



Ikmal Hisham Albakri, the National Mosque, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1965. © MASSA, 2007.

Nation Building and Modern Architecture in Malaysia

BY NOR HAYATI HUSSAIN

This paper explores the historical development of modern architecture in Malaysia, which is evident in the emerging architectural language; the efforts of the Federation of Malaya Society of Architects (later known as the *Pertubuhan Akitek* Malaysia); as well as the direction taken by the architectural practice in the country; all of which were driven by the prevailing political, economic as well as the socio-cultural attributes of the new nation, and the vision on Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya. The outcome of all these is an architecture that speaks of the nation's modern society's values and identity.

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The period after the WWII saw Malaya attempting to cope with problems of independence, nationalism, language, Malayanisation and education. The existing diversity established during the colonial periods had to be ended to produce a unified national system. The post-war reconstruction effort was aimed at unifying all the people in Malaya into a nation. Many buildings were constructed to meet public needs and, at the same time, express a national vision for the future, an indication that architecture was seen as a means to unite the people. One of the common strategies employed by a nation in its pursuit of a single national identity is the construction and dissemination of a certain "image" of the nation, which, in most cases, is evident in its sheer size and lasting impression. It would be constructed to "portray images referencing ethnic, cultural or religious belief in order to potentially evoke the nationalistic sentiments among the masses"¹. This notion is further strengthened by Amos Rapoport, who stated that architecture "occupies and shapes the physical social context as well as influencing the perceptual nature of human behavior"² thus, mirroring the spiritual and physical values, political ideology and technological achievement of a society³. Be it through its function or expression, architectural design carries messages that identify the building with the nation and society at a particular time. It is a common practice of the leaders of a nation, as well as politicians, to determine the direction of the nation's political agenda in suiting the aspiration of its people. As seen in many great civilizations, monuments and landmarks were constructed by their leaders, as an indication of the nation's achievements and progress. It would also serve as indicators of their performance while in power.

"Works of architecture become the major focus for political leaders to render their national ideologies. Architecture is the best tool as it metaphorically communicates to the masses through scale, form and other elements"⁴.

Before going further into the history of the architectural development of the country, it is important to understand the prevailing circumstances that influence it. In a relatively young nation, one of the most influential figures that steered the direction towards unity was its first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903-1990)⁵. As previously mentioned, the greatest challenge towards unity was to bring together the three main ethnic groups that were divided by the British colonists, and this division was strongly evident in various aspects such as cultural identity as well as language. Policies, legislation and the administration had to be molded to address the aspirations of all three groups, and to reflect the characteristics of democracy, a governance system that the leaders had collectively adopted, as highlighted by Cheah Boon Kheng⁶. Abdul Rahman strongly believed that unity, as well as every individual's commitment towards it, would guarantee liberty, security, prosperity and happiness in the future⁷. Though strong in its quest to become a united nation, its leaders as well as its people were challenged by a number of significant events that have left deep impacts and affected many aspects including architectural practice and the development of the country.

As early as the mid-1950s, the transformation of style from neo-classical architecture to modern architecture was obvious, particularly in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Penang. Among significant buildings constructed in Kuala Lumpur are the Federal House [Iversen (1906-1976) and Van Sitteren (1904-1968), 1954], the British Council building [Kenneth Charles Duncan⁸ (1898-1983), 1956] and the Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia [Lee Yoon Thim (1905-1977), 1959]. The Federal House, an 8-story administrative building, contains offices with an adjoining block to house other public spaces; staircases, lift lobbies and an entrance hall that links the two blocks. The façade of the slab block is treated as a thin frame filled entirely with screens of metal-framed glass and green vitrolite panels, making the Federal House one of the earliest International Style buildings in Kuala Lumpur and

01 A stamp to commemorate the Independence Day with picture of Tunku Abdul Rahman. © National Museum, 1957.



02 Tunku Abdul Rahman waving to the public with a clinched finger on the eve of the Independence Day. © National Museum, 1957.



a construction that uses plastic as a building material. The British Council building was designed to house a cultural center, a library and the offices of the British Council. It was constructed in a reinforced concrete post-and-beam system with a unique granite decorative external wall finish. It won the RIBA Bronze Medal in 1959 for the integration of modern and indigenous architectural design. Designed in a true modernist style, with v-shaped struts featuring on the façade, the Institute of Malaysian Language and Literature, comprised a large block containing offices and a concert hall that is raised on columns to allow for a covered entrance and through driveway. The end wall of the concert hall features a colourful mosaic mural designed by Ismail Mustam (1944-) depicting various national themes.

