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UNIVERSIDAD  
DE GRANADA



COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA  
DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

TOMO I

# COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

TOMO I



JUAN CALATRAVA  
DAVID ARREDONDO GARRIDO  
MARTA RODRÍGUEZ ITURRIAGA  
(EDS.)

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del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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## **Open-Air Museums in Borneo and the Dialectic of Vernacular Form**

Los museos al aire libre de Borneo y la dialéctica de la forma vernácula

AZMAH ARZMI

University Malaysia Sarawak, aazmah@unimas.my

### **Abstract**

Los museos al aire libre del patrimonio cultural de Borneo pretenden preservar y mostrar las casas tradicionales de las comunidades indígenas. Sin embargo, la autenticidad de estos museos es cuestionable, ya que a menudo aíslan las casas de su contexto original y presentan una visión romántica de la vida tradicional. Este artículo sostiene que la arquitectura vernácula de Borneo no es estática, sino que ha evolucionado, respondiendo a los cambios en las necesidades socioeconómicas y a la globalización. También destaca la actitud ambivalente de los indígenas hacia las casas vernáculas tradicionales, ya que representan su identidad cultural pero no ofrecen mucha comodidad ni practicidad en el mundo actual. El artículo hace un llamamiento para que los museos de arquitectura al aire libre de Borneo sean más inclusivos y documenten la historia de los cambios en el estilo de vida de los indígenas y la adaptación de sus hogares.

Open-air cultural heritage museums in Borneo aim to preserve and showcase the traditional houses of the indigenous communities. However, the authenticity of these museums is questionable, as they often isolate the houses from their original context and present a romanticized view of traditional life. This paper argues that vernacular architecture in Borneo is not static but has evolved, responding to changes in socio-economic needs and globalization. The paper also highlights the indigenous people's ambivalent attitude towards traditional vernacular houses, as they represent their cultural identity but do not provide much comfort or practicality in today's world. The paper calls for open-air architecture museums in Borneo to be more inclusive, and to document the history of the indigenous people's changing lifestyles and the adaptation of their homes.

### **Keywords**

Museos al aire libre, Borneo, arquitectura vernácula tropical, pueblos indígenas  
Open-air museums, Borneo, tropical vernacular architecture, indigenous people



## Introduction

The purpose of the Sarawak Cultural Village in Kuching and the Mari-Mari Cultural Village in Kota Kinabalu is to preserve and showcase the traditional houses of the indigenous communities in Borneo for domestic and foreign tourists. The structures here were reconstructed using traditional materials and techniques, such as with belian ironwood, bamboo and nipa leaves (fig. 1). They were built in a natural setting as if to convey that these houses exist in a pristine, unspoiled environment. In Sarawak Cultural Village for example, these houses are spread out around a lake amidst the lush backdrop of tropical rainforest and Mount Santubong. Annual cultural and religious events such as the Rainforest Music Festival and Hari Gawai are often held there, with captivating performances and re-enactments. Despite being a popular cultural attraction, the downside to these open-air museums is the issue of authenticity. Visitors may not comprehend the real-world challenges that are affecting the actual indigenous villages in Borneo today, as these houses are isolated from their original context due to their commodification for tourism. These open-air museums seem to suggest that these traditional building forms, which respond to the cultural and climatic environment, have stood the test of time and contrast with the international modern style, characterized by standardization and technological innovation.



Figure 1. The Orang Ulu House at the Sarawak Cultural Village, 2022, Azmah Arzmi.

When you go for a quick drive along the Pan-Borneo Highway in Sarawak past the Bidayuh and Iban villages, you would be hard-pressed to find these pure timber longhouse structures depicted in the Cultural Village, although a few may exist in remote areas. Rather, there are a myriad of different forms of detached houses, ranging from wooden houses on stilts with zinc roofs to a single-storey house made of bricks. Most of the indigenous Sarawakians no longer live in longhouses, some having moved to the port cities and smaller towns for work, some setting up detached houses in villages close to the cities or living in the peri-urban areas. Those who do, do not live in a pure timber longhouse. Instead, they live in renovated two-storey longhouses made of bricks, concrete, glass, zinc, or tiled roofs. Vernacular in form, but modern in structure. Their traditional spatial configuration is also supplemented with additional layouts according to the needs of the residents. The reality is in sharp contrast to the books and past research on indigenous houses in Sarawak published over the past 50 years.

