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FROM TRADITION TO TRANSITION: ADDRESSING THE MALAY LANDSCAPE DEFICIT IN PERAK TENGAH

**Nur Huzeima Mohd Hussain¹, Ahmad Zamil Zakaria²,
Atikah Raihanah Amir³, Desy Aryanti⁴, Mazkhalis Mahi⁵**

*^{1,2,3}Department of Built Environment Studies and Technology,
Faculty of Built Environment,*

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA, PERAK BRANCH, MALAYSIA

⁴ Department of Architecture,

UNIVERSITAS BUNG HATTA, SUMATERA BARAT, INDONESIA

*⁵Department of Landscape Promotion & Industry,
JABATAN LANDSKAP NEGARA*

Abstract

This study addresses the growing issue of cultural and spatial disparities in traditional Malay settlements, focusing on Perak Tengah. The key issue investigated is the Malay landscape deficit; the measurable decline of culturally embedded spatial patterns, vernacular architecture, land use traditions, and communal values, driven by rapid urbanisation and modern planning practices. The research aims to conceptualise and examine this deficit by identifying key indicators of landscape and cultural transformations in rural Malay contexts. Specifically, the objectives are to trace physical changes, evaluate the condition of traditional houses, and assess socio-cultural implications over time. Using a qualitative case study method combining document analysis, field observation, and GIS mapping (1990–2020), the study focuses on villages such as Kampong Ekor Bota, Kampong Bota Kiri, and Kampong Padang Tenggara. The limitations are subjected to accessible data gained through GIS and fieldwork. Findings highlight four authenticity deficit indicators and the erosion of traditional landscapes. The study contributes to culturally sensitive planning by offering recommendations aligned with the future demands for inclusive, heritage-resilient development in Malaysia.

Keywords: Malay Landscape, deficit, authenticity, kampong, Perak Tengah

¹ Corresponding author. Email: nurhu154@uitm.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

The traditional Malay cultural landscape, once richly embedded in Malaysia's physical and social fabric, faces a growing threat of erasure. Rapid urbanisation, changing lifestyles, and prioritising economic development have led to the neglect and marginalisation of indigenous spatial traditions, architectural heritage, and community values. As a result, many Malaysian towns and rural areas reflect globalised urban forms rather than the nuanced, place-based identities rooted in the nation's cultural history (Yusof et al., 2022).

In the Malay worldview, the landscape is not merely a physical setting but an embodiment of *adat* (customs), belief systems, and social structures. The traditional kampung, with its organic layout, timber houses on stilts, shaded communal spaces, and intimate relationship with nature, represents more than architecture; it symbolises a way of life (King, 2008; Gullick, 1987). Yet, these elements are often absent in contemporary planning practices, giving rise to what this paper terms a "Malay landscape deficit".

This deficit refers to the tangible, measurable erosion of the traditional Malay cultural landscape. It includes the loss of traditional spatial arrangements, vernacular architectural typologies, agricultural land use, and spaces of communal interaction. As settlements modernise, organic kampung layouts are replaced with grid systems; timber stilt houses give way to concrete structures; and rice fields or orchards are converted into residential or industrial zones.

Closely linked but conceptually distinct is the idea of an "authenticity deficit", a deeper, qualitative disconnection between modern developments and the genuine cultural expressions they attempt to represent. This occurs when so-called Malay identity is evoked only at the surface level through motifs, signage, or symbolic references without preserving the embedded spatial logic, environmental responsiveness, or social coherence of traditional Malay settlements (Ismail, 2018).

As Malaysia looks toward more inclusive and sustainable development, there is a critical need to interrogate the extent of these deficits and their implications. This paper raises concerns on: Is the Malay landscape facing a deficit in Perak Tengah? What are the spatial, architectural, and social changes in kampung life? And how can planning considerations better accommodate cultural continuity amid inevitable change? By critically assessing the interface between tradition and modernity, and between physical form and lived experience, this study uniquely contributes to the discourse on culturally sensitive planning by contextualizing the concept of 'authenticity deficit' within the Malay rural landscape, framing it as both a planning and cultural sustainability issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(i) The Malay Cultural Landscape Tradition

The Malay cultural landscape is rooted in a holistic worldview that integrates physical, social, and spiritual dimensions. Traditional kampung settings reflect adat (customs), Islamic values, and environmental responsiveness. Scholars such as Gullick (1987), King (2008), and Wan Hashim (1994) describe how kampung spatial arrangements featuring timber houses on stilts, open verandahs (*anjung*), and modular layouts (*rumah ibu*, *rumah dapur*) are designed to accommodate communal living, environmental adaptation, and spiritual orientation.

