

# **ARCHITECTURAL COMMITMENT TO AN ENVIRONMENTALLY BALANCED LANDSCAPE**

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QUILL STUDIES IN MALAYSIAN SOCIETY:  
SHAPING OUR DESTINY: VISION 2020

**ARCHITECTURAL COMMITMENT TO AN ENVIRONMENTALLY BALANCED  
LANDSCAPE**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

My paper intend to look at the role architects can play and to pose some questions on the direction towards achieving an environmentally friendly, sustainable and an all-caring attitude for development; which will create a positive and dynamic social order for Malaysia's Vision 2020.

Architects have only a small supportive and creative role to play in my development. Therefore, if I were to assume a *too important a role* for the architectural profession, I would only be misleading my fellow professionals and myself of our self-importance. We know that the built environment today is dictated and controlled by the powers within the various strata's of the Government. Planning decisions and policies, although well meaning and well intended for over-all benefit of the nation is laced by self-perpetuating motivations. That many of our cities should bear much similarity to their Western counterparts stems probably from a misconceived notion that a 'high-rise' aluminum and glass manifestation is the much 'sought-after' symbol of success and 'having arrived'; synonymous with becoming 'respectable' and equitable to the values of the West. Architectural ideals, ideas, designs and concepts are often manipulated and misinterpreted by wealthy land developers and owners, who having seen some 'out-of-context' examples overseas pride themselves at knowing what is best for Malaysia, insist that Architects must follow their directives and adopt those designs for Malaysianization. Malaysian Architects are not inclined to be non-accommodating; therefore gently or meekly obliging. It is also *knowing which side of your bread is buttered*.

There are other professionals who, because of the seniority over their architectural counterparts in Government services, use their position and clout to push for more control and administrative advantages, to make inroads into the architectural professional pie. Be that as it may, if having acquired a larger share of the development 'pie' then they must also assume complementary responsibility for the poor quality of the built environment. But this is not so. The Architects are known to have been blamed for most of the environmental ills, e.g. road system poorly laid out to create congestion, wrong replacements of facilities e.g. oxidation pond next to children's playground or open space reserve for recreation etc. This prevailing attitude must change.

The concept of a balanced Environment for 2020 must be based on the co-operation of everyone. Each accepting his role and playing his role altruistically and sincerely. That which is beyond one's scope ought to be left to others. Architectural training is one meant for a universal macro overview of what constitute

Quality environment for  
Quality living, leading to a  
Quality of life, which is

Not an imposition on nature and natural environment, but one in harmony and in complementary manner creates a balance where on the one hand there is sustainable development and balanced on the other with Conservation.

Since the Modern Movement and the establishing of formal Architectural training, the methodology, theoretical and teaching approach to Architecture has not changed greatly. Global technology since the Industrial Revolution has gone through the Electronics and

now going into the Green Environmental Era. The aftermath, impact, residue and consequences of Industrialization is now being felt, causing alarm, and concern; the 'Global Warming', the depletion of the ozone layer, the increase of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere etc. The sudden demand for quality of environmental control and a need for an awareness of renewable and sustainable development question existing values. The realization and refocusing on a global basis towards conservation and preservation of earth's natural resources to counter-balance the non-sustainable or reusable resources has become a compulsion and necessity. Architecture is at the crossroad, In witnessing a shift in values and re-evaluation of existing norms, the body of Architects have to formulate a new role for the profession to craft a new architecture for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a caring Architecture, a sustainable Architecture based on renewable resources, and an Architecture for global survival for Malaysia.

## **2.0            HISTORICALLY EXISTING**

### **2.01            Nature's Gift**

As Malaysians, we are very lucky both environmentally and economically. Traditionally our wealth had come from sources which almost have a 'fairy-tale' ring to it. We dig our ground to wealth in the form of tin, oil etc; not only that our money also 'grow on trees', rubber, palm oil, timber etc; for food we harvest our rivers and seas. Just as the prices of tin and rubber dropped and our economy threatened, we discovered high priced prime quality petroleum. He who is above is always smiling on Malaysians.

Can Malaysians say that we are looking after all our natural resources? Is that why sometimes our environment is abused and taken for granted? Are Malaysians generally getting too greedy and less concerned about our natural heritage and environment? What will we be leaving behind for our future generations? Is that the reason which prompted the Malaysian Government to introduce a new legislation providing stiffer penalties and empowering the military to arrest illegal loggers in order to protect the natural forests.

Both our Architecture and the natural environment are at the crossroads and solutions may be difficult, but we may and can;

- a) plot and chart the path towards a renewable and sustainable management of natural resources;
- b) lay out some basic ground rules for a sustainable development for the future; and;
- c) restrict and define terms and references in the context of the change in global values towards maintaining sustainable and renewable developments; etc;

for Malaysia so that some form of what we now have will be maintained, retained sustained, preserved and handed down to our future generation.

