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The Contemporary Iban Longhouse
The Sustenance and Applicability of a Socio-spatial Culture

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The Contemporary Iban Longhouse: The Sustenance and Applicability of a Socio-spatial Culture

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Abstract: The use of architectural forms, symbols, and spatial layouts to represent identity is a selectively negotiated process. As contemporary built environments continue to develop, identity is increasingly contested, as is the notion of cultural sustainability. Indigenous cultures have the added difficulty of negotiating identities within a postcolonial context of nation building, ethnic/localised identity and internal/external notions of authenticity. In this context, this paper will explore the changing nature of the Iban longhouse in Sarawak, Malaysia. Unlike many traditional Asian building types, longhouses are still widely constructed by the Iban, though superficially, contemporary examples bear little resemblance to traditional ones. However, they retain certain culturally based socio-spatial qualities that indicate the maintenance of Iban cultural belonging and identity. The continuing presence of the Iban longhouse as a living spatial typology speaks of an ongoing dialogue between indigenous cultural tradition and globalised architectural idioms. They also indicate the ongoing cultural autonomy of the Iban and the successful adaptation of their traditional social patterns and practices into the contemporary world. More broadly, interest by contemporary architects in Iban longhouses suggests the wider applicability of their indigenous knowledge to the issues of socially sustainable housing.

Keywords: Cultural Sustainability, Architecture, Space and Culture

One of the most distinctive traditional typologies in Southeast Asia is the longhouse. Traditionally, several Austronesian peoples dwelt in longhouses, that is, elongated dwellings that housed a number of people beyond a nuclear family group. In its abbreviated form, such a longhouse might have housed the members of an extended family, clan or moiety within a village, but to its greatest extent a single longhouse might once have constituted an entire village. In some cultures, this once meant buildings that were hundreds of metres long. Many of the indigenous peoples of Borneo lived in longhouses, as did the Manggarai of Flores, the Siberut of Mentawai, as well as the Ede and other Austronesian groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. However, today the longhouse is a threatened typology. As will be discussed shortly in this paper, in some of the areas mentioned above longhouses have disappeared, and in others they are either no longer constructed, being constructed mostly for tourists or being maintained as cultural artefacts rather than living spaces. The only exception to this general trend to abandon longhouse living occurs within the Iban, an ethnic group indigenous to the island of Borneo. The Iban are one of the groups collectively often referred to as Dayaks (which also includes Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kelabit, Kadazandusun, and many others). Traditional Iban territory extends through the Malaysian state of Sarawak into the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Barat. The Iban rumah panjai (literally ‘house long’) is still being commonly constructed and it is this phenomenon that is the focus of the paper. Why are the Iban still building longhouses when they are disappearing in other parts of Southeast Asia, and what does this have to do with the sustainability of their culture?

More broadly, what are the implications of this maintenance of an ancient building typology by one culture for a rapidly changing world? The use of architectural forms, symbols and spatial layouts to represent identity is a matter of ongoing negotiation for all cultures. However, minority cultures in many countries have the added difficulty of negotiating their identities within a context of postcolonial nation building. While most such cultures have traditional building types, not all of these types have survived into the contemporary world. Additionally, many that have survived have been materially and spatially altered. In the wake of such changes,
questions of cultural identity and authenticity are raised. In the past, the relative autonomy and isolation of local or minority cultures and traditions meant that architecture could readily be identified with particular places and peoples. However most locations have now been overlaid by expressions of colonialism, global religion, nationalism and multinational capitalism. Consequently built environments have become arenas where national and cultural identity is tangibly negotiated in a context of globalisation, population growth and technological change. Worries about the loss of identity in the wake of modernity and globalisation are not new. Neither are attempts to problematise the notion that the distinctiveness of localities lie solely in their traditions.¹

