additional space can be further created by adding three more pillars toward the front of the house. This elongated space is separated by the wall of the house, and is called *serambi*. In Riau, and the east coast of Malaysia, it is called *selasar*. This front part of the house is reserved for male guests. Female guests will proceed straight in through a door. With the addition of the *serambi*, a house is called *rumah tiang dua belas* (a house with twelve pillars). To this house of twelve pillars, many more additional spaces can be made. This type of house is found all over West Malaysia.

Addition to the kitchen for more space is common. Normally, this space formed a building by itself, called the *dapur* area, and runs parallel to the main house. The *dapur* may be connected to the main house by a raised floor with no roof (in Malacca, this area has a raised cemented floor). This connecting space is called *selang* or *pelantar*

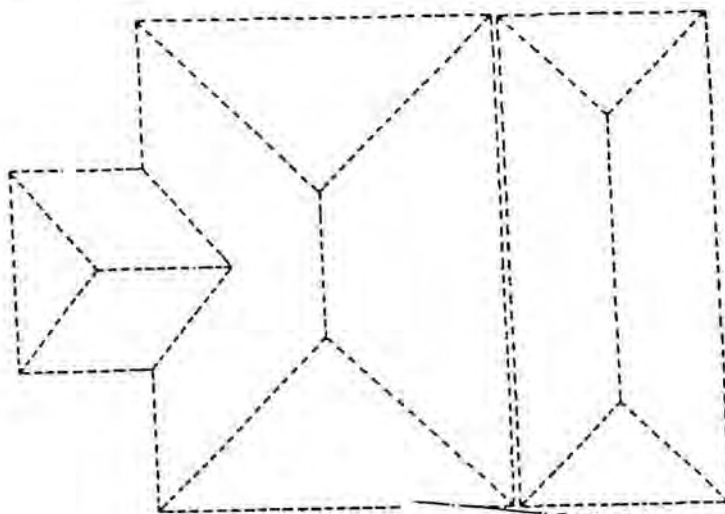
KONSTRUKSI TIANG, LANTAI, PASUK
RUMAH DANGAH
(CONSTRUCTION OF POLES, WOODEN FLOOR OF MALAYAN HOUSE)



