

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23 Jalan AU5 C/3
Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang Selangor
Malaysia
5 November 1982

BEB-11

Pintu Gerbang

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

Dear Peter,

Gates have been with us a long time, as long as men and their gods have occupied dwellings. Gates provide passageway, support structural loads and define space: the inside, the outside, the entrance, the exit. From these humble, utilitarian origins, gates, over time, have developed a host of symbolic functions as identity and rites of passage markers. Gates not only get us from here to there but tell us where we are going via identifying marks, words or symbols, shape, size or orientation. Gates may also signify a changed state of consciousness, economic, political or marital status or even a new plateau of spiritual development. Designers and architects have found different ways of emphasizing these symbolic functions. Javanese temple builders, from the ninth century onwards, carved the fearsome, grinning visage and upper jaw of Kala, the god of time, over temple doorways, symbolically devouring those that passed underneath and leading to a new spiritual plane within. Similarly, Dante, passing through the Gates of Hell on his own spiritual journey in his thirteenth century poem Inferno, noted a rather forbidding admonishment carved overhead: "Lay Down All Hope, You That Go In By Me." Less ominous are the riotous, secular decorations painted on college dormitory doors, a veritable folk art on some American campuses.

Symbolism par excellence is the freestanding, commemorative gate monument. Free of most of the load-carrying, support functions inherent in structural gates, the commemorative gate is usually built solely to memorialize an event, honor a person, consecrate a place or validate a ritual. Commemorative gates go back at least as far as Stonehenge and have been built in Japan, India, China, Java and Bali. Most are structurally simple, using basic post-and-lintel design, or as in the Indonesian split gate, two posts sans lintel. More complex are gates in the manner of the Roman triumphal arches, employing voussoirs (wedge-shaped stones) to transfer

Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is architecture.



1. Kala-carving on Javanese temple gate.



2. Balinese temple gate.



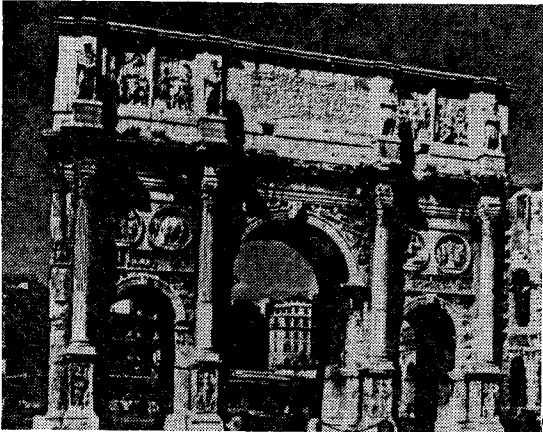
3. Gua Gaja, Balinese cave gate.

the pull of gravity into diagonal thrust and thence into a vertical force by the resistance of other arches or the inertia of buttresses. Originally built to honor the Emperors Titus, Septimius Severus and Constantine, the triumphal arches found favor with later Europeans eager to harken back to Rome's glory. The French Arc de Triomphe, the British Marble Arch and the British-colonial India Gate in New Delhi were all built in imitation of the Roman model. Today, in the post-colonial era, fortunes and tastes have changed and the commemorative arch tradition has languished. Save for isolated projects like the St. Louis Gateway Arch, such monuments are a thing of the past.

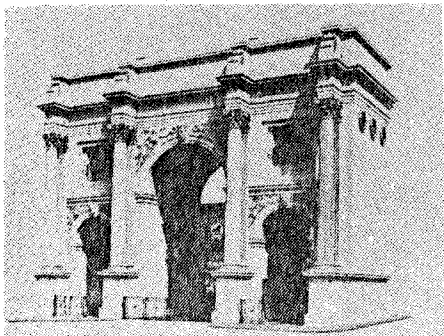
Except in Malaysia. It is here, oddly enough, that a commemorative gate tradition not only survives, but flourishes. Locally, these gates are called "arches" or in Malay, "pintu gerbang," literally, "arched doorways." Most, however, are not true arches, instead relying on post-and-lintel construction. Unlike the European edifices of old, these Malaysian gates are not permanent stone structures but rather, temporary, seasonal creations of wood, plastic and metal, built yearly to commemorate major national, cultural and religious events. As such, they have evolved quickly, changing from year to year, subject to the current political ideology and the whims of taste. Supported by private firms, city councils and state governments, bespangled with nationalistic, religious and cultural mottos and symbols, commemorative gates have become major visual components in the government's push for a national Malaysian culture. Like Soviet and Chinese "socialist realism" murals or Indonesia's Sukarno-era nationalist sculpture,

Malaysian commemorative gates are art in the service of the state, official visual reminders of what Malaysia is, or rather, should be.

