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## Spatial reading of *kampungs* by using Gordon Cullen's theory: A contemporary perspective

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# Spatial reading of kampungs by using Gordon Cullen's theory: A contemporary perspective

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**Abstract.** Contemporary perspective is to transform the theory reading of space in Asian cities, particularly to the reading of kampung in Surabaya. Kampung (urban village) are commonly read as a disorder neighbourhood located in a modern urban area. Through the perspective, analysed inside out of urban spaces, the kampungs is read not only on the physical structure but the meaning behind the use. It is compulsory to consider the three parameters of urban observation for this perspective: theoretical concept, phenomenological scope, and point of view. In this research, these observed parameters: theory of townscape by Gordon Cullen, phenomenon of public and private space in the kampung, and applying the research method of ground research. Cullen's theory one of well known Western-centric theory is needed to be included since Asian still lack of theoretical presence. The observation of the phenomenon is to extend the theory and to read urban spaces in greater Asia including studying meaning behind the urban structure. The result of this research has shown that unfixed urban elements in the kampung create stronger sense of urban enjoyment than fixed elements. The unfixed are related to the social activities occurred that identify the fluid condition of private and public usage.

**Keywords:** Contemporary urbanism, meaning observation, urban elements.

## 1. Introduction

The need to have a perspective that can make existing urban theories more relevant in regard of their 'application' in specific urban settings is crucial, particularly in order to understand urban settings which very different from those urban settings in which or for which most (western) urban theories have been developed. This article aims to provide an alternative approach for Asian scholars, specifically, to read and understand an urban situation like a kampung.

People in Asia still look at theories like Townscape from Cullen, because there are still very few Asian theories available. Building on the work of Nihal Perera, this article applies a 'contemporary urban perspective', that is a postcolonial approach and a concern for the production of meaning in urban settings, to make one such Western theories theory, Gordon Cullen's "Concise Townscape" from 1961, specific for an Asian context of today. Cullen's theory puts emphasize on the visual pleasure of the observers that is created through the visual sense, through place and content through which the observer can enjoy the urban setting.

Historically, the case study of kampung Keputran are older than the city of Surabaya, Indonesia. At first, they were settlement areas of people who work at sugar cane fields. When the city grows and expands, kampungs become part of the city; they are located scattered around the central city including



some in the central city, including Keputran kampung. During the modernization of the city at 1950s, kampungs keep their originality of their social life and organic pattern of the layout, which is occupied by low and single houses, also contrast their lifestyle with those modern lifestyles in the city. The development of kampungs is far from the consideration of arts to people's visual pleasure; particularly for public spaces such as open spaces and streets. Kampungs rather develop organically in their layout of streets, alleys and houses.

The aim of the spatial reading of the kampung is to make the Cullen's theory more specific. The reading is to observe the development of meaning comparing to the art sense understood by young people living in the kampung. The meaning development is related to the usage of public and private space in the kampung in terms of space contestation between the users.

### 1.1. The contemporary perspective

The meaning of the word contemporary is present or current. In this article the definition of contemporary perspective is adopted from Perera [1]. It means the perspective to analyse city or urban spaces and architecture by considering space and its elements as results of social production, especially as transformation of local and global understanding of culture.

