

Toward A Holistic Understanding of Sense of Place: A Phenomenological Reading of Chew Jetty, Penang

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Abstract

The twentieth century urban growth has engulfed small villages and places which form parts of the urban environment. One example of such place is the Chew Jetty in Georgetown. Situated along the Pengkalan Weld (Weld Quay), Chew Jetty, an on-stilts water village which housed migrant communities, has been in existence since the 19th century. For Georgetown, as a world heritage site, it is vital to preserve its histories, communities and cultural practices of places. Positioning itself as a small contribution within this large colossal task, this paper aims to reveal the perception on the local sense of place of the Clan Jetties amidst the backdrop of Georgetown's globalised everyday life. Adopting Francis Violich's phenomenological approach for reading small urban places as the method of study, this paper argues that the reading of place by way of phenomenology acts as a vehicle to communicate unique visual and social images of place.

Keywords: Sense of Place, Chew Jetty, Phenomenology, Place-making, Identity

Introduction

While de-territorialization of small villages due to globalization and commercialization of place is a common phenomenon, boundaries that define places and their identities get thinned out. The unique character and the sense of place of small villages dissipate amidst the globalized urban environments. The Clan Jetties of Georgetown in Penang is one example of such condition.

The Clan Jetties, situated along the Weld Quay, comprises of six long jetties projecting southeast into the channel between Penang and the mainland which has been in existence since the 19th century. Each jetty is a small community of water villages linking a number of wooden houses on stilts. Their ancestors came from small coastal communities in the Fukien province, China, and were mostly fisherman and gatherers of oysters. Upon arriving in Penang, majority of them worked as clan coolies to service the flourishing entreport and maritime trade then. Historically, each jetty was controlled by a different clan, each were bonded by their common lineage and clan history. This exclusivity contributed to the distinctive identity of the Clan Jetties and differentiates them from other jetty communities like the Noordin Ghaut Jetty, Peng Arn Jetty, and Ban Liaw Ketty. (Chan, 2002) Since the 1960s and 1970s, most of the jetty clansmen could no longer rely on the port or the sea for their economic livelihood due to the inception of the Port Labour Board in 1965 and the imposition of a ban of the government in 1976 on Taiwanese crew from coming ashore, which subsequently resulted in social disintegration of the clan communities. (Chan, 2002)

Today, over a century later, the fate of the Clan Jetties is contested amidst the contrasting backdrop of the globalized urban environment of Georgetown. Originally there were seven jetties but one was removed during the construction of the modern ferry terminal. Currently there are eight surviving clusters of residential jetties and seven clans—the Seh Lim Keo, Seh Chew Keo, Seh Tan Keo, Seh Lee Keo, Chap Seh Keo (Mixed Surname Jetty), Seh Yeoh Keo and Seh Koay Keo. Currently, from the outside, the jetties are a maze of dilapidated planks, resembling an old deteriorating neighbourhood and low-cost housing enclave. Among the jetties, only the Chew Jetty continues to have any clan related activity, the once a year annual worship of its temple deity and 'Tee Kong' (God of Heaven or Sky God) on the 9th of Chinese New Year (Lunar calendar). In July 2008, the historical enclave of George Town (together with Malacca) was fêted as Malaysia's one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in which the Clan Jetties formed part of the core zone, and part of the heritage walk trail of Georgetown.

As part of the core zone and with its interesting history and blend of cultural and religious activities, the communities and the physical make-up of the Clan Jetties at the Weld Quay settlements are indeed unique. The Clan Jetties is also featured in the official and other tourism websites featuring Georgetown, Penang as well as featured in travel news. In this sense, the Clan Jetties is a significant place as both a tourist magnet as well as a place with rich cultural heritages.

Realizing that the Clan Jetties have a strong and unique contribution to the history of Penang, current research suggests the urgent need to preserve and commemorate its social and cultural histories (Chan, 2002), and its ecological and cultural heritages. (Atkinsons, 2004) In the conference paper titled 'Rediscovering Historic Communal Sites and Commemorating their histories—The Case of the Clan Jetties', Chan (2002) captured the history of the Clan Jetties comprehensively and presented three proposals (1) research, especially collaborative community-based investigation and popular forms of documentation; (2) establishing a series or centre (museum) of commemoration houses; and, (3) a Penang's Story People's Museum.