The origins of Malaysia's commemorative gates are obscure. Photographic records are sporadic and before the late 1950's, rare. My informants in Kuala Lumpur can remember a few simple commemorative gates constructed during the first Independence Day celebrations on August 31st, 1957 and before this, seasonal Christmas arches erected by British stores like Robinson's. Malaysian cultural chauvinism notwithstanding, however, modern commemorative gates have no documented indigenous historical precedent, no bamboo-and-thatch village commemorative that might have begotten today's variegated brood. True, in Kelantan and Trengganu one can still find the original pintu gerbang from which modern urban commemorative gates derive their name. These freestanding entrance gates were once placed at the front, and sometimes rear, of northeast coast Malay homes. But this tradition is domestic, not commemorative, and none of the modern gates I have seen appear to have their basis here. Both the Indian and



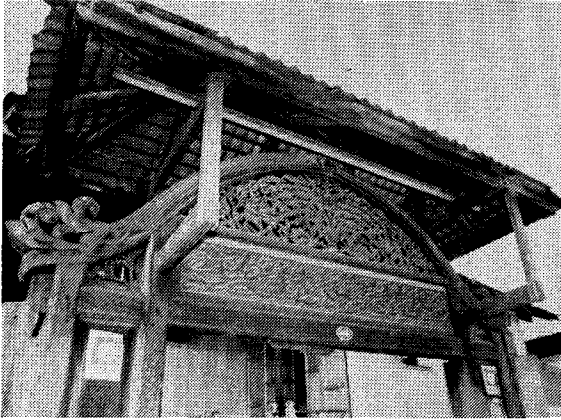
4. Arch of Constantine, Rome.



5. Marble Arch, London.



6. Arc de Triomphe, Paris.



7. Pintu gerbang, Kelantan

Chinese communities also have their own gate-building traditions, but the South Indian govipuram and the Chinese temple-gate are religious structures, usually attached to temple walls. Again, neither seem to have been major visual sources for the design of modern Malaysian gates. India, of course, does have a tradition of commemorative pillars, erected at the command of the Emperor Asoka in the second century B.C., but these monuments have no known descendants or analogues on the Peninsula. Also commemorative, but closer in spirit to the modern Malaysian tradition, is the Javanese split gate, a permanent stone or concrete village demarcation monument repainted annually throughout the island for Indonesian Independence Day celebrations. Again, however, no known examples of the split gate have been erected on the Peninsula nor do any modern Malaysian commemoratives



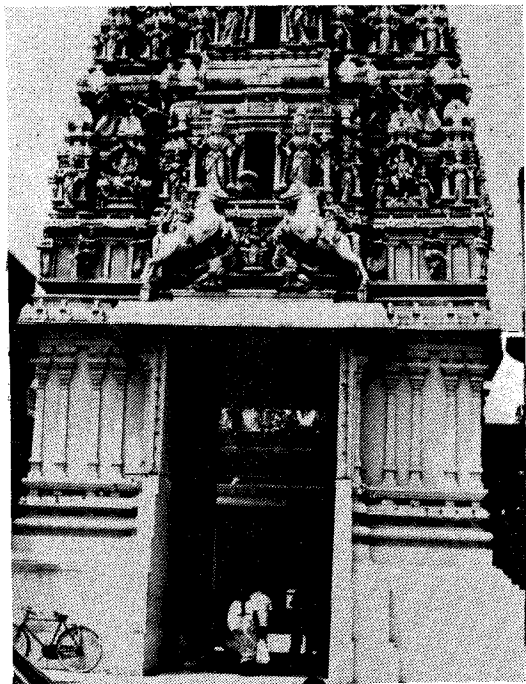
8. Pintu gerbang, Kelantan



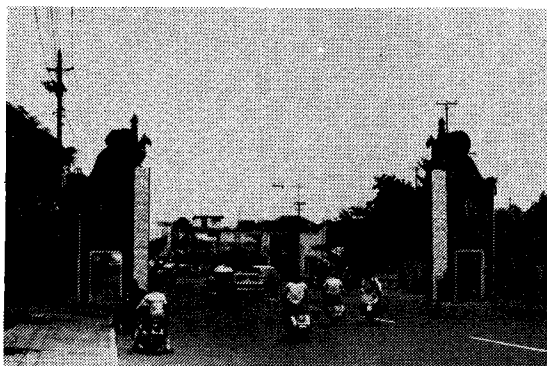
9. Pintu gerbang, Kelantan

reflect this type of design. Perhaps, then, the Malaysian commemorative gate is not heir to any one tradition or combination of traditions, but instead, a truly modern creation, the product of contemporary urban genius.

