Towards a Malaysian Identity in Architecture

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MALAYSIA

General Background

The Federation of Malaysia comprises Peninsular Malaysia which projects out southwesterly from mainland Asia, and Sabah and Sarawak which successively occupy the northern and northeastern parts of the island of Borneo. Being part of the Malay world the inhabitants inherit the same civilization with the people of eastern Indochina and southern Thailand, the Cambodians, the Indonesians and the Filipinos. Until the end of the eighteenth century the Peninsular was populated almost exclusively by the indigenous people called the Malais and foreign traders who mainly consisted of Chinese and Arabs were to be found in small numbers in the capital of the various Malay sultanates. British intervention early in the nineteenth century marked the beginning of a multi-racial population, because Chinese immigration was henceforth encouraged and Indian workers were introduced in great number to facilitate British economic interests.

Peninsular Malaysia, previously known as Malaya consists of eleven states; she gained her independence in 1957 and was joined by Sabah and Sarawak six years later to form the present day federation. Currently the population of Malaysia consists of 56% bumiputra (indigenous people mainly Malay), 34% Chinese and 10% Indian and others. Islam which is the official religion is professed by the majority of the Bumiputra, whereas the followers of other religions enjoy complete freedom of worship.

The racial riots that broke loose on the 13th May 1969 shook the very foundation of the country. In its aftermath, an analysis was made on the main causes of the tragedy, and as a result the New Economic Policy was formulated and the ‘Bukan Negara’ was established as the basis for the encouragement of a more harmonious relationship among the races.

Thus in multi-racial Malaysia the need to evolve a national culture is not only for projecting a distinct national identity overseas, but most importantly because its very validity as a national entity depends on a great deal on the cultural unity among the various communities. The National Cultural Congress that took place in 1971 gave birth to three principles...
for the formation of the national culture, these are:

a) that the Malaysian national culture shall be based on the culture of the indigenous people of the region;

b) that elements from other cultures which are suitable and appropriate may be incorporated into the national culture; and

c) that Islam shall become an important element in the evolution of the culture.

Since architecture in particular and built environment in general are but a manifestation of the culture itself, the above principles naturally become the guidelines for a conscious effort to evolve the architecture with a national identity. Reflecting the expression of people’s way of life that encompasses their physical and moral values, tastes, emotion, philosophy and religion, architecture should constitute the most visible uniqueness of a culture. The emphasis on identity is essential for an indigenous architecture, that is an architecture that develops from within and derives its inspiration from the cultural heritage and regional ecological context.

Built Environment and the Way of Life

The two-way relationship that exists between man and his environment provides a strong justification for the creation of architecture with a national identity, because the built-environment that is designed and constructed by man will directly or indirectly influence the way people live in it. As Churchill once said: ‘We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us’. In a similar tone Janu Dubov stated that ‘man shapes himself through decisions that shape his environment’. Hassan Fathy likened the reciprocal relationship at that between a small and its house. The small exercises salient characteristics which hardens to form the small’s house. Conversely, the house so formed determines the very shape of the small. In fact, the small’s whole life is influenced by its house.

Likewise, a house affects its occupants’ way of life, from the where about and the way they sleep, where shower, cook, eat, rest to entertaining guests, etc. The grouping of houses with shops, schools, offices, factories, mosque and other facilities form a neighbourhood; several neighbourhood form a town, and several towns constitute a state. At the national level, the character and form of the environment influence the way people live in that country.

Adopting the findings of geography experts, Rapport identifies three theories about the effects of physical environment on man; these are ‘environmental determinism’, ‘environmental possibilities’ and ‘environmental probabilities’. Even though they differ in terms of direction and degree of effect, the three suggest that physical environment may give positive impact on the social environment. Thus, the best way towards a desired social environment is to create an appropriate physical environment. There is no guarantee that a particular design will produce a certain attitude and behaviour in the users, but the awareness about the link between the two is important for the architect, planner, engineer and the like. Even if it does not provide them with foolproof solution, the knowledge will enable them to identify and avoid those aspects with possible negative effects. Thus, architecture in particular and built-environment in general have an important role to play or least can contribute in the efforts to build a desired way of living, thereby helping to create a unifying culture in a nation that for so long has been fragmented into ethnically based sub-culture.
At this juncture it is pertinent to quote E.R. Mawson's statement:

"The relationship between culture and environment, between culture and technology, is woven very closely together and each is capable of modifying the other. If one is not careful and selective of new imported technology, one inevitably destroys the fabric of a nation's cultural tradition - and architecture."