However, as contemporary built environments continue to develop, identity remains contested, as does the notion of cultural sustainability in relation to architecture. The United Nations’ 2002 Kanazawa Resolutions argue that sustaining cultures in terms of contemporary life is a matter of ‘dialogical coexistence’.² These Resolutions adapt the notion of cultural heritage to a contemporary and globalised context by updating it from traditional ideas of distinct and isolated ‘cultures’ to incorporate ideas of cultural diversity and selective pluralism. In this definition, cultural sustainability is still a matter of the preservation or reinvigoration of the past, but also engages in an ongoing dialogue with the changing nature of its locality. The question remains; in a contemporary environment, can architecture engage with its traditional role as the embodiment of cultural symbolism (updated to include contemporary cultural flows), while at the same time remaining open to constant re-interpretations, re-imaginings and re-appropriations of its fabric, its spaces, and its surroundings? If so, what now constitutes the sustenance of a local culture when it comes to architecture? Is it the maintenance of traditional craft skills, use of materials and motifs, or the continuity of spatial arrangements and their social correlations? Ideally, one might say all of these aspects are critical, but in a world where cultural, social and economic isolation is increasingly untenable, choices are often required. In the globalised contemporary environment many world-views have become available to even the most remote peoples. As a result, those wishing to maintain a traditional way of life have to consciously choose to do so, and this choice means interpreting their own traditions to suit changing circumstances.³

Magali Sarfatti Larson makes the point that buildings can only suggest, rather than deliver, a narrative.⁴ Their intended evocation of particular meanings depends on users' and observers' familiarity with their form and symbolic content. She makes the distinction between architectural and extra-architectural meanings; architectural meanings being the ones reliant on specifically architectural experiences, whereas extra-architectural meanings are related to the general background and circumstances of the user or observer. The tendency for many people not to notice the architecture that they use, Sarfatti-Larson puts down to the successful internalisation of the codified functions of most buildings. Architecture is, to borrow a Bourdieu-an term, a structuring structure. People may create architecture, but in turn it affects them. As British architect Edward Ijherika puts it, architecture reinforces 'mytho-ethical conceptions of human life' because it is not just a product, but also embodies a cultural process.⁵ The production of architecture is essentially heuristic, a product of experience rather than exhaustive research. Architecture's formal properties, therefore, cannot be considered in an unmediated way. They are always construed through a cultural context and a lens of preconceptions. The overall suggestion

³ Giddens, A. 1994, p.75.
is that the answer lies in the social, political and economic aspects of architectural culture. However the terms by which architecture might be represented as such (its object-related properties: spatial organisation, order, material etc.) are far from neutral, as Lesley Naa Lokko has similarly argued, being mediated by history and ideology. Western architecture's tradition of privileging the visual can blind Western observers' judgements of others’ ways of engaging with modernity. These issues might seem abstract. However, when considering the contemporary viability of non-Western forms of architecture, many of which are vanishing in the face of globalisation, modernisation and technological change, issues of privilege and value are critical. If locally traditional typologies disappear, then not only ways of life but ways of thinking about and inhabiting space are threatened.

This is what has happened to the longhouse in most of Southeast Asia. As noted earlier, construction of and dwelling in longhouses has been in decline across Southeast Asia and in some areas has died out altogether. An example of this is amongst the Manggarai people of Flores. In the early twentieth century the Manggarai constructed two types of houses. One, with a circular plan, housed two or three related families. The other house-type had an oval plan, housed many families and so hundreds of people under one roof. However the Dutch colonial government objected to these larger dwellings, ostensibly on the basis of hygiene, decreed maximum dimensions for new houses and effectively ensured that only the circular house type has survived to the present day. In other areas of the former Dutch East Indies, longhouses survived mostly in remote areas. Again, notions of hygiene were often used as reasons for official disapproval of the type, but as Winzeler points out, missionaries were also instrumental in their abandonment.