Whatever the origins, gate building prospered in Malaysia during the 1960's and 1970's, though erratically. By the beginning of the 1980's most Malaysian cities were erecting



10. Govipuram, Kuala Lumpur



12. Split gate, Java

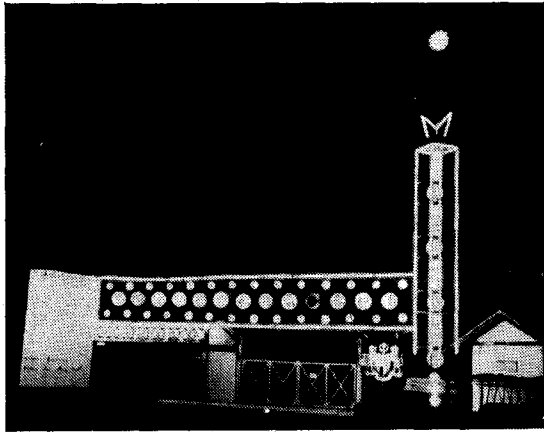


11. Chinese-style mosque gate, Malacca.



13. Chinese temple-gate, Penang

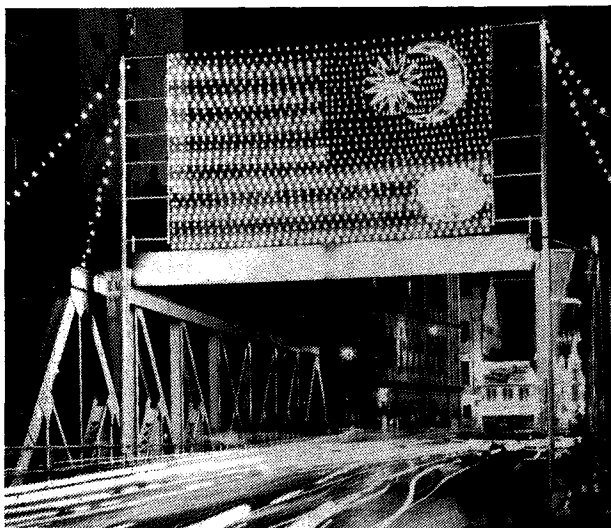
at least one gate per year to commemorate Independence Day and, occasionally, other events. The majority reflected then-current architectural trends. Since the colonial era, most Malaysian civic architecture has drawn its visual inspiration from the West, Islam and Malay culture. Commemorative gates have followed suit. Throughout the last two decades, much gate ornament has incorporated hard-edged, high-tech Western design elements in keeping with the government's emphasis on Sains dan Teknologi. Islamic ornamentation and Malay-inspired designs have proven even more popular. Minarets, spires, domes, ogees, and a variety of cusped, horseshoe and lancet arches are often combined with variations