Architects and other professionals associated with development of new habitat and housing must be

Aware of; conscious of, and sensitive to

The natural environment, be economical in their designs to conserve energy and to propagate an awareness and an attitude towards environmental friendliness.

## 2.02 Architects' Responsibility

When planning and designing development projects, one places oneself in the same category as the 'creator', but of a more finite scale. It is a great responsibility. What we create, will ultimately affect the inhabitants who lives there. It affects

- a) their quality of life;
- b) whether environmentally it inspires them to great spiritual heights or it drags them into 'ghetto-like' existence which saps their soul;
- c) their comfort and convenience – are there 'flash-floods', or regular flooding?, during heavy rain-fall';
- d) visually and environmentally is the scheme totally denuded of trees and natural vegetation that it is almost like a desert?

These are fundamental issues which all responsible professionals both in the public and private sectors must address and focus on.

Degradation of the atmosphere is caused by carbon dioxide emission, and 80% is attributed to the developed North whilst the South is responsible for only 20%. The need to re-discover, re-orientate and re-focus on building materials, construction techniques and traditional values which will not degrade the quality of our atmosphere and environment becomes primary concern for Architects. The present route without foresight will lead the profession into a cul-de-sac; whereby we may be accused of being 'uncaring' or even irresponsible.

Steel and concrete hailed as new technology were breakthroughs for construction, in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and celebrated all over Europe with great elation. Today the 'celebration' which propelled the West is fast exhausting and depleting the natural minerals and raw materials reserves. Debris of that great 'celebration' can be seen all over Europe. The fuel and energy consumed in order to sustain the production of these materials must now evoked careful evaluation with respect to the deterioration of the natural environment and the quality of the atmosphere.

## 2.03 Human Element

All developments are for human consumption it therefore follows that the most important consideration and ingredient in any development must be how the 'human element' is looked after. Regrettably the 'human' factor is too often forgotten by the developers, local authorities and consultants – they have become too engrossed with the bottom line – the profit margin. Man himself takes a 'back-seat' in the name of Progress and Development. P&D is a great thing. All third world countries aspire for it but wrongly applied it becomes a burden.

Too many projects on town planning, housing schemes, urban rehousing or squatter rehousing, agricultural resettlement etc; had all emphasized the wrong values of P&D. We may have gone for quantity and not quality, resulting in the degeneration of the quality of both the built and the natural environment; the quality of life of the people, and the discarding of ones' own traditional values. The rich natural heritage of Malaysia with its vast tropical jungle, river network, flora, fauna and natural formation makes it one of the most envied and interesting of all the developing nations of the South.

Conservation and sustainable management of both our built and natural environment may be in the minds of some Malaysians, but it is a burning subject which needs to be addressed. (Under the administration of the former Colonial powers and early settlers, towns and urban areas settled, lacked distinctive character, they do not create a sense of permanence or belonging to the inhabitants). An environment for gracious, graceful and quality living amongst the people was never considered or planned. This attitude must change and is changing with Malaysia pushing towards 2020. The protection of our natural forests was given only some cursory attention prior to Independence, now it is to be a total commitment for its conservation complemented by a sustainable forestry management programme.

### **3.0 SURGING FORWARD**

#### **3.01 Spirit of Architecture & Environment**

As we approach 2020, our architecture and urban environment that is reflective of the 'spirit' of Malaysia must be carved out of our cultural needs. Architects must be in the forefront. Architects must be the "Force of Resistance" against the 'fast-buck' or 'hit-and run' developments in order to protect the environment and to give the future Malaysians the best.

In this respect the Government must play an important leadership and constructive role. The recent stand by the Ministry of Housing over 'no trees, no C.F.' is probably one of the greatest landmark decision in the housing industry. The building industry needs Government support and directives concerning quality of environment and life. Once a political decision is made by the Government, there is balanced 2020, a co-ordinated and committed support from the Government is required, for a well designed, built and the sustainability of the natural environments.

Continuous efforts by the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment on environmental issues and the importance of the EIA report are certainly a thrust in the correct direction. Its success will ultimately be dependent upon the support sincerity, commitment and integrity of both the enforcers and the implementers.

Prevailing attitudes must change. Man-made structures must complement the landscape and co-jointly inspire and create a sense of belonging for its occupiers. In this context the Architects of Malaysia have a heavy burden and responsibility towards our 'charge'. The cultural spirit and texture of the Malaysian surroundings must be captured in the creativity of the local architecture, translating the local spirit into spaces and structure within the works expressed. There should be more concern and serious attempts at understanding and appreciating the deeper meaning of Malaysian architecture from among Local Authorities when vetting designs. Currently values have no standard for precedence; and approving officers do not appear to have the basic requisite tools in order to evaluate what constitute good design. In this respect the Architect is required to educate the public on what is good or bad. A consistency of thought and work need to be encouraged from among the different strata of Malaysian society.