European missionaries were often against longhouses because they assumed that they were the main basis of traditional ways of pagan life, including the practice of many ceremonies, the observation of taboos, and the consumption of large quantities of alcohol during festivals. In some instances they also supposed that longhouse life was immoral because premarital sexual activity was often a normal part of courtship and marriage and because the sleeping arrangements of traditional longhouse apartments did not allow for marital activities to be carried out in much privacy from others, including children.

While the predominant religion of the state changed, longhouses continued to be discouraged in in newly independent Indonesia. Some of the reasons were similar; the density of longhouse living was considered unhygienic, a fire hazard and too encouraging of illicit sexual relations. However, new reasons were added, allied to the cause of new nationhood. In this context longhouses were considered obstacles to economic achievement. In their communal and (in some cases) egalitarian nature they were seen to encourage economic levelling and so hold back the development of their region and the nation overall.

There have also been broader social pressures. In the modern economy of Indonesia, many people in Kalimantan have migrated from small villages and rural areas to coastal towns in search of education and jobs, leaving an inadequate population to maintain large longhouses. More specifically, building of longhouses in remote areas is greatly reduced as construction work attracts those who would otherwise be building them. As Balan Laway notes in relation to his

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own Kayan Leken culture in Kalimantan, the disappearance of longhouses can still be attributed to government interest in replacing ‘out-of-date’ longhouses with single-family dwellings, but also the younger generation of his community have become more assimilated into mainstream Indonesian society and more individualistic, leading to a weakening of kinship ties. Without such ties, it is difficult to generate the cooperative effort needed to establish or maintain traditional buildings.10 When resettling outside their home territories, those of shared cultural background may maintain communities, but their buildings are necessarily different. For instance Guerreiro notes that when immigrants from longhouse-building communities resettle they live in individual houses but construct a balai, a pavilion that may echo a longhouse in form.11 However, this is only used as a dwelling for occasional ritual events, and otherwise is more of a meeting hall.

In Vietnam, similar reasons can be found for the decline of longhouses. The French colonial authorities, like the Dutch, objected to longhouses on the basis of hygiene, but also had other prejudicial attitudes. Several of the longhouse-building ethnic groups in the Vietnamese highlands, including the predominant group, the Ede, are traditionally matrilineal. Because of this, French ethnographers labelled them ‘matriarchal’, a conception that caused the colonial authorities to consider their culture primitive.12 This attitude was maintained by the South Vietnamese and united Vietnamese governments (the dominant Viet Kinh in both states being strongly patrilineal and patriarchal, despite their ideological differences). There was also, of course, the disruption of the Vietnam War, with the traditional homelands of the Ede, Cotu, Xtieng and other longhouse-building peoples being heavily affected by the conflict. Between 1954 and 1975, many villagers from these communities were resettled in encampments.13 Ostensibly this was for security reasons, as the authorities argued that they could not protect remote communities while the war continued, but there was also a deliberate policy to disallow the construction of longhouses in the resettlement areas, and to mix up ethnic groups with different traditions. This enforced movement caused both the disruption of traditional livelihoods and the usurping of land later by the Viet majority. Much of this disruption, as in Indonesia, was done in the name of national development, with the communal nature of longhouse communities seen as lacking in incentive for material progress. The socialist twist on this disapproval was paradoxically to also disapprove of the communality of longhouses because their presence indicated allegiance to the family, tribe or village rather than to the state. Since the end of the Vietnam conflict there has also been a large influx of Viet Kinh into to the Central Highlands and rapid growth of agriculture (mostly coffee plantations) and other industries. The overall effect of this has been to break down the traditional tenure system in Ede and other communities, and, as in Kalimantan, the transference of the communal (but not the dwelling) aspects of the nha dai to the nha rong (communal meeting hall). Few longhouses now remain in the Central Highlands and those that do are smaller, containing extended families rather than an entire clan or village. Possibly the most ‘authentic’ nha dai in terms of its materiality at least, is one recently constructed in the National Ethnology Museum in Hanoi. The one aspect of contemporary life that might save the Ede longhouse, however, is a developing tourist industry. Increased interest in longhouses from overseas tourists is providing a small revival and new longhouses are being

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constructed for the first time in decades. As a symbol of changing governmental attitudes, the recently constructed (2011) Ethnology Museum at Dak Lak in the highlands has its architecture based on Ede longhouse – in concrete, but suggestive at least of a re-valorisation of local minority culture (museum literature is provided in English, Vietnamese, and Ede).

