

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
20 September 1982

BEB-10

Groping

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Hijjas Kasturi is an architect.

"For some time now," he says, "each of us has been trying, in our various directions, to find Malaysian architecture. We haven't found it yet, and I think it will take at least another generation before anything is formalized. This is the beginning; a very exciting period, but one full of discontinuities."

"We lack a charismatic leadership to define Malaysian architecture as Frank Lloyd Wright did at one time for American architecture. We all come from different architectural schools with different philosophies. There is no unity. Some architects only want to implement what they've learned abroad. Others think the Minangkabau roof, 'Islamic' arches and other ornamentation are enough. Its a horrible misconception that these constitute Malaysian architecture. These are elements. Elements are superficial things. When you think in elements you will trap yourself and become artificial in your assessment and in your discipline. In my firm we are looking for something deeper than that. We are not always successful. But we are searching. We are groping. And we are very committed. I think one day we may make history."

Heavy stuff coming from the founder and sole proprietor of a seventy-member architectural firm barely five years old this year, with most of its portfolio either on the drawing boards or under construction. But Hijjas Kasturi Associates is the envy of the competition. In its brief existence the firm has managed to grab some of Malaysia's choicest architectural plums, among them the recently completed Club Mediterranee resort in the east coast town of Cherating, Pahang (where the firm functioned as the local counterpart to the French architectural concern, CVZ Paterne), Kuala Lumpur headquarters for LUTH (Lembaga Urusan dan Tabung Haji, the government facilitating and coordinating agency for Malaysian Muslims wishing to undertake the haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca), Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and MIDA

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(Malaysian Industrial Development Authority). The firm has also designed a variety of office buildings and housing estates in Kuala Lumpur and other communities.

Most recently, Hijjas Kasturi Associates won an international design competition for the controversial Malayan Banking Berhad headquarters, controversial because of the structure's siting on Court Hill, one of the last remaining green spots in Kuala Lumpur ("Save Court Hill" T-shirts were hot items in 1979 when the fate of the grass-and-tree covered knoll still hung in the balance. Only half the site, however, will be required by the actual structure. The rest will be given over to "landscaped gardens," this mollifying opponents of the project only slightly). Upon completion in 1986 the M\$200 million Malayan Banking headquarters will be, at over 50 stories, the tallest building in the capital. Design and manpower requirements for the project have pushed

Hijjas Kasturi Associates into high gear. The firm recently expanded its staff and offices to fill the entire ninth floor of yet another Hijjas Kasturi structure, the elegant Bangunan Datuk Zainol, sandwiched with other office buildings into the congested Jalan Melaka area of Kuala Lumpur (referred to by over-zealous tourist brochures as the "throbbing heart of the financial district").

Though his firm is a scant half-decade old, Hijjas himself has over sixteen years of architectural experience. With a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Melbourne, plus five years Australian and two years Singaporean work experience, Hijjas was well qualified to return to Malaysia





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in 1967 to set up the Department of Art and Architecture at the then-fledgling Institut Teknologi MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat, the government agency charged with uplifting the economic status of the Malays and other bumiputra "indigenous inhabitants"). As the founding head, he attempted to foster an interdependent, multi-disciplinary, "Bauhaus" approach to art and architectural education. He also prepared the Master Plan for the ITM campus in Shah Alam, now capital of Selangor state. In 1969, Hijjas left ITM and became a founding principal partner in Arkitek Bersekutu and later Arkitek Bersekutu Malaysia. In 1977 he departed from the latter firm and set up Hijjas Kasturi Associates Sendirian (Sendirian, Sendirian Berhad and Berhad are Malaysian terms for Private, Private Limited and Limited respectively).

Innovative design and lucrative, highly publicized and occasionally controversial projects like the Malayan Banking headquarters have helped to make Hijjas one of Malaysia's better-known architects, a high-profile, vocal proponent of his own brand of Malaysian architecture. A recently-published Hijjas Kasturi Associates brochure describes the gist of his philosophy:

"There is a constant attempt to forge a new approach to Malaysian architecture that is not a mere imitation of the West but which suits this country's climate and cultural heterogeneity. The relegation of the past to mere ornamentation is avoided at all costs and the design team of Hijjas Kasturi Associates is optimistic that it is on the way to developing an original approach that is relevant to Malaysia today in light of its history."

