INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23 Jalan AU5 C/3
Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
26 August 1982

BEB-9

Building a Culture

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

Dear Peter,

Malaysia's architects are in a position to be envied: the nation's cities are being made over in a new image and they are the sculptors. Since Independence, the Malaysian government has expended considerable effort refurbishing and rennovating domestic and commerical colonial-era buildings, replacing some and augmenting them with contemporary structures in a variety of architectural styles. The aim is the modernization and expansion of the cities (particularly Kuala Lumpur) and a restructuring of the urban population in line with government policy, encouraging Malay immigration into these now heavily Chinese areas. The result has been a hunger for new buildings unequaled in Southeast Asia. Even Singapore's much-vaunted appetite, though formidable, is limited by the island's small size. Malaysia has over 127,000 square miles on which to build; those areas not yet designated for plantation schemes, forest reserves, parks, industrial development or new transportation infrastructure are rapidly filling with new homes and commerical buildings. Though the global recession has finally cooled Malaysia's cheery economic fires somewhat, urban development continues with gusto. Most Malaysian cities (and not a few towns) now strive for a few hundred acres of spanking new concrete-and-tile tract homes, a scattering of skyscrapers and at least one multi-story shopping complex. Kuala Lumpur is bristling with them. Better: many of the country's potentially significant national structures have yet to be built. The National Theater, National Library and National Cemetary are on the drawing boards and the National Museum is slated for extensive expansion and rennovation. There's more than enough work to go around.

Malaysia's architects are also faced with a dilemma: though the government wants new Edifices, new Monuments and new Symbols they cannot simply emulate international architectural trends. A recent government edict requires all new civic architecture to in some manner reflect Malaysian culture, neglecting, however to define the cultural parameters of this expectation. National

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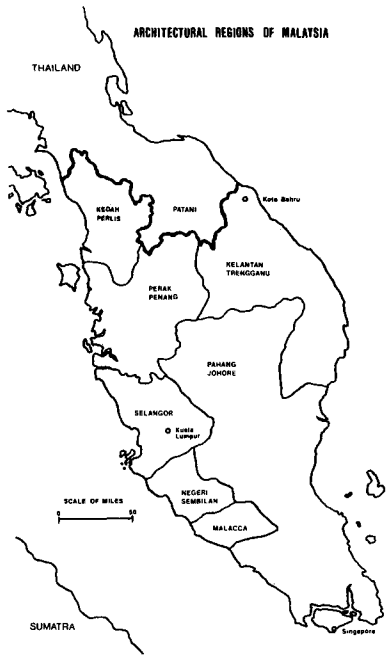
Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is architecture.



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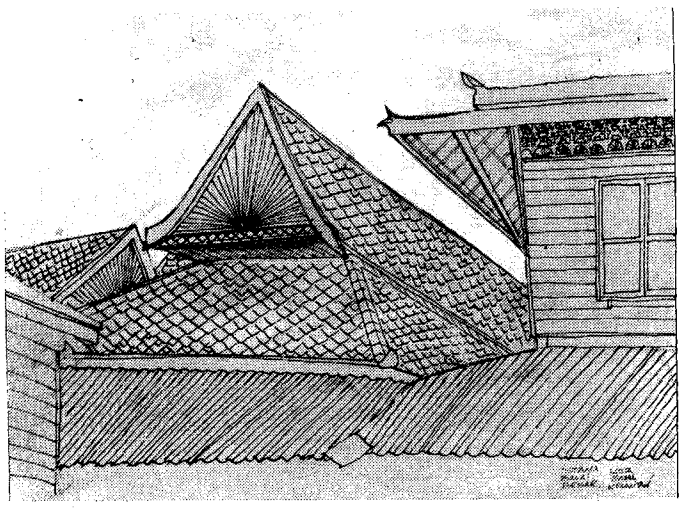
policy is a catalyst: it is up to the individual architects to sift through the nation's cultural melange for designs sufficiently Malaysian to get the official nod. Potentially, then, each individual architect could develop an idiosyncratic "Malaysian" architectural style.

But from whence to choose? Each of Malaysia's component ethnic communities has well-established architectural traditions. Too, regional historical influences have contributed to the nation's built environment. Choices are not simple, even among the political frontrunners.

Malay architecture, officially favored as the basis for the National Amalgam, is exceedingly regional: virtually every state has an identifiable Malay architectural style, the result of provincial evolution, long term diffusion and direct importation from neighboring cultures. The "Kelantan-Trengganu" style, for instance, noted for its elaborate timber construction and carving, distinctive finials and clay-tile roofs, shares many features with southern Thai architecture of the Patani region. The "Negeri Sembilan" style, on the other hand, characterized by upward curved gables and layered or multiple-tier roofs, has evolved from the architecture of that state's Sumateran Minangkabau immigrants. Minangkabau architecture itself displays stylistic links with the architecture of the neighboring Sumateran Bataks. Malacca, Selangor, Perak-Penang, Kedah-Perlis and Johore-Pahang each have their own variants of Malay architecture. Islamic architecture, another official favorite, is characterized by an even greater plethora of regional as well as historical variations: Indian Moghul, Persian and Saudi are but a few.



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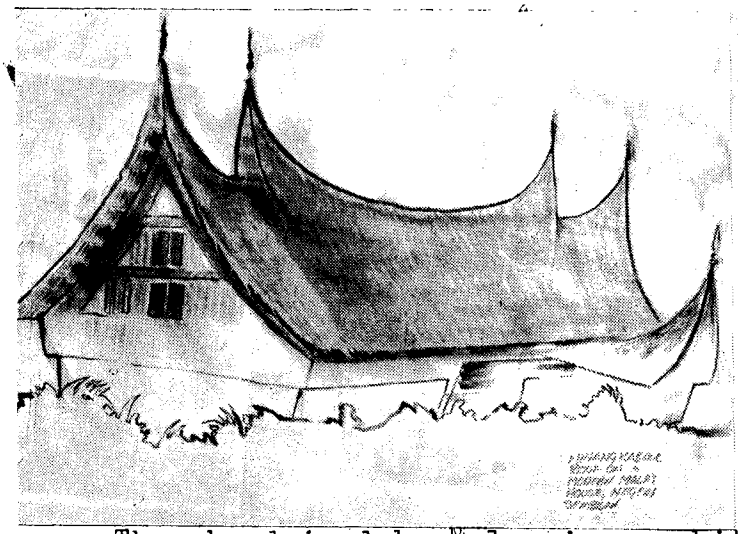
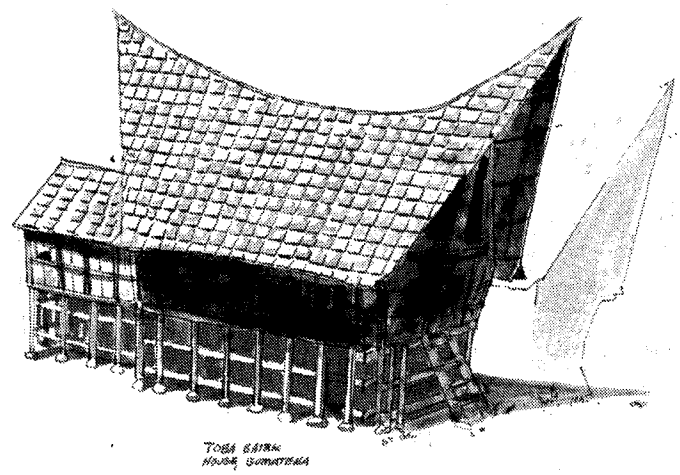
Chinese architecture is frowned upon as a basis for national structures, though classically-styled Chinese temples and shophouses are a major component of Malaysia's cities. Indian temple architecture, imported wholesale from the sub-continent, fares no better in official buildings. Locally-assimilated styles, like



