

# THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN MALAYSIAN ARCHITECTURE

## INTRODUCTION

The search for a national identity seems to be a must for countries which have either newly become independent or with a leadership that stresses certain groups of race as 'better' than others. To most countries, this search is a high profile event as it has strong political implications. Of all the arts and technology produced by man, architecture is the most conspicuous of them all. The search for a national identity is a most difficult endeavor and for a multi-cultural nation, the effort is even more so. To search for one's identity is also something of a peculiar nature since it implies that one has either lost the identity or does not have a clue as to who one is. In this short essay, we will attempt to classify the various approaches towards answering the problem of a national architectural identity without considering whether there was a conscious effort or not by the architects.

## THE PROBLEM OF ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

In this section we will attempt to elucidate the philosophical concerns of identity in architecture. These concerns range from Frank Lloyd Wright's definition of a truly American and Democratic architecture to Le Corbusier's concern of a mass-produced global architecture of internationalism. In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Augustus Pugin was concerned with the idea of a true Christian architecture which he ultimately found to be embodied in the Gothic vocabulary whereas Louis Henry Sullivan philosophised his way through the idea of a noble classical

architecture. In answering Adolf Hitler's ranting of a superior Aryan race, Albert Speer gave him the Roman grandeur of triumphal arches, domed administrative structures with, of course, triple the scale of their precedence. In the rural parts of any country there still survives remnant of indigenous architecture whose only philosophy is to seek shelter in the best manner with a spatial layout exactly in consonance with their way of life. We can consider that there are no less than three different identities in any nation's architectural works; a natural identity, a forced identity and a manufactured identity.

### **Natural Architectural Identity**

A natural architectural identity can be defined as one which has what the modernist thinkers refer to as a 'spirit of the times' and what present post-modernist concerns of a 'spirit of the place'. A building is supposed to possess true identity if it responds religiously to the idea of both spirits. The idea of spirit of the times refers to a direct response of the users and builders to the available technology, the structural know how and the economic consideration of a particular time. Thus, the Malay house with its long gable roof, timber post, beam and wall construction and small human labor is as true to its times as the mud construction of traditional Egyptian architecture and the arched masonry construction of the Romans. In the modern age, the only natural identity which can be found as relates to the spirit of contemporary technology is the stadium and bridge construction. Long span bridges of two kilometers tend to have the inverted catenaries arch shape of suspended high strength steel whilst stadium structures use the pneumatic, tent and reinforced concrete cantilevered shell. These structures are shaped in the manner that the structural system and the economies of construction dictate.

The idea of spirit of place refers to the direct response of the builders to climatic considerations, geographic make up of the land and the culture of a particular society. Thus the Malay house with its isolated

mass, raised platform, generous *serambi's* or verandahs, full length windows with *kerawang* ventilation grilles and high roof form to ease the passage of air and shed off heavy rainfalls contrast strongly with those of temperate regions of heavy masonry walls with barrel vaults containing little openings to trap heat in and hold the snow at bay. The colonial and sino-eclectic heritage in Malaysia presents excellent examples of this type of natural identity. The sino-eclectic heritage brought with it the Chinese masonry construction in such buildings as the Kampung Hulu Mosque in Melaka and the long shop houses found in the same state. The colonial heritage presents two interesting building types which are the Palladian all masonry buildings and the reinterpretation of Malay timber buildings. In the colonial and sino-eclectic architectural heritage, innovations and adaptation to the climate were ingeniously developed in the high ceiling interiors, clerestorey windows and the use of air-wells or internal courts. Masonry has a heat lag property that absorb heat during the day and slowly releases this stored energy at night. The colonial builders were aware of this phenomenon and thus experimented with the proportion of the interior space, placement and amount of fenestration area with also some ideas of placement and sizes of air-wells. The colonial heritage also provided Malaysia with their version of the Malay House with louvered verandah and walls to replace the ornate *serambi* ballustrade, the squat Palladian proportion to replace the high raised platforms and the hipped gable roof with ventilation openings. These buildings are identities in their own right since they represent the new Malaysian architectural entity with Western upbringing and the tools of modern technology. It is a fortunate thing that the government of the day recognizes the importance of these heritage buildings but it is most unfortunate that local architects do not appreciate their design solutions and opt for a more energy active architecture of air conditioning and electric lights.