### 3.02 Educating the Public

Architects must:-

- educate the public, both the private and the public sectors;
- demonstrate to the public by what we build and design;
- set good examples for quality of life, for preserving and creating a sustainable environment etc;
- support our national aspiration for Quality. In support of:-

#### **What we are;**

the Architect must lead the building industry towards quality of environment for our Malaysians, towards quality built-environment for our citizens to ensure the future is protected for our children and their children; and that Malaysia which embraces so many diversified groups will become a basis for a wealthy and enriched nation.

#### **What we have;**

the Architect must lead to enlighten other professional groups, the people in authority and the public of the wealth of our natural environment, our rich cultural heritage within our built environment, our natural resources and the need to preserve them for our future generation.

#### **What we are capable of;**

The Architect must in themselves strive for internal pride and confidence. He needs to package and market his skill to the end-user that a **“Made in Malaysia” product must be better for use in Malaysia** than an imported product which had not taken cultural environmental, climatic and local skills into consideration. Therefore Architects must produce quality work to justify the confidence placed in them. The public and government must also provide the support the Architect deserves. After all the “Made in Malaysia”, Proton cars would not have been a success story if our Government had not supported it.

#### **What is rightly ours to protect;**

Our civilization is but only a very fragile and thin veneer that can be easily erased or obliterated. Architecture is not simply a question of building four walls and a roof over your head. It goes deeper than that. It involves:

preserving culture;  
knowing history;  
understanding climate;  
choice of building materials;  
appreciating our environment; and most of all  
valuing the human-element.

These are the values that architects must protect for enriching and ensuring the quality of the Malaysian way of life.

#### **What we should not squander in carelessness;**

In too many developments the first thing being done is to layout the plan in a ‘grid – fashion’ and the consultants will ‘platform’ the slopes. On site the trees are felled; the top-soil is bulldozed in together with the poor quality earth and removed or used

as backfilling; the slopes cut and valleys filled in; natural heritage, our environment, our source of life, being destroyed.

P&D must go on, but in the process harmony must be maintained and Architects must be in the forefront to crusade the cause of environment for Malaysians. Malaysia needs P&D, but P&D must not be 'over-priced', and it should not mean destroying our environment to the deterioration of our quality of life. If that is the price Malaysians must pay for P&D, something is wrong. As Architects we must respect and protect what nature has provided, to complement and to treasure. If the Architect is not protective towards the environment, the future is bleak. Architects, after all, create built environment for humans; and the keywords are "human" and "environment". Without both there can be no architecture or future.

### 3.03 Architecture Towards an Environmental Friendly Landscape

For Architects to be committed towards an Environmental friendly and balanced 2020 we must observe the following as a body of Architects. The Architect must with dignity and self-respect observe and adhere to the following in order that we may survive to serve: -

- a) we do not allow ourselves to be "intimidated" by other professionals, authorities and clients, but to maintain our courage and conviction of what is the right course for the well being and best for Malaysians and Malaysia in 2020;
- b) we are not afraid to commit ourselves or make a stand on any issues (even if it later proved to be a mistake). For every issue there has to be a "win-lose" situation. We hope to "win" always but if we have to lose sometimes – so be it. We can only do our best;
- c) Do not be afraid to take "chances" if the situation calls for it. If we win, the whole profession and the Nation win. It is the case of "no venture, no gain", and 2020 is a venture;
- d) Do not give in without giving the issue a good fight. Architects have been "gentlemen" for far too long. We must make a stand, to say "enough is enough"; we must now make a stand in order to create an environment suitable for Malaysians which is not dictated by the developer or the Local Authorities;
- e) Do not give into aging. With aging one becomes senile. Samuel Ullman's essay "Youth" had been adopted wholesale by the Japanese businessmen's life philosophy. This single-minded approach after adopting this philosophy has taken them to where they are now. Allow me to quote a little from this fine essay;

*"Youth is not a time of life;  
it is a state of mind .....*

*We grow old by deserting our ideals.....  
in the center of your heart and my heart, there is a wireless station..... it  
receives messages of ....courage and power...*

*When the aerials are down and your spirit is covered with snows of cynicism  
and the ice of pessimism, then you are growing old .....your aerials are up...  
there is hope you may die young at 80."*

### 3.04 GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR THE ARCHITECTS

The Architect must carry the burden of having to create an Environmental Friendly Landscape. But without the support, understanding and sympathy of the Government towards this end nothing can be achieved. The profession needs Government support.