the Malacca "Straits-Born" Chinese (as opposed to China-born immigrants) row houses, are more acceptable. Thai architecture gets hardly a glance.

British colonial architecture is considered historically important, lending Malaysia's urban environment much of its present-day character. Many examples, particularly those Kuala Lumpur government buildings in the North Indian Islamic style, have been preserved. Though admired by Malaysian architects for its climatic practicality and often functional elegance, British colonial architecture is not favored as a basis for a national style or even as a condiment. Things British are declassé these days, as the administration "Looks East" (to Japan and South Korea) for inspiration.



The issues at stake in Malaysia's architectural controversy, tradition versus modernity, international versus indigenous, Malay versus non-Malay and Malaysian, challenge all the arts, but in architecture are particularly charged with political and emotional significance. Architecture is, after all, a created environment in which people must live and work, regardless of race or ideology. Whereas dance, music and art can incorporate or discard new technology or ideological trends with relative flexability, architecture is unique in its permanence and scale. It can awe, instruct or inspire, but, spurious or profound, it is with us for a long time.

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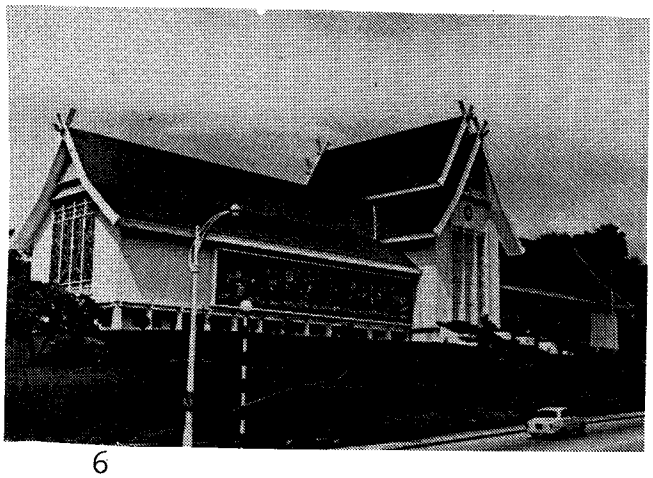
Thus far architects have had only irregular success with a Malaysian style. The concept of "Malaysian architecture" is, like "Malaysian society," a post-Independence phenomenon. Foreign architects, primarily British, dominated civic architecture until the early 1960's, designing such national structures as the Post Office, High Court and Houses of Parliament. Foreign-



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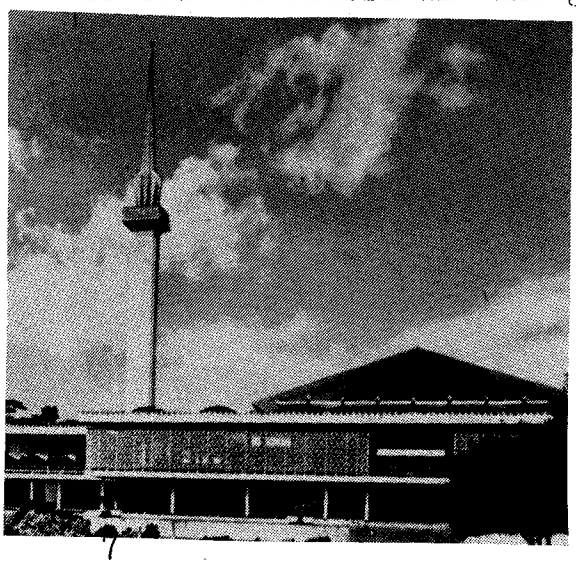
trained Malaysian architects began to enter the fray in the late 1950's but accredited local architectural training did not get underway until 1980. Stabs at a "definative Malaysian style" were sporadic and ill-coordinated. The hard-edged concrete parasol roof and minaret of the National Mosque and the National Museum with its hybrid Kedah-Kelantan roof and Minangkabau planning are significant examples from this period.

In the late 1960's the Minangkabau roof emerged as the most popular "Malaysianization" device, championed by then Minister of Culture Datuk Abdul Samad Idris, himself of Minangkabau ancestry. The distinctive curving gables were appended to every conceivable structure: custom-built homes, signboards, lampposts and trash containers are but a small sampling. Stripped of any indigenous cultural or symbolic significance, the Minangkabau roof was at the mercy of Malaysian designers. Personal whim and use of materials other than the traditional nipa-palm thatch forced the classical Minangkabau curve into a variety of gymnastic contortions, with little in common save an upward turn to the gable ends. Time and perhaps overuse has eroded the Minangkabau roof's popularity outside of Negeri Sembilan in recent years. Fallen from grace, the Minangkabau roof is the butt of editorial lambasts from architects and the lay public and fuel for roundtable discussions and political speeches.



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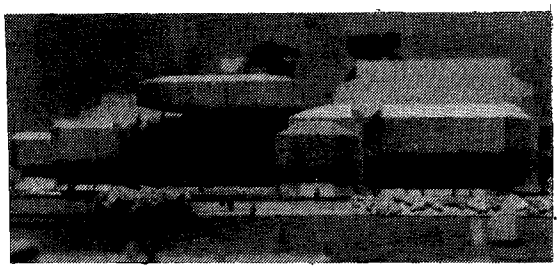
Other routes towards culturally-pregnant Malaysian architecture have also received scrutiny from the profession, politicians and the press. Majallah Arkitek, the journal of PAM (the Malaysian architectural association), frequently publishes articles on the latest Malaysian architecture, the merits of particular architectural styles, the meaning of "Malaysian architecture," style versus function and related subjects. In the newspapers, particularly controversial designs are the subject of media diatribes, investigative exposés and occasional letter campaigns. Malaysians take their architecture seriously.