### **Forced Architectural Identity**

A forced architectural identity can be defined as that which is produced by clients for the users who have little choice in the matter. The best example that we can see in Malaysia is the modern housing estates. The main characteristics of these housing estates have hardly changed in the four decades of its introduction. The estates are laid out in a grid-iron manner which suits cars better than its human occupants. The houses are of plastered masonry in-fill walls over a reinforced concrete structural frame. The common typology is the terraced or link houses with little fenestration and hipped-gable timber roofs of clay tiles. The other typology is the walk up tenement of the same construction materials and structure. Another characteristic of the link houses includes a car porch with back alleys as setbacks. On the one hand, this is the typical modern identity that litters the country but on the other hand, much of its architectural features negate the understanding of masonry construction in a tropical setting such as those of the colonial masonry heritage. The site lay out as well as the spatial planning of the buildings ignores much of the cultural lifestyles of the occupants. An obvious clue to this malady can be seen in the renovations that are usually done just as soon as the ink on the CFO certificate dries! Forced identity is a result of pure economic concerns of insensitive developers and government agencies that fail to place the priorities of the people in relation to the cultural interpretation of architecture.

### **Manufactured Architectural Identity**

When politicians and professionals begin to impose their racial and political preferences, we have an architecture of manufactured identity. Most of the prestigious architectural works in the country fall into this category. On the one hand, this approach is valid from the perspective that a new nation with a multi-cultural people needs to select the so called universal traits and introduce new ones in order to develop a 'strand' that

would propel the nation forward into a success story. On the other hand, manufactured architecture to suit political whims and fancies are a farce to the spirit of times and spirit of place that marks eons of ‘good architecture’. In countries where the idea of democracy and good government are the more or less sole ‘rights’ of one party, manufactured architectural identity is a must as a political rallying cry. The next section deals with the various manufactured identity on architecture found in Malaysia.

### **APPROACHES IN DEFINING ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA**

The modern movement in Europe gave birth to three ‘traditions’ of modernism. The first is the pure machine approach to architecture that is structural in emphasis, skin and bones in expression and the minimalist less-is-more dictum of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. This tradition gave birth to the architecture of Norman Foster, Renzo Piano and Cesar Pelli with such buildings as the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank. The second tradition is by Le Corbusier who argues that although houses were machines for living in, the whole architectural product must present an intellectual beauty of platonic forms and brute regionalist response. This ‘intellectual architecture’ gave birth to such mystics as Peter Einsmen and Louis Kahn with buildings such as the confused houses of Einsmen and the Harvard College. The third tradition is the one by Frank Lloyd Wright who argues for an organic architecture steeped in the regional climatic and cultural responses complete with a serious system of ornamentation. The architecture of Geoffrey Bawa and Bruce Goff are testament to this tradition. Local architects in Malaysia who studied in the West came home to try several approaches of these versions of modern tradition.

### **Machine Regionalism**

This approach carries with it the tradition of Mies and Corbu in considering the building as nothing more than a machine that would sieve the climate through it. Corbu's brutalist architecture as shown in his Monastery La Tourette, Villa Shodan and Chandigarh inspired the Malaysian counterparts of Kuala Lumpur General Hospital and many of University Malaya lecture theaters, Convention Halls and office buildings and Ken Yeang's Roof-Roof house. The use of deep overhangs, 'egg crate' recessed windows, louvered shade and openings with exposed concrete construction characterised this architecture. Regionalists do not see themselves as looking for a specific national identity but merely to build a passive design shelter in response to the local climate. Some architects such as Ken Yeang carries this philosophy to such deconstructivist extremes as in the Mesiniaga in Subang Jaya. Dr. Yeang's primary intention, it seems is to answer the question of a bio-climatic skyscraper in the tropics.