14. National Electricity Board gate; Independence Day, 1957



16. Malaysia Day gate, 1963



15. Malaysia Day gate, 1963



17. Malaysia Day gate, 1963

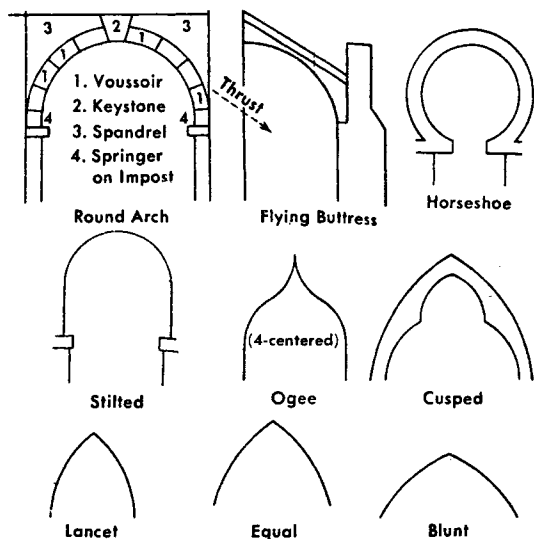


18. Malaysia Day gate, 1963

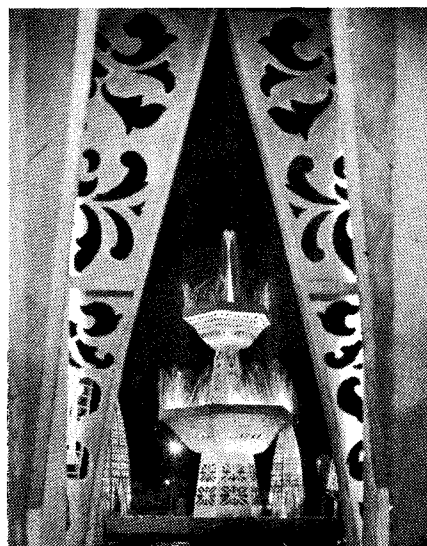


19. Koran Reading Competition gate, 1973

on the ever-popular Minangkabau roof (see BEB-9 and BEB-10 for discussion of this architectural form), Kelantanese wood carving, and artifacts like the keris (ceremonial Malay knife). Arabic writing or Arabic-style, Malay-language Jawi script are virtual imperatives for mottos and other words, either alone or in combination with English or English-style, Malay-language Rumi. Elements from Chinese and Indian culture are almost unseen on today's commemorative gates. In fact, these structures are a prime method of insinuating Malay/Islamic cultural edifices into Chinese and Indian areas. Though most Malaysian cities are predominantly Chinese, commemorative gates, like city hall, are Malay.



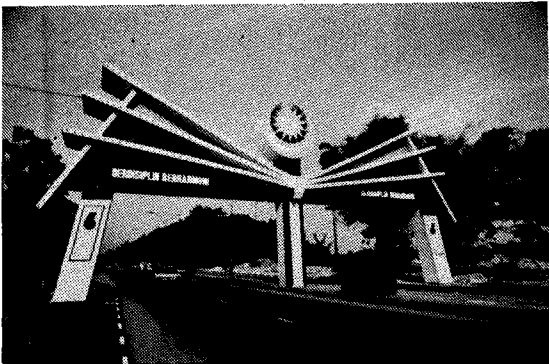
20. Types of Arches



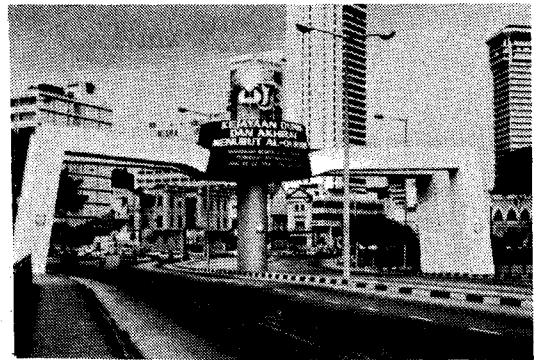
21. Malaysia Day, 1963

Though commemorative gates are now a hallowed urban tradition in Malaysia, competitive gate building is a comparatively recent phenomenon, restricted primarily to the Kuala Lumpur area. Such competitive fever, however, is endemic throughout the urban areas of the Peninsula. Schools, clubs, media and government are forever sponsoring contests to raise funds, foster talent and promote civic and national pride. Not long ago, Kuala Lumpur held a contest for the Federal Territory logo. More recently, Utusan Malaysia, a Malay-language daily, polled its readers for a new masthead design. Even Malayan Banking had a contest for the design of its new Kuala Lumpur headquarters. Though democratic in spirit, such competitions, particularly government design competitions, are often rather narrow political conduits for creative activity. The sky is not the limit here; art is focussed along ideologically determined "Malaysian" lines. Since 1979, gate design has entered this fray.

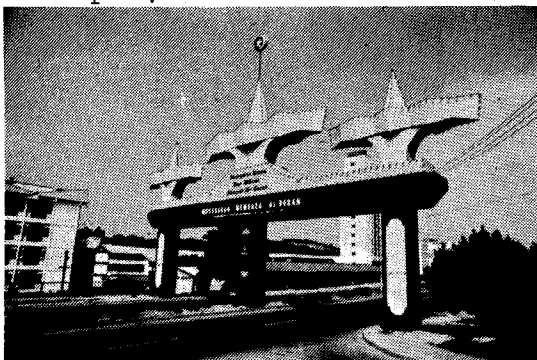
The Kuala Lumpur city hall sponsors the now-annual Pintu Gerbang competition, inviting selected firms to build commemorative gates at pre-determined spots around the city center.



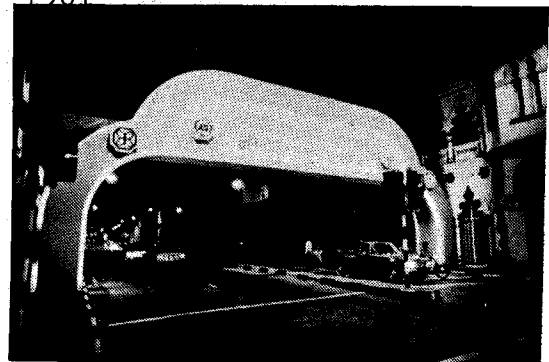
22. PETRONAS gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1981