So does the government: under the new guidelines, architectural designs that could, as one architect said, "be found just anywhere in the world," are considered unacceptable. Slackers are required to redesign, resubmit and sometimes still meet the deadline

Designs for both the Daya Bumi Complex and the National Theater, approved under previous administrations, were ordered redesigned under the present regime. The former now incorporates Islamic design elements while the latter sports a multi-layered arrangement of traditionally-inspired pitched roofs.



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Though the Malaysian government's prodding has encouraged culturally-inspired architecture, much of today's design seems to be more cosmetic adornment, employing traditionally-based rooflines, finials and arches for effect rather than any fundamental synthesis of traditional and modern design principles. Schooled in Western techniques and history, many Malaysian architects seem to have little empathy for indigenous design or spatial concepts and thus tend to employ only the obvious or the ornamental. All the more reason to study the complexities of the nation's architectural heritage before attempting a contemporary design.

Nik Malik bin Nik Zainol Abidin has done just that. A lecturer at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Nik has a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the Universiti of Western Australia, Perth, a Master's in Landscape Architecture from Britain's Sheffield University and a teaching qualification from the University of London. In 1975 he helped to initiate a program at UTM for the documentation of historical Malaysian buildings that to date has recorded over 200 structures, primarily timber-frame homes, istanas (palaces) and mosques,as well as some Chinese temples. Future documentation plans include Indian temples and British colonial structures.

I spoke to Nik on two occasions after his recent return from a tour of American university landscape architecture programs as a visiting critic. He feels the documentation of historical Malaysian buildings is critical to the nation's architectural future. Timber structures, primarily Malay, are a top priority as they are more vulnerable to deterioration than brick or stone buildings. Some, over a century old and fallen into disrepair are little more than overgrown foundations with perhaps a portion of wall or roof remaining. UTM's archi-

tectural documentation will serve not only as a historical record and a source for architects designing modern Malaysian structures, but will facilitate the reconstruction of these buildings in the future, down to the last wooden dowel.

Under the UTM program, student teams of five to nine members each are sent into the field every year for the three-month term holidays to study historical buildings in various parts of Penninsular Malaysia (thus far, no documentation has been done in East Malaysia). Buildings are chosen through a combination of historical significance and the particular interests of the group members. For the duration of the project, students live, sleep and eat in their chosen building, producing measured drawings and photographic documentation and undertaking interviews with occupants, descendants of former occupants and craftsmen. Nik and his assistants visit the various

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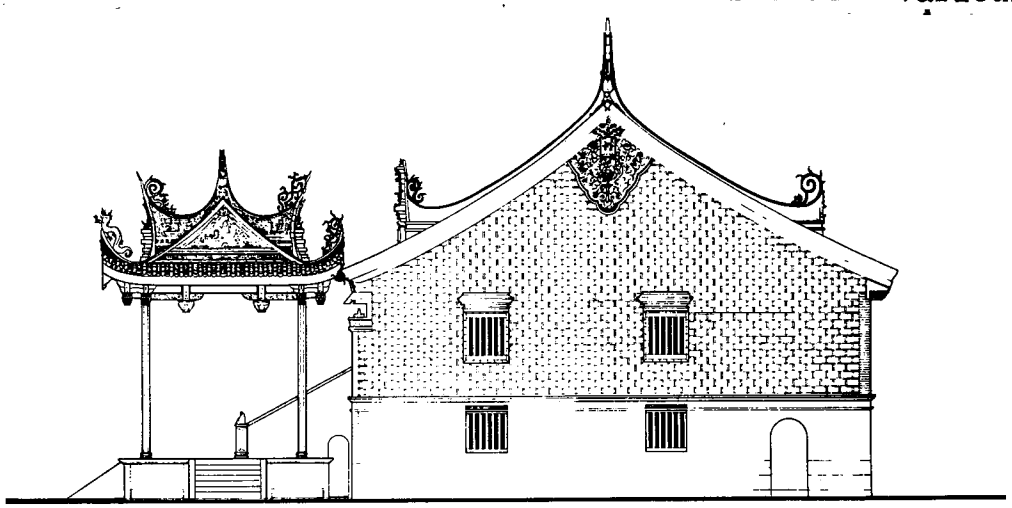

SIDE ELEVATION

0.5 20 40 80ft

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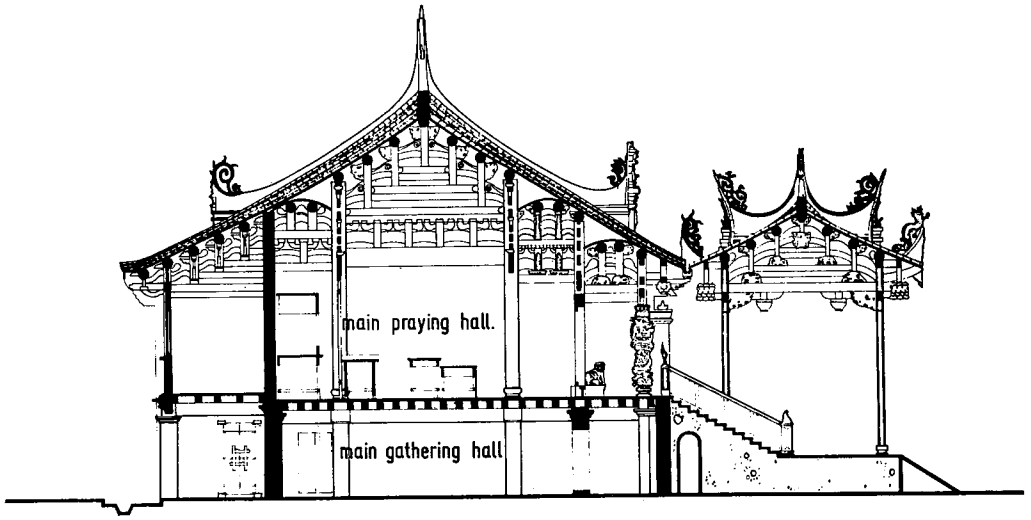