### **Primitive Regionalism**

Primitive regionalism is similar in spirit to that of the machine regionalist in their quest for a climatically passive design building. However, the primitive regionalist believes that materials play an important role not only as something which would weather well but it connects man to his ancient origins as part of Nature's children. Frank Lloyd Wright can be said to be the father of an organic approach which saw the potential lessons of the past traditional architecture. In Malaysia, the resort architecture of Datai in Langkawi, Sebana and Hotel Sofitel in Johor provides a tropical layout of verandahs, open buildings and lots of timber construction to suggest the fantasy of a tropical paradise. One problem with this approach is its questionable potential for public use if timber is its main character. Some believe that in order for this approach to join the big leagues of public architecture for an urban high density

lifestyle the question of reinterpreting and innovating timber construction and air-conditioned less buildings would have to be seriously addressed.

### **Traditional Malay Revivalism**

One of the earliest responses to the government's call to project a national architectural identity was the proliferation of pseudo-traditional Malay architecture. Revivalism stems from such critics as Hassan Fathi who argues for a traditional vernacular revivalism to solve the problem of housing societies. However, many architects went astray from this honorable intention and embraced revivalism as what was practiced in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century after the disasters with Mannerism and Baroque architecture. The Bank Bumiputra HQ was one of the first to answer this call and Convention Halls of PWTC was also in line with the spirit. The two buildings are highly charged symbols of the Malay political power and their populist response says much about the ruling elite. Buildings such as the Losong Museum which is supposed to cater for a more general audience seems to fall into the same quagmire. The three buildings follow a similar *modus operandi* which calls for the 'ballooning' of a traditional Malay residence into a gigantic structure of concrete. The main criticism of this particular type of architecture stems from the fact that the syntax of the traditional house fits best a domestic scale structure of timber and its transformation into a different building type suggest that the Malays may not possess high imagination and creativity. A similar revivalism tendency that swept England and America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century saw critics like Louis Henry Sullivan attacking the inappropriateness of 'everything Roman and of totalitarian values' into an American bank of a democratic one. The National Museum in Kuala Lumpur seems to save the day with its honest attempt of arriving at a new vocabulary which saw the synthesis between classical monumentality and the sedate use of gable roofs and ornamentation. It may be argued that this approach may have taken the extension of the colonial stroke of

synthesising European Classicism and the Malay vernacular. The Restoran Seri Melayu offers an interesting response to the problem of scale by breaking up much of the mass of the building thus retaining the humility of the Malay house but with a new function of a restaurant.

### **Metaphor**

The use of metaphors are identified with architects who view buildings not as mere shelters but as a totem pole riddled with messages. Although there were a few modernist who violated the cardinal rule of strict mechanical boxes, architects like Wright and Saarinen managed to get away quiet well with their own abstract rendition of flight as in the TWA Terminal and the praying hand as in the Madison Unitarian Church. Malaysian architects came out with their versions of metaphors as seen in such buildings as the Maybank *keris*, the National Libraries romance with the *tengkolok* or Malay traditional male head dress, the National theater's *sirih junjung* and the Telekom HQ 's *pucuk rebung*. The main attraction of this approach is again its populist appeal and the human weakness for novelty. Although the intention of these metaphors are serious in the eyes of the clients and the architects, one could not help but wonder how such vocabulary would fare with a new generation that no longer recognises these artifacts as primary symbols in their lives. Another criticism is about the reading of the metaphor. Charles Jencks suggest that the use of metaphors is better when one has to guess at its meaning rather than a direct reading. The abstract nature of Corbusier's Ronchamp, Wright's Unitarian Church, the Sydney Opera House and the TWA Terminal are testimonies to the potential strength of a suggestive metaphor.