24. PERNAS gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1981



23. National Electricity Board gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1981



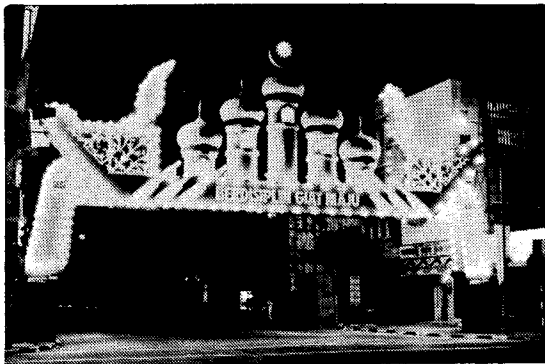
25. Bank Bumiputera gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982



26. MISC gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1981



27. MISC gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982

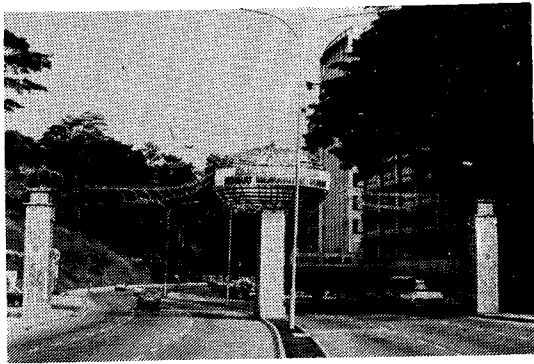


28. MISC gate(night), Kuala Lumpur, 1982

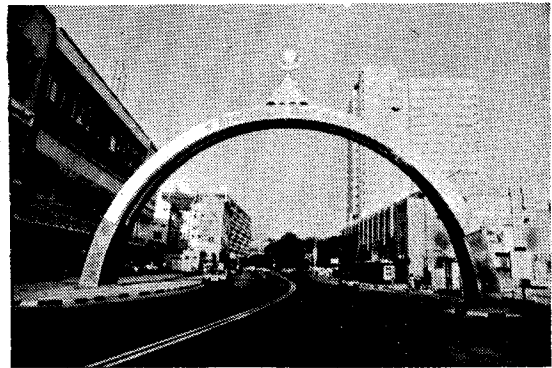
The stakes are high: entrants must build, maintain, light and insure the gates at their own expense, usually M\$30,000-\$60,000 (US\$12,500-\$25,000). But the gates, with company logos on the support posts, are an excellent form of advertising and public relations, straddling major Kuala Lumpur thoroughfares for many months during the official commemorative season.

The season seems to get a bit longer each year, as more events are added to the competitive calendar. Competitive gates now commemorate not only Independence Day but also the annual International Koran Reading Competition and, during 1980, the installation of the new king, the Yang di-Pertuan Agung (Malaysia's sultans take turns in this office, each for a five year stretch). City hall insists the competitive gates should stand for no more than six months, but they are rapidly approaching the point of semi-permanence, erected by the same firms in the same places, year after year.

National culture is considered a particularly important aspect of these competitive gates: they serve as one of the major media for the official "theme of the year," a slogan, chosen by government committee, that is later appended to billboards, bumper stickers and even song lyrics. Usually inspirational in intent, and even slightly spartan, the themes revolve around civic virtues: in 1980 the theme was "Berbakti, Berdisiplin" (loyalty and discipline), in 1981 "Berdisiplin, Berharmoni" (discipline and harmony) and in 1982 "Berdisiplin Giat Maju" (discipline,



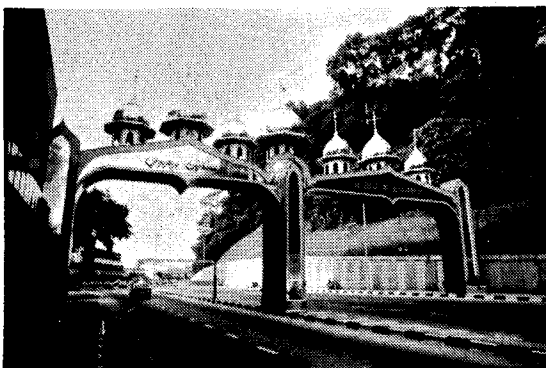
29. Genting gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1981