SECTION A A

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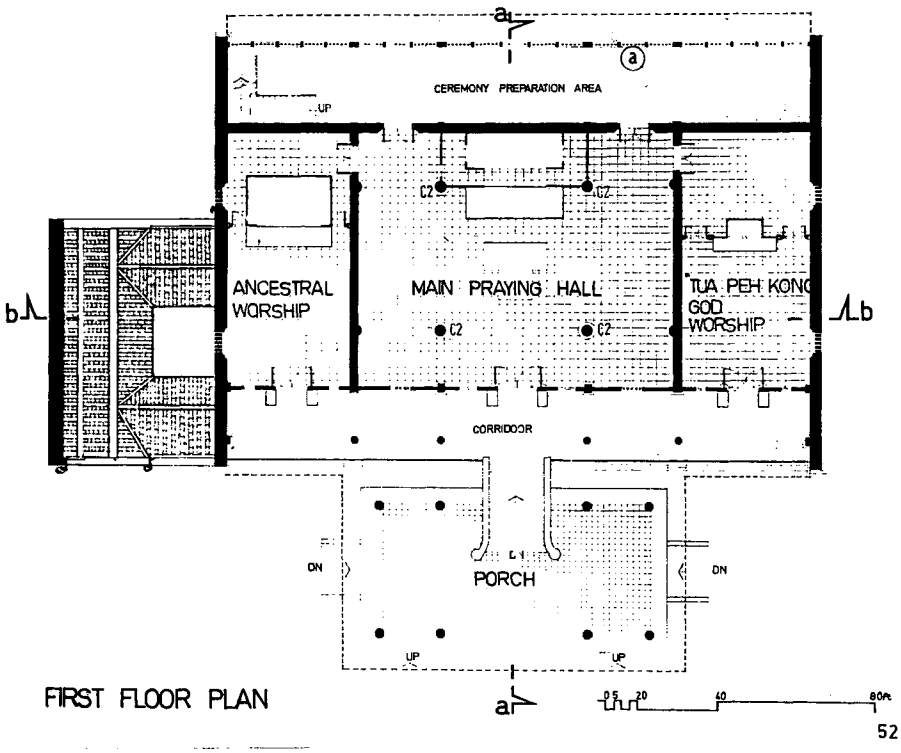

sites to give instruction, assistance and encouragement.

At the end of the year, documentation is submitted in bound folios, comprehensive records that include elevation and site plan drawings, exploded-view construction plans, ornament plans and details, historical information and anthropological data on the ceremony and beliefs associated with construction. UTM is now preparing a compilation of all the documentation projects for publication next year.

Though UTM has only one of several documentation programs in Malaysia (measured drawing and other documentation are also pursued by students at Institut Teknologi MARA and Universiti Sains Malaysia) it has been judged the best: in a PAM measured drawing competition in 1976, UTM took first, second and third prize, enough money to send the winners to Lake Toba Sumatera for a look at Batak architecture.

Some of the students' historical/anthropological documentation gives justification to Nik's claim that, "to understand the Malay house you must know its spirit." Malay building construction, like other aspects of Malay culture, is permeated with a syncretic fusion of Hindu/animist and Islamic beliefs. Nik's students have postulated that certain ornamental floral motifs may have developed from Hindu or Buddhist images, abstracted to conform to Islamic religious prohibitions. Similarly, the present-day "seven-layer" construction (six visible layers, one invisible) found in some Malay mosques may actually

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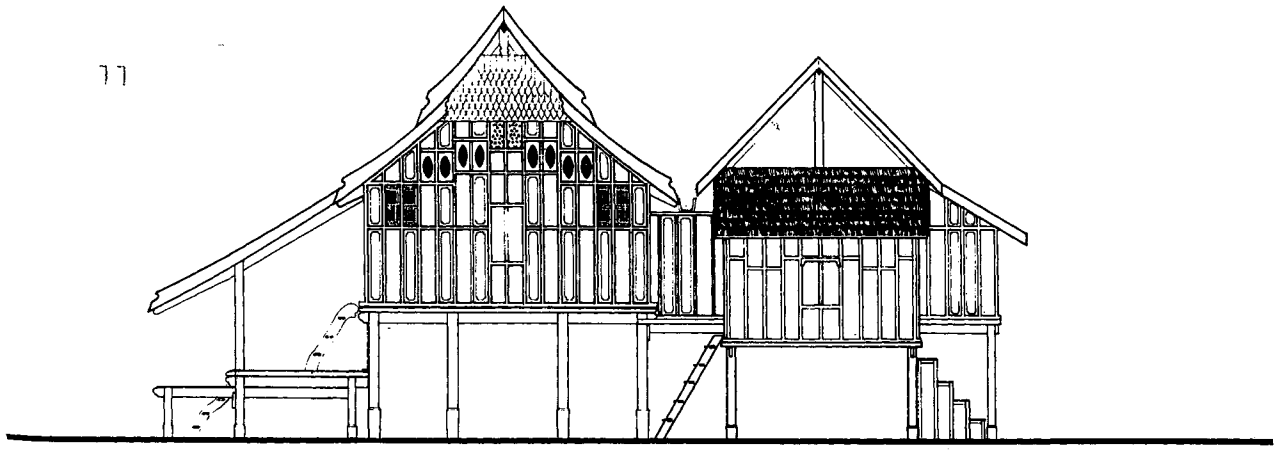
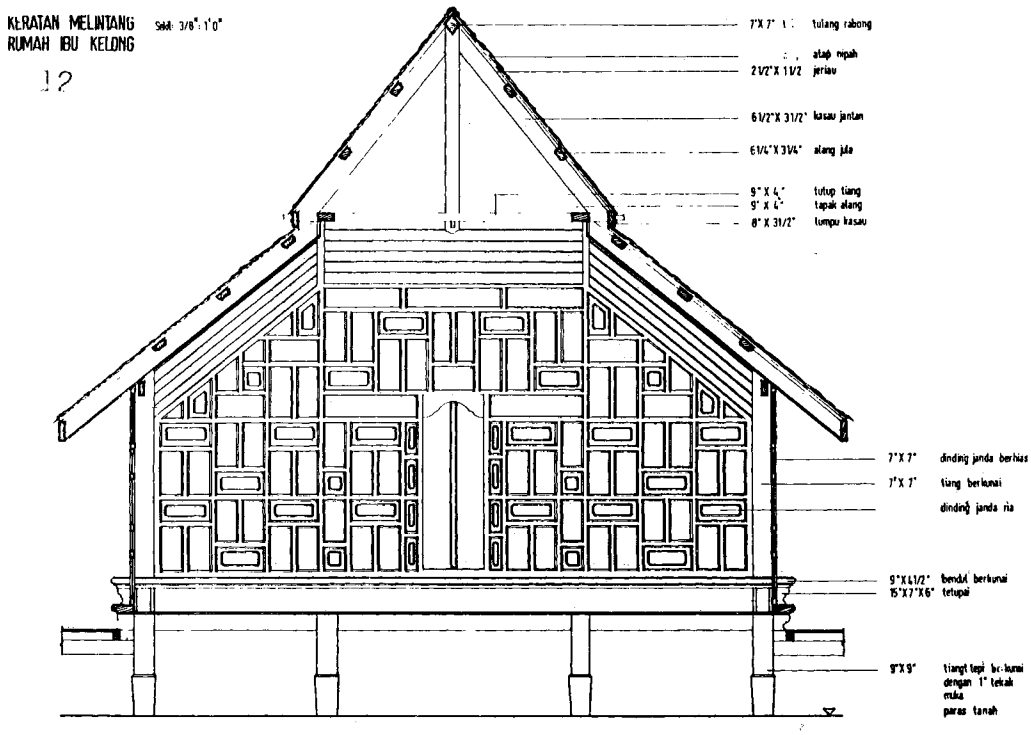