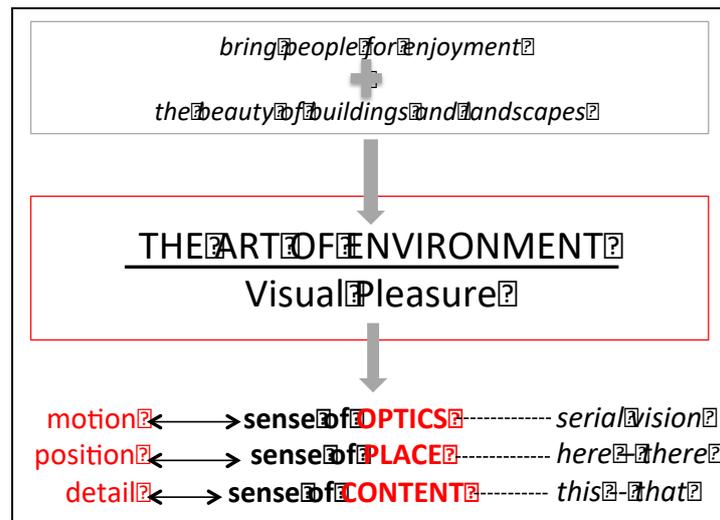
The perspective tries to break from any binary categorization and comparison such as developed-developing, western-eastern; it tries to see the original urban phenomenon based on the process of the social production in its urban area. This perspective/approach also rejects a purely Western perspective as a reference point to universally analyse urban areas around the globe. This perspective has been coined as postcolonial view or postcolonial urbanism, which does not mean that the colonizers are totally gone, but the colonial hierarchy is simply repeated in different ways, which are in cultural and economical discrimination [2]. This discrimination could be seen in the kampungs' areas; since the kampungs are located in the central city it means that they are on valuable land while their physical and social development is stark contrast with the modern city surrounding them.

The aim of this perspective is to challenge the Western-centric perspective in analysing cities in the global South or in South East Asia [3]. The contemporary perspective analyses cities in regard cities through their power of changing especially in terms of society without referring them to any ideal cities. It observes another perspective in analysing urban spaces particularly the Asian or outside Euro-American cities in order to have better understanding of, what the mainstream called, the subaltern. Mainstream literature highlights the categorization of modern and vernacular: benefiting the modern because of its focus on image and buildings, but leaving behind the vernacular for its poverty, uncontrolled growth and overcrowding.

Many urban scholars have trapped their thinking into this dualism of Western and the other based on the mainstream literature [4]. The dualism is such as ignoring the society's characteristics and backgrounds of subject matter, and put the western model as an ideal model to understand other cities [5]. The focuses of contemporary perspective's analysis are on the process of rethinking particular theory and in relation to shift from 'forms to norms', and also a shift from analytic of structure to analytic of assemblage [6, 7]. Therefore, contemporary perspective requires a strong interpretation of grounded norms rather than collecting data/information in order to only analyse them under available structures or forms [2].

### 1.2 *Gordon Cullen's theory*

Thomas Gordon Cullen is a British architect and urban designer who published a book entitled *Concise Townscape*, first published in 1961. His idea is highlighting the visual factor of buildings and landscapes that may give the observers pleasure; he categorized as architectural draftsmen [8]. Cullen also argues that the ability of human to enjoy or hate the urban space is triggered by the structure of buildings, landscape and forms of the city [9].



**Figure 1.** Idea of Townscape by Gordon Cullen.

Cullen has three main concerns in his Townscape book: optics, place, and content. Optics is related to visual ability of humans to enjoy cinematic view, movement, beautiful sequences; humans can feel these while moving through spaces in the city and they visualize the changing scenery. Place; it is a quality of urban spaces that could give a feeling of in or out of the environment. Content; it is related to the detail of the urban spaces such as color, texture, style, scale and uniqueness. These three concerns are building the quality of cities or urban spaces that give pleasure to humans.

In order to explore the physical quality of buildings and landscapes, Cullen also mentions factors that create a high quality of urban spaces. These factors are grandiose vista, fluctuation (to express the sequence of space created by buildings), undulation (a compulsive departure of city's axis), and thisness (to highlight the uniqueness among places) and they are widely accepted and applied for British and European cities.

When Asian scholars bring this understanding of urban art to an Asian setting such as kampungs, there is a mismatch in reading this urban configuration and place. The reading tools or urban analytical elements that Cullen has offered are problematic when applied in a kampung setting. For instance, kampungs put 'art' as the very last consideration in their development. Kampungs are developed organically, one house at a time, one part of street at a time. Considered planning through a planning office just doesn't exist in the development of a kampung, - apart from some later interventions like environmental improvement programs from the local government. Therefore, in applying Cullen's theory to setting such as kampungs, it needs an additional approach to consider and analyse 'meaning' which will be undertaken by this research through the lens of contemporary perspective.