The reasons for the Iban exception to this regional history of decline in longhouse construction and inhabitation lie partially in their particular colonial and post-colonial history. Related to this is the enduring nature of traditional Iban social structures, and their connection with spatiality of the rumah panjai. For the Iban, there was an unusual political situation through most of the colonial period. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what is now the Malaysian state of Sarawak was ruled by the three ‘White Rajahs’ Brooke. James Brooke, the earliest, arrived essentially on Borneo as a free agent, lending armed assistance to the Sultan of Brunei and in return receiving increasingly large land concessions. Thus, while the Brookes’ domain was gradually subsumed into the British Empire, as rulers they remained distinct in their attitudes towards local traditions. Under their overall control, they were content to maintain indigenous systems. Furthermore, even as they asserted greater levels of control under Viner Brooke, the last of the three Brookes to rule Sarawak, they regulated that longhouses had to be a certain minimum size, as this made them easier to administrate. Under Malaysian rule, governmental regulations continue to be indifferent and sometimes in favour of longhouses. For instance, while there have been a couple of controversial resettlement schemes, the construction of longhouses has continued, in part because they are administratively viewed as community buildings, rather than private dwellings and so have been eligible for types of financial assistance unavailable to residences. The Iban are also, relatively speaking, a more powerful minority in Sarawak than are the Ede in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Within Sarawak the Iban constitute around 29% of the population, whereas the Ede only constitute around 15% of the Vietnamese Central Highlands’ population. Also, while it has not always been an advantage in exercising Iban political power (there are a multitude of Iban-based political parties in Sarawak), Iban egalitarianism is critical to its continuing inhabitation. The Iban rumah panjai’s maintenance of a balance between egalitarian communalism and individual ownership seems to be a key to its ongoing relevance in contemporary society. Whereas other longhouse-inhabiting societies may have been more hierarchical in their spatio-social arrangements, and thus vulnerable to abandonment in a more globalised, state-based political environment, the Iban’s relative lack of hierarchy may have helped the rumah panjai from meeting the same fate.

A closer examination of the spatial organisation of the rumah panjai is indicative of this relative egalitarianism. While the most obvious aspect of an Iban rumah panjai is its length, it is best understood in cross-section. In terms of proprietorship, the rumah panjai can be thought of as a series of linked segments, each of which is owned and occupied by a single family. Firstly, each family has its own private series of spaces and rooms, the bilik, the equivalent of an apartment. This opens onto a covered gallery that is spatially continuous with its neighbours (and so extends from one end of the rumah panjai to the other). This is the ruai, and while it is still owned by a single family, by custom it is treated as communal space. The ruai is the space where rituals and festivities are held, there traditionally the heads of defeated enemies are displayed, and where day-to-day people relax, socialise and work. On the other side of the ruai from the bilik is the tanju, an uncovered gallery or yard, where outdoor tasks are completed and food is dried. This sequence of bilik/ruai/tanju can be understood as a single dwelling, and the rumah panjai overall can be understood as a number of these dwellings joined together. However, while

each bilik remains separate, there are no separations between the ruai, so together they form a long gallery. Nor are there any separations between the tanju in the traditional rumah panjai so they also form a similarly continuous open platform (though fences between individual tanju have become more apparent in contemporary rumah panjai, as will be discussed a little later in this paper). A notable aspect to each bilik is that they are of equal width, so their doors onto the ruai are equally spaced. These doors are also quite homogenous in their size and decorative treatment. Each rumah panjai has a tuai rumah, (head of the house) and his bilik is usually centrally located. However, other than this centrality, its width is the same and its entrance is no larger or more elaborate than that of any other bilik. Perhaps there will be a portrait of the tuai rumah and his family, a small sign on the door, or an adjacent hanging basket of smoked skulls (the Iban traditionally took the heads of enemies in battle, though this practice ceased in the early twentieth century).