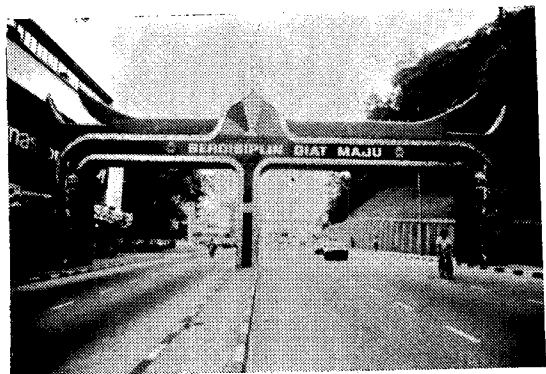
30. Genting gate, Kuala Lumpur 1982

diligence, success). Subsidiary events have their own, equally disciplined themes. Aesthetics are also expected to toe the official line. Though gates are judged on a variety of visual criteria, including nighttime, artificially lit appearance, "Malaysian cultural content" stands paramount. Winning gates have been heavy on Malay/Islamic ornamentation two years running. The 1980 winner employed giant keris-shaped support posts while the top position in 1981 went to gates using an Islamic dome theme. Domes and stylized dome-forms received three honorable mentions in 1982 though the winner, PERNAS (Perbadanan Nasional or National Corporation, a semi-government, multi-functional conglomerate), used few traditional elements. Stylized, aluminum-coated thunderbolt support posts and lintels were the visual mainstays of this latter arch, crowned by an Islamic star-and-crescent and a Malaysian flag design.

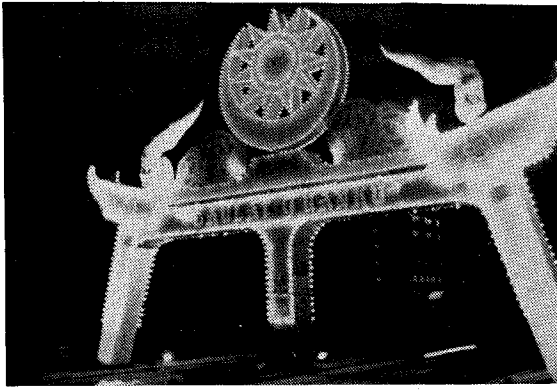
State governments have done Kuala Lumpur one better. In recent years, at some state borders, truly permanent gates have



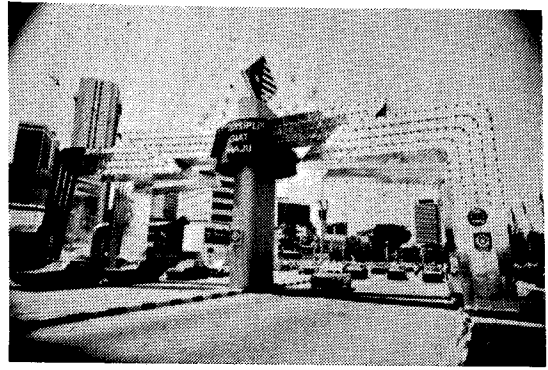
31. PERNAS-Sime Darby gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1981 winner



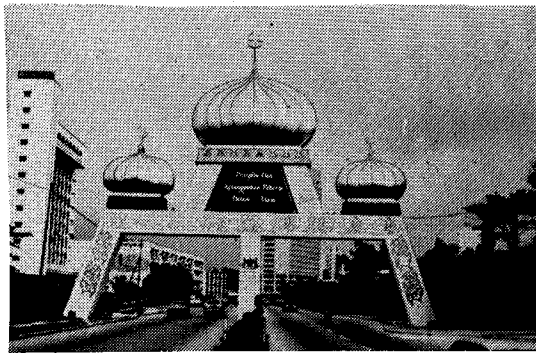
32. PERNAS-Sime Darby gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982



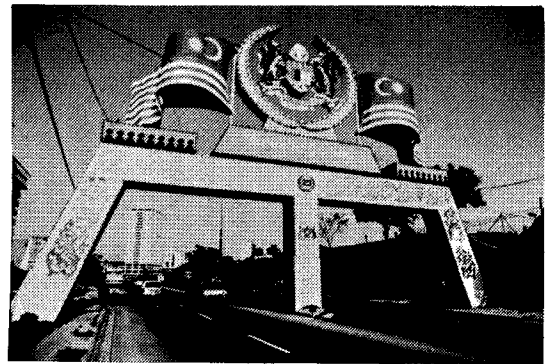
33. National Electricity Board gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1980 winner



34. PERNAS gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982 winner



35. National Electricity Board gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982 honorable mention (Koran Reading Competition facade)



36. National Electricity Board gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982 (Independence Day facade)



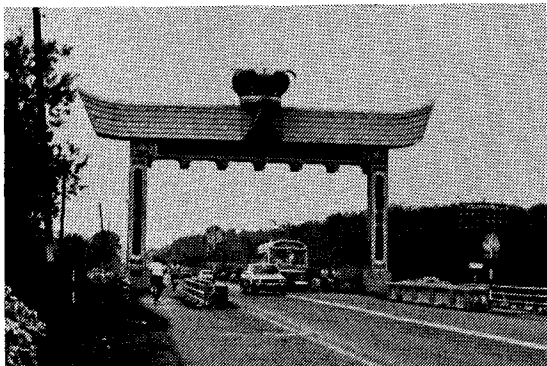
37. PETRONAS gate, Kuala Lumpur, 1982 honorable mention