## 2. Research method

According to Perera [2], there are three important parameters for applying the contemporary urbanism approach, which are: the scope, the theoretical concept, and the point of view. These three parameters help this research to develop its methodology and methods. The definition of 'scope' is urbanism issues in Asian cities; such as phenomenological characters of poverty, contestation of public-private, and formal-informal [7].

The second parameter is the Western-centric urban theory, which is to clarify and explain the phenomena within existing concept (because Asia still lacks of theoretical presence in literature). The last tool is the 'point of view'; it means to hear a story from the ground, develop empathy, share the same time and space, and acknowledge the concept through which the story is built. These three tools are used in this article to explore the case study of kampungs. Hence, the scope of this research is to explore the use of public space in the kampungs which known as a contested space between public and private. This contestation is a common phenomenon in Asian cities and views as an urban problem.

The theoretical concept that would be reconstructed is Cullen's theory in visual of cities; where Cullen put emphasizes in visibility factor and less weight in the exploration of meaning factor. The last parameter is the point of view; which has seen through an empirical way of ground research through observation of the kampung's daily rhythm and people's perception to the kampung by applying depth interview. Group of young adults living in the kampungs since they were born is the main respondents to explore the spatial perception and conception. The young adults aged 18 yr to 24 yr old are chosen because of their important role as the agent of change especially in a hybrid area such as the kampungs.

Methods applied in the ground research are:

- i. Mapping the physical condition of the kampung through solid-void analysis
- ii. Identification the daily rhythm of kampung's people by observing their activity
- iii. Interview to the young adults to identify the spatial perception and conception of their neighbourhood

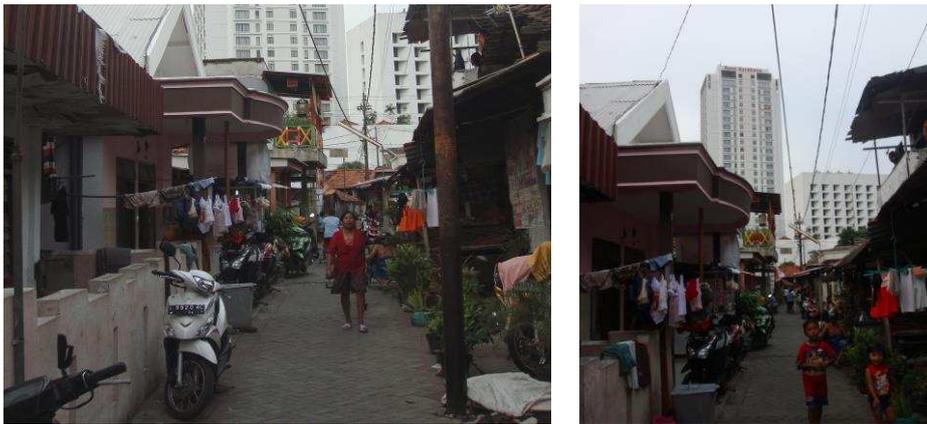
### 3. Analysis and discussion

The significance of the case study of the kampungs in rethinking Cullen's theory is to fill in the gap of reading kampung through the theory that does not capture what is important in the kampungs; which is meaning. The theory application partly captures the condition of the kampung, mainly on the visual quality. The kampungs grow organically, it could be seen on the pattern of the alley, how to approach the kampungs and also the size and location of the housing plots in the kampungs (see the picture of solid-void analysis).