Positioning itself within the broad research interests and concerns of the Clan Jetties, this research focuses on defining the local sense of place of the Clan Jetties by using the Chew Jetty as a case study. Chew Jetty is used as a case as it is one of the jetties which are still actively used, amongst the other six remaining jetties off Jalan Pengkalan Weld. The wooden stilts village is the home to the family with the surname 'Chew' who are descendants from Xin Lin She village, Tong Aun District, Quan Zhou Prefecture of Fujian Province. The Chew Clan is by far the largest among the Weld Quay family of clans. These clusters of wooden houses were built by the Chinese poor immigrants from the south-eastern coast of China, known as the Fujian Province.

Today, the Chew Jetty is still home to hundreds of people living in this area but many have changed their social and economic lifestyle. They embrace the experience of living in the Chew Jetty with the commencement of a homestay programme at 59A, Chew Jetty, Weld Quay. A community centre was built behind the temple at the entrance of the Chew Jetty functioning as an educational setting and recreational space for the community. The rich heritage of Chew Jetties is portrayed also by its inclusion in the 'Mirrors of Georgetown' in which one of the twelve large mural paintings by artist Ernest Zacharevic were strategically placed within the heritage core zone; the painting was titled 'Children in a boat'. Despite its awareness from a tourism perspective, the fate of such small urban historic sites is fragile.

Adopting Francis Violich's phenomenological reading for small urban places, this paper reveals the unique structure and character of the Chew Jetty that contributes to its sense of place. In order to achieve this aim, the paper will first define the notion of 'sense of place' and identify its importance and relationship to the preservation of histories, communities and cultures of places. Subsequently, it describes the phenomenological approach taken in reading the place. Consequently, this paper reveals the local sense of place and unique characteristics of the Chew Jetty. By doing so, the sense of place may be strongly enhanced by the place being written about with the bigger aim for protecting, preserving and enhancing places felt to be of value.

The Sense of Place

Due to its inter-disciplinary (anthropology, sociology, environmental psychology, urban studies, philosophy, history) nature, there is a lack of common definition or understanding of the 'sense of place'. Although this concept is fuzzy, there are definitions that narrow its focus into: (1) the interpretive perspective on places; and, (2) the emotional attachment to place. This paper grapples with the former.

Understanding the notion of place is one of the significant issues since the 1970s. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), in his seminal work *Space and Place* argued that a place comes into existence when humans give meaning to a part of the larger, undifferentiated space. Any time a location is identified or given a name, it is separated from the undefined space that surrounds it. Some places, however, have been given stronger meanings, names or definitions by society than others. These are the places that are said to have a strong sense of place.

In the field of architecture, the sense of place was related to the notion of "lived-experience". Christian Norberg-Schulz, in the opening of his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* related "place" closely to the term "genius loci". "Genius loci" is a Roman concept that refers to 'a guardian spirit who gives lives to people and places...and determines their character or essence'. (Norberg-Schulz, 1976, p. 422) He expressed the following on the notion of sense of place:

'Man dwells where he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment, or...when he experiences the environment as meaningful. Dwelling...implies something more than "shelter". It implies that the spaces where life occurs are places.' (Norberg-Schulz, 1980) Quoting from Suzanne Langer, Norberg-Schulz argued that 'architecture belongs to poetry, and its purpose is to help man to dwell. But architecture is a difficult art. To make practical towns and buildings is not enough. Architecture comes into being when a 'total environment is made visible'. (Norberg-Schulz, 1976, p. 422) Similar concerns were raised by Karsten Harries who stressed the need to 'discover the importance of neighborhoods and regions ... which will articulate their character...' (Harries, 1975, p. 396). Places said to have a strong 'sense of place' have a strong identity and character that is deeply felt by local inhabitants and by many visitors. Sense of place is a social phenomenon that exists independently of any one individual's perceptions or experiences, yet is dependent on human engagement for its existence.

