

Ode to the House

At the heart of the traditional Malay house are architectural genius and age-old wisdom.

ILLUSTRATION: AHMAD HARUN
TEXT: REPRODUCED FROM *RUMAH, AN ODE TO THE MALAY HOUSE*

The Malay house represents the wisdom of traditional building, of sharing a habitat with others, and of living sustainably with nature. In its simplest form, the traditional *rumah* (house) is a post-and-lintel structure, raised above the ground on stilts or piers, covered with a thatched or tiled roof, enclosed with wooden or bamboo walls, and perforated with windows and lattices. Size, form and ornamentation depend as much on the wealth and status of its owner as they do the regional variations of its location.

Malay settlements are found on the Malay Peninsula and in the Malay provinces along the east coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. They have much in common with other Southeast Asian houses, yet they are distinct in their ethnic and local identities. From the humble fisherman's hut to the elegantly-carved houses of Terengganu, the eclectic houses of Melaka with their brick piers, and the magnificent communal houses of Negeri Sembilan – each Malay house type expresses the culture, customs and the *genius loci* or spirit of the place.



LEFT: Pintu Borak. The poet describes this door as: "The carved and polished *pintu borak* is where one's gaze may be cast over the wide and spacious grounds."

BELOW: An illustration of a *rumah* with animals being fed in the house compound.

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Rumah* with *selembayung* with twin peaks. *Selembayung* is a pair of ornately carved finials, projecting from the upper rake edge of the roof.

A MYRIAD MALAY HOUSES

Malay house types are sometimes classified by their roof forms: The boat-shaped *rumah lontik* with its gently curved ridge, the traditional *bumbung panjang* with its long-ridged slopes, the *bumbung Perak* with its Dutch-cut roof and the *bumbung Limas* with its multifarious aprons – hip, half-hip and gable. Then, there are different house layouts, varied by the size and placement of the porch (*anjung*) at the front, and the cookhouse (*rumah dapur*) at the back. The *gajah menyusu*, with the smaller house attached to the main house, is likened to a suckling elephant.

The traditional Malay house is part of a cluster of dwellings and ancillary buildings set in a compound; in fact, the English word 'compound' is derived from the Malay word, *kampung*. It is to this space that the house belongs – bounded yet open, created by a clustering of forms with their multiple orientations and approaches. Every path leads to the village mosque, the most magnificent structure around, to which the stature of all other dwellings must submit. The orientation of *kampung* houses was changed by roads, those that can be crossed and those that cannot.





ABOVE: An area called *poserek*, located in the inner space of the house, specifically used for gatherings of selected members of the family.

KAMPUNG LIFE

Traditional ways of living with others are part of a gentle moral economy. In the *kampung*, people, families and neighbours are connected by a communal web of mutual obligations, which find expression in daily acts of kindness. At the centre of this web is the kitchen or *dapur* – ‘the heat of the hearth’ – where with alimentation, advice and admonishment, children are nourished and kinship is nurtured. Old values and sayings (*pepatah pepatih*) are remembered whenever one returns ‘home’ (*balik kampung*) to the place of one’s origin.

The house represents one’s station in life: The houses of nobility display emblematic roof ornaments, while the rich

show off their wealth with carved embellishments. The house is a stage (*rumah panggung*) and life takes place within it. The raised porch (*anjung*) is the halfway space where interactions take place between host and visitor. Prosperous owners welcome exalted guests on the *anjung*, in full view of neighbours. Guests are invited in as far as the front hall, but the *pintu Malim* guards the privacy of the women’s quarters. The poor man, unseen, enters his humble hut by a rudimentary ladder.

LEGACY IN WOOD

Traditional ways of building are handed down from master to apprentice. The indigenous house builder is the vernacular architect. He sites and positions

the house to be built, taking into account the directions of the sun, wind, forest, field and other human dwellings. He plans the layout and specifies the materials according to the client’s means, family size and requirements. He extracts the timbers from a nearby forest depending on the size of available trees, knowing the hardness and durability of wood species and the most economical ways of cutting timbers.

The act of hoisting large timbers usually requires the help of all the strong men in the village. The first column is erected ceremoniously, then the inner four, and then the others – from the inner to the outer, from the large timbers to the small. The master and his apprentice then set to work

on site. Roof trusses and joists keep the columns in place, joined and secured without nails. Floorboards and wall boards are cut and planed. Split bamboo is woven for walls and partitions. Finials are fashioned. Lattices, fanlights and rail guards are punctured and carved. Roofs of terracotta tiles, *Singgora* shingles or thatched *nipah* palm are laid piece by piece, completing the shelter. The builder coordinates the myriad house-building tasks among those paid and unpaid, those skilled and not so skilled. He applies his methods in order to protect the house from the elements, pests and ground rot, and to sanctify the house from the unseen.