**Figure 2.** The case study: 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> alley of Keputran Pasar Kecil and Kampung of Kedondong Kidul 1<sup>st</sup> alley

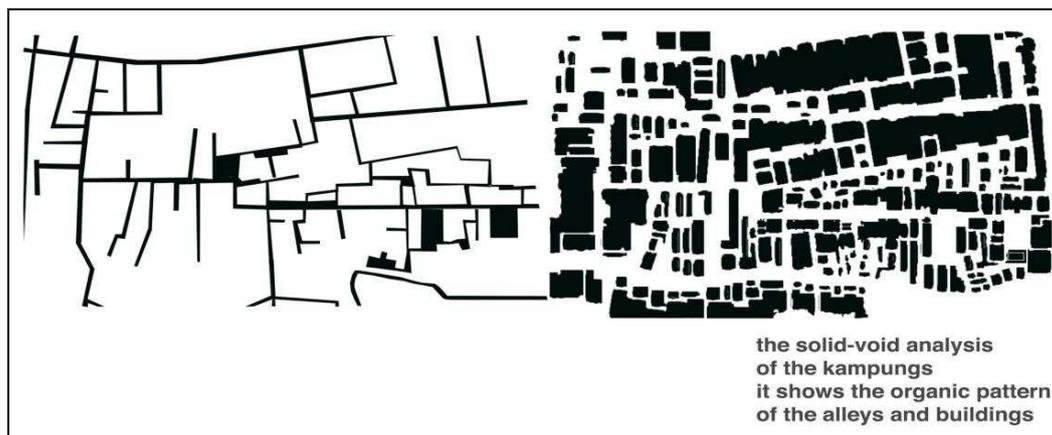
The case study is three alleys of kampungs in the centre of Surabaya city, locally named as the 1<sup>st</sup> Kedondong Kidul (KPK 1), 3<sup>rd</sup> Keputran Pasar Kecil (KPK 3) and 4<sup>th</sup> Keputran Pasar Kecil (KPC 4) alleys. The 1<sup>st</sup> alley of Keputran Pasar Kecil is located directly in juxtaposition with the BRI Tower, and the 4<sup>th</sup> alley is located side by side with the Urip Flat. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> alley of Pasar Kecil is the location of the gutter/silted channel. The 4 m pedestrian of the main street is physically separated the kampungs' entrances with the main street. It also connects the kampungs with the shops and kampungs areas opposite them through the pedestrian-bridge over the main street. Shops, banks and other commercial facilities are grown along this pedestrian. Especially in the afternoon (after working hour), many food/beverages hawkers occupy the pavement. It is also functioned as parking areas for motorbikes and becaks (becak—pedicab) to ride and park.



**Figure 3.** The kampung and the commercial areas as a background.

### 3.1. The reading of the kampungs

Through the contemporary perspective, the reading of kampungs is done by observing the social production of space that occurred in the kampungs. This research undertook two analysing methods: observing the daily rhythm of the kampungs and exploring the perception of the young adults of their kampungs.



**Figure 4.** The solid and void analysis of the kampungs.

### 3.2. The daily rhythm

To understand the dynamic life of the kampungs, the observation focused on the daily rhythm especially in kampung Keputran Pasar Kecil in the 3<sup>rd</sup> alley (KPK 3). This alley is the busiest alley compared to other alleys, because it has the closest access to the Keputran market. This market is the biggest wholesaler market for vegetables and fruits in Surabaya. The market opens from late night to early morning, and most of its workers and sellers are living in this kampungs.

3.2.1. Daily rhythm: Morning. Walking in KPK 3 at early morning (before 5 a.m.), male workers are going back from the market while the rest of the kampung's dwellers just wake up and are getting ready for morning prayers. Men and women with their sarung (sheath) are heading to the mosque just near the entrance of the kampung. The sound of the prayer call is occupying the whole space of the kampung. At the same time, young adults, who finished with their party in the cyber café, are walking their motorbike out to the kampung.

Getting deeper walking in the alley, domestic activities can be seen and clearly smelt. Mothers are preparing food for their family and business (warung), the smells of frying tofu, boiling rice or

crushing spices are very strong in the alley. The smell is mixed with fresh fragrant from powder and soap came from the public toilet/bathroom.