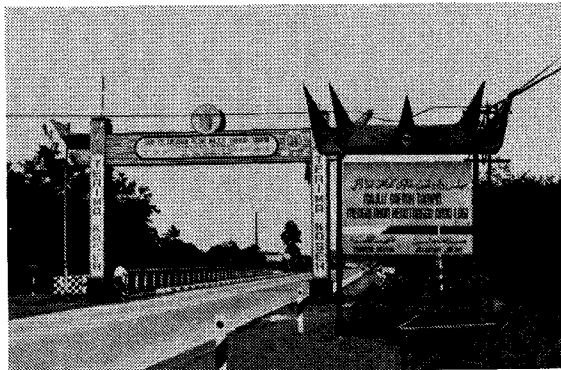
38. PKNS gate (overpass), Kuala Lumpur, 1982 honorable mention

been constructed, functioning as regional/cultural identity markers. More sturdily and expensively constructed than temporary gates, these permanent structures symbolize both the perimeters of the the local sultan's realm and the local culture. The Negeri Sembilan border gate, astride the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore highway, is representative of this new form. A heirarchical arrangement of modified Minangkabau roofs crown the gate lintel, symbolic of that ethnic group's predominance in the state.

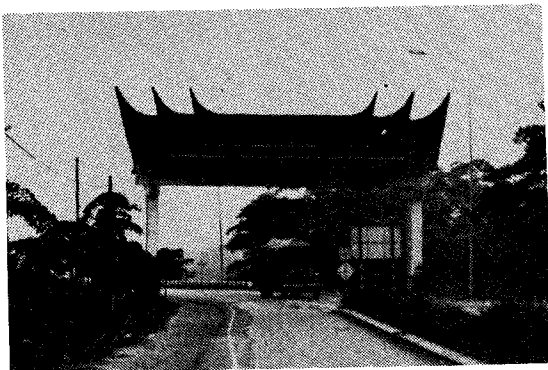
Territoriality is important to the sultans as an affirmation of their traditional rights over the land and their subjects. In 1974 the Sultan of Selangor ruefully bequeathed Kuala Lumpur to the Federal Government, an unprecedented loss of territory for a post-colonial Malay ruler. To commemorate the event and secure his borders, the sultan erected the ultimate in permanent gates, the "Kota Darul Ehsan", completed in early 1982. Built at a cost of over four million taxpayer ringgit (US\$1.65 million), this new gate straddles one of the Federal Territory's major arteries, the Kuala Lumpur-Kelang highway. It is a strange hybrid. Nicknamed the "Marble Arch," this more in reference to its



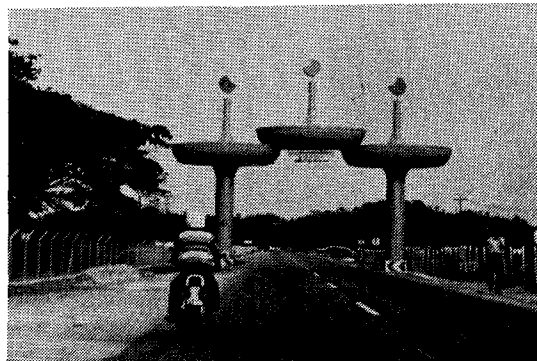
39. Johore northern entrance gate, KL-Singapore highway