These built forms are intimately tied to the landscape: houses face rivers or roads, compounds are shaded with local trees, and agricultural land surrounds the residential core. The kampung functions as both a settlement and a living system of knowledge, with values of *gotong-royong* (mutual help) and familial continuity shaping everyday life.

(ii) Cultural Landscape Transition

Over recent decades, Malaysia's rural and peri-urban regions have undergone substantial transformation due to development pressures, changing lifestyles, and planning paradigms prioritising modernisation. Scholars like Hussein (2008) and Said & Shamsuddin (2015) document the steady erosion of kampung spatial identity, replaced by gridded housing layouts and infrastructure-driven development. This transition often disrupts traditional land-use patterns, replacing agriculture with institutional or residential zoning (Nordin et al., 2019; Rashid & Othman, 2021).

Planning mechanisms, though technically robust, are often culturally blind. Ahmad et al. (2020) and Kamarudin et al. (2022) critique current spatial planning for sidelining heritage preservation in favour of efficiency and uniformity. Attempts to "preserve" Malay identity frequently result in superficial representations using decorative motifs or symbolic facades without maintaining spatial logic, environmental adaptation, or social function (Farid et al., 2023; Ismail, 2018).

This transition phase reflects a complex interplay between policy, land speculation, youth migration, and lifestyle shifts. In regions like Perak Tengah, where *kampung* morphology once defined the rural landscape, these pressures lead to a fragmentation of cultural continuity.

(iii) Emerging Evidences of The Malay Landscape Deficit

The term Malay landscape deficit captures the cumulative loss of traditional Malay spatial identity, cultural function, and environmental integration. It is both a physical and symbolic erosion of the *kampung* landscape visible in the disappearance of timber houses, fenced compounds, and the decline of communal spaces like *balai raya* or *suraus*. Zainol et al. (2022) and Mazlan et al. (2022)

highlight landscape changes in Perak Tengah where agricultural areas are fragmented, traditional houses deteriorate, and social spaces are underused or repurposed.

Closely related is the concept of authenticity deficit (Ismail, 2018), which describes how modern developments may mimic visual elements of Malay architecture without retaining their embedded cultural logic. The loss of features such as the *rumah panggung*, passive cooling systems, or house orientation to Qibla signifies a disconnect between form and meaning. This deficit is further exacerbated by planning approaches that neglect cultural indicators. As planning documents and local development plans prioritise growth targets and infrastructure delivery, *kampung* settlements become increasingly excluded from the vision of sustainable development (Kamarudin et al., 2022).

This study positions the Malay landscape deficit as a critical planning challenge, particularly in areas like Perak Tengah where traditional and transitional elements collide.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative case study methodology to examine the Malay landscape deficit in Perak Tengah, Perak, a district known for its concentration of traditional *kampung* settlements and ongoing peri-urban transformation. Perak Tengah was selected as the study area because it represents one of the few remaining regions in Peninsular Malaysia where traditional Malay *kampung* settlements still exist alongside rapidly growing urban development. GIS analysis from 1990 to 2020 shows a 37% increase in built-up areas, mainly replacing paddy fields and timber-based housing compounds. As many *kampungs* in Perak Tengah still retain vernacular architectural features, spatial layouts, and social practices, this pursuits the suitable location for studying the transition from tradition to modernity in the Malay landscape.

Further to the investigations, five (5) villages were selected for detailed study namely Kampung Ekor Bota, Kampung Bota Kiri, Kampung Padang Tenggal, Kampung Baru Bota, and Kampung Pulau Pisang. The selected reasons are based on (i) Traditional Features Still Present (ii) Visible Transformation (iii) Good Access and Data Availability. These sites provide the right conditions to study how traditional Malay landscapes are being lost or changed over time, and how planning can better protect them. Furthermore, the selection of these five villages was guided by their representativeness of traditional features, observable transitions, and accessibility for fieldwork. However, limitations include the modest sample size, dependence on accessible GIS datasets, and the limited transferability of results beyond Perak Tengah's specific socio-cultural context.

The methodology integrates several data collection and analysis strategies:

- i. **Field Observation:** On-site visits to selected kampung locations in Perak Tengah were conducted to observe changes in building typologies, spatial arrangements, land use, and human activity patterns.
- ii. **Document Analysis:** Review of planning documents, policy guidelines (such as the National Physical Plan and local development plans), and archival records of kampung development.
- iii. **GIS-based Land Use Mapping:** Satellite imagery and land use data from 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020 were analysed to visualise spatial transformations, identify encroachment patterns, and quantify the loss of cultural and agricultural landscapes.