#### a) Foreign Architects in Malaysia

The profession is not being given adequate protection in respect of project distribution between local and foreign Architects. Government representatives still harbour some preference for the foreigners. It is always much easier for foreigners to be granted audience with Government people than for locals. The Whiteman still cast a spell of awe among the simple folks working in most Government departments. Foreign Embassies provide assistance towards their Nationals intending to solicit work in Malaysia. The same cannot be said for our Public Services personnel.

#### b) To Close Ranks

The need to close ranks is a concept yet to be imbued into our culture. Malaysians lack confidence and pride in our own; and are reticent with our praises or compliments even when justified. The Architectural profession had suffered in silence for far too long. It is hope that with the changing mood of our Nation, this anomaly which exist will be corrected.

The anti-palm oil and anti-tropical hardwood campaign generated from the West is unfair trade strategies against us. Malaysia ought to insist that foreigners especially architects, securing projects and enjoying economic benefits must subscribe to and support the sustainability of Malaysia's economic policies. This is fair bargain for trade benefits.

## 4.0 PROBLEMS NEEDED TO BE CONSIDERED, EVALUATED AND RESOLVED FOR 2020

### 4.01 Population Growth

Malaysia's current population is 18 million with 43% living in urban areas, and only 30% of the population will be living in the rural areas by 2020. The projected population then will be around 38 million. This means that 70% or 26.6 million will live in urban areas and 11.4 million in rural areas. The imposition on all infrastructural facilities will be mammoth. Supply of water, electricity, telecommunications, sanitary, transportation, communication, education, housing, health care, etc; must be coordinated with precision and determination. The fragile interdependency of these facilities is such that an unbalanced juggling will result in a total collapse of the system.

2020 is a mere 30 years time-span from now. Unless all development and infrastructure are coordinated statistically and strategically planned, we may follow similar path already experienced by other neighbouring countries. If the urban growth of the Malaysian cities and environment between 1970s and 1990s is used as an example of coordinated and preplanned growth, the next 30 years will mean chaos.

The last M.A. featured works from the Sabah and Sarawak chapters was the July/August '90 issue. The Borneo sub continent, with its vast tropical jungle, river network, flora, fauna and natural mountain formation makes it the most interesting of all the States in Malaysia. The vegetation is different and there is a great need for some form of conservation and control of the natural resources. Sabah, the Timber State has a very large portion of it still in jungle with only some coastal settlements sparsely spread around the State.

Recent exploration to the Gunung Lotong forest conservation area highlighted many species of floral and fauna which is rare and worthy of preservation. The burning question is asked, but what of the other areas? Are there not other areas worthy of preservation?

Conservation it seems is still foreign in the minds of many Sabahans. If there is a movement for the preservation or conservation of both the natural and man-made environment, then they have kept it very closed to their hearts. There do not appear to be anything in the urban areas to suggest that conservation of existing architectural heritage is being practised. This attitude may largely be the result of a legacy left over by the North Borneo Company which used to administer the State. A desire to keep or to create a sense of permanence or belonging is not there.

Architecturally the towns and urban areas lack a distinctive character which one could refer to as the 'architecture and spirit', reflective of the great Borneo sub-continent or the Timber State. Samples of recent works are non reflective of any directional development, architectural research or innovativeness in design. It appears to be the same boring regurgitation of repetitive architecture adopted from the worst models in Semenanjung. Housing schemes and shophouse developments are soul-less and lacking imagination. They are simply laid out on a grid-iron pattern on flat parched land where the natural vegetation and terrain had been tampered with.

The developers are not interested in preserving the natural environment. It's the 'fast-buck' or 'hit and run' attitude. What about the architects? Are the architects the only 'force of resistance'? The answer is deafeningly obvious. This attitude needs to change.

Architecture is not simply to provide housing or shelter. Malaysia is not a devastated country seeking aid from the Western countries or U.N. to 'feed and provide shelter' for our people. Local governments and those responsible must bear this in mind when planning housing projects. It is not only to provide four walls and roof over one's head that is of primary importance. It goes deeper than that. Man-made structures must complement the natural environment and co-jointly inspire and create a sense of belonging to its occupiers. In this context, the architects of Sabah have a heavy burden and responsibility towards their 'charge'. Whether it be a success or failure, only time will tell. It is not too late if there is a sincere and serious attempt to correct current attitudes.

Examples of work by Sabah architects in this issue will highlight the difficulty faced by members at large. Logistically, communication from one place to another is an effort and can become a physical drawback. It is therefore hardly surprising that although this issue was requested specially by Sabah members, not many projects were submitted, as the physical exercise of photography and sending materials to Kuala Lumpur can be difficult.