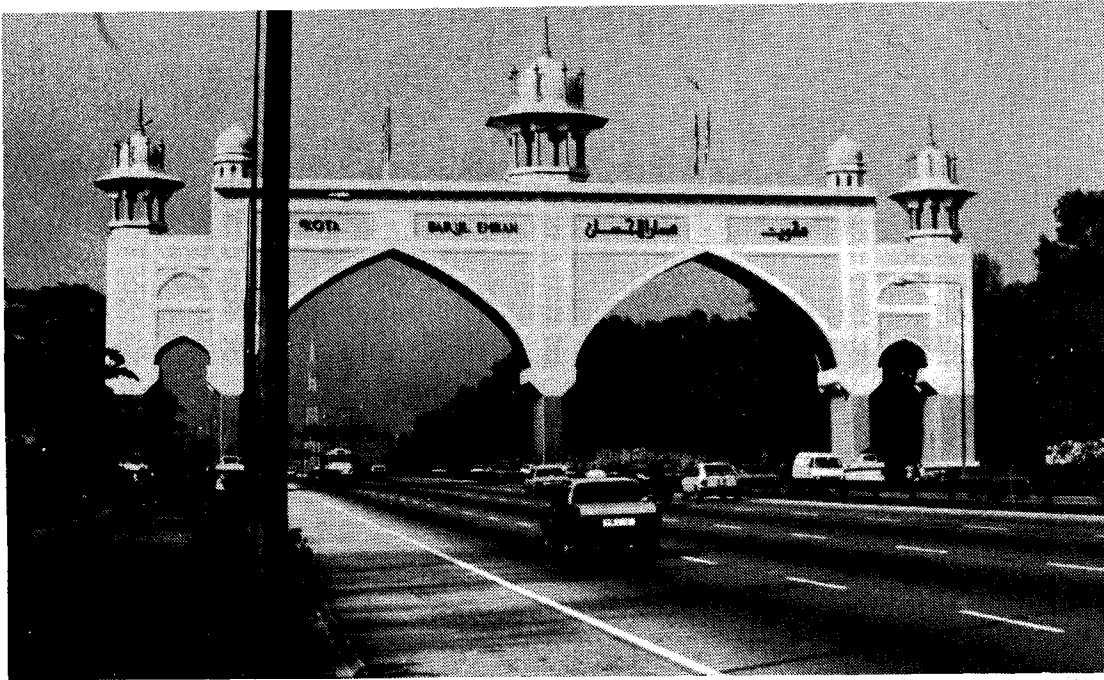
41. Tampin Independence Day commemorative gate, Negeri Sembilan



40. Negeri Sembilan northern entrance gate, KL-Singapore highway



42. Alor Setar northern entrance gate, Kedah



43. The Marble Arch, Selangor

design links with the Hyde Park original than the actual construction, the gate is built of reinforced concrete with some marble facing at the base. Like the British Marble Arch and the Roman Arch of Constantine, the Malaysian structure has subsidiary side arches flanking the main entranceway, an inscription and decorative facing. In overall appearance, however, this modern triumphal arch is unquestionably Islamic and Malay. Unlike the round, Roman-style arch-gates of Europe, the Malaysian Marble Arch has main and flanking entrances (four instead of the usual three, to accommodate modern freeway traffic) in the blunt arch style, akin to those found in the North Indian-design Kuala Lumpur train station and post office. The Arch also incorporates North Indian-style domes (again similar to the train station), Islamic, geometric facade ornamentation, the Selangor state seal and the words "Kota Darul Ehsan," royal Malay for "Selangor State Monument." Four antique cannons guard the exterior support posts. Less elaborate, but no less permanent gates have been erected to watch over the other road entrances to Selangor.

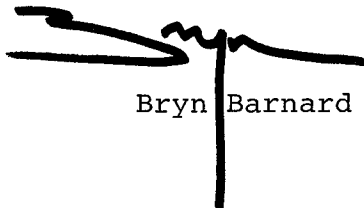
Construction of the Marble Arch did not go unchallenged. Newspaper editorials and letters questioned the wisdom of such a massive, non-essential outlay of taxpayer money and more importantly, the right of Malaysia's royalty to authorize such expenditures. Charges of waste and possible misman-

nagement in the construction of the gate briefly filled the news until the sultan, fed up with his ungrateful rakyat (subjects) commanded the argument closed: the Arch was built, a monument for future generations, and that was that. Though the media has been silenced on the subject, the Arch continues to provoke private commentary and debate, particularly in the privacy of automobiles that daily pass beneath this giant edifice.

The Marble Arch may be the last grandiose gate project produced in Malaysia for some time to come. Public scrutiny and recession-inspired national and state budget cuts (1982 is the most austere federal budget in decades) make such luxurious monuments unaffordable political and economic liabilities. Hard times have reduced participation in the Kuala Lumpur gate competition as well. Many of the regulars, like MAS (Malaysian Airline System), are in the red this year and could only afford very small arches. Less-entrenched participants backed out completely.

But gates are no longer the quasi-folk art of the 1950's. These polyglot, freestyle borrowings from indigenous and foreign traditions have become monuments, tourist attractions and the subject of some scholarly research. Even architects have begun to turn to gates for inspiration, poring over photographic examples in the National Archives and National Museum. Gates have become one of Malaysia's few truly urban cultural traditions. In a country where such symbols are nurtured, groomed, displayed and enshrined, gates will probably continue to be produced well into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bryn Barnard', with a long vertical line extending downwards from the end of the signature.

Bryn Barnard

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The quote from Dante's Inferno is from Canto III:9, the Penguin Books edition, translated by Dorothy Leigh Sayers, 1949.