Figure 1: (top). rumah panjai near Batang Ai, Sarawak, Malaysia: Main entry to the end of the ruai (bilik start to the left of the door opening).

Figure 2: (bottom). rumah panjai. A view of the tanju, with bilik to the right.

In a traditional rumah panjai, all of these spaces are framed in timber, with hand-adzed timber floors, palm thatch roofs and bamboo or timber wall cladding. Their floors are raised from the ground on timber piles, sometimes a metre or so off the ground and sometimes much higher depending on the topography. Rumah panjai are customarily constructed on areas of elevated ground near rivers and other watercourses, and preference is for a flat floor platform for the entire length of the collective ruai, so their length can mean that a rumah panjai’s extremities are the equivalent of a few storeys from the ground. For the Iban, traditional architectural emphasis
is on spatial arrangement. While there is carving and other symbolic/decorative elements, they are not intrinsic to the form of the rumah panjai as are, say, the upswept roofs of the Torajan tongkonan or the Minangkabau rumah gadang. When extra bilik required for a growing community cannot be accommodated by topography, the solution may be the creation of another rumah panjai. Rumah panjai are used to being moved periodically when necessitated by shifting cultivation practices, or split because of a dispute over leadership or community direction.

On the main road as well as the major rivers flowing from the interior of Sarawak, both adapted and newly constructed rumah panjai can frequently be seen. Adapted rumah panjai are particularly interesting, partially due to their heterogeneous aesthetic and material qualities, but largely because they indicate ongoing assimilation and adaptation of aspects of contemporary world while maintaining essential spatial qualities. Often they maintain the raised floors and framed structure of the traditional rumah panjai, but bear the traces of material and technological change. An example of this type of hybrid traditional-contemporary longhouse is Rumah Matop, near the town of Betong on Southern Sarawak. Rumah Matop is accessible by a good road from the main highway through Sarawak, and occupies a small rise next to a small river. Originally constructed in 1925 further away from the river, the longhouse was re-built in 1943 in its present location. Nearby are oil palm plantations, a source of the longhouse’s income. Rumah Matop itself constitutes a small village, containing 28 bilik (apartments), each of which is occupied by a family. Though not all bilik owners are permanent residents of the longhouse, each bilik has developed individually. Some are quite small, extending laterally from the ruai to form a short sequence of rooms. Others have been considerably expanded. The location of the ruai over a small hill means that bilik can be extended both upwards and downwards, and some are surprisingly large, though all share roughly the same cross-sectional width. Materials also vary. The predominant cladding is corrugated metal sheeting, though there is some timber boarding and cement sheeting. Roofs may be single-pitched or gable-ended, and the heterogeneity of forms combined with the topography, means that the visual impression from the side is of a beached fishing village or series of terrace houses, rather than a single building.

