

MASTERMINDING THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN MALAYSIA

A COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR DR MOHAMAD TAJUDDIN HAJI MOHAMAD RASDI

► The basic question for someone who is in charge of preserving the architectural heritage of Malaysia would be 'which one to preserve?'. In a nutshell, the question simply implies that whatever we see in front of us, day in and day out, is actually our heritage. From the monumental statements of Putrajaya to the DBKL Petaling Flats, architecture refuses to lie, and instead stands out amidst the babble of praises and excuses.

The Heritage Dilemma. As man cannot live a full life without his own sense of 'the past' in order to derive his rituals, thoughts and values and thus, so does a nation fail to prosper in the fullest sense of the term without her history. As intelligent citizens of a nation, we need to understand our past in order to do three things, to emulate it, to adapt it or to discard it. Which ever is the task, you cannot not know your history. Thus it is with architectural heritage. Though the name of the game seems to be which heritage to preserve as a shining example to posterity, what value would any decision have if the story is unclear? To me it is a sad day indeed when one's heritage is subjected to the 'operationalisation' of efficient business management ethos. Quickly zero in to your target client and sell, sell, sell! The subject of writing history and architectural heritage is no different. How can one 'zero in' when one does not know the historical forces that shape our environment? Thus, the task for a body which has been vested with the monumental effort of identifying architectural heritage must begin with masterminding the intellectual heritage of the forces that shape our built environment.

I will illustrate three cases to show our 'hasty' predicament. The first case is a war memorial and cemetery for the soldiers in the WWII situated in Taiping Lake Gardens, Penang. I remember as a teenager gazing at the quiet majesty of the cemetery's architectural composition; rows of regimented white tombstones are set on a flat green meadow with a slight suggestion of rubble fence and a sedate gateway. Lo and behold, today the Taiping Municipal Council has seen fit to 'liven' the place up by adding colorful flowers in between the tombstones guarded by rows of symmetrically planted pompous Royal Palm trees. What an utter disaster! There is yet a research to look into the intention of the architect concerning the cemetery design.

The second case is the Parliament Building of

Malaysia. My first visit to this important heritage of Malaysia's First Democracy was about two months ago during a research trip to find out about this particular building. As I was trained in the Modernist ethos, and being a student of architectural history, I could appreciate the echoes of socialism and non-feudalistic statements as seen in the exterior composition of the building. The pristine white and grey language speaks of the days of a hundred year old revolution against the over ornamented aristocratic architecture of the Ecole de Beaux arts. The political struggle of the Western world against the chains of feudalism over two centuries ago can be felt strongly in this monument to democracy in Malaysia. But travesty awaits as I step into the building. The Parliament was being renovated. And what do I find? Post-modern monumentalism! Fat classical pillars, ornate mouldings adorn the simple walls and ceilings of the Parliament Building. To me it was like Malaysia was reverting to the pre-colonial days of feudalism! What would one say to a country that does not even have a record of her own history of civilizing elements?

The third case concerns the JKR quarter housing. Recently, in the course of doing research on the Colonial-Malay hybrid quarter houses of Taiping, I met up with a few of my former students, who are now JKR architects. One of them proudly showed a medium-rise apartment which he designed for the new line of government quarters. I noticed that the design is the typical cluster type with a central stair core and masonry in-fill walls over reinforced concrete frame. I showed him the Colonial-Malay Hybrid quarter housing which I was researching, and also some pictures of the JKR Police Barrack in Taiping where I used to live. I explained how the lessons of the past, concerning timber louvered panels being used in both types of schemes which made good ventilation sense, rather than his full masonry walls and non-louvered windows. The JKR Police Barrack had two other advantages in that every unit has a storage room on the ground floor to keep bicycles and other things. I told him that his quarter housing would be filled with bicycles on the stair landings. Furthermore, the design of the long corridor of the JKR Police Barrack speaks of a *serambi* idea in which children can play safely under the theme of 'defensible space'. His quarter housing contains

only a stair landing and the door-to-door face off which is bound to create havoc when families quarrel. When asked about why he failed to learn from the past, he simply shrugged his shoulders and said that 'reinventing the wheel' is how JKR does its work because there is no study and proper documentation done on the modern heritage of this country.

The Traditional Heritage. The documentation of the traditional architectural heritage could be said to be well established. What is needed is financial sponsorship. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia started the subject of Measured Drawing in the early seventies modeled at first from the simplistic surveys and sketches of the English tradition. It then slowly developed into a full-fledged investigation of the history, with a complete drawing of the building in a manner that made reconstruction a possibility. Institut Teknologi MARA followed suit and later, so did Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaya and Lim Kok Wing Institute of Creative Technology. KALAM, or Pusat Kajian Alam Bina Dunia Melayu (Centre for the Study of Built Environment in the Malay World), came into being in 1996 to spearhead development in the documentation and the dissemination of South East Asian architectural heritage in this region.

To date, there is an approximate total of over 700 buildings measured and documented in all institutions. Most of these activities, to date do not have any funding except a meager amount provided by the institution, small tokens of research grants and sometimes it even comes from lecturer's own pockets. KALAM is lucky to have evolved into a centre, and is struggling to make ends meet by selling some of the work and undertaking research contract. In USM, my colleague sponsors his students himself because of his commitment to the study of traditional and colonial architecture. It is high time the works of all these institutions be recognized as an important endeavor that documents the scientific, artistic and cultural heritage of the nation which is contained in the buildings of the past. The time is nigh that the National Museum under the Ministry of Arts and Heritage coordinate this important work and help to finance the research, in the form of government grants, or the ministry could perhaps be the coordinat-

ing body that pools corporate sponsorship for the research and publication of this important historical documentation.