Architects and Clients

Since the birth of a work of architecture is basically the fruit of cooperation between the architect and his client, the efforts to develop architecture with a national identity depend a great deal on the attitude and willingness of these two role players. In this context, the Malaysian architects may be categorized into three groups; those who are against, those who are for and those who are opportunistic.

The opponents argue that the world is getting smaller and thanks to the spread of modern technology and the use of new building materials, architecture is becoming more and more universal. Thus any attempt to relate it with religion, culture or tradition is a move backward. Malaysian heritage of traditional architecture is considered too poor and thus inappropriate for the foundation of a modern architecture in a multi-racial society. These architects mainly consist of those without cultural roots in the country or ignorant of their own historical and cultural heritage and usually had their education overseas.

The economic boom of the seventies was the golden era for the Malaysian architects. Their services were greatly sought after due to the increased demand for office spaces, hotels, housing, etc. Architects were no overheard by their works that they failed to give their best and the quality of their design suffered. It was easier to produce unimaginative glass and concrete boxes reminiscent of samples shown in the latest issues of foreign magazines; and the use of reflective glass curtain walls spread shamelessly.

At these the faults do not lie entirely with the architects. Business tycoons, directors of company and such clients often consist of people with little cultural sensitivity and even less national feeling, so they can be easily influenced by what they see overseas. It is not uncommon that they specifically instruct the architects to copy a particular building that they admired in the cities they previously visited.

Some government agencies too were to be blamed, for instance with regards to the spread of multi-storey residential blocks using the latest imported technologies. With the present of saving construction period, a variety of mass-produced components were used without proper scrutiny whether the techniques and design were really suitable for the country in terms of affordability, need and way of life of the prospective residents. Indubitably, economic and technological progress, urban growth and housing development have taken place at the expense of national identity.

The second group consists of those architects who wholeheartedly agree and are genuinely committed to architecture with a national identity. Unfortunately, this group is still very much in minority.

Conversely, the opportunists and the hypocrites form the majority. When the client has no strong feeling about his building, they will come up with international-style design, but if the client insists on a building with Nusantara characteristics, they force themselves to conform. Through their contacts with influential people, some manage to get mammoth government projects where Malaysian identity is a pre-requisite. The outcome is less
then satisfactory. May be the architects are not very sensitive or probably they are so pressed with time that they are unable to produce quality design that requires serious research and thorough preparation. In any case, their opportunistic attitude prevails as at the same time they seem to outdo each other in producing Western modern style design for other clients just like the first group.

The Training of Architects

Currently there are about 1200 architects in Malaysia. These architects may be divided into three groups; the first which is the biggest consisting of about 700 had their whole training overseas; the second about 300, spent three to four years overseas to complete their course after having obtained a semi-professional diploma in Malaysia; and the rest comprising about 200 had their entire education within the country. Obviously, the home-grown architects still constitute a minority with very little influence, having entered the profession only since 1978.

Unlike such fields of study as mathematics, engineering, computer science etc. architecture involves locally oriented knowledge such as cultural history, climate, building materials, housing and building law. These trained overseas will need times to learn those things individually without formal classes, in fact there is a possibility they can not equal the local graduates in certain aspects of practice. Furthermore, the influence of modernist philosophy which is given emphasis in the West is usually so entrenched in their mind that it is difficult to modify and replace with the way of thinking that is not only respectful of the community values, traditional architectural heritage and national aspiration but also sensitive to the local environment, climate, materials and techniques. It is difficult to expect them to understand let alone to pioneer the efforts to arrive for the architecture with a national identity.

Now that there are three full-fledged architectural courses in the country, the habit of sending our youth overseas to study architecture and giving automatic recognition to qualifications from certain British Commonwealth countries need to be reviewed. Not only it is harmful to the country's economy as described above, but also wasteful from the financial point of view. In fact the time has now come for the government to insist that any graduate architects from overseas be required to take up and pass examinations in certain relevant subjects before their qualification can be recognized.

In the long run the only way to solve the problem is to ensure that all architects or at least the majority of those practising in Malaysia are products of local education. With proper training they can be moulded to become responsible architects committed to the evolution of a national culture through architecture. This is a challenge that the three existing institutions (namely UTM, UIH and UMS) have to face. To achieve the objective a closer cooperation among them is needed for the common benefit, particularly in activities such as the documentation and research on traditional architectural heritage. The cooperation should also be extended to architecture schools in the neighbouring countries especially Indonesia where the legacy of the Malay Civilization is abundantly rich.