Many other Malaysian architects regard this sort of rhetoric as political posturing, an attempt to curry favor with potential clients and the government in light of the recent official "Malaysian architectural identity" directive (BEB-9). Perhaps because of his frequent appearances in the media spotlight, virtually every Malaysian architect I've spoken to here thus far has an opinion on Hijjas Kasturi. Said one critic:

"Like all of us, Hijjas is searching for a style, an identity. But by now I think he's reached a position in the field where he doesn't have to justify his decisions with a "Malaysian identity" label. It's just talk. My only fear is that he may have begun to believe it himself."

Indeed, when I interviewed Hijjas a few months back he did seem to believe what he said and appeared quite sincere in his determination to evolve an urban Malaysian architectural style that would somehow incorporate the philosophical tenets of the nation's component cultures. He described with enthusiasm the research teams his firm has set up to ferret out the cultural bases for this new architectural idiom. Undoubtedly, Hijjas is cognizant of the advantages of inserting "Malaysian culture" here and there in the client brief these days. But, rhetoric or no, there is also an apparent conviction that he and his associates are on to something:

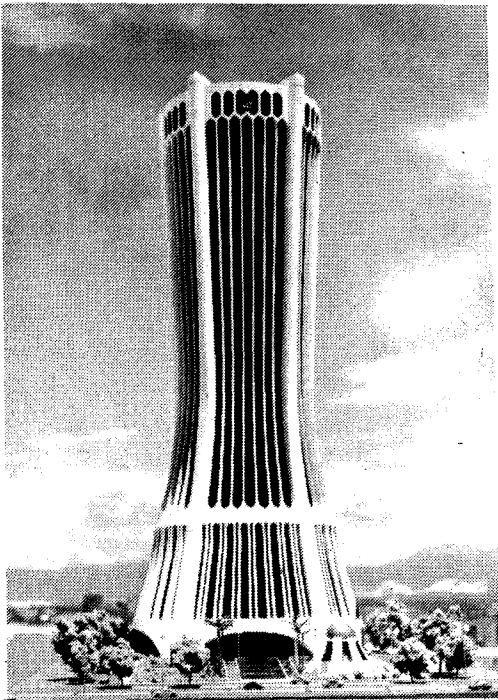
"Find the concept," he says, "the philosophy. Not elements. Determine what kind of space you want to create. Are you trying to humble men or uplift them? Then consider the environment, the surroundings, the atmosphere and of course, the site. From things as basic as these we can create a design."

The once popular Minangkabau roof (BEB-9) is anathema to Hijjas. He is an outspoken critic of the ill-considered use of this roofstyle in Malaysia. In an interview published in the July 2, 1982 Malay Mail (a local afternoon English-language daily) he derides Malaysian architects' "dearth of imagination" and their "blind copying" of a roofstyle that "was never very common here anyway." Here he states his architectural ideals in yet another way:

"If we can realistically and honestly assess the elements of our way of life, then we can begin the design exercise of adapting the philosophy into the masses and spaces that relate best to the Malaysian community." He also cites Malay adat (indigenous tradition) and Chinese fung shui (geomancy) as possible sources of inspiration.

Though Hijjas is probably the only Malay architect on the Peninsula to mention the possibility of non-Malay culture as a possible source of Malaysian architectural inspiration, he has yet to incorporate anything obviously Chinese, much less Indian, into his work. Perhaps, shunning the culturally specific ornamentation and rooflines that mark much contemporary Malaysian civic architecture, his intent is, in part, to determine traditional architectural responses to the local environment common to all races, integrating these into his design. Easier said than done.

The LUTH building, a much acclaimed Hijjas Kasturi Associates design, affords little opportunity for cultural synthesis. Here solely Islamic inspiration is a necessity; it would hardly do to have conservative Muslim clients discover that their new building incorporated design principles based on infidel Chinese geomancy. Hijjas, however, has endeavoured to combine function with form in an austere structure reflective of Islam's emphasis on purity and simplicity. Thus, the circular building, rising from a base flared to accommodate greater lower-level demand for space and traffic to an echoing lesser flare in the upper floors, incor-