Traditional ways of living sustainably with nature are passed down from generation to generation. Kampung settlements are traditionally sited in relation to landscape features: Close enough to the river to obtain water for daily use, but far enough to avoid its angry floods; near enough to the jungle to source for forest products and medicines, but far enough



LEFT: *Tiang Bujang*, a solitary free-standing pillar in the centre of the house.

BELOW: *Rumah perabung panjang*; a house which sports a roof ridge that runs parallel to the main thoroughfare in front of it.

to keep safe from snakes and wild animals. In an agricultural setting, kampung houses are grouped together in the shade of tall tree groves, like an atoll in a sea of green or yellowing rice fields.

FORM & FUNCTIONALITY

Structures and space serve several purposes. Built over land, the understoreys of farmers' houses are used for storage and livestock. Built over water, the fishermen's houses are raised on stilts where boats are tethered, and linked by plank gangways where catch is dried.

The architecture of the Malay house mitigates the harshness of the tropical climate – the heat of day, the force of monsoon rains. Trees are planted for shade. Traditional roofing materials create an envelope of coolness. The raised house and verandahs (*serambi*) capture the breeze. Porous partitions allow cross-ventilation through rooms. Natural soft light filters through lattices. Work and play carry on in the umbrage of generous roof overhangs.

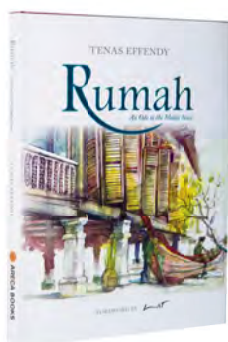


RUMAH

AN ODE TO A MALAY HOUSE



Tenas Effendy's poem in his book *Rumah* describes the Riau-Malay house in all its complexity and declares the tangible and intangible elements shared by all Malay houses in the region. As the verses unfold, various aspects of the rumah are carefully revealed layer by layer like a many petalled flower in slow bloom. Captured within these lines are the silent and spiritual elements found within its four walls, encompassing the cycles of birth and death, of nurturing and learning, mysticism and religion, social conduct and moral values, traditional customs and the daily episodes of life. This is the *vis vitae* of the Malay psyche, all wrapped in an elegant ode to the Malay house.



Rumah, An Ode to a Malay House is published by Areca Books.
www.arecabooks.com

RIGHT: The position/ arrangement of steps leading into the house comes with its own set of significance: "The first extends a greeting, the second scrapes the dust of your heels away, the third casts weariness aside, the fourth is for surveying the grounds, the fifth is trod with *adat* (tradition), the sixth is where the handrails give rest".





BELOW: Homes were built in total harmony with nature and its surroundings.

A WEALTH OF WISDOM

Life's abundance is in rice harvests, fish caught from a river, the bounty of fruit orchards. As for material possessions, less is more. Prized possessions fit into an earthly trunk. Rooms in the Malay house are characterised by a lack of furniture, an absence of clutter. With an unfurling of mats, the floor is a place for reading, repose and sleep. Dishes are laid out and meals are taken on the mat. Waste is unheard of. All sorts of things are borrowed, lent, used and reused. Food scraps nourish the plants or are fed to the livestock. In awe of spirits, humans tread lightly into the forest. All around the kampung, nature regenerates itself.

Today, the wisdom of the traditional Malay house is more relevant than ever. The iconic *rumah* is arguably the

most significant symbol of our traditional architectural legacy. Yet, heritage legislation, geared toward the monumental, is hardly, if ever, used to protect it. The kampung has even less chance of surviving than the individual *rumah*.

The traditional Malay kampung is a cluster of dwellings set in a compound and includes any related communal, service or ancillary buildings. The kampung is often part of an indigenous cultural landscape associated with rice farming, orchards or fishing; it encompasses open spaces, trees and vegetation, water and earth features. The spatial character of the kampung depicts its rural or peri-urban beginnings, even if it may have since been subsumed by urban expansion.

As the traditional Malay house is increasingly endangered, so are the ethos of communal living and the wisdom of living

in harmony with nature. In many rural areas, Malay houses weather from neglect. The rural–urban drift has left the old folk as caretakers of our common heritage. Many kampung settlements have already been lost. In towns and cities, most urban villages have been cleared for redevelopment, while the odd one, out of thousands, is carefully preserved in museums and resorts. Taken out of its kampung context, the Malay house is little more than a curiosity – an anomaly even – amongst indigenous forms that have colonised the modern Southeast Asian landscape. So many children have never experienced the joy of living in a traditional Malay house, and soon, many will have grown up without ever having visited a traditional kampung in its natural setting. 🏡