Of no less importance is the inclusion of subjects like History, Sociology and Comparative Religion in the curriculum and syllabus of architecture courses in Malaysia. These subjects should be especially formulated to give the students better awareness about the strengths and weaknesses of the country with her multi-racial society and better understanding of each other's habits, creed and beliefs. These will help improve mutual trust, respect and inter-ethnic tolerance among students of different origins.
which are ingredients for racial integration. Racially integrated architects can play a major role in attaining national unity, the paramount objective of the government policy.

Vernacularism and Regionalism

Teaching architects in the institutes of higher learning all over the world has become a common duty to provide guidance to their students in producing good design solutions to an architectural problem. During the first half of this century, the philosophy of the modern movement was considered the absolute truth, and students were forced to swallow it. Of late we begin to have doubts realizing many weaknesses and contradictions inherent in the teaching. Scolin has critically studied this phenomenon and come to a conclusion that the design rules emanating from the modern movement as taught in the lecture halls and studios of architecture schools were not only inappropriate but indeed harmful to man and his environment. He also discovered that the public in general either dislike or are even hostile toward the modern aesthetics as propagated by the movement. Recent remarks and writings by Prince Charles of the United Kingdom may be regarded as the culmination of such reaction. It is no exaggeration to say that modern movement has now lost its grip and disintegrated into separate movements such as post-modernism, high-technology, free-style etc.

The writer strongly feels that in Malaysia, the academicians and studio masters at the three schools that offer architecture courses should consciously make an effort to contribute towards the evolution of national identity in architecture through their teaching. While exposing students to all architectural movements, emphasis should be given to vernacular and regional movements. As we all know vernacular movement in North America seeks architectural ideas based on buildings that actually grow in the locality and are derived for the blend of outstanding elements from the old and the new world. Wilson describes it as "conservative" and "radical" at the same time, since the movement learns from past experience and uses the experience as a new source of solution for contemporary architectural problems. The desire to re-establish the link with fundamental characteristics of buildings and recreate basic architectural forms are the factors that influence many architects to adopt vernacularism. P.L. Wright once stated that folk buildings that grew to meet the actual need of the people and were built with such natural sensitivity as to blend harmoniously with the environment deserve to be studied if compared with those works that use academic theories. Even if these buildings are not considered attractive, they are definitely not offensive like most modern buildings. Vernacular buildings reflect a 'truth of fundamentals' that causes them to be comfortably a part of the landscape.

Malaysia can also learn from Queensland where a vernacular style has developed that distinguishes the state from the rest of Australia. Rich heritage in timber buildings has inspired Queensland architects to produce works that reflect deep understanding and creative interaction with their local tradition in terms of forms, construction techniques and use of materials. To Le Corbusier modern buildings are widely copied around the world are totally alien and unattractive to his state. He is determined to develop a contemporary regional architecture that adopts and incorporates widely visible elements and common practices in the local architecture, and recombines them in a new formula that has a dialogue with old existing buildings in the vicinity.

It is interesting to note that the works of Queensland vernacular architects can be individually distinguishable and that their contemporaneity remains prominent without copying international style architecture.
In Southeast Asia, Filipino architect F.R. Manosa gains respect because of his success in using local materials such as stones, timber, bamboo, rattan and palm leaves and giving new spirit to traditional forms.

He is determined to contribute towards the evolution of identity in the architecture of his country, which according to him are dependent on two important aspects (3):

1) The architecture should be a reflection of the culture in which it is found. This is seen in the symbolism of the structure.

2) A building should respond to the local conditions, to the climate, to the materials and the techniques and to the budget available.

In the meantime, the realisation that the import of Western modern architecture without digestion and modification has brought crisis to the third world has dawned on some of more sensitive architects. Traditional values that give importance to the interests and needs of the community as well as harmonious relationship with the surrounding, diametrically oppose to Western influences that put emphasis on maximum efficiency in physical performance and the beauty of individual facades. Thus regionalism was born with a pledge to bring back something that has been ignored by Western modern movement; that is the continuity between the old and the new in a locality. The aim need not be a 'pure' identity but rather the result of a creative process of marriage between local culture and modified imported model.