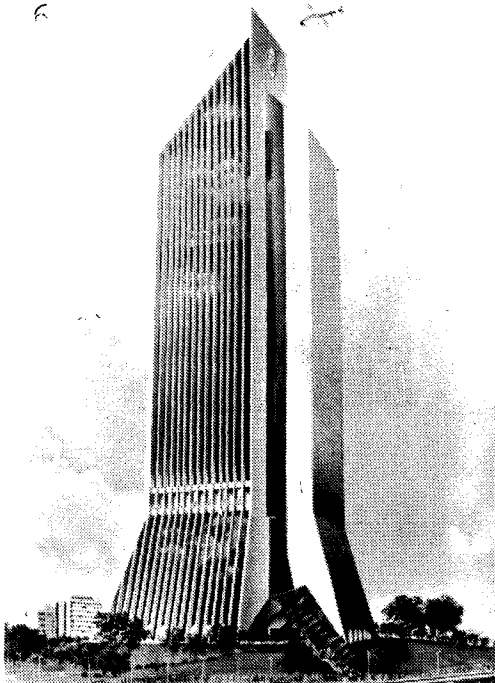
porates five pillars that support the structure, accomodate peripheral airconditioning systems and symbolize the five tenets of Islam. Hijjas clâims the design adheres to many of the traditions of Islamic architecture, deriving much of its inspiration from traditional minaret forms. As the building will serve not only as LUTH headquarters but will also accomodate secular tenancy, special Islamic religious needs have been given extra consideration in the interior design: elevators are clustered in two groups around a central core structure so that members of LUTH may, if they wish, reserve one set for their own use, thus avoiding contact with other, possibly kafir (unbeliever) tenants.

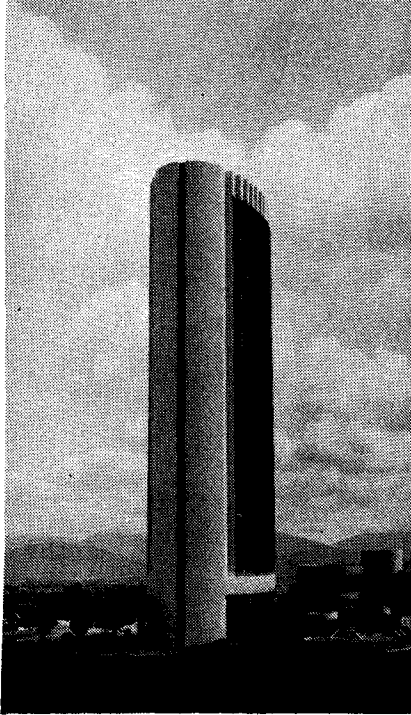
In contrast to the LUTH headquarters' circular floor plan, the new Malayan Banking headquarters are based

on a design of interlocking squares, from which rise two staggered, diagonally-roofed tower blocks, faced top-to-bottom with mullion columns for a cathedral-like, reach-for-the-sky effect. Already 50 feet above street level on its Court Hill dais, the Malayan Banking entrance must be reached by escalators protected by a hierarchical arrangement of roofs, reminiscent of Malay tradition:

"In the past," explains Hijjas, "in some Malay communities only the most influential men in the community could have more than one roof on their house. More roofs reflected higher status. We've incorporated this concept [the entrance has some eleven roofs, high status indeed] justifying the use of roofs as protection form the elements."

Less legitimate, perhaps is the now popular comparison of the building with a keris (BEB-9). Hijjas admits the thoughts of this traditional Malay weapon had no part in the original design. But after a researcher from Universiti Sains Malaysia remarked that the design reminded him of the legendary Taming Sari, the lost keris of Hang Tuah, Malacca's storied warrior of the past, well this was just too tempting to pass up and was mentioned to the prospective client. Hijjas has received a lot of flak from his peers for this bit of political hay. After all, he won the contest.





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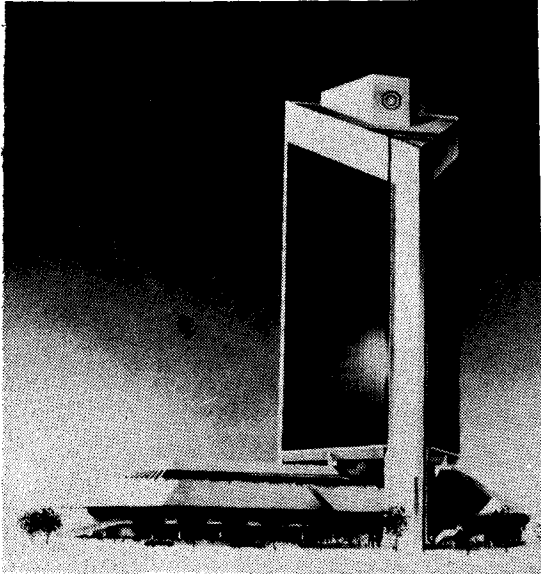
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Conceptualized and supervised by Hijjas and nurtured by subsidiary project architects and engineers (the staff includes nine associate architects, two engineers and a team of technicians, draughtsmen and modellers. Partial assistance is also provided by a Tektronix 4054 graphic computer for standard architectural detail and similar repetitive tasks), the firm's designs are often based on simple geometric forms. Hijjas believes such simplicity helps give a building strong architectural presence. The Apera office building, for example, is based on an elliptical floor plan and has the added distinction of landscaping and an annex building inspired by the abstract paintings of Ibrahim Hussein, a-layia's best-known and highest priced contemporary artist, whose works grace many of the walls of Hijjas' offices. The firm's brochure gushes:

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"This marriage between artist and architect, the former having a purely artistic inclination while the latter concentrates more on technology and functionalism, promises to create exciting forms which assist in functional planning."

Even with less conceptually demanding structures, Hijjas



tries to avoid the concrete box syndrome so common in contemporary Asian architecture. Wisma Batik, for instance is an attempt at "architectural sculpture." Hijjas had even hoped to give the building a red horizontal stripe to echo the adjacent British colonial-era structures in the North Indian architectural mode. This was a bit too whimsical (or perhaps too graphic) for the client's tastes and was rejected.

The MIDA headquarters, another in-progress project, are structured around a central tower block based on a triangular floor plan. Hijjas considers this building the firm's most successful foray into the Malaysian stylistic arena to date. He explains:

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"In graphic design you depict things that are easily identifiable or that remind people of something or excite them. We have done the same thing. The element most often seen in traditional architecture is the overhanging pitched roof. The typical pitched, gabled roof is domestic, however. This is not a domestic structure. It's



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an office building, requiring a podium and tower block. We've made these look like two interlinked buildings, the slanted overhanging roof of the podium alluding to traditional roof design, while the raised columns of the tower block reflect the stilts of kampung [village] architecture. Lifting the tower block onto columns also creates an atrium, while the triangular shape accommodates the view, better on the front two sides than the back. Of course we are also trying to be different and the shape helps to give the building an identity."

Establishing an identity not only gives a building singular presence; it also serves as a sort of architectural signature; a mark: a means of recogni-



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tion, something most architects, like most creative artists, strive for. Hijjas Kasturi Associates has managed, in a remarkably brief period of time, to establish such a signature, an architectural mode recognizable by architects and increasingly, by the public. Controversial projects like the Malayan Banking headquarters, whatever their drawbacks, have succeeded in elevating architectural discussion beyond the elite circle of designers and planners to the public forum. Though Hijjas may not qualify as that charismatic architect needed to fire the Malaysian imagination, he has at least helped to educate the public and the politicians about the potential of Malaysian architecture that goes beyond mere ornament and superficial detail. At the very least Hijjas Kasturi Associates has taken some of the first steps towards a Malaysian architecture that, who knows, might one day even go beyond politics.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Bryn Barnard'.

Bryn Barnard

List of Illustrations

1. Sketch; portrait of Hijjas Kasturi; ink on paper; BEB
2. T-shirt; "Save Court Hill, K.L. For The People"; lent by Mr. Krishan Jit.
3. Photograph; Bangunan Datuk Zainol, Kuala Lumpur. Bank Bumiputera is to the left, Chartered Bank is to the right; HKA
4. Photograph; Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, Kuala Lumpur; HKA
5. Photograph; LUTH headquarters, Kuala Lumpur; HKA
6. Photograph; Malayan Banking Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur. The building's comparison to the Taming Sari keris could have some rather unfortunate interpretations. At one point in the Hang Tuah legend, the hero's friend, Hang Jebat, thinking Hang Tuah has been killed, runs amuck with the Taming Sari, killing quite a few people himself before he is stopped. Hang Tuah later reappears and Hang Jebat, overcome with emotion, insists Hang Tuah kill him with the Taming Sari. In some versions of the legend, they duel, but here too, Hang Tuah kills his friend with the keris.
7. Photograph; Apera-ULG office building and annex, Kuala Lumpur; HKA
8. Photograph; Wisma Batik, Kuala Lumpur; HKA
9. Painting; detail of work by Ibrahim Hussein; HKA
10. Photograph; MIDA headquarters, Kuala Lumpur; HKA
11. Sketch; kampung house, Malacca; ink and marker on bristol board; BEB
12. Photograph; Club Mediterranee, Cherating, Pahang; HKA

Received in Hanover 10/4/82