The main entry to the longhouse is at the end of the building. Here, as this end is well past the summit of the small hill, the floor is considerably elevated from the ground, and is accessed by a long set of stairs. The immediate impression is not that of a traditional building. The gable end of the longhouse is clad in corrugated metal sheeting, punctuating with a few shuttered windows, and to its left is a recent addition. This takes the form of a double-storey gable-roofed dwelling and its corrugated sheeting is so new as to be extremely shiny in the Sarawak sunshine. From the other side, however, evidence of tradition can be seen. The longhouse is raised on slim timber posts, some of which are straight and obviously sawn, but others are more rustic and hand-adzed.
On entering, the *ruai* is quite uniform, with walls and floor formed of timber boards, and the ceiling of plasterboard or cement sheeting. What is immediately apparent is its length. As a gallery the *ruai* runs almost the full length of the longhouse, without changes in level or other architectural differentiation. Tables and chairs are positioned occasionally, but much of the space is empty. On the *tanju* side, louvred windows, some framed in timber, some in aluminium, admit light and ventilation. Some floorboards are sawn and others adzed and the ongoing renewal of the longhouse fabric can be clearly seen. An aspect of particular cultural interest (and shock for some visitors) are the circular baskets hanging from the ceiling in a couple of locations. These contain the smoked heads of former enemies, (though none collected since the 1930s). Each *bilik* has its own door, and these are timber panelled and also uniform. The egalitarian nature of the longhouse community means that there is no distinction in size or grandeur for the *tuai rumah’s* (head of the longhouse) *bilik*, its central position and some attendant portraits the only indication of its location. On a post near the centre of the *ruai* is a whiteboard containing a roster, the body corporate of the longhouse community. Inside the *bilik*, as might be guessed from the exterior of the longhouse, vary greatly in size, but essentially contain all the spaces and fitting one would expect from a contemporary rural house; tables, chairs, couches, televisions, computers, kitchen cabinets, beds. Only the large ceramic jars, located prominently near the entrance to each *bilik*, provide a direct reference to Iban cultural traditions. As both the physical and perceptual spine of the *rumah panjai*, the *ruai* remains consistent in its materiality and spatial integrity, despite the

Figure 3: (top). Rumah Matop, near Betong, Sarawak, Malaysia: Main entry porch to the end of the *ruai*.

Figure 4: (bottom). Rumah Matop: Inside the *ruai*. The wall separating the *bilik* from the *ruai* can be seen on the left.
heterogeneity of the exterior. While there are changes in surface material in different parts of the ruai, there is no obvious distinction in terms of ownership. It is the clearest manifestation of the continuity of traditional Iban spatial culture. The bilik too, despite its modern accoutrements, has not changed its essential nature as a family-owned and inhabited space.

Figure 5: (top). Rumah Matop: Inside a bilik.

Figure 6: (bottom). Rumah Matop: A view of the tanju.

The main spatial difference from the pre-modern rumah panjai can be found in the tanju. Here what was formerly a continuous open platform has been partially divided up into a series of yards. An assortment of fences and walls demarcate tanju sections that correspond with particular bilik, and new elements, water tanks, concrete toilet blocks and satellite dishes are also manifestations of these newly demarcated spaces. Each family is responsible for the upkeep of their section, and while collaboration is common, individual choices over design and construction may prevail. Collective identity still resides in a social sense, but the economics of living in modern Sarawak has caused demarcations in the tanju as a utilitarian space. As different families make their livings in different ways; working in nearby towns, trading, maintaining private plantations – rather than communally farming, each section of tanju is required for a different purpose. The undersides of some tanju have been converted so that family cars may be parked underneath. This heterogeneity also characterises the exterior from the bilik side.
As mentioned earlier, as each bilik extends from the collective ruai it has developed according to the needs, means and desires of the individual family that occupies it. On the exterior this manifests as a great variety of forms, so the rumah panjai seems less like a single building than a mass of connected structures. However the ongoing centrality of the ruai suggests that the longhouse still plays a key role in both forming and reinforcing Iban identity. The conclusion that might be drawn from Rumah Matop is that so long as the basic sectional schema of the rumah panjai remains intact, that issues of form and material are relatively inconsequential.