El-Wahl for instance seeks his inspiration from the Arabic cultural heritage. He works from within and integrates it for the contemporary condition. If modern movement gave emphasis on the aesthetics that condense decoration and the use of traditional elements, El-Wahl is the opposite; he believes in historical style. He regarded architecture as a biological or organic process and likened the creation of an architectural work with the birth of a baby who must inherit the genes from its parents. In architecture the genes are the generic form of traditional buildings. El-Wahl also compares architecture with a language with its own words, syntax and messages. Thus an architect should design buildings that communicate in the language that is understood in the region they were built.

We can also learn from Geoffrey Bawa whose work stands out because it expressed formal architectural language that sought inspiration in the traditional building forms and techniques found in Sri Lanka. Moreover his buildings are always harmoniously integrated with the local landscape of the country.

In spite of their differences in origin and approach, the writer strongly feels that vernacularism and regionalism are bound to complement each other and together they can be used as effective vehicles towards the evolution of architecture with a national identity in Malaysia.

At this juncture El-Wahl's view about the relationship between the two movements will be pertinent. It has been argued some of his works might not be considered vernacular because they are not directly related with the prevalent characteristics in the locality, even though their Arabic identity is strikingly clear. In this connection El-Wahl explains to him vernacular architecture seems integral architecture which has indigenous characteristics. Thus it is the opposite of imported architecture with foreign characteristics such as Western modern architecture. Imported style must be rejected just like a plant that cannot be grown in a foreign
land. However, the basis for this rejection should be reconsidered when it comes to architectural elements from the neighboring environment with similar character and spirit that can be absorbed and integrated into a modern style of a local environment. In this context the introduction of new elements into the native repertoire should be encouraged, because it is essential for the continuity and rejuvenation of tradition that needs enrichment and variety if we want to prevent it from stagnation or deterioration. Only through this approach architectural design can overcome the obstacles of narrow thinking based on locality.

El-Wailly's approach as described above can be used as guidelines in the process of evolving modern architecture with a Malay identity. Extreme approach that suggests every state in the Federation should have its own identity for example would only stifle architectural development in the country. This is contrary to the scholarly dream and against the spirit of decisions made in the National Cultural Congress that purposely emphasized 'region' as the basis for cultural development.

‘Modern-Traditional’ Architecture

Although the modernist group regards tradition as an obstacle to progress and decides to break away from it, people in general maintain their tradition albeit in a modified form. Admittedly, there will be no progress without change, hence tradition as an aspect of culture should also change with time and it should be rejuvenated to suit new situation and condition without necessarily destroying its original spirit. Virtuous aspects of traditional culture should be preserved, upgraded and strengthened in line with modern need. Architects too should be encouraged to identify, study and interpret these virtues in their design for which they should be given complete freedom without interference from the government.

An important aspect that has to be introduced and nurtured among the students and architects is a state of mind that respects and upholds community and national values above their personal values. This does not mean that they would be robbed off their individuality or sacrifice their creativity.

Vernaculars and regionalism have succeeded in bringing alternatives to modern movement. Even in the West the movement is no longer sacred and post-modernism can be considered a reversion, an attempt to re-establish link with Western history and tradition that have been severed by the modern movement.

In responding to vernaculars and regionalism in Malaysia can learn from others experience. The way vernacular is used can be regarded as being in a continuum between two extreme points. At one extreme vernacular is seen as a style or an image that should be emulated as closely as possible. At the other extreme one interprets the main principles or the basic fundamentals only, such as structure, materials, image and their adaptation to the surrounding. Judging from the example must responds lie between the two extremes, ranging from interest in materials and building process, through style and image to form and construction details.

In our efforts to evolve a Malay identity in architecture we too can have two extreme approaches: direct or indirect. In the direct approach traditional building forms are interpreted creatively, whereas in the indirect approach designs are developed through their general principles only. In reality the difference between the two is quite big and provide a wide range for various alternative strategies. Architects' sensitivities, imagination and creativity have a complete freedom of movement between the extreme points alleviating fear that the designs produced will all be the
In a recent conference on Malay culture at Kuala Lumpur the writer advocated the use of "modern-traditional" approach to develop a Malaysian identity in architecture. When we design new buildings we all want them to be modern in the sense that they have the latest available facilities and conveniences to lead our life or perform our works comfortably and in harmony with our environment. However, all these should be achieved in an atmosphere that encourages awareness about the link with tradition, the sense of belonging and continuity of cultural values. Design, image and symbols that generate Western modern ambience are alien to us and therefore ought to be discouraged, since it is not possible to totally ban them in a cross country like Malaysia. The term "modern-traditional" could also be given a meaning to cover both vernacular and regional movement representing an alternative to other foreign influences.