In his book, Sten Rentzogh addressed the critiques surrounding open-air museums in the context of Europe and USA. Whether it is the Skansen in Sweden, the Village Museums in Romania, or the Čičmany Museum Village in Slovakia, these open-air museums have the tendency to decontextualize buildings and romanticize traditional lifestyles. People keen on assessing these museum villages need to be critical about their accuracy and authenticity.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Borneo, the Sarawak Cultural Village and Mari-Mari Village in Sabah do not depict the reality of the indigenous peoples' lifestyles. Visitors may not comprehend the real-world challenges that are affecting the actual indigenous villages in Borneo today, as these houses are isolated from their original context due to their commodification for tourism. These open-air museums seem to suggest that these traditional building forms, which respond to the cultural and climatic environment, have stood the test of time and are in contrast to the international modern style, characterized by standardization and technological innovation. Therefore, this paper argues that vernacular architecture in Borneo is not static but has evolved, responding to changes in socio-economic needs and globalization. In reality, these hybrid forms of the vernacular are commonly found in rural settlements throughout Borneo, whereas the pure traditional form, which is constructed out of natural, local resources is now difficult to find. Even in the heartlands of Borneo, such as in Padawan, Sarawak, near the Kalimantan border, the Bidayuh people have adapted their homes with industrialized building materials. Hence, this paper interrogates the interplay between these two vernacular forms, and the role of museums in communicating this dialectic. One that is fetishized by idealist architects and tourists, and the other in which the actual indigenous people inhabit today. This paper also highlights the indigenous people's ambivalent attitude towards the former, that, although it represents their cultural identity, it does not provide much comfort or practicality in today's world as much as the hybrid vernacular. Yet, as much as vernacular architecture enthusiasts insist on the preservation of the traditional, the evolution process of its hybrid counterpart should also be documented and included within the

<sup>1</sup> Sten Rentzogh, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2007).

museum narrative. Open-air architecture museums in Borneo should be just as much about the history of the indigenous people's changing lifestyles and the adaptation of their homes as well as the display of traditional vernacular heritage.

The first part of the paper discusses the depiction of the Dayak<sup>2</sup> longhouse and the Malay house typology within the Sarawak Cultural Village. Based on my fieldwork and interviews with indigenous villagers, I provide a couple of real-life hybrid vernacular homes of similar typology within Sarawak which have undergone changes over time due to the people's social mobility and economic position. The second section discusses how houses should be viewed as subjects, rather than objects. The last section proposes a methodology of how hybridization of vernacular forms could be recorded, given the advanced technology and digitalization, to archive the houses and how they should be curated in today's museums.