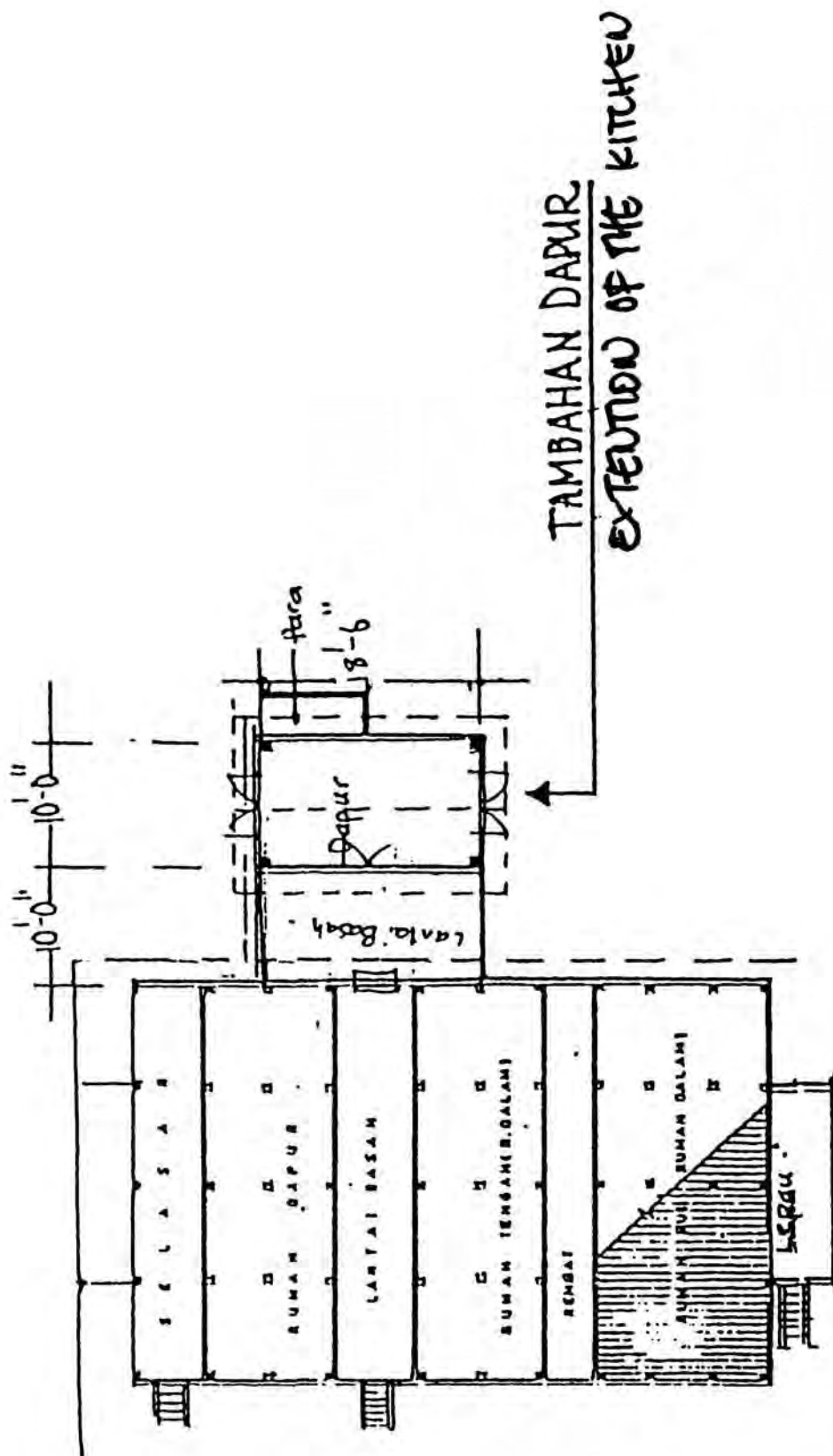
PANDANGAN TEPI
SIDE ELEVATION

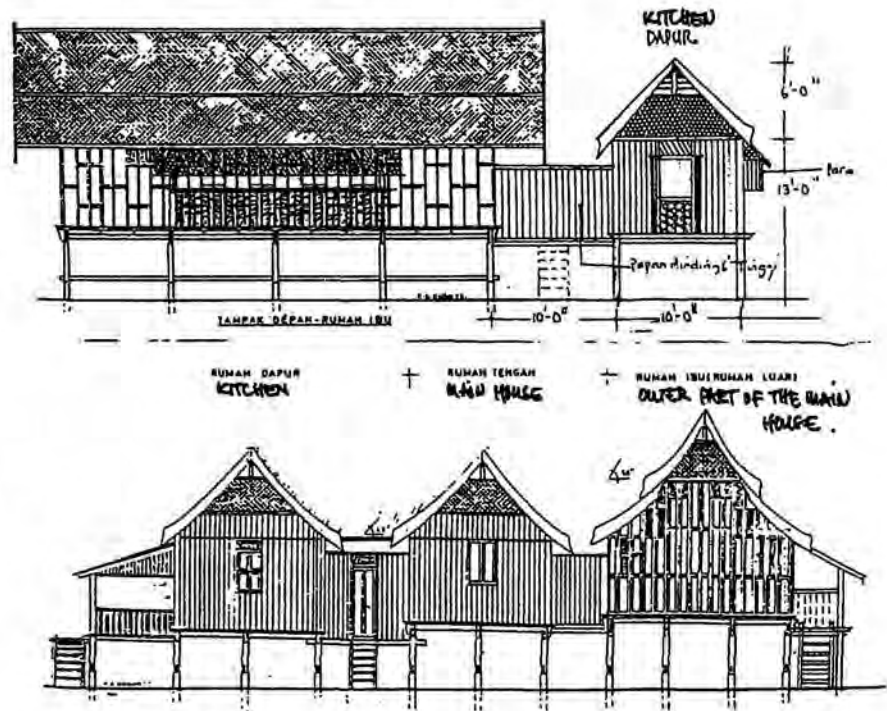
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Meter
SEKIL