0 1 2 4 6 8 Ka.
UKURAN

PANDANGAN BARAT

be a continuation of a preexisting Hindu temple form. Some traditions of non-Islamic origin continue to be observed: the tiang seri, first supporting pillar in the home or palace, is erected with great ceremony. The capital is typically decorated with layers of colored cloth, infused, of course, with appropriate spells. Under the pillar are placed gold scrappings, gold coins or a scoop of auspicious earth to bring luck and wealth. This practice is reputed to have some rather bizarre variations: legend has it that one of Kelantan's early sultans had warriors, not coins, buried under each of the supporting tiang in the audience hall of the Istana Balai Besar in Kota Baru. In this same palace, students



chanced upon a locked room, the Istana Dalam (inner palace) that has remained unopened since that sultan's death. The contents of the chamber remain a mystery.

Islam also plays an influential role in the design and decoration of traditional Malay buildings. Oriented with one wall facing Mecca (the kiblat), homes were typically decorated with extensive wood carving and latticework, employing floral motifs and Arabic script, the latter usually Koranic phrases chosen for their protective power. This protective writing is particularly prevalent above doors and windows where as latticework carving it not only provides spiritual protection from intruders and other evil-doers, but also doubles as ventilation screens. For some Malays, however, such protection was apparently not sufficient. Says Nik:

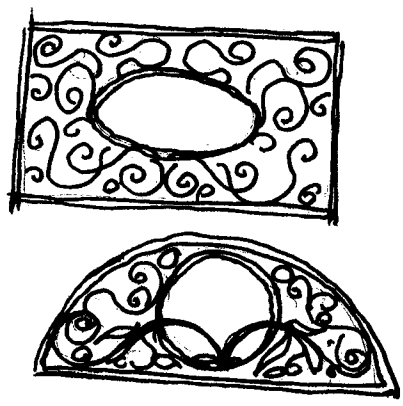
"I know of one home where every day after subuh, the dawn prayer, the owner would walk around the house seven times, with prayers and so-on. People who wanted to steal or who had other evil intentions entered this house and were unable to find their way out. This has been documented. His children and grandchildren remember this man and venerate him."

Floral motifs, though not obviously protective in the manner of the Arabic script, are not simply decorative. Nik's students found some leaf, flower and vine patterns to be rather sophisticated religious statements:

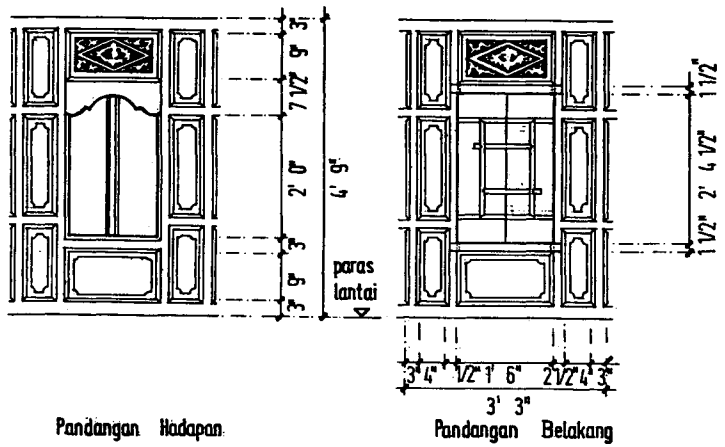
"There are two aspects to the quality of God," explains Nik. "The one is visible, but in terms of words, like the Kufic writing [one of the many styles of Arabic script]. Then there are symbols, such as floral decoration. The other quality is invisible, represented by empty space, an oval void with no beginning and no end. From the edge of this void spring the tendrils of a bean, which does have a beginning and an end. And from this come the flowers and leaves. Thus the visible and invisible are combined. At first when we found these empty wall spaces, surrounded by ornament, we thought they must have once been filled with mirrors. But no, we were told. They were supposed to be that way. Though kampung village people don't know what these mean, the muftis [religious advisors] and the imams [religious leaders] know. The wood carvers know."

Nik considers himself an architectural purist. His study of traditional Malaysian architectural styles has engendered a rather severe ideological approach to the current Malaysian architectural debate:

"Should we choose Indian, Malay or Chinese? I don't like combining and I think the understanding of Malaysian and combination is not quite right.