The Modern Architectural Heritage. Unlike the traditional and colonial architectural heritage which are getting more popular everyday, the modern heritage is shunned because of its bland and 'uninteresting' or undecorated forms. In a pragmatic and sense-oriented culture, it is hard to dwell on the issue of 'intellectual' beauty or the idea of 'architectural honesty'. The effort of documenting the modern heritage is almost nil in the present time in Malaysia. A revamp of attitude is in order. What, then, is so important about the modern heritage of architecture? I believe that modern architectural heritage is important, as a discourse of National Identity as well as being an environmentally sensitive architecture.

With respect to the idea of national identity in architecture, such effort is of prime importance in creating a harmonious society. Despite what has been written about how the modern architectural revolution in the West later became the 'International Style', the fathers of modernism questioned soundly the validity of aping historical and foreign precedence in architecture. I refer to these discourses on redefining architecture in the late 19th century as a 'clash of values in architecture'. The moralistic values of Christianity and socialism clashed against the values of scientific technology, economy and art. Architecture then was a product of philosophical discourses and moralistic values.

After three decades of these discourses, the aping of forms and mediocrity of intelligence took the easy way out by copying, rather than critical adoption or rethinking of ideas. In the sixties, when the first generation of Malaysian architects came back from overseas to practice and replace expatriate architects, there was a call for a national identity to be reflected in architecture by leaders. The period that gave birth to buildings like the Parliament House, the National Mosque, and the Negeri Sembilan Sate Mosque were the product of a rich experimentation which saw the clash of modernistic and Malaysian values against that of the climate, economy and available technology. These experimentations of architectural forms, material assemblage and expressions were the puritanistic versions of architecture that was not hindered much by political authoritarianism. It reflected an identity that did not play on an obvious and single ethnic reference, but instead used new motifs and was a response to the climate within the understood technology. Thus, the Parliament building became the Malaysian symbol of a progressive culture that respected the values of all ethnicity by its refusal to let one ethnic architectural element dominate all others. The National Mosque reflected the idea of Islam in Malaysia not subjugated by any inferiority complex notion of middle-eastern grandeur. The



- 1 About 15 blocks of this excellent housing design stands ready to be demolished in Taiping and in Butterworth. And yet, I saw no structural cracks, no tilted columns and no damaged walls. A simple refurbishment exercise would save hundreds of millions, and save this design for future architects to learn from.
- 2 The best affordable housing I have ever come across as an architect. The ground floor acts as storage for every unit, where bicycles and vespas would be parked. The whole external corridor with double stair cores are a dream playground for me when we were playing "police and thieves" and "combat".
- 3 Were the palm trees recently planted supposed to enhance the sacred atmosphere in a symmetrical layout? The original concept calls for flat planes with the regimented vertical tombstones in contrast, not palm trees.
- 4 The planting of colourful foliage in between the tombstones by the authorities destroys the serene combination of white-tombstones against the earth-green meditative state. Perhaps the authorities thought the meditative atmosphere is too 'boring'.
- 4 The 'fat' false column that destroys the integrity of the socialist language of a parliamentary democracy as intended perhaps by Ivor Shipley may yet stands as a testament to the "falseness" of our rubber stamping parliament?

asymmetrical massing, single minaret and generous serambi or verandah remarks of the image of Islam as a religion abhorring waste and a way of life which speaks a humble and non imperialistic language to the users. The JKR Police Barrack, which was probably designed in the late sixties, was a superb culmination of energy passive design and cultural understanding of the modern Malaysian community. Much of these important contributions are already lost amidst the grandiose statements of Turkish and Iranian Mosques, alongside imperial architectural statements and low-ceilinged full masonry terrace houses and apartment buildings made convenient for the air-conditioned dealer.

When the late Datuk Kington Loo passed away, no call has been made to document his contribution to the thoughts of architecture and nation building. True architectural expression is a byproduct of the values that a professional possess, and to which he has accumulated throughout his life. There is no standard formulas and templates for nation building and architectural identity but it is simply an informed choice one makes after deliberating on the right questions.

Conclusion. I do not wish to enter into a debate of which heritage to preserve yet. What I believe is the paramount importance of masterminding the infrastructure of architectural historical documen-

tation. Without this serious effort, there is only mere sentiment and vested interest in the effort of conservation and the preservation of our heritage. With the birth of a whole ministry devoted to heritage, it is important to build a strong foundation and working formula towards strategizing a battle plan to tackle the knowledge management of such an important subject. Architectural heritage reflects not only the aesthetic sense but the technological prowess and also the indispensable understanding of culture.

History are the pages which form a book that teaches man who he was and puts him in a better position of deciding where he is going. Many third world countries face a myriad of problems concerning the break down of society, pollution and a path towards political 'feudalism'. You can read all this in the architecture and the city in these countries. To be a civilized country, we must know our specific ailment and apart from treating the symptoms with the proper medication, we must review our lifestyle priorities. Repeating the same lifestyle in complete ignorance is a recipe for an early demise after a stressful life. Change with foresight and hindsight is the true medication. Without the pages of architectural history, both in traditional and modern heritage, it is quite easy to predict how we would live in our future environment... *lebih kurang sama sajalah* (just about the same). 