The abstract and neutral qualities of modern architecture were favorable since they allowed for reinterpretation and disassociation with specific references to ethnicity and beliefs. As modern architecture emerged as a response to the era of industrialism, function and economy were the two main design considerations in order to serve people in a poor economy. In addition, the new architecture emphasized integrity and honesty, parallel to the peoples' aspiration for a democratic and righteous way of living. Modern architecture was to take heed of the development of society, and was meant to be responsive in its design. Modern architecture merged the philosophical, economic, historical and socio-cultural factors in constructing a new architectural design in parallel with contemporary architectural thought⁹.

The Federation of Malaya Society of Architects (FMSA) established in 1923 (later changed to *Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia*, PAM, in 1967), representing the professionals in Malaya (later Malaysia in 1963), took the role of supervising and determining the direction of architectural development in the newly established nation. The Society's concerns and

attempts in creating an architecture befitting the identity; values and meaning of Malaya were evidenced in their activities, discourses and publications, as well as the efforts in making the voice of local architects heard, and therefore, can be considered as a direct reflection of the local architects' thoughts and concerns. With the establishment of the Society, architects in Malaya were optimistic about the future of new construction in Malaya¹⁰. New urban centers were developed with large scale construction of new building typologies such as shops, schools, offices and mansions. Petaling Jaya (1952), one of the first satellite towns, was established with the aim of solving the problem of overcrowding in the city of Kuala Lumpur. The development was initiated by the Selangor State Government who entrusted the Kuala Lumpur District Office and Petaling Jaya Board to manage it. In late 1954, a statutory body, Petaling Jaya Authority, took over the responsibility and, by January 1, 1964, the State of Selangor gazetted a municipal board to govern the city. The development included residential areas, employment and recreation areas in a number of connected neighborhood units, as well as land set aside for commercial purposes, government buildings, public facilities and other uses. The city was planned to be a model for Malaya's future new town developments that featured better housing designs integrated with proper town planning organisation, modelled after similar developments in Britain.

The promising economic development in Malaya and Singapore after WWII was an attraction for foreign architects, particularly the British, to come and set up their practices. By the time Malaya gained its independence in 1957, the number had reduced, as some of these foreign architects had decided to leave the country, while the remaining stayed on and contributed to the development of the architecture for the new nation. At the same time, the first generation of Malayan architects, who graduated from

03 A local newspaper headline featured the independence celebration with picture of Tunku surrounded by the public. © National Museum, 1957.



04 Stanley E. Jewkes of PWD, Merdeka Stadium, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1957. The stadium was considered the first modern building of the new nation by UNESCO in 2008. © National Museum, 1957.



abroad, particularly Australia and the United Kingdom, came back after completing their studies.

Generally, there were three types of practices at the time: first, independent practices which were set up by local architects, namely, T. S. Leong, Lee Yoon Thim (Y. T. Lee) (1905–1977) and Fong Ying Leong; and the second were partnerships between local graduates such as Chung & Wong, Ho Kwong Yew (1903–1942)¹¹ & Sons, Alfred H. K. Wong (1930–) as well as the Malayan Architects Co-Partnership (MAC, 1960–1967). The firm MAC was one of the earliest local firms, founded by three Western educated architectural graduates; Lim Chong Keat a graduate of the University of Manchester (1930–), Chen Voon Fee (1931–2008) and William Lim Siew Wai (1932–), both graduated from the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London. The third type comprised practices which were set up through collaborations between foreign architects and locals such as Booty, Edwards and Partners (Est. in 1923, renamed as BEP in 1969), and Swan & Maclaren architects (1892–). With the return of the local practitioners from abroad, the engineering and architectural disciplines became professional¹². They brought with them knowledge and experience which they gained abroad such as standardization and modularization of materials, design and building processes, together with the application of modern products and systems.