In recent decades, cultural geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and urban planners studied why certain places hold special meaning to particular people or peoples. Many studies on place during the 1990s conceptualized place as a product of reiterative process of spatial and cultural practice and the emphasis on the role of people in the construction of place. As pointed out by Doreen Massey (1997), a particular place may have a character of its own; it is absolutely not a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares. It could hardly be less so. Massey's argument on place stressed the following: places are not static; they are processes (of social relations and interactions); place as defined by the outside (places are not about boundaries); place as site of multiple identities; and a uniqueness of place defined by its interactions (Massey, 1997).

The non-static sense of place is reiterated by Edward Relph (2009) who stressed that 'place' is a synaesthetic faculty that combines sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, imagination, purpose, and anticipation. It is both an individual and intersubjective attribute, closely connected to community as well as to personal memory and self. It is variable. Some people are not much interested in the world around them, and place for them is mostly a lived background. But others always attend closely to the character of the places they encounter. (Relph, 2009)

Based on these definitions, the sense of place is derived from the lived-experience and interactions of the (natural, built and cultural) 'environment' that differentiates it from other places. Despite the variedness of definitions, several common grounds can be established in defining the sense of place: (1) It comprises of a combination of characteristics (physical and socio-cultural elements) that collectively constructs a particular sense of place, and differentiates it from others; (2) Sense of place is temporal; and, (3) Sense of place is experienced.

Materials and Methods: Phenomenological Enquiry of Place

In order to reveal the local sense of place of the Chew Jetty, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Drawing from the philosophy of phenomenology, it uses the first-person phenomenological inquiry, i.e. the researcher's first hand experience of the phenomenon as a basis for examining its specific characteristics and qualities. The phenomenological approach offers an innovative way for looking at the person-environment relationship and for identifying and understanding its complex, multi-dimensional structure. Since the researcher as human instrument is the heart of phenomenological method, the specific research methods used should readily portray human experience in experiential terms. The best phenomenological methods, therefore, are those that allow human experience to arise in a rich, unstructured, multidimensional way.

The approach towards revealing the sense of place of Chew Jetty is adapted from Francis Violich's field work approach to seeking meaning in small towns (Violich, 1983). This method is for defining the particular qualities of the environment that shaped the sense of identity for both residents and visitors. As an example, Violich examined the contrasting qualities of place for several Dalmatian towns with varying spatial layouts (Violich, 1983). Using such techniques as sketching, mapping, and journal entries, he immersed himself in each place for several days and sought to "read each as a whole". Violich gathered data through direct, firsthand 'reading' of places on foot to experience town patterns intensively in relation to the natural environmental setting, details of architecture, turning points in history, and patterns of use by residents.

Violich's method of 'reading' small urban spaces is adapted because of the following:

- The method is appropriate for 'small' spaces, observing spatial pattern which is accessible by foot at pedestrian scale;

- The phenomenological method evoked intuitive perceptual responses in an integrated and comprehensive way from which to derive specific sources on identity of place. The interpretation of the identity of place developed to be a ‘reading’ of the visual and social environment both for its content of form and function. Through the process of field work, the unique qualities that determine the sense of place emerge. As described by Violich, the direct and personalized experience with places can bring forth the kind of emotional and intellectual responses that can deepen perception of place;
- The method defines the particular spatial pattern of place that shaped the sense of identity for both locals and visitors rather than the more passive and superficial observation or impersonal and mechanized survey work. The "reading" carried out on foot exposed enormous potential variety of spatial forms. The uniqueness of each is revealed when the entire system of streets, squares, open space centers and buildings is fully experienced, and deliberately compared. In different ways, each place generates a profound sense of connectedness for people that are apparent in everyday life. Each has its own most endeared architectural features that fix images in the minds of "insiders" and "outsiders."