This conclusion is borne out by many newly constructed rumah panjai. Some can be hard to recognise at first glance. Constructed of a mixture of concrete, rendered brickwork and roofed in sheet metal or glazed ceramic tiles, new rumah panjai are often set directly on the ground with concrete slab floors. Windows are aluminium framed. There is little if any discernable architectural style. Such buildings seem to the outsider indistinguishable from generic contemporary terrace or row houses that are widespread in Sarawak and other parts of Southeast Asia.
This confusion can be explained by the fact that architectural modernity arrived in non-Western societies at a particular time of European cultural hegemony. Modernism's disavowal of meaning (in terms of representation in architecture) is thus a particularly Western way of looking at it, and so is disarticulation of the architectural 'object' from its possible meanings (other than the question of its ontological nature). From the perspective of the non-Westerner, however, the trappings of modernity, in particular its material and technological qualities, are not necessarily incompatible with their own architectural priorities. Architectural discussion on traditional buildings remains dominated by a commentary on the struggle between conservation and destruction, rather than one of translation and adaptation. As the anthropologist James Clifford puts it, this view involves a ‘salvage paradigm’, a desire to rescue the ‘authentic’ culture that is being destroyed by historical change.\(^\text{17}\) In this paradigm, evaluation of a modern concrete \textit{rumah panjai} concentrates on its aesthetic properties, seeing these pejoratively as a loss of culture and tradition, while not noticing the distinctive qualities of the building’s spatiality. Whatever they look like, contemporary \textit{rumah panjai} maintain this distinctive spatiality. Their layouts are very similar to Rumah Matop. The collective \textit{ruai} appears either as a wide continuous veranda or gallery, depending on whether its frontage is walled or balustraded. Individual \textit{bilik} are aligned in

rows behind this ruai, accessed by doors of consistent size and distance apart. Behind each bilik is the tanju, though on the ground this may appear more like a series of yards. Some bilik are double storey, and utilise the space above the ruai. This reinforces the resemblance of the building to a row of terrace houses, and obscures the fact that there is quite a different spatial arrangement within.

As this spatial arrangement is key to the rumah panjai, questions arise. Is it the particular social structure of the Iban that has led to sustenance of such a spatial arrangement? Or is there something about the spatial arrangement that has sustained traditional Iban social and cultural structures and so assisted their survival in a contemporary environment? A particular illustration of this was the interest taken in the Iban longhouse by twentieth-century British architects Alison and Peter Smithson. The Smithsons are well known in architectural circles for being the progenitors of the architectural idiom known as Brutalism. A product of mid-twentieth-century modernism, Brutalism looked for ‘honesty’ in ordinary materials, as well as direct acknowledgement of the conditions of post-war architectural reconstruction in aiming for a socially utopian built environment. In the Smithsons’ 1970 book Ordinariness and Light appears an image entitled ‘Sea Dayaks’ Longhouse.’ As a typology, this (Iban) longhouse seemed to be applicable to their utopian ideas. Unlike many traditional buildings, the longhouse (at least in the image) was not encrusted with symbolic decoration and ‘exotic’ form, but a direct and unselfconsciously ‘ordinary’ spatial type, onto which the Smithsons could project their ideas for a new and more egalitarian British society. As Crinson notes in his discussion of the Smithson’s interest in the subject, they saw the longhouse as socially appealing; “community incarnate rather than just a household” as well as aesthetically pleasing, “because, like the Victorian bye-law street, it was not picturesque.” The Smithsons applied spatial aspects of the longhouse, in particular the important relationship between the collective ruai and the individual bilik, to the ‘streets in the air’ of their own mass housing designs.

The Smithsons’ interest in the longhouse was filtered through their Modernist sensibility. However, in their disavowal of the cultural specificity of the typology, their appropriation paradoxically provides clues to how the rumah panjai has successfully adapted to a contemporary environment. A building like Rumah Matop indicates that perhaps more important than the survival of traditional form or decorative detail is a community’s agency to pragmatically negotiate their own sense of spatiality into the contemporary world. Beyond this, while the rumah panjai typology embodies a very particular socio-spatial organisation, it also suggests alternatives to Western-derived notions of architectural space can survive and be influential in a culturally globalised environment.

* All photographs are by author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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