According to Ken Yeang, a majority of architecture firms, expatriates and locals were very much influenced by contemporary architectural ideas prevailing in Europe at that time. In his opinion, they were “considerably influenced by contemporary British architecture: the work of the Smithsons, Lasdun (1914–2001), the brutalist movement in the 1950s and the hi-tech influences of the early 1960s”¹³. The architectural ideas were based on a strong sense of rationality as well as functionalism, as were advocated by the Modern Movement. Typically, the architectural features were simple, with no ornamentation and totally utilitari-

an. However, Ken Yeang also remarked that, though they were excited by opportunities to experiment, the architects in Malaya were fully aware of the need to respond to the tropical climate.

In preparation for the approaching independence celebrations and associated soccer match, the Public Works Department designed and built a stadium named Merdeka Stadium (Independence Stadium, 1957), as the largest stadium in Southeast Asia in the late 1950s. It was constructed using a reinforced concrete structure and was ready for the most historic event in Malaya: the Declaration of Independence on 31 August 1957. The stadium has a thin shell roof, and arches over the grandstand. Four prestressed concrete pylons supporting the corner floodlights were cast on site and lifted into position.

Another example of early modern architecture in Kuala Lumpur is the Kuala Lumpur International Airport [Kington Loo (1930–2003) of BEP, 1965] located in Subang. The airport features a hyperbolic paraboloid shell roof with mushroom columns which remind visitors of the country’s lush tropical forest. In 1965, the airport had the longest runway in Southeast Asia at 3,474 meters. The design sits within a modern architectural language while responding well to Malaysia’s tropical climate with open balconies and wide cantilevered roofs.

The post-independence period provided an opportunity for architects in Malaya to reflect on its past and envision the future. According to Ngiom, “there was a hive of activity to cater for the needs of a newly formed nation together with the demands of a growing commercial sector. It was an exceedingly busy period for the small community of architects”¹⁴. Chen Voon Fee remarked that the period after independence was conducive to experimentation: “The country had just gained independence, and the mood was one of optimism. We were on the threshold of a new life, and we felt that anything was possible”¹⁵.

To show the support of the society towards this national agenda and the appreciation of the architects who were in the process of developing an architectural identity, FMSA started a series of discourses to discuss the issue of national architecture in Malaya through its official publication, PETA. From 1955 to 1958, under the theme “Towards Malayan Architecture”, articles were written to provide historical information on the development of architecture and the articles’ intention was to educate members of the society as well as the public. PETA also featured an article by Julius Posener entitled “Architecture in Malaya: Impressions of a Newcomer”¹⁶, proposing a review of housing design based on those built before the war. He expressed his concern over the rapid development of Malayan architecture that was strongly influenced by the styles from the West and the East. He stressed that, with the intention to capture modernity, Malayan architects, at the time, had forgotten the traditional architecture which is well suited to the climate and culture of Malaya. Therefore, it was his sincerest hope for Malayan architects to produce architecture that suited the Malayan context whilst being aware of the variations that the 20th century would pose.

In its June 1960 edition, PETA published an article by Raymond Honey entitled “An Architecture for Malaya”, in which architects in Malaya were reminded to design for their times, nevertheless not to ignore their locality. He also emphasized the importance of the effort to search for a national architecture and that architects should not resort to mere decoration. In the endeavor of searching for a national identity in architecture, Raymond Honey stressed that it is a process which is “an evolving one and inevitably there must be a phase of experiment and inevitably the phase will produce some deviations”. The experiments, according to him, should take several contributing factors into consideration such as “cultural background, existing tradition in architecture, climate, locally produced material and craftsmanship, and architects’ own craft”¹⁷.

Designs of two major national projects demonstrated two different approaches undertaken by architects in Malaya at that time. The Parliament building (1963), a project by the Public Works Department, led by William Ivor Shipley (1915-1995) has given a reinterpretation of modern architectural language in a tropical setting. Ivor Shipley credited his experience “of maintaining and designing buildings” in Malaya on his sensitivity “to local conditions and attentiveness to climatic adaptations and cultural attenuations”¹⁸. On the other hand, the architect for the second project looked further into local traditions for inspiration. The National Museum (1963), designed by Ho Kok Hoe (1922-2015) and supervised by Mubin Sheppard (1905-1994) reflected an adaptation of traditional Malay architecture to modern design. The design, which is dubbed as “a revision of the local traditional palace symbolizing the nation’s sovereignty integrated with functionalism, provided a new solution on how to marry the past and the present”¹⁹.