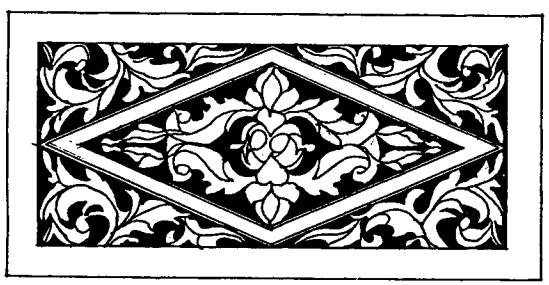
TINGKAP



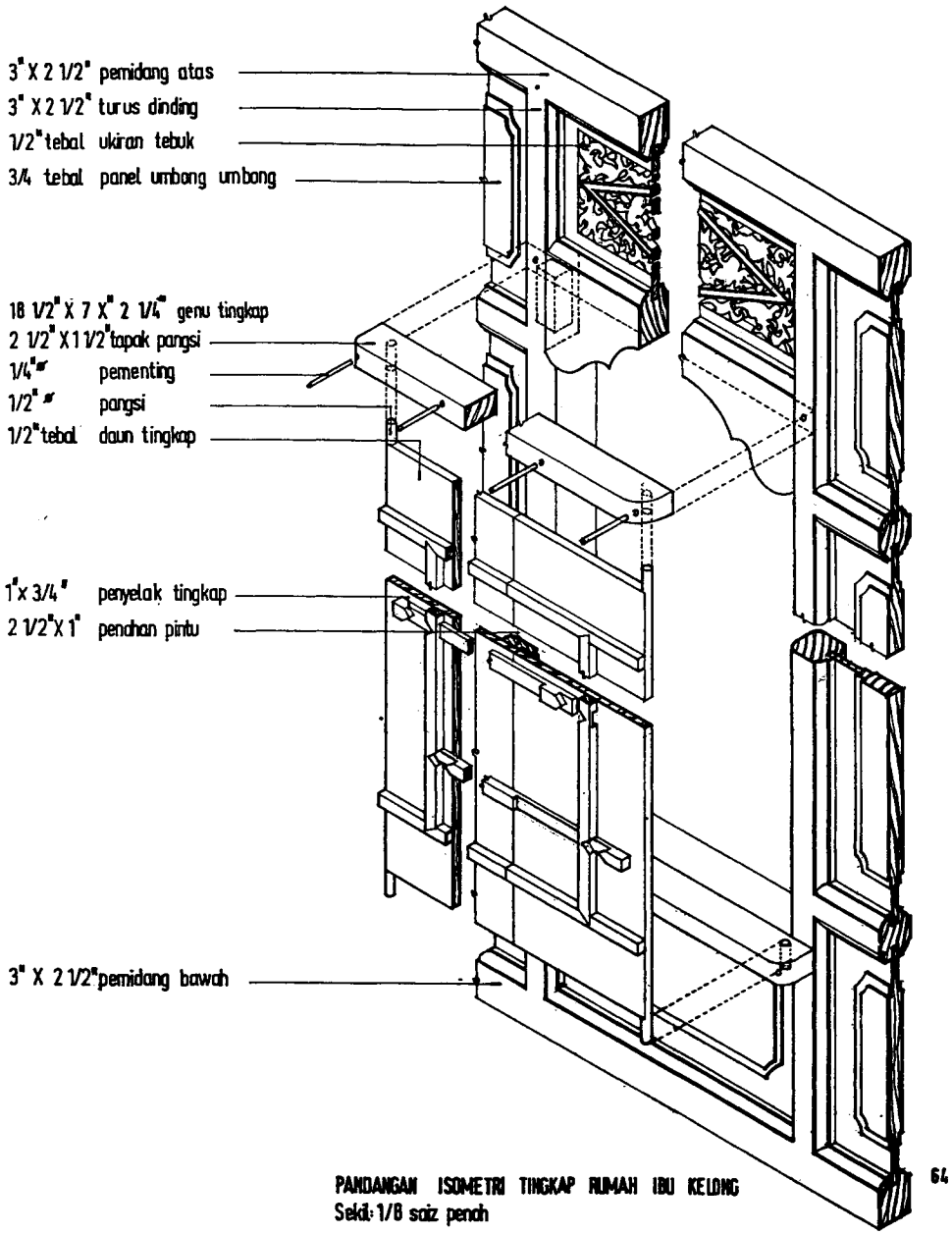
Pandangan Hadapan

Pandangan Belakang

Sekil:1/2"=1' 0"



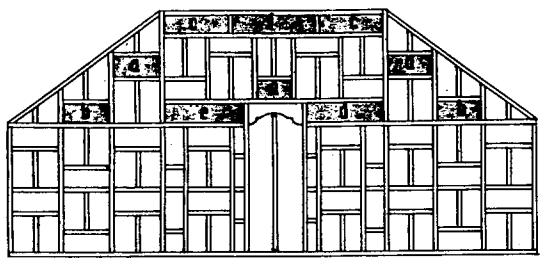
PANDANGAN HADAPAN UKIRAN TEBUK TINGKAP
Sekil: 1/4 saiz penoh



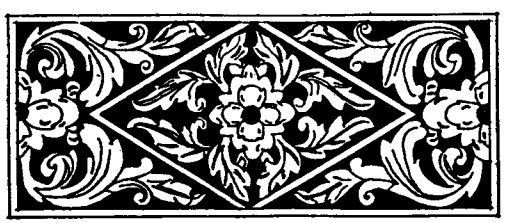
PANDANGAN ISOMETRI TINGKAP RUMAH IBU KELONG
Sekil: 1/8 saiz penoh

HIASAN
Sekil: 2" = 1' 0"

DINDING JANDA RIA RUMAH IBU KELONG
Sekil: 3/16" = 1' 0"

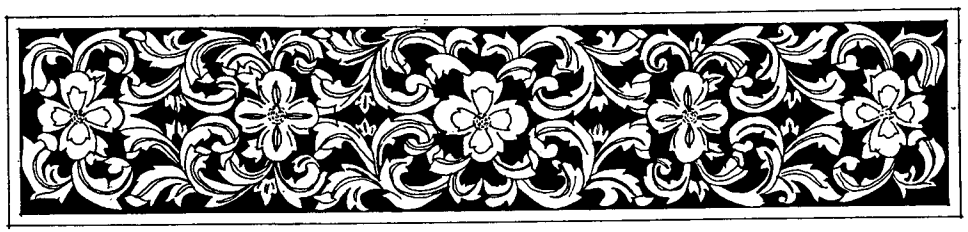


Ukiran a UKIRAN DAUN SEMBONG

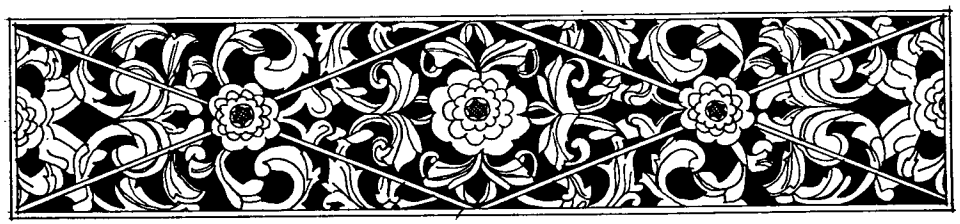


Ukiran b UKIRAN DAUN SEMBONG

Ukiran c UKIRAN BUNGA KIAMBANG DAUN SEMBONG



Ukiran d UKIRAN DAUN SEMBONG



Ukiran e UKIRAN BUNGA KIAMBANG

Ukiran f UKIRAN AWAN LARAT DAUN DALADANI

This is a political, not an aesthetic or visual situation. We're creating buildings that reflect the current political ideology, not the underlying aesthetics. Aesthetics must be above ideology and it must have a functional implication. I don't think we should muck about with symbols just for the sake of symbols."

But should architecture be Malay-based?