RUMAH PERANG LIMA



TOP VIEW





tengah (centre platform). Nowadays, most of the connecting space between the kitchen and main house is roofed, forming a house called *rumah dua bandung* (two-block house).

There is also an addition to the *serambi* area by adding half the original *serambi* area, at the end of it. This added area is called *anjung* in Malacca, and *pangkal serambi* in Negeri Sembilan. Some also add a new *anjung* at the other end of the *serambi*, and if it is the same size as the first *anjung*, the *serambi* looks symmetrical and well balanced (in the feudal Malay world, it is called *taboo*). The addition of *anjung* is common nowadays because of the need for space to put furniture in the guest area.

A house of twelve pillars (including the *serambi*, *rumah ibu*, and *kelek anak*) can be further enlarged by adding more pillars to it. The Malays normally do not make small additions to the main house (*rumah ibu*). It is given respect and honour, thus cannot be altered or damaged. Additions can be made to the *serambi* or kitchen area. Hence, many kitchen areas have been changed and renovated, yet the *rumah ibu* (literally translated to mean house of mother) remains untouched. The last addition is made to the roof by putting up ceiling to all or part of the *rumah ibu*. This is called *loteng* or *peran* (ceiling).

A *loteng* can be raised high so that it looks like a double-storey house. Having a *Loteng* is only an option; most Malay houses in Malacca, Rembau and Sungai Linggi in Negeri Sembilan have *lotengs*.

A “complete” Malay house in the early period is that which has twelve pillars, comprising three zones. They are:

- a. Front zone, for the males and guests.
- b. Middle zone, the main house and of great importance.
- c. Back zone, for the females, and a kitchen area.

A dwelling place built by human beings is not a house unless it satisfies three basic requirements, i.e. it must have a roof, floor and wall. These three elements form the space area that can later be divided into various compartments with their own special functions as required by their occupants.

Space in the architecture of a traditional Malay house reflects the social norms of the Malays, especially with regard to the social interaction between the male and female members of their society. It must be able to accommodate duo-compartmentalisation. Space comprises the *serambi* and *anjung* at the front of the house; the *rumah ibu*; the sleeping room; space for the *kelek anak* in the centre; the kitchen and the *pelantar* (platform) at the back part of the house.

Generally, a traditional Malay house has the following components:

- a. *Anjung*
- b. *Serambi*
- c. *Rumah ibu*
- d. Sleeping room
- e. *Kelek anak*
- f. Kitchen
- g. *Pelantar*
- h. *Perigi* (well) near the house.

These spaces have their own functions, based on concepts of space that are different from that for a modern house, where it is assumed the occupant dedicates specialized function for each particular room. The space in a modern house is known for its particular use; for example, sleeping room for sleeping, bathroom for bathing, dinning room for meals, leisure room for resting, etc.. To use the activity

To understand the concept of space in a traditional Malay house, a particular space or area carries more than one function or activity.

concept for each particular area in a modern house to understand the concept of space in a traditional Malay house, a particular space or area carries more than one function or activity.

To appreciate the spatial functions in a traditional Malay house, we need to understand the concepts of duo-compartmentalisation, and public-private usage. Malay society in pre-modern period only recognised social norms for duo-compartmentalisation whereby the society is socially divided into two groups – male and female. In line with the requirements of these social norms, the houses were designed and planned in such a way as to accommodate the idea of duo-compartmentalisation. This can be better understood once the activities of the occupants of the houses are determined in detail. The concept of public-private usage refers to space that is open, and that which is regarded as close. Open means the space can be used by outsiders, while close areas are for members of the household only.