Closer to 7 a.m., the alley starts to be bustling, mothers are walking their children to school. Older children paddling their bikes or run to the school while adults workers with their uniform are walking their motorbikes (not allow to ride in the alleys). Some old people are cleaning their front yard and the alley with their bamboo broom, the dust is flying in the air. The chitchat sound of the children is dominant in the space.

In the space of the alley, the outside of kampung, the contrasting conditions of the surrounding with its tall commercial buildings can be clearly seen. In the morning when the kampung wakes up and get ready to work and school, the surrounding areas are still quiet and calm. The kampungs' dwellers through their walking movement from the market, firstly see the tall buildings, then entering the low and individual houses in the kampungs, could feel the contrast. The space of alley is marked by the smell of cooking meals and sound of prayer and of children. The public space of the alley is an enclosure that is safe for children and the alley, as communal space, acts like an extension of their private space.

3.2.2. Daily rhythm: Before noon. Before noon, mothers are doing their shopping activity for their daily meals. They walk to the spots in the alley that hawkers are grouping permanently. Most of the sellers are men, so is the money lender that is lending money to the mothers and the sellers. Mothers are buying fruit, vegetables, meat, and also plastic housewares or kitchen utensils.

In these spots the occurring activity is not only concerned with shopping but also important for social interaction, the discussion is various from simple thing related to their family to serious matter such as politics in the country. Some people said they were gossiping, but the fact shows that it is the way they create bond and trust to each other.

In traditional patriarchal families in most Asian cities, men are the head of the families. But in this society in the kampungs, women play a significant role especially in managing money. During the activity of morning shopping, the women manage the family income, therefore the existence of renters are important particularly on the new school academic year when tuition fee need to be paid. Women with their shopping, gossiping and lending business, predominantly occupy the space of the alley at that time. The meaning of place is recognized by these social interactions, and other domestic activity such as picking vegetables, hanging wet laundry or drying left over rice.

3.2.3. Daily rhythm: Noon. At noon, the day gets hot and the alley is quiet. The space of the alleys is occupied by hanging laundry, mattress, and dried food. Women are sitting (or some doing their domestics business) in shaded space on their terraces. In KPK 3, most women and some men are having their tea and lunch on a concrete platform in the half way along the alley. In this spot, there is a warung (snack shop) with a space extending into the alley by means of a plastic cover, which creates a shaded space. The seller also provides movable table and chairs.

In the hot day, the alley is functioned as a space for transportation for people moving with detail of its wall covered by domestic things, such as laundry and dry food. Only in the wider shaded space, people gather to have their lunch and socialize. The alley is public but the detail or content of the space is private.

3.2.4. Daily rhythm: After noon. After 3 p.m. is the time the alley start to busy again when the children come back from school and mothers are helping little children with their shower. After older children have arrived home and got change, they are playing in the alley while waiting for the Quran study in the mosque.



**Figure 5.** The kampungs' alley at one afternoon.

Around this time, most young adults have just woken up and are having their meals in the warung. They socialize with other kampung dwellers and some are accompanying their little brothers playing around the platform. Women socialize by sitting in front of their house while feeding, bathing their little children or preparing dinner. The mothers are talking to each other and watch their toddlers playing around. Then, the mothers continue combing the children's hair, powdering, and massaging eucalyptus oil on their tummy.

After the Ashar of prayer time (4 p.m.) many activities occur in the alley. Male adults are eating, chatting, sitting mostly in the warung (including the young adults after waking up from their night party). Women's activity as part of the neighborhood program have occurred in the community multipurpose room just on the second floor of the kampung's gate. Approaching the Maghrib of prayer time (6 p.m.), the male adults continue their activity in previous spots, and women and their children are focusing their activity in their houses and their surrounding. Mothers are helping the children with the homework and some start opening their warung in front of their house selling snacks, coffee, and tea.

From afternoon to early night, the space in the alley is bustling with people from any ages. Each group has their own activities and their own rhythm and spot. They do not bother each other, evidently they support each other by agreeing the domination of specific spots, time and group of people. Safe, open and lively is the best quality to be given to show the situation in the alley at that time.