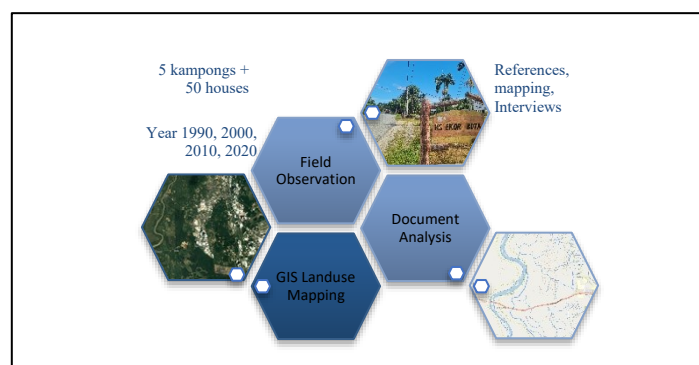


Figure 1: Mixed qualitative approach with triangulation method
Source: Author

This mixed qualitative approach allows for a triangulation of data sources to capture both the visible and intangible dimensions of the Malay landscape deficit. It also facilitates the identification of key indicators, such as spatial pattern disruption, architectural homogenisation, land use conversion, and decline in communal spaces, which form the basis of the analysis and recommendations. Ethics Statement: The field observations conducted in this study complied with institutional ethical standards. No human subjects were directly interviewed; however, permissions for site visits were obtained from local community representatives and the university's research committee.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study identified four interrelated indicators that characterised the Malay landscape deficit in Perak Tengah. Each reflects a material and symbolic transformation of the traditional kampung landscape, further complicated by top-down planning paradigms and shifting socio-economic conditions. The indicators are: (i) Loss of Tangible Landscape and Traditional Spatial Patterns, (ii)

Architectural Homogenisation, (iii) Land Use Changes and Agricultural Decline, and (iv) Decline of Communal Functions and Social Spaces. Together, these indicators reflect how modern planning, institutional priorities, and socio-economic shifts have fundamentally restructured the once-cohesive Malay rural landscape.

i. Spatial Patterns Disruption

The transformation from organically evolved kampung layouts to formal grid-based subdivisions signifies a significant rupture in spatial culture. Traditionally, Malay settlements were orientated toward natural features rivers, communal spaces, and agricultural fields anchored by social logic and *adat*. However, spatial analysis of Perak Tengah indicates a standardised street grids and cul-de-sacs imposed by state housing schemes and private developers.



Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Malay Landscape Changes in Perak Tengah (1990-2020)

Year	1990	2000	2010	2020
Built-up Area	Sparse development (10%), primarily traditional Malay kampung settlements.	Moderate increase (30%) in development, especially around Seri Iskandar.	Rapid expansion (60%) of urban and institutional zones.	Significant urban sprawl (80%), large portions converted to housing and industry.
Traditional Kampung Houses	Majority (90%) intact, scattered across rural settings.	Beginning signs (70%) of renovation using concrete materials.	More kampung houses (40%) were replaced or extended with modern materials.	Only 20% remain liveable in original form; many abandoned or deteriorated.
Agricultural Land	Extensive paddy fields and mixed rural agriculture.	Still dominant, but beginning to reduce around new developments.	Rapid conversion to mixed-use land.	Highly fragmented; some replaced by urban and commercial use.
Natural Landscape & Forests	Forested regions and river systems largely undisturbed.	Some deforestation around Seri Iskandar and Tronoh.	Noticeable fragmentation and degradation of green belts.	Significant loss due to mining, urbanisation, and infrastructure projects.
Infrastructure Development	Minimal roads and connectivity.	Major roads expanding toward Seri Iskandar and educational institutions.	Road networks densified, connecting towns and satellite settlements.	Full road networks, commercial areas, and residential grids established.
Cultural Landscape Integrity	High integrity of spatial, social, and	Gradual decline due to structural and	Fragmentation increases;	Severe deficit in authenticity and

Year	1990	2000	2010	2020
	architectural traditions.	social modernisation.	authenticity begins to diminish.	continuity of Malay cultural landscape.

Source: Author

This shift undermines the relational nature of kampung design by disrupting environmental responsiveness, privacy gradients, and communal proximity (Ahmad et al., 2020). The National Rural Physical Planning Policy has inadvertently privileged uniformity over local adaptation, thereby marginalising kampung planning principles (Kamarudin et al., 2022).