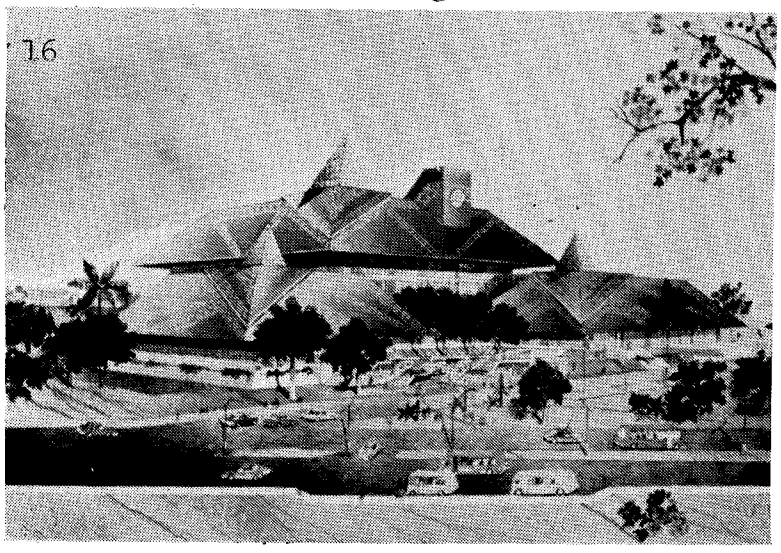
"For civic architecture, yes. Because architecture has its place. Malay architecture belongs here. The Chinese architecture has its base in China. I would like to go there and see Chinese architecture reflecting the indigenous culture. I don't think a Chinese temple here should look like a Malay house either. It must have its own character. National buildings, however, must have their place here. If I migrated to Australia, would I build my traditional Malay house? Perhaps. But that's private, not national."

Though Nik's reasoning may be based on asthetics, even he admits his ideas have profound political implications; in Malaysia even the loftiest ideals manage to become entangled in ethnic politics. Where there is culture there is controversy and insisting on the necessity of Malay-only Malaysian architecture is certain to cause resentment in other ethnic quarters. Nik, however, insists on the same cultural purity within Malay architecture:

"Regional architecture should stay regional and retain its integrity. Let's not take a little bit here and a little bit there."

"Now recently, I was talking with a landscape architect, a colleague of mine, who wants to build a Kelantanese wakaf, a shelter in Kuala Lumpur. He says this is the capital city and is a melting pot for the representatives of various parts of Malaysia. That is one argument perhaps I can accept. But I'm still adamant that states should retain their own architecture. We shouldn't build a Minangkabau building in Kedah or Johore."

"If architects are going to look for a 'Malaysian' style, they should look at this regional architecture. Instead, I feel that simply because many of them are trained overseas they don't know where to look. Now they are desparate to find symbols and are looking at artifacts, not architecture. So now we have one building [the new Malayan Banking Headquarters by Hijjas Kasturi Associates Sendirian] that is said to represent a keris [a Malay ritual knife] and another [the National Library by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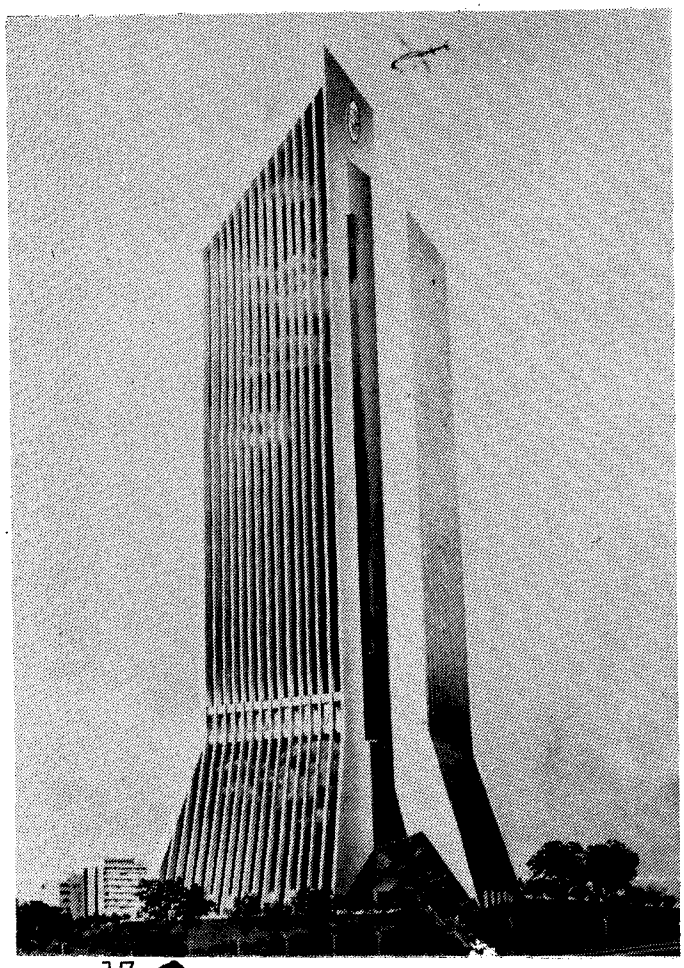

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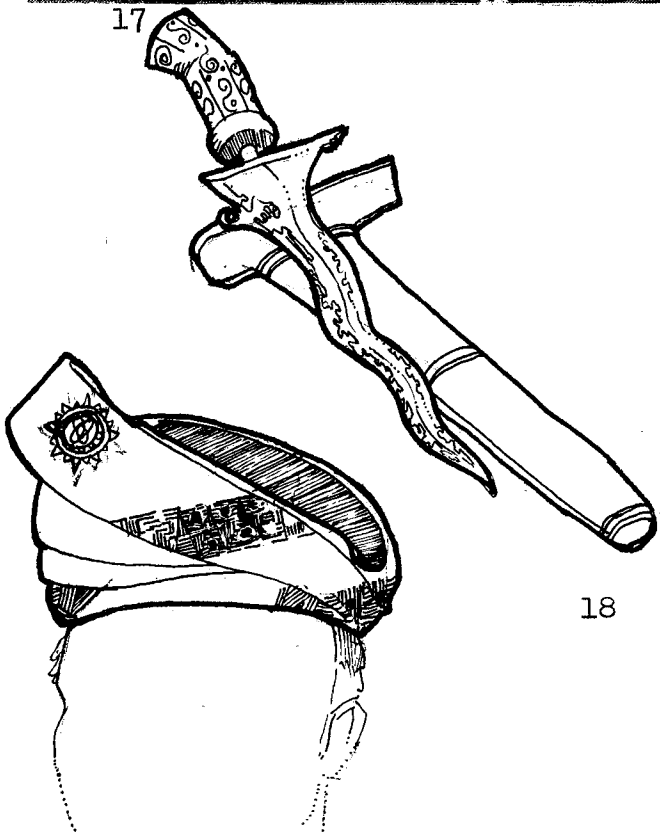

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Kumpulan Arkitek] that is based on a tengkolok [Malay ceremonial headdress]. The problem here is that these artifacts represent so many things to so many people. The keris is a symbol of wealth. Yes. Fitting for a bank. But it also kills. It is a symbol of suffering, a symbol of chaos, The tengkolok, though it goes on the head, represents status and power, not knowledge. As an educationalist I would say you are teaching people the wrong things. You are adulterating the meaning for the next generation. I find it a rather lame excuse myself, an attempt to convince the client."