In general, the trend and efforts made by architects towards an architecture with a national identity were noted by many. Posener stated that architecture in 1961 began “to

swerve towards the direction of nationalism in an attempt to promote a new identity for the new nation”²⁰. While Phillip Goad, in his observations of Malaysian architecture since 1957, highlighted that there are two aspects that were continuously pondered upon by Malaysians: architecture and identity, he praised the design of the Parliament House and the National Mosque (1965, by Ikmal Hisham Albakri, 1931-2006, a graduate of Sheffield University, 1956) as the best buildings which, to him, demonstrated “convincing statements of independence and of abstracted cultural reference”²¹. This is in line with the design intent of the National Mosque, as elaborated by Ikmal Hisham Albakri, one of its architects:

Our approach to the design of Masjid Negara was definitely a departure from the normally accepted perspective of adapting the traditional Islamic architecture style of Middle East. We set out with a conceptual approach based on three main objectives:

- a) It must reflect its function as an Islamic religious building of prayer.*
- b) There must also be a need for a building to have a national (Malayan) character or identity.*
- c) At the same time, it must be contemporary in appearance”²².*

Similarly, Maxwell Fry (1899-1987), in his article entitled “First Impressions of Kuala Lumpur”, in PETA, June 1962, commended the architecture of the Parliament House and its landscape. One of the most fascinating features for him was the de-centralized approach, which he considered as monumental yet modern. He felt “the setting was so perfect in its tropical character, that nothing should be allowed to impede its absolute consummation: for it is not often that the intentions of a government are so beautifully embodied in point not of architecture alone”²³, but also in landscape.

A competition for a great hall for the University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur was held in 1961 (The Chancellery Hall, 1966). The university needed a 300 seat hall mainly



05 Kington Loo of BEP, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Subang, Malaysia, 1965. With a hyperbolic paraboloid concrete roof and the longest runway in Southeast Asia at the time of its construction, the airport was as one of the most modern airports in the region in the 1960s. © National Archive, 1960s.

06 Kington Loo of BEP, *Dewan Tunku Canselor* [The Chancellery Hall], *Universiti Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1966. The Chancellery Hall is one of the first modern buildings in the city with a strong resemblance to Le Corbusier's Brutalist architecture. © Nor Hayati Hussain, 2017.



07 An aerial view of Petaling Jaya, one of the modern satellite cities serving Kuala Lumpur developed in 1952. © National Archive, 1960s.

for the purposes of convocation and public events. The winner, a scheme by the BEP *Akitek*, demonstrated a strong brutalist architectural language with an exposed raw concrete finish and an expressive mass. However, it responds well to tropical climate with the use of deep overhangs, the *brise-soleil* and angled openings to reduce the amount of direct sunlight into the building. The arrangement of the *brise-soleil* has a great impact on the massing of the hall, as it tones down the scale of the building and acts as ornamentation to the façade of the hall. The design is a unique example of an adaptation of modern architectural idioms to the local context of climate and culture.

On 20th January 1967, FMSA ceased operation and was replaced by the *Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM)*²⁴. Its first president was Ikmal Hisham Albakri, the first fully-qualified Malay architect in Malaya. The architectural aspiration in the 1960s was to develop an architecture for Malaya that was part of its own culture. Raymond Honey stated that the desire was not only to echo the independence from the former colonial power, but also for the new nation to develop “in ways that adequately reflect the various cultures represented in its citizens”²⁵. It is a fact that the evolution of a Malaysian culture, which inevitably mirrors the identity of Malaysia, is not a process that can happen within a specific period, but requires a prolonged assimilation and integration of the people which is comprised of different ethnic groups. The way of life of the people in Malaya in the 1960s changed dramatically as the political and economic conditions presented different sets of challenges.

FMSA has played a major role in promoting the efforts of reshaping the national architectural identity in Malaya and then Malaysia in the 1960s. In great part, this was done by providing the direction and organizing events towards reshaping the identity of Malaysian architecture. Modern design fits the modern Malaysian political and economic aspects as outcomes of a new society, a new era and new opportunities. Architecture became the visual symbol of the economic, political and socio-cultural development while, at the same time, provided the challenges and opportunities for architects in Malaysia to experiment within that brief period of time in the history of Malaysia.