### The Modern Hybridization of Vernacular Traditional Homes

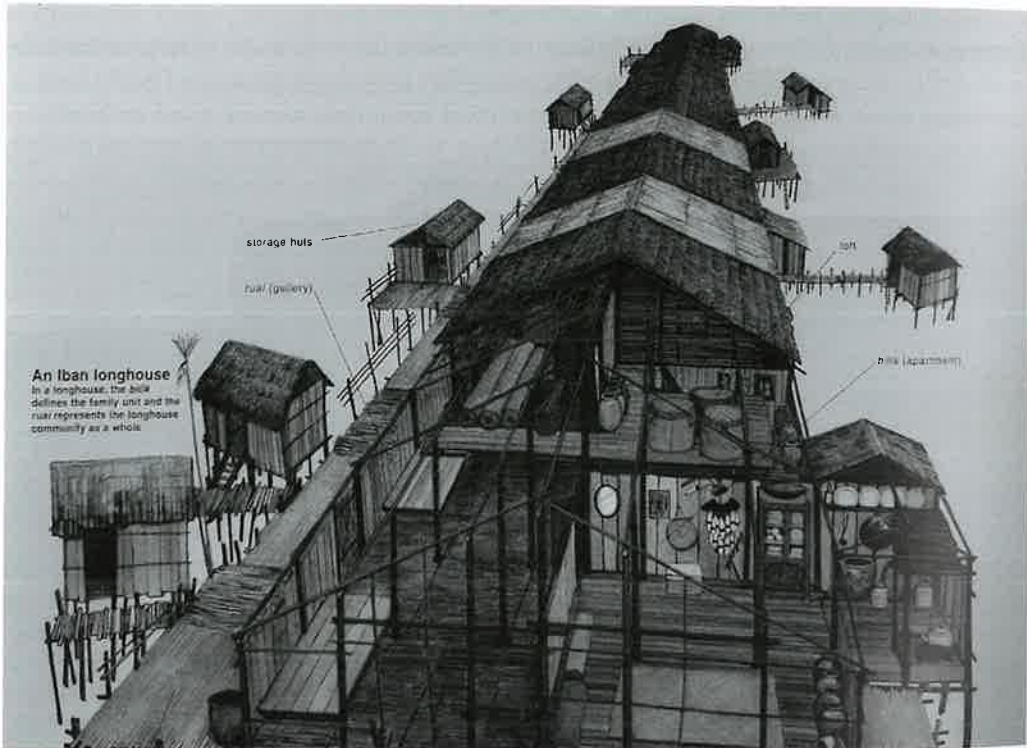


Figure 2. "Sectional Perspective of an Iban longhouse". Source: Chen Voon Fee, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Architecture* (New York: Archipelago Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>2</sup> [Dayak is an umbrella term referring to the different indigenous ethnic groups in Sarawak, which mainly consist of Ibans (50%), followed by Bidayuh (6.5%), Melanau (3.1%)] Sarawak Government, *Sarawak Data*, available online at <https://data.sarawak.gov.my/>, retrieved on 15 August 2021.

In the Sarawak Cultural Village, as with the other cultural villages in Sabah, each vernacular archetype of the home is strictly classified as belonging to a specific ethnic group. For example, the Iban Longhouse, is different from the Orang Ulu Longhouse or the Bidayuh Baruk House. For this essay, I will discuss the typology of the longhouse and the Malay house, as they are the most common vernacular archetypes found throughout Sarawak.

The longhouse, which reflects the preference for communal lifestyles of the Sarawakian peoples, consists of several units for families connected by a long gallery (*ruai*) where gatherings and social activities take place (fig. 2). It is usually situated by the river, as the river used to be the main mode of transportation and lifeline of the Dayaks.<sup>3</sup> It is not uncommon to find longhouses consisting of 20 or more apartments, and usually people in the community are related to each other one way or another. As the family grows, another longhouse is built parallel to the original longhouse to accommodate more people. A longhouse is made of timber, raised on stilts at least two metres above ground, and are traditionally accessible via notched log. The posts can be made from belian ironwood, the roof is from nipa leaves and sometimes split bamboo is used for flooring. The *ruai* is sometimes connected to an open deck, where rice grains, pepper crops or fish are dried in the hot sun and where the women hang their laundry. The kitchen, bathrooms are often located within the units at the back. This typical spatial organization is captured in the Iban and Bidayuh Longhouse within the Sarawak Cultural Village.

A great example of a hybrid longhouse is the Mongkos Longhouse at the Bidayuh village of Mongkos near the Indonesian Kalimantan border in the Serian district of Sarawak. The village was founded along the Mongkos river, before the first road in the area was established in 1968. The architecture of the longhouse, which has existed since 1957, follows the description of the typical longhouse mentioned in the previous paragraph (fig. 3, fig. 4). Another longhouse was built parallel to the original longhouse, but it was burnt down in 2002 and rebuilt with bricks, concrete and zinc roof. Meanwhile, the original longhouse still retained its structural integrity, but the nipa roof has been replaced with zinc, and instead of notched logs, two of the tree entrances replaced with concrete staircase. Over time, the kitchens and bathrooms within the units became detached and then placed on the ground floor rather than on the raised platform of the original longhouse and solidified through concrete and zinc. Hence, the longhouse still maintained its spatial layout, but some parts were added and replaced with industrial building materials, particularly the wet areas. This is due to the belief that sustainable building materials may not last and the demand for permanence, given that the other longhouse had burnt down.

What open-air museums often fail to acknowledge, is the nuances and the cross-cultural, inter-ethnic exchanges which influence the real-world vernacular homes. As the Dayaks, who usually live upriver in the hinterlands or the highlands, move closer downriver to the coastline where the Malays reside, they usually adopt the typology of the Malay home. A

<sup>3</sup> Chen Voon Fee, *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Architecture* (New York: Archipelago Press, 1998), 34-35.

Malay house is usually a single detached home and provides greater flexibility than the longhouse.



Figure 3. A hybrid vernacular longhouse in Mongkos, featuring a notched log staircase and zinc roof, 2023, Azmah Arzmi.