The fieldwork is developed as a “reading” of the visual and social environment both for its content or urban form and function. Through this process, the unique qualities that determine the sense of place and local identity of Chew Jetty will begin to emerge. Adapting Violich’s method to reading small towns, the researcher spent three days in the Clan Jetties (particularly in the Chew Jetty). Violich recommended a period of three to five days in places of from one to five hundred persons. The following were the processes during the fieldwork: The first impression of the town was observed and experienced by foot avoiding reliance on official maps (there was no official map available for tourist). This phase involved observation and recording of the overall perception of the town. After experiencing the town fully, the patterns and structure of the place were recorded and annotated through mental map and sketches. Once the overall structure is recorded, the reading is broken up into smaller parts and to walk the smaller arteries and enclaves of the place to observe human patterns and use. The observations are recorded through diagrams and photographs. The data gathered from the experiences and observations formed the main data for analysis on the senses of place and local distinctiveness of the Chew Jetty.

Results and Discussion: Chew Jetty’s Overall Structure

The structure of place for the Chew Jetty is recorded through a mental map which displayed a strong pattern of Chew Jetty (Figure 1). Based on the mapping derived through observation and recording, the visual and social image of Chew Jetty is defined by varied spatial characteristics, and is unified by its system of movement.

Patterns, proximity and scale of the built environment

One unique character of the Chew Jetty is its smallness and intimacy of the built forms, which creates relative visual differentiation to its “outside”. The entrance to Chew Jetty (and all the other Jetties) is almost obscured. Approaching from the street, Pengkalan Weld Road, the entry is delineated with outdoor “shed-like” dining spaces. The obscurity is due to the smallness of the entry, dwarfed by the scale of the built forms within the inner Georgetown. While approaching from the sea, the intimate built forms on stilts of Chew Jetty appear as miniatures, of a totally different texture and colour to that of the inner city. The layer of background versus middle ground and foreground offers varied layered spaces that distinguished the patina of Chew Jetty. Approaching from the sea, the Chew Jetty offers a panoramic vista due to its position at the fringe between the land and the sea, set on the edge between the sea and the sky. This position offers a surreal visual image of place (Figure 2).

The cohesive spine and the diverse dwellings

Upon entering into the Chew Jetty, the system of movement, a linear circulation spine forms a cohesive structure, a common denominator that reconciles the diversity of individual forms of expression of the Chew Jetty. The built forms within the Jetty are connected by a network of paths, made out of timber planks on stilts, which form the circulation route for pedestrians, evidently marked by a small signage labeled “Welcome to Chew Jetty” at the entry into the small urban place. With an intimate entrance, the movement is dictated by a linear cohesive path that offers accessibility through the spaces within the Jetty, almost choreographing the experiential reading of this place. It forms a “street” that promotes social contact between residents as well as visitors, as a communal living room (Figure 3). The patterns, proximity and scale of built forms contribute to a sense of community within the Chew Jetty.

Blurring of the public-private territories

While the Chew Jetty used to be a residential enclave, today, the Jetty has morphed into a tourist magnet that visitors may find in the Heritage Trail of Georgetown. Inevitably, this scenario had impacted on the experience and character of place. The Chew Jetty is experience somewhat like a ‘public living gallery’. Today, the Jetty is delineated with commercially-driven activities, operated from their domestic spaces, such as hair salon, souvenir shop, convenience store, and homestay.

The wooden path that connects the built forms within the Jetty which offers such experience has altered the territorial difference of private and public spaces within this residential enclave. The concept of public and private is seen as a series of spatial qualities which, differing gradually, refer to accessibility, responsibility the relation between private property and supervision of specific spatial units (Hertzberger, 2005, p. 13). While the patio along the main path acts as an intermediate buffer space, the paths, constructed from wooden planks on stilts, become the arteries for the visitors to experience the life of this small urban place (Figure 4).

With the jetty becoming more public, the private spaces (and life) of the inhabitants has changed due to greater degree of accessibility. Despite the Chew Jetty being a domestic residential enclave, the relationship between the wooden path, the built form and the spaces, has “opened up” the social image of place to visitors. The image of this small urban place is perceived as an extroverted space by which spaces are turned inside-out: the domestic spaces within the Jetty display the private life of the inhabitants. The patio becomes the threshold space between public and private domains, defining the territorial boundaries between the inhabitants and the visitors (Figure 5). While the main path appears to be public, a non-physical territorial differentiation is expressed by the smaller path that connects the main path to the inner paths of the Jetty, forming a more private enclave, mainly used by the locals. Water-courts also form occasional accidental spots that greet visitors with images of Chew Jetty. These spatial elements form threshold demarcating the public and the private domains (Figure 6).