An analysis of GIS and field observation data revealed a significant transformation of the physical landscape across the five kampongs; between 1990 and 2020, built-up areas increased by an average of 37%, often at the expense of agricultural and green spaces. In Kampung Baru Bota, several traditional timber houses were either replaced or modified with concrete structures lacking climatic responsiveness and symbolic detailing. Compound boundaries once defined by vegetation and social function have become fenced and isolated (Ibrahim et al., 2013).

Moreover, Figure 3 also shows the remaining traditional Malay house, though it physically remains, it is no longer liveable, showing signs of neglect and abandonment. The house retains its cultural form but has lost its function, highlighting a shift from lived tradition to static heritage.



Figure 3: The Remaining Original Malay Traditional House in Perak Tengah

Source: Author

ii. Architectural Homogenisation

There is a marked disappearance of traditional architectural forms, such as the *rumah Melayu* with elevated floors, ventilation-focused design, and symbolic carvings. These have been replaced by generic terrace and single-storey dwellings, often devoid of vernacular cues. While some developments attempt to simulate ‘Malay identity’ through superficial motifs (e.g. wood carvings panels), the loss of symbolic authenticity and ecological design principles remains evident.

This form of architectural erasure aligns with what Ismail (2018) terms the authenticity deficit; a gap between visual representation and lived cultural meaning. Contemporary houses do not respond to climatic or social needs, resulting in a loss of identity and performance.



Figure 4: Photo evidence juxtaposes timber heritage homes in Perak Tengah kampongs with adjacent concrete resettlement units built post-2000, illustrating stylistic and functional discontinuity *Source: Author*



Figure 5: Remaining Authentic feature in Malay Traditional Houses in Perak Tengah *Source: Author*

The erosion of traditional Malay house features in contemporary development reflects a deeper authenticity deficit that goes beyond physical changes; it signals a disconnection from the cultural, spiritual, and environmental logic that once defined Malay domestic architecture. Traditional elements such as *tiang seri* (central pillars), elevated timber floors, and modular layouts were not merely aesthetic choices but expressions of values rooted in spiritual beliefs,

family structure, and climatic responsiveness (Wan Hashim, 1994; Lim, 1987). The loss of features like the *anjung* (verandah), *rumah ibu - rumah dapur* modularity, and ornate wood carvings represents a rupture in the intangible cultural knowledge passed down through generations (Tajuddin, 2006). Details of these authenticity deficits as labelled in Figure 5 are explained in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of Authenticity deficit in Traditional Malay House in Perak Tengah

Authentic Feature	Modern/Altered condition	Nature of Deficit
Rumah Tiang 12 / Tiang Seri (central pillars)	Replaced by reinforced concrete frames	Loss of sacred spatial anchor; structural symbolism removed
Timber Construction (chengal, meranti, etc.)	Substituted with cement, bricks, or steel	Loss of local material knowledge and climate-responsive design
Bumbung Perabung Lima (five-ridge roof)	Changed to flat/slab or generic pitched roofs	Disconnection from cultural roof geometry and spiritual orientation
Tangga Batu / Tangga Kayu (front stairs)	Removed or replaced by generic tiled steps	Loss of transitional space that signals respect and welcome
Ukiran Kayu (intricate wooden carvings)	Omitted entirely or mass-produced alternatives used	Loss of craftsmanship, identity and storytelling motifs
Open Verandah / Anjung	Enclosed or removed for space or air-conditioning	Loss of communal interaction space and natural ventilation
Elevated Floor (Rumah Panggung)	Ground-level construction due to concrete base	Loss of flood resilience and airflow underneath the house
Modular Expansion (Rumah Ibu, Rumah Dapur)	Static floor plan from commercial developer housing	Loss of adaptability and familial growth embedded in house design
Orientation to Qibla / Landscape	Ignored or inconsistent in newer housing designs	Loss of spiritual and environmental alignment

Source: Author

Simultaneously, when contemporary traditional house renovation was replaced with mass-produced, concrete-based forms lacking symbolic orientation or environmental adaptation, the Malay house loses its identity as a living cultural artefact. This transformation diminishes not only the architectural heritage but also the embedded social norms, rituals, and communal ways of life traditionally anchored in the home (Hussein, 2008; Said & Shamsuddin, 2015). As such, the authenticity deficit in house features becomes a key indicator of the broader Malay landscape deficit, a visible manifestation of how planning and development have failed to uphold cultural continuity in the built environment.

iii. Land Use Changes and Agricultural Decline

Kampung settlements in Perak Tengah historically relied on agrarian land use, including paddy cultivation, rubber tapping, and small - scale orchards. GIS land use data shows that from 1990 to 2020, approximately 37.5% of paddy and orchard lands in selected subdistricts were converted into housing or light industrial zones. This shift correlates with rising land speculation, housing schemes under Rancangan Malaysia, and youth migration away from agriculture (Rashid & Othman, 2021).