Presently, many works of modern architecture of the late 1950s and 1960s in Malaysia are at risk due to urban redevelopment and modification for new uses. Some of them have been demolished and replaced for more lucrative gain. Due to their “young age”, unimposing and modest character, modern architecture is considered less attractive and of less significance, therefore many are unappreciated and left abandoned. Among those demolished and replaced are the first modern international Kuala Lumpur Airport at Subang (demolished in 1998) and the Pudu Jail, the first and only fully equipped penitentiary facilities in Kuala Lumpur in late 19th century (demolished in 2008). Urgent action is needed to create a comprehensive inventory and record of modern architecture in Malaysia to facilitate educational and scholarly opportunities, also to promote appreciation towards our modern architectural heritage. Governmental agencies, such as the Department of Heritage, and private

organisations, such as Badan Warisan (The Heritage of Malaysia Trust), and PAM could collaborate, lead and support the effort. As part of a city, modern architecture provides a reference to its history and character that identifies the place, nation and country.

Notes

- Some part of this paper was extracted from the author's PhD thesis *Thoughts on Malaysian Architecture Identity and Design Principles of Malaysian Architects Co-Partnership*, unpublished PhD thesis, Johor Bahru, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2015.
- 1 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983.
 - 2 Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Non-Verbal Communication Approach*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1990.
 - 3 Ikmal Hisham Albakri, “Persejarahan (Menyentuh Aspek-aspek Seperti Bahan, Teknik, Konsep dan Sosial)”, *Seminar Ke Arab Identiti Kebangsaan Dalam Senibina*, Kuala Lumpur, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia Dan Sukan, 1981, Lampiran 1.
 - 4 Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power and National Identity*, New York, Routledge, 2008.
 - 5 Tunku Abdul Rahman referred as Tunku from this point onwards
 - 6 Cheah Boon Kheng (ed.), *The Challenge of Ethnicity Building a Nation in Malaysia*, Singapore, Marshall Cavendish Academy, 2004.
 - 7 Excerpted from the speech made by Tunku on receiving the Freedom of the City of London, NST June 19 1968, as published in Zainul Ariffin Mohammed Isa (ed.), *Tunku in His Own Word*, Kuala Lumpur, New Straits Time, 2009.
 - 8 Australian modernist architect known for his Western Australian architecture until 1970s. Studied at Perth Technical College (1917).
 - 9 Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, USA, MIT, 1965.
 - 10 Ngiam and Lillian Tay, *80 Years of Architecture in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia, 2000.
 - 11 Ho Kwong Yew was the first local-born Asian to become a registered architect in Singapore. His son, Ho Kok Hoe, designed the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. Well known for Haw Par Villa (1937), Singapore.
 - 12 Lai Chee Kien, *Building Merdeka Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur 1957-1966*, Malaysia, Petronas, 2007.
 - 13 Ken Yeang, “A Review of Malaysian Architecture 1957-1987”, *MA*, 1987, 24.
 - 14 Ngiam and Lillian Tay, *op. cit.*
 - 15 Chen Voon Fee, “Houses: 1957 – 1987 (or 30 Years of Dreams fulfilled?)”, in Chan Chee Yoong (ed.), *Post-Merdeka Architecture Malaysia 1957-1987*, Kuala Lumpur, Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia, 1987, 31.
 - 16 Julius Posener, “Architecture in Malaya: Impressions of a newcomer, Towards a Malayan Architecture”, *PETA* 2 (1), 1957, 1-9.
 - 17 Raymond Honey, “An Architecture for Malaya”, *PETA* 2 (2), 1960, 1-3.
 - 18 Lai Chee Kien, *op. cit.*
 - 19 Nor Hayati Hussain, *Muzium Negara MASSA Monographs*, Malaysia, Taylor's University, 2010.
 - 20 Julius Posener, “Malaya”, in J. M. Richards (ed.), *New Buildings in the Commonwealth*, Ipswich, Architectural Press, 1961, 193-202.
 - 21 Phillip Goad, *Culture at the Crossroads: recent Malaysian Architecture*, Kuala Lumpur, Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia, 2007, 8-25.
 - 22 Ikmal Hisham Albakri, “PAM Gold Medal Address (Part 1)”, *Majalah Akitek*, Vol.5, no. 2, P53, Mar/Apr 1993.
 - 23 Maxwell Fry, “First Impressions of Kuala Lumpur”, *PETA*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1962.
 - 24 Malayan Institute of Architects.
 - 25 Raymond Honey, *op. cit.*

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