Views and seclusion

While the views from afar offer a unique backdrop for the small water village, the views within the Jetty defines its social contact. The play of contrast between views and seclusion create a heightened experience of place where both the openness and separation of spaces defines the public and private domains of the Chew Jetty. For example, elements such as constricted views and gaps that limit ones connection to people and space (Figure 6). Besides the demarcation of public and private spaces through spatial elements, views offer element of privacy/individuality and community (Figure 7).

In contrast to the varied built forms along the circulation spine which suggests seclusion and privacy, the temples, acting as the guardians of place, form the nodes of communal gathering and celebrations during festive periods (Figure 8). The tree temple at the entrance is said to house spirits of their ancestors. While, a formal temple, at the end of the path, at the fringe of the water, is used primarily by the fishermen to pray for a safe journey and give thanks upon their safe return. Anchoring both ends of the Jetty, they act as activators of the otherwise dormant and silent Chew Jetty.

The innocence, and at the same time, the threat toward the Chew Jetty are portrayed by the simple life of its inhabitants. The image of boat, children, fishing net, inhabitants seating by the patio and gathering at the community center and temples: all these images offer a static image echoing the silence and stillness of space. Even while the people are not evident, traces of the simple life is showcased through art, objects and traces of events (Figure 9).

Despite the need of preservation and commemoration of Clan Jetties’ social and cultural histories and its cultural heritages, it is important to address the current identity and image of today’s sense of place it the evolving and non-static place identity. These historic sites offer variety, curiosity and delight to the contemporary experience of the modern urban fabric.

Conclusion

The central question is: What has been learned about the sense of place of Chew Jetty from the reading experience? A reading of the overall all structure and sequence of its basic components does indeed reveal a uniqueness that can be quite specifically defined. Its sense of place derives from its own particular structural pattern of major and minor circulation routes and arteries, their relationship to the human activity and spatial use, and the way the place sets within the backdrop by the historical and globalized urban environment.

Chew Jetty's essential qualities emanate from its visual and social image. Its uniqueness lies in the way the varied physical forms with its systems of movement, all constructed without conscious planning, serves to maximize social interaction and the element of curiosity. It offers a picturesque experience of the natural and constructed environment and a community which unconsciously create the kinds of connection via windows, doorways, paths, and nodes to meet their need for contact. Its smallness awed by the urban built environment enhances the potentials for perceiving these qualities. While gentrification of dilapidating urban historic sites is unavoidable, it is necessary to understand the experiential qualities that construct the image of places as one of the ways to value the sense of history and memory, amidst the modernizing urban fabric.