Other than the space to cater for the need of duo-compartmentalisation and public-private usage, there are also spaces created from external factors – called micro and macro factors. Micro factors refer to the requirements demanded by the house occupants in relation to their activities in the house. The macro factors refer to the needs of the society toward the traditional Malay house vis-à-vis social, cultural, economic and religious aspects.

Usage of Space and Philosophy

The following is a brief description of the types of spaces connected to a traditional Malay house, including those outside the house, its village and surroundings, and space in front and under the house (*kolong*).

The Village and its Surroundings

Kampung, or village, is the living area for Malay communities. A village has many houses, the number of which is not fixed. The houses are normally close to the rice (*padi*) fields, rivers and streams. The early Malays who sailed and lived in house-boats or rafts, locate their families within a community, maintaining security from external threats. This style of living can also be seen among the dayak tribe, in Kalimantan, who live in long houses that are connected with several families under one roof.

Open Space around the House

Every traditional Malay house should have an open space around it. The space is an area which is free of grass and constantly swept and kept clean. This area in front of the house is important, and should be wider than the others. The space on the sides of the house is narrower, and that behind the house is much smaller and given less attention. Further away from these open spaces (*halaman*) may be fruit and vegetable gardens. The open space has to be clean, spotless and free of foliage and litter. This gives rise to erosion due to heavy rains (the Malays seem not to be concerned with erosion, and would simply put up wood cuttings or rocks to prevent it).

The importance of the open space to the Malays is contained in their proverb, *Kampung dan Halaman* (Village and the Open Space). If a person is said to have no village and open space, he is regarded as being very poor and aimless. The *halaman* has its aesthetic value. It looks beautiful and attractive if decorated with flower plants and herbs. If the *halaman* is clean, *spacious* and wide, it will keep away harmful insects and poisonous creatures.

The *halaman* also functions as a playground for children, as well as training areas for practising self-defence. On a wedding day, the *halaman* becomes the area for receiving guests, where tents (*penanggeh* or *khemah*) are erected, and cultural groups hold performances. Discussion, negotiation, engagement, betrothal (*pinang-meminang*) and other related activities are often carried out at the end of the *serambi*.

Designs and Functions

Basically, a Malay house can be divided into the front, middle and back part, all of which centre around the *rumah ibu* (main house) and the kitchen.

Anjung

An entrance to a traditional Malay house is by the stairs or steps that lead to a closed area called *anjung*, which acts as the transitional area between the guests and the house owners or hosts. The steps are connected directly to the house and have a *lean-to* type of roofing.

At the main entrance to the house, guests and visitors are entertained in the *anjung*. It is also a resting place, where long wooden benches may be provided, for sitting, conversation and observing passers-by. Net-making and sewing are also done in this area. As a sign of respect to the males as leaders and administrators of the house, the *anjung* is their domain for carrying out their activities.

Serambi Gantung

From the entrance or steps, you enter the *serambi gantung*, a long narrow area adjacent to, and a bit lower than, the *rumah ibu*. It has a roof separated from the main house by a wooden wall. The *serambi gantung* can be built at the same time as the main house, or at a later stage.

Male guests are entertained here, where they make fish nets, teach the Qur'an, or just sit and discuss local affairs. Since this area is lower than the main house (the floor is about seven inches lower than the floor of the main house), the guests will feel comfortable to discuss matters without disturbing the peace of the others. Its low windows provide good ventilation and, preferably, beautiful scenery for the guests. The frontal position of the *serambi gantung*, together with its functions, makes it an important part of traditional Malay architecture.

In conclusion, genuine architecture, nurtured by natural interests, is a result of evolution. In this light, the utmost should be done to preserve traditional Malay architecture, which is a cultural evolution and heritage of the Malays.

Lokman Hj Mohd Zen

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