In Malaysia, since independence a number of public buildings have been designed to incorporate features derived from the Malay vernacular in accordance with design frameworks laid out by the government. This gradually became a trend in many privately owned modern developments. However, unlike the Middle East, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, Malaysia has yet to produce outstanding work that brings international recognition. In those countries architects like El-Fakih, G.Ram and T.B. Wannas persistently fight for their principles and produce consistently high quality designs whereas in Malaysia, as already mentioned, these designs were the result of a requirement imposed upon the architect.

A possible exception who deserves to be mentioned here is Jimmy Lim who in the opinion of the writer has given some commendable contribution to Malaysian architecture. Unlike many architects of the migrant races, Jimmy truly believes that Malaysian architecture should express the culture and tradition of the indigenous people of the country. He claims to have totally assimilated himself and in his efforts to widen and strengthen his knowledge about the native culture, he makes study trips not only to various parts of the country but also to other islands in the Malay archipelago from where he has gathered tremendous amount of heritage material. Jimmy's work draws inspiration from traditional forms coupled with refined construction details and enriched with decorative elements that harmoniously blend Malay and Chinese motifs. Using mainly timber and bricks, his designs reflect an exquisite sensitivity for the site and the environment and a profound understanding of the understandable effects of tropical climate. In local workshops and seminars Lim often criticizes his colleagues for hastily importing and blindly following the various "fads" from the West.

Before concluding this brief dissertation on "modern-traditional" approach, a word of caution would be in order. Although architectural style in often seen as the easiest answer to a question of how to express the national identity, aspects of human activities should not be forgotten. It must be realized that the richness and complexity of character in Malaysian towns and cities are the attributes of the various types of informal human activities by street vendors, watch repairers, bakers and their like. Growing over the years these activities involving and patronised by all ethnic communities become unique examples of community shared habits which have often been lost due to rapid changes in our environment. Efforts must be made to perpetuate these activities by providing proper places in the new built environment. In other words, special care must be given to ensure that architecture and built form are designed to encourage and facilitate informal human activities of the common people. Without these our towns will lose their character and therefore their Malaysian identity or at least a part of it.
Summary and Conclusion

In Malaysia, the attempts to evolve a Malaysian identity in architecture constitutes an integral part of the efforts to forge the national culture. During the last two decades, however, Western modernity has gained influence and due to a combination of factors the kind of architecture that flourished is usually out of context, unsuitable for tropical climates, wasteful in the use of energies, expensive to maintain and alien to the local way of life. The economic recession that plagued the country in the early eighties could be considered as a blessing in disguise. Henceforth, haggard competition in the architectural practice is expected to improve the quality of design and services.

Using the mass-media, the public should be exposed to the richness and the virtues of traditional architecture in Malaysia and the Malay world in general. This is to instil a sense of pride in their heritage and hopefully influence prospective clients to desire modern buildings with traditional characteristics.

Revived interests in vernacular architecture and the spread of regionalisms in the international arena augur well for the efforts mentioned above. These developments have undoubtedly opened the eyes of the Malaysian architects, reduce their blind following of the international style and help to strengthen a movement toward a 'Modern-Traditional' architecture in Malaysia. At any rate, the effective implementation for National Cultural principles would be greatly endorsed by the local authorities. Nevertheless, architects and planners alike should not regard physical form as the only expression of identity. Due importance should be given to other aspects such as informal human activities as a unique portrayal of everyday lifestyle of the Malaysian people.

It is the contention of the writer that the new generation of Malay architects should be products of the local institutions of higher learning where emphasis is given to local issues, tropical climatic influence on architecture, local materials and techniques, appreciation of traditional architecture and the evolution of national culture. They can be expected to be more sensitive to their mission as the creators of built environment that is appropriate to the local conditions, strengthen commonly shared values among the races and in line with the national aspiration if compared with those trained overseas.

The colonial legacy of giving automatic recognition to architectural qualification from certain foreign countries should be revised and current practice of sponsoring young students to take up architecture overseas should immediately cease.

Notes:
3. Ibid., p.60.

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