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List of illustrations

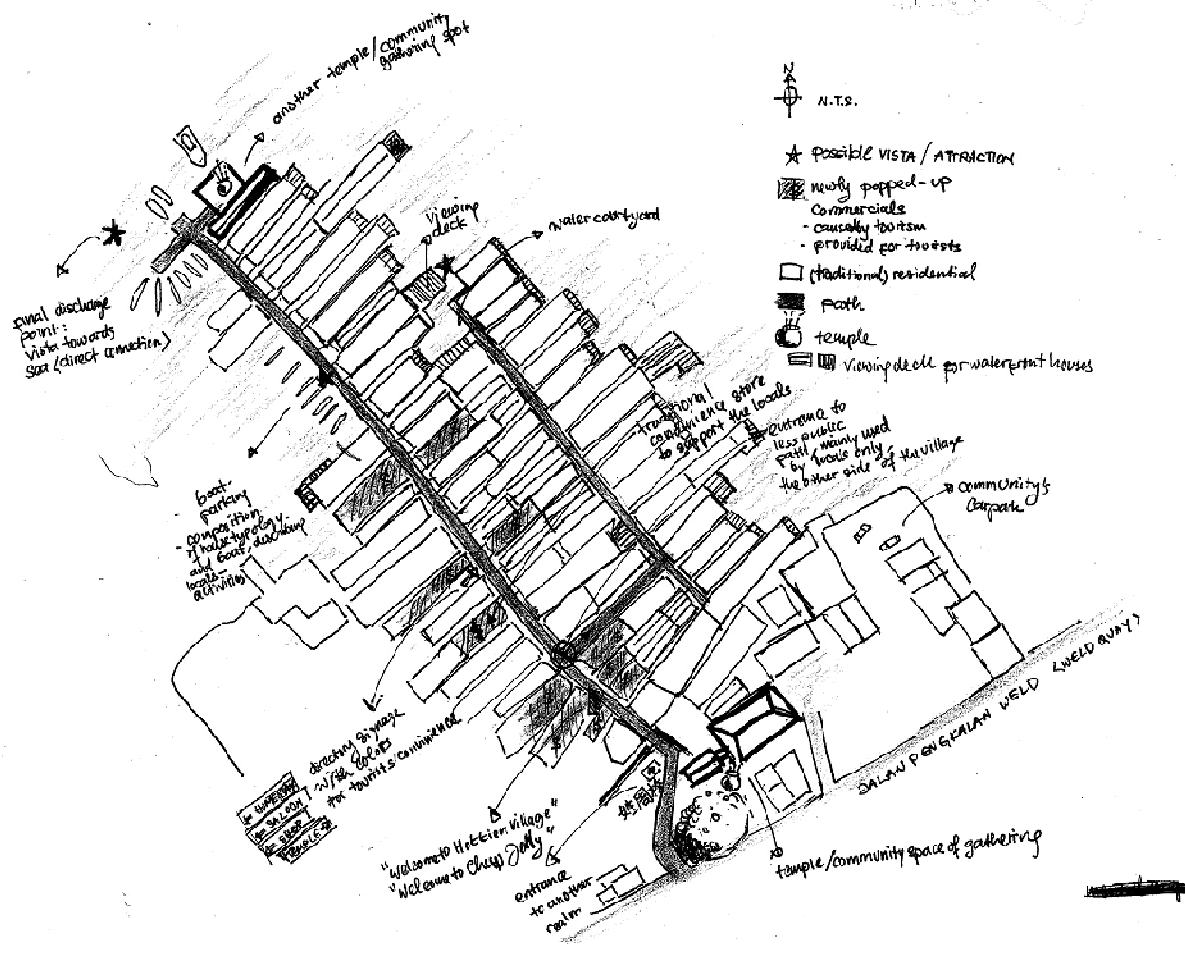
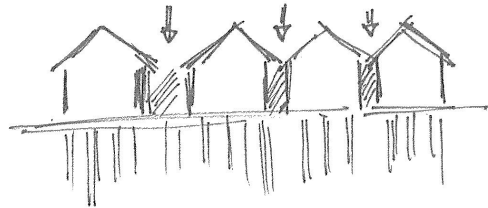


Figure 1: Mental map of the Chew Jetty

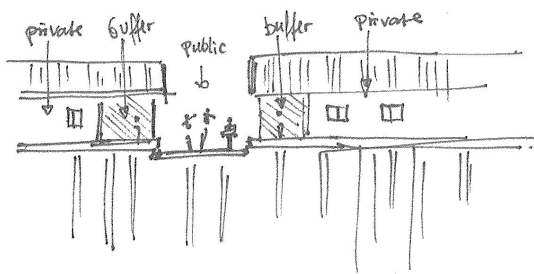


Figure 2: Chew Jetty and its setting



- gaps in between houses + their roof shapes showing each house ~~is~~ built by different people as stand alone (bungalow) house.
- They might know or not know who were their neighbor but they are staying together as a community

Figure 3: The varied built forms unified through the circulation



- clear definition of public & private common pedestrian path (bridge) was built slightly lower than the porch of each house
- almost every house next to the bridge has a porch/verandah before their house making locals feel comfortable w/n their private zone (buffer)

Figure 4: The relationship between the path, the patio (buffer) and the private spaces