### **Modernistic Expressionism**

We have phrased the term modernistic expressionism to describe the National Mosque, the Parliament Building and the State Mosque of Negeri Sembilan. The term modernistic implies the machine approach of

building as a climate sieve as in the works of Ken Yeang with a rejection of direct historical reference in its image. The term expressionism is used by historians and critics of architecture to describe a certain bent in modernist architects to use abstract metaphors which are almost always 'structuralised'. The Masjid Negara or the National Mosque is an excellent and unique creation of Malaysian architecture in that it frames the whole building as a huge *wakaf*-like shelter or as a generous *serambi*-verandah structure. The building is horizontal in expression and this serves well the vocabulary of humility in Islam. The fact that the building is a tropical model with a lot of fenestration punctured by light-wells with ponds as inner courts add to the idea of moderation in the religion. The rejection of symmetry and a strict hierarchical composition of the massing presents well the image of Islam as a religion of the people rather than the poor middle-eastern imitation of domes, arches, courts and minarets common to the other mosques of its time and particularly of the present era. The mosque is an abstraction of the Malay house as evidenced in its raised prayer hall and *serambi*. The roof which covers the mosque proper or the prayer hall is a folded plate structure which is chosen because of its metaphor of a royal umbrella. The metaphor is seen as a reference to the mosque's uniqueness as the 'sultan' of all mosques in Malaysia and is meant only for this particular building. The Negeri Sembilan State Mosque is shaped with several intersecting conoids of reinforced concrete shell structure to refer perhaps to the curved Minangkabau *gonjong* roof forms. Thus, as in the folded plate roofs of Masjid Negara, both buildings use metaphors that are integrated with the building structure. The Parliament Building presents two contrasting massing of a tower with suspended outer scales as sun shading device against a jagged pitched roof of reinforced concrete frame meant to refer to the high-pitched gable roofs of the *Nusantara* traditional architecture. The building presents a unique statement of democracy in Malaysia in its caution of not using any strong

ethnic reference, its asymmetrical composition when seen from afar and finally its spartan image void of frivolous ornamentation.

#### MALAYSIAN IDENTITY: THE WAY...FORWARD?

As regards the three types of identity, it is hoped that the 'forced identity' might turn into a 'natural identity' in which such situation as housing might be approached from its socio-cultural and climatic aspect. Although research in housing continues to be done, very little can be done if there exist no political will among the people and the leadership in Malaysia to affect change.

As regards the manufactured identity, it will always be with us so long as there are politics and political symbolism. It is hoped, however that future architects would be more discerning in their approach. There is a potential for the growth of machine regionalism for such development as housing and commercial complexes as it is a rational approach. This approach, however, might be limited if an architect is engaged in a highly charged symbolic monument. The approach of primitive regionalism represents a hope for sustainable development if it can solve what critics refer to as high density development. However, these critics should also be aware of Alvin Tofler's prediction of the death of high density commercial and office complexes with the development of the electronic cottage industry where on-line business transaction would shift the business center back to the home. As regards to revivalism, we should shift far away from straight revivalism and experiment with either the Hassan Fathi's solution of it or adapt the language of historical precedence into a new and dynamic dialogue. The use of metaphors must be weighted concerning its motifs and indirect suggestive qualities. Of all the approaches, the modernistic expressionism of buildings has the greatest potential of creating new and meaningful architectural interpretation and messages.

With all the experiments and approaches done by local architects, Malaysia was poised to make a quantum leapt into the future when a big

question mark loomed in the form of the Prime Minister's Department and Residence of Putrajaya. Several serious questions are raised by these highly charged monuments. The first question concerns the idea of an obvious and direct ethnic reference in its Malay-Muslim vocabulary. The second question concerns the problem of a democratic country presented with the syntax of a totalitarian vocabulary of palatial monumentality, lavishness, strong symmetry and strict compositional hierarchy. The third question raised is the total absence of an attempt to produce any gesture towards tropical architecture. These two buildings including the Putra Mosque fall under a new category of Foreign Eclecticism. Though eclecticism is a valid architectural approach, the big question is why resort to it when we have a few successes in all the five approaches mentioned. Where do we go from here? It is fortunate that the Kuala Lumpur International Airport designed by Kisho Kurukawa came into the scene and set forth the future path of modernistic expressionism. The new airport is laden with metaphors of our cultural heritage although it did not tackle much some of the regionalistic issues raised in the present time. Nevertheless, the form is new and dynamic and certainly does not call on any specific ethnic or religious reference. The euphoria over the possession of the tallest building in the world would never alter the simple truth that architecture in Malaysia is still in its infancy when it comes to grapple with an intellectual discourse on the acceptable approach in producing a national architectural identity.