Figure 4. Azmah Arzmi, "The gallery, or *ruai*, where social activities take place in the longhouse", 2023. Source: Courtesy of the author.

It is also raised on posts and the private spaces are intermediated by a social space in front at the main entrance. Unlike the Dayak Longhouse, the Malay house is only built for one family at a time and can be incrementally added over time as the family expands. Usually the more private the space, such as the bedroom, the higher it is situated within the home. The Dayaks often refer to the Malay house typology as *rumah limas*, which is now becoming the most dominant typology dotting the rural landscapes of Sarawak.

Nowadays, with the construction of highways and roads throughout Borneo, the Dayaks began moving away from their communities and built their homes along the roads rather than the river. They sometimes own their own fruit orchards or cash crop plantations such as pepper or palm oil, the roads helping to supply their produce to the cities. Their houses change over time as they begin to accumulate wealth or expansion of family members. Their changing lifestyles, economic and social mobility is often reflected in the transformative process of their homes, as demonstrated in the following case study.

Philip (74) and Sinyong (68), a married Iban couple, are farmers who cultivate palm oil crops. They reside in a modest village, Kampung Tungkah Dayak near the mouth of the Batang Sadong river, 72km away from Kuching. This stand-alone house (fig. 5) was originally made from timber in the 1970s when they first set up residence. It was a typical vernacular post-and-beam tropical house, raised on stilts, with storage underneath. There was the main structure in the middle and auxiliary parts attached on each side. Over time, as the couple bore five children, they added a ground floor and demolished the auxiliary parts to replace them with rooms made out of concrete walls and glass louvred windows (fig. 5). The family still retained the (now) upper floor of the original timber structure, only to replace the materiality of the roof and windows, along with added concrete foundation. Both floors of the main structure consist of a master bedroom, bedrooms and living rooms. The auxiliary part on the west consists of wet areas such as kitchen, toilet, along with dining area, storage and 'hang-out' area. The eastern auxiliary part contains an additional bedroom, extended living space and guest room. Their children have grown up and moved away, though their youngest daughter still live with them. However, their house is still expanding, and fig. 6 shows Philip and one of his sons currently working on constructing a veranda connected to the western auxiliary side. These extra spaces are intended to accommodate their extended family during festive seasons when their adult children and grandchildren come to visit.

To comprehend this other dimension of vernacularity in Borneo, one must acknowledge the indigenous peoples' need for self-actualization while negotiating their cultural identity in the face of modernization and globalization. John Turner<sup>4</sup> argued that one should also view housing as a verb, i.e., as a process of regenerating itself in the context of the users' livelihood. His second law of housing looks at what the house does, not what it is. In the case of Philip's family home, a clear understanding of the domestic relationships explains how

<sup>4</sup> John Turner and Robert Fichter, *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 151.

spaces are adapted and parts retrofitted over time. Peter Kellett<sup>5</sup> noted that acculturation takes place when indigenous ethnic groups migrate to the cities and set up homes. Imitation in design and building practice of their homes are an attempt to validate their aspirations to succeed, with the audience being the neighbours. This is especially true of Philip's 1970s home, as they imitated the structure of Malay houses.



Figure 5. The house of Philip and Sinyong, both farmers who own a small palm oil plantation, 2022, Rio Ferdinand and Paul Natu.



Figure 6. Philip and one of his sons building an extension to their home to cater for family gatherings and rituals, 2022, Paul Natu.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kellett, "Original Copies? Imitative Design Practices in Informal Settlements", *Archnet-IJAR, International Journal of Architectural Research* 7, n.º 1 (2013): 151-161.

### Vernacular Home as a Subject rather than Object

While it is true that these pure wooden indigenous houses of Borneo need to be preserved and documented in the form of open-air museums, the problem lies therein in treating them as, in the words of Peter Kellett a "static cultural model"<sup>6</sup> to be consumed by tourists and traditional architecture enthusiasts. This obsession with "purity", to only validate vernacular indigenous architecture that is only made from pure timber and disregard their hybrid modern variant is very much a colonial mindset. Modernity is not an all-encompassing evil. It provides opportunities for self-actualization, transcends boundaries, allows indigenous peoples to pursue education, participate in the global economy, use advanced technology for their benefit, as well as speed up communication and thus improve quality of life. This concept lends credence to the indigenous people of Sarawak, as the morphological changes of their vernacular dwellings reflect their participation in modernizing ways of life. In conventional research on Borneo architecture, there is a lack of attention to the lived experience of indigenous peoples, as if they do not play a large part in the preservation of their own heritage.