### 3.2.5. Daily rhythm: Night.

Fewer people are in the alley. The location of socialization is slightly different for the afternoon activities. The kampung's alley is predominantly occupied by young male adults and men. They gather around the Mosque and the cyber café started from around 8 p.m. The café is open all day (24 h a day/7 d a week) and some customers come from outside the kampung. They are walk or ride their motorbike to the café. The motorbikes are parked in the open space near the Mosque; hence, when the men who are gathered in the open space finish their socializing and go to work (at the Keputran market), the space is full of the café's customers' motorbikes. At night, the kampung is relatively quiet; only the main alley has street lamps, all houses and warungs are closed except the cyber café and its warung. The only people who walk in the alley are the workers with their uniform who just finished their night shift.



**Figure 6.** The kampungs' alley for party at one night.

Around midnight when the young adults are tired with playing online game in the cyber café, a party is about to start. Young adults from outside the kampung also join the party, they bring *cukrik* (*cukrik*—illegal brewed drinks mixed with energy drinks or sodas), cigarettes and some light food. They gather in front of the café, some sitting on the alley floor, and some on bamboo benches. Sometimes, the drunken men bully passers-by (particularly women) and ask for money in a worst situation.

Around 2 a.m. the party finishes. Some young adults are still able to walk home or ride their motorbikes; others are too drunk to even stand up and are sleeping on the floor or available benches. Sometimes, they fight within the group, and other adults will make them stop. In many cases, when the young adults start to fight, *becak* drivers who are sleeping inside their *becaks* that are parked near the kampung's gate, break the fight and ask them to go home. The space of alley at night shows a different situation than during the day when a multitude of users are present; at night there is only dominating group of society, young men, and other groups are afraid of this domination.

### 3.3. The meaning

After exploring the daily rhythm of the kampung and after understanding in detail the use of public space of the kampung's alleys, the fieldwork continued by exploring the young adults' perception of the kampung and its public space by undertaking depth interview with them as the respondents of this research. Key aim was here to identify the meaning of the public space that they experience everyday in the kampungs.

In positive terms, the respondent perceived their kampung as a safe and harmonious place, where people from all ages could socialize freely. They are satisfied with the social life in the kampung whereas he likes to join the party and the gambling activity in the cyber café. Sometimes, the respondents were involved in the brawling with other groups.

Another perception (that came up in the interviews): the kampung is perceived as nice place but it is also full of gossipers; peaceful place but traditional way of life. These respondents understood the changing meaning of space in the kampungs over the course of a day. The meanings are carried by the people and their activities. It is the detail that the respondents understood about the space. The physical condition of the kampungs (low, single and semi permanent houses) are seen as traditional characteristic compared to the modern building around them. The contrasting condition with the surrounding creates a feeling of 'thereness', a condition that also Cullen refers to.



**Figure 7.** Social spots along the alley.

In negative terms, the respondents highlight the activity of gamblers, drunkards, and jobless people in the kampungs. They considered them as a group of immoral and wild people. These activities produce a feeling of fear in the other dwellers. The group also noticed the specific spots for those activities; they feel safe in their spot/location but unsafe in other specific location that are associated with devious behaviour. This is also a feeling of thereness that develops a sense of place.

Some respondents also mention the lack of a future perspective for the people living in the kampungs as well as the kampung itself. The young adults face difficulties in finding jobs in or

around the kampungs; and sooner or later, the kampungs will be changed into a commercial area following the development of its surrounding. This process is already gradually happening with one by one of the dwellers selling their houses.

In terms of places that carries a strong meaning for the respondents a number of spaces were mentioned: the cybercafé, the open space near the Mosque and the concrete platform in the middle of the kampung. The meanings for them are both positive and negative. The cybercafé for instance carries a positive meaning when referring to the online game competition, and a negative meaning when referring to the drunkards activity during the night. According to the respondents the space near the cyber café is perceived as the most dangerous spot in the KPK 3. At night, this spot is the area for young adults having their cukrik party, of getting drunk, and where passers-by are bullied. Yet, contrarily, during the rest of the day, and especially in the afternoon, this is the spot where children and mothers are having their social activity.