The conversion disrupts not only livelihoods but also embedded knowledge systems tied to seasonal rhythms and intergenerational stewardship. Additionally, this contributes to broader issues of food security and ecological imbalance in rural Malaysia (Shafie et al., 2019).

The elaboration in Figure 1 showed distribution and classification data revealed substantial land cover changes around kampong in Bota and mukim Layang-layang in Perak Tengah, which was once dense with agricultural land and activities was now subsequently developed.

iv. Social Cohesion Decline

Communal life, once a defining feature of kampong society, is diminishing under the pressure of individualised lifestyles and the disappearance of shared spaces. Observations highlighted the closure or underuse of *balai raya*, open prayer grounds, and weekly markets. With fewer youths remaining in villages, older residents report social fragmentation and reduced intergenerational transmission of customs.

Planners often neglect these intangible cultural functions, focusing instead on infrastructure delivery. However, the social vibrancy of kampong life stems from spatial encounters and ritual events that necessitate physical venues (Abd Wahab & Ahmad, 2022).



Figure 6: The repurposing of communal lots including mosque, schools, community hub
Source: Author

Table 3: Summary of The Malay Landscape deficit in Perak Tengah

Indicator	Symptom	Underlying Issues	Impact on Malay Landscape	Malay Landscape deficit
Spatial Pattern Disruption	Gridded layouts replace organic.	Top down planning, lack of participatory design	Fragmentation of organic settlement layout. Disconnection from river-oriented development logic	Loss of spatial identity
Architectural Homogenisation	Vernacular lots to modern form	Symbolic vs Genuine Identity	Loss of timber-based architecture and traditional passive cooling techniques	Loss of architectural authenticity
Landuse changes & Agricultural Decline	Rise of residential / Industrial	Market-driven land reform, Youth migration	Loss of self-sustaining village economy and relationship with land	Loss of cultural ecology
Social Cohesion Decline	Disuse of Communal facilities	Neglect of Social Infrastructure in Planning	Decline in intergenerational living, weakening of <i>gotong-royong</i> and <i>adat</i>	Loss of socio-cultural coherence

Source: Author

This refined analysis aligns with field data and positions the Malay landscape deficit within global concerns about heritage loss, rural depopulation, and culturally blind urbanism (UNESCO, 2020). It also underscores the limitations of current planning instruments in sustaining culturally rooted landscapes in transitional regions like Perak Tengah.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasises the critical need to reassess planning strategies in light of the lived cultural realities of Malay settlements. Through grounded, place-based analysis in Perak Tengah, the research has achieved its aim of identifying the drivers and manifestations of the Malay landscape deficit. The analysis of physical transformations in Perak Tengah from 1990 to 2020 reveals a clear pattern of cultural and spatial erosion within traditional Malay *kampung* settlements. The shift from organic, low-density layouts to rigid, modern housing schemes has disrupted the spatial identity rooted in Malay customs and environmental adaptation. A significant decline in traditional architecture, agricultural land use, and communal functions further illustrates the depth of the Malay landscape deficit.

Addressing these deficits calls for a reintegration of traditional knowledge in planning policy, a revaluation of cultural spaces, and active community participation. If unaddressed, the authenticity deficit will continue to widen, resulting in *kampung* environments that retain symbolic facades but lose

their soul. Future planning must therefore look beyond infrastructure to encompass meaning, memory, and identity in spatial development.

The practical recommendations offered, such as incorporating cultural indicators into spatial planning instruments, promoting community-based stewardship of heritage landscapes, and enabling adaptive reuse of traditional homes, seek to reconcile tradition with transformation. These strategies are relevant to Malaysian planners, particularly in addressing the objectives outlined in national frameworks such as the National Physical Plan (NPP), National Urbanisation Policy (NUP), and Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, all of which stress the importance of inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural resilience.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a more culturally sensitive planning paradigm that aligns with the mission of Plan Malaysia: to support evidence-based policies that honour local identity, promote spatial equity, and empower communities to shape their own futures. Preserving the Malay rural landscape is not about resisting change but about ensuring that it is rooted in a sense of place, memory, and cultural resilience. Future research could expand the concept of 'Malay landscape deficit' to comparable Southeast Asian contexts such as Indonesia, Thailand, or Brunei, where rural cultural landscapes face similar pressures of modernisation and authenticity erosion

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