This dichotomy between contemporary hybrid vernacular home and the traditional vernacular house exists within the discourse of Southeast Asian architecture. Open-air museums in Borneo owe their existence in large part due to the recognition of the value of traditional architecture and materiality during the colonial period (fig. 7). This perception also influenced a sense of pride and national identity in the post-colonial era. However, this objectification of the houses as an aesthetic, 'cultural static model' has no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seeing that cultural identities of the Dayaks are becoming more fluid, amalgamated in response to the evolving social and economic contexts. To overcome this matter, it is essential to decolonize the architectural exhibitions within open-air museums by considering the house as an active subject. This entails addressing the house as a container of social activities which creates and is created by meaningful practices.<sup>7</sup>

### Decolonizing Open-Air Museums in Borneo

Currently, open-air museums are based off colonial archives and imperialist projects. Information on indigenous vernacular architecture was collected in previous centuries through drawings, travel diaries, government reports, expedition journals or paintings by explorers from Western countries and then curated in the libraries and museums. The nature of which this research was approached and studied, needs to be adapted and decolonized. Decolonization of open-air museums in Borneo does not mean restitution of objects, but rather, a mode of practice on how information about the houses and their contexts can be disseminated. Open-air museums can also complement their housing artefacts with anthropological and ethnographic studies, shedding light on the local communities they are supposed to represent.

<sup>6</sup> Kellett, "Original Copies?...", 151-161

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Vellinga, "Living Architecture: Re-imagining Vernacularity in Southeast Asia and Oceania", *Fabrications* 30, n.º 1 (2020): 11-24.



Figure 7. Tourists admiring the Baruk house, a typology associated with the Bidayuh ethnic group, 2023, Azmah Arzmi.

Another option is to encourage the co-production of knowledge and participatory methods. Local communities, native experts who have experienced building houses in rural settlements should be involved in the interpretation and representation of their houses during temporary exhibitions in museums. Digitalization and social media offer avenues for the public to share their oral histories and records of their multi-generational family homes. Through GIS and mapping research methods, open-air museums can also contribute to geographical understanding by showing the public the areas where longhouses and the *rumah limas* exist, bringing awareness to the distribution of housing styles across Borneo. Furthermore, open-air museums can depict the evolution of housing and its adaptation to changing times, highlighting the transition from river-based communities to road-connected settlements. Reinterpreted narrations of cultural practices and recognizing current building methods provide a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the people's lives and acknowledge how houses transform over time.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 12.

Educational programs could be introduced, as open-air museums are frequently visited by schoolchildren, university students and academics. These study trips should be tailored by providing opportunities to engage with people from local communities and promoting dialogues that promote critical thinking. Vernacular architecture often does not involve any registered architects, as they are made by skilled carpenters with inherited building knowledge from their forefathers. Open-air museums have done little to recognize the creativity, autonomy, and intelligence of these builders. Local workshops with the local artisans and village craftsmen could be held within these open-air museums, to showcase their skills as well as support their livelihood, thus preserving intangible cultural heritage.

### Conclusion

Memories and local knowledge of the indigenous people in Borneo do not disappear, despite a history of colonization and modernity.<sup>9</sup> As they relocate and recontextualize themselves in new urban or rural environments, they are open to interpretations in the production of spaces, which are articulated in the transformation of their homes. It is worth recording the evolving forms of their vernacular homes, as they represent the negotiation of cultural identity, which is stabilized through their collective and social memory that inform their everyday practices.

Hence, open-air museums are not only places where local architectural traditions are preserved, but also represent the national and cultural identity of the communities to which the vernacular houses belong. Open-air museums need to ensure their stability in order to fully capitalize on their distinctive resources. They should maximize their intellectual interactions with the public, transcending their traditional role as preservers of collective memory, and actively embrace the responsibility of critically examining history.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Silvia Spolaor and Vitor Oliveira, "Urban Forms of Informality: Decoloniality as a Perspective for Morphological Studies", in *Formal Methods in Architecture*, ed. by Sara Eloy, David Leite, Viana Franklim Morais et al. (Lisbon: Springer, 2021), 197-205.

<sup>10</sup> Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums...*