When the respondents were asked to compare their social bond with friends and the physical condition with the kampungs, most of them agreed that friendship is the best thing they could get from the kampungs. In other words, they have stronger feeling attached to their friends than to their living space. Additionally, they agreed that they would move out from the kampungs as long as they could move out together.

Most of the respondents feel hopeless about their future since it is difficult for them to find good jobs in any formal institutions or even in the CBD attached to their kampungs. The respondents who come from poor families are usually trapped in a low economic structure for generations. Quality improvement of houses is relatively slow and has only happened within the last 10 yr, yet it is still faster than improvement of public facilities.

#### 3.4. The summary

The exploration of daily rhythm of the kampungs through direct observation and interview is the way to know the cultural norms of the kampungs dwellers, specifically in practical ways. It is also to observe the case study through inside-out observation, by investigating and interpreting the ground (physical and social life). This is how to observe kampungs through the perspective of contemporary urbanism.

According to Cullen's theory [10], the environmental recognition has three senses: optics, place and content. The sense of optics in the kampungs is strong when the observers see the contrasting physical condition of the kampungs and its surrounding areas. Through sequential movement from the outside to inside the kampungs and vice versa, the contrast in terms of building forms that cover heights, density, materials, and spaciousness can clearly be observed. The contrast of social spaces that most observers (or respondents) highlighted (not by optics only) is the condition of outside and inside the kampungs. Outside, there is no or very little social space, while there is more space for movement (street and pedestrian ways). Inside, the social spaces are dominant in the kampungs' alleys despite the spaces being relatively small.

The sense of place in the kampungs is clearly marked by the existence of social activity. The observers feel the spirit of the place while they are having their social activity in the kampungs; and it is marked by simple physical symbols in the kampung such as the cyber café and the open space near the Mosque. The spirit is embedded with the social life, while the attachment feeling with their social life is stronger than the physical life of the kampungs. This also explains the sense of place that create a stronger feeling of here and there, particularly in the alleys as one space that contains many social activities in a day.

Reading the detail of the environment identifies the sense of content according to Cullen. In the case of the kampungs, the physical content of the kampungs is less recognized by the observers because it bears weak physical characteristics such as forms, colors, textures or shapes. The observers recognized the kampungs by identifying the spots of social activities for specific groups. The detail are memorized in terms of time of activity, the name of the person, the precise spot, and most topics of socialization.

#### 4. Conclusion

In answering the first objective, the case of the Keputran kampungs, the research has demonstrated that meaning development is more important than the art sense of the environment. The art consideration came later (or not at all) after the meaning development of space that is recognized through social activity occurred in that area. In the perspective of urban contemporary, the meaning of places in the kampungs is an assemblage deriving from various perceptions by the users. The past experiences developed the current perceptions, and then later develop the identification of meaning of place. The phenomenological scope that has been studied in this research, the alleys are sharing spaces of people in kampungs.

For the second research objective, through the exploration of the daily rhythm in Keputran kampungs, could be seen that there is a social agreement between the daily users of the kampungs' spaces in using the space based on time. Hence, there is no contestation of space usage, and time is a significant factor to read the meaning of the spaces. Time usage of the alleys develops different meaning of the same space that depends on the society who uses it. This could not be identified through Cullen's approach alone with the observation of motion, position and detail that mostly understood visually.

On the other hand, in the kampungs the sense of place and content is firstly developed by the sense of community and social life. Urban elements that are identified by the observers are not only understood through the visual quality but also through the meaning to their social life. In the case of extending Cullen's theory with the urban contemporary perspective and the case such as kampungs, it needs not only visual observation but also the observation of social life that creates the sense of the place and content.

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