Figure 5: The daily life as an image of Chew Jetty

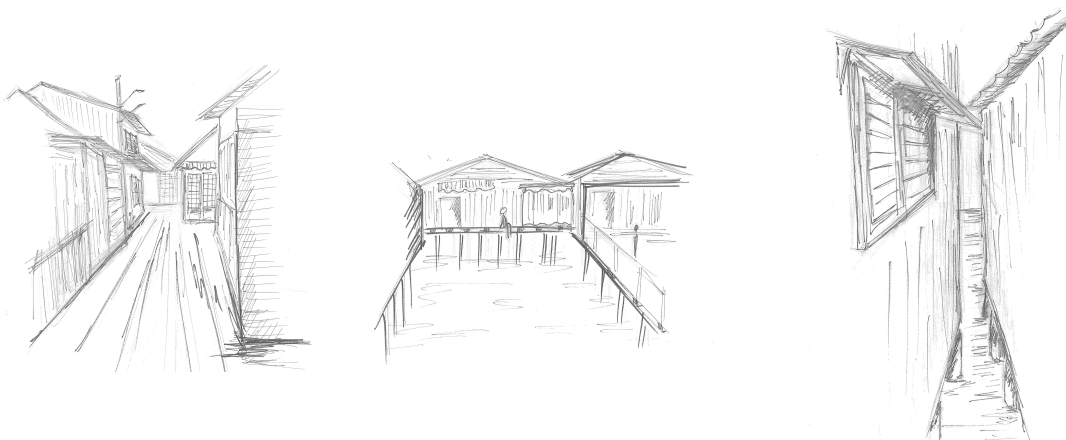


Figure 6: The threshold between public and private defined by smaller paths, water courts and gaps between built forms

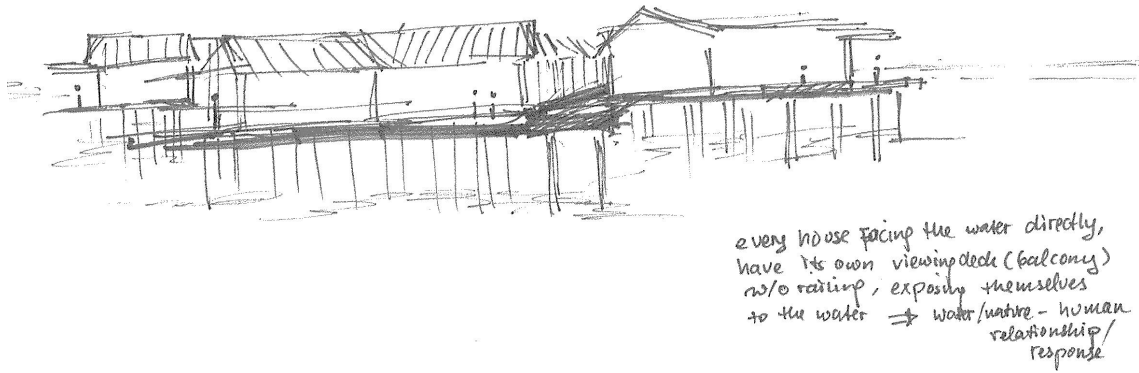
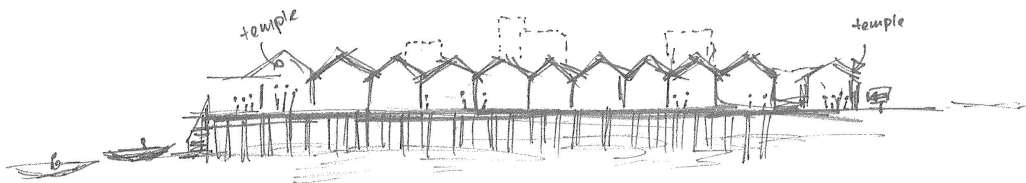


Figure 7: Each dwelling faces the water demarcating their private space



- skyline without highrise people in the village does not feel intimidated by tall buildings (highrise are quite a distance away)
- one community feel
- house are very close to each other - not much difference in social status (seen from the house)
- small community like a family
- protected by temple at entrance and temple at the back
- temple as community space

Figure 8: Temple as a node and community space that holds the jetty together



Figure 9: Traces of the life of Chew Jetty