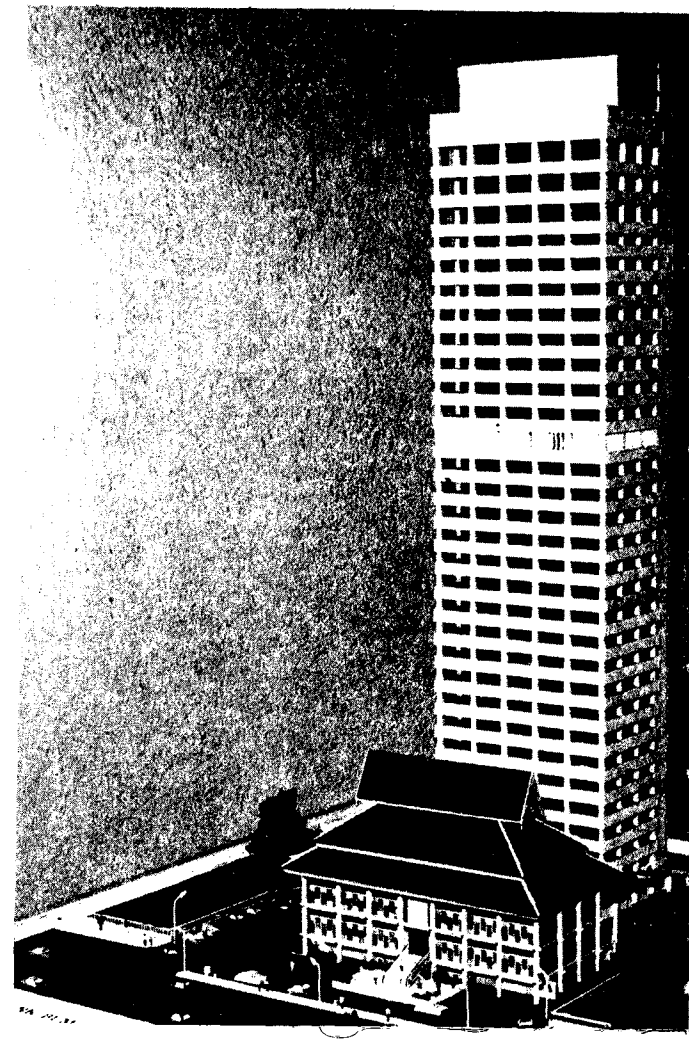
Nik's opinions are not merely the untested dogma of a secure academic. He has had the opportunity to test his beliefs as an architectural consultant on such projects as the Pusara Negara (National Cemetary), the MADA state agricultural agency headquarters in Kedah and the Bank Bumiputra headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Nik is critical of the new Bank Bumiputra headquarters, but feels it is more on the right track than keris and tengkoloks. Combining an enlarged reproduction of Istana Seri Akar (a ruined Kelantanese palace documented by UTM students) with a modern tower block, Bank Bumiputera is one of Kuala Lumpur's most controversial buildings, exciting the wrath of most architects but fairly well received by the public.

"I think its a bit vulgar," says Nik," and has no scale. But it is a model for others to build on." In fact the Bank Bumiputra design has inspired other traditional-modern combinations, notably the new Permodalan Na-

sional (national finance company) headquarters.

Nik's purist ideals have taken on special significance in his design consultation for the national hero's cemetary, the Pusara Negara. Here, seperation of tradition is essential. Malaysian or no, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians insist on burial with members of their own faith. Some even object to sharing the same road for the cortege. Luckily, the parcel of land alloted for the Pusara Negara is hilly, allowing one hill per religion, seperate roads leading to each from a common plaza. Though the seperate burial grounds will conform to the requirements of each religion (Nik has even researched tombstone designs)the central plaza will most likely have a National/Malay flavor. Nik has suggested entrance gates displaying the empty-void-with-bean-tendrils from Kelantanese tradition and a plaza floor in granite exhibiting the tapak harimau (tiger footprint) pattern from the woven tikar mat tradition, this symbolizing both the State (the Malaysian tiger) and the fallen heros (the footprint). Nik would also like to see a pitched roof on the cemetary's entrance structure, alluding to Peninsular house design.



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National Identity is an elusive thing, particularly in a plural society's architecture. Nik Malik has by no means discovered the only valid approach. He is, however, one of the few Malaysian architects I have met that enjoys such a solid background in traditional Malaysian architectural design. In consequence, his work is singular in its aesthetic consistency and respect for cultural convention. Working as a consultant he has has less immediate impact on contemporary Malaysian architecture than his full-time colleagues; perhaps his students, similarly schooled, will imbue their own work with some of Nik's traditionalist ideals.

Other Malaysian architects might do well to take advantage of the documentation efforts of UTM and other Malaysian architectural institutions, educating themselves not only on traditional styles, but on the practical climatic and structural aspects of indigenous Malaysian buildings as well. With a firm foundation in the cumulative knowledge of the past, Malaysian architects cannot help but more intelligently plan the future.

Sincerely,

Bryn Barnard

List of Illustrations

1. Map of Malaysia, showing Malay architectural regions as described by Nik Malik; L. Newell.
2. Sketch; roof section of Istana Balai Besar; Kota Baru, Kelantan; ink and charcoal dust on canson paper; BEB.
3. Drawing; Minangkabau-style modern home near the Kuala Lumpur-Seremban Highway, Negeri Sembilan; charcoal on bristol board; BEB
4. Drawing; traditional Batak house near Lake Toba; northern Sumatera; sepia ink on bristol board; BEB
5. Photograph; railway station (left) and railway administration building (right, formerly government offices) designed by British colonial architects in north Indian Islamic style; Kuala Lumpur; postcard photograph
6. Photograph; National Museum with hybrid Kedah-Kelantan roof and silang gunting (crossed scissors) finials. Overall Minangkabau design; Kuala Lumpur; postcard photograph.
7. Photograph; National mosque with open parasol roof, closed parasol minaret and geometrically patterned walls; Kuala Lumpur; postcard photograph.
8. Photograph/drawing; two designs for National Theater, by architect Nik Mohamed Mahmood, Kumpulan Senireka. Original design, in sculptured concrete, was said to draw inspiration from the traditional Malay competitive tops or gasing. Final design employs an arrangement of traditionally-styled pitched roofs. Curved gables a la Minangkabau were considered and rejected. End-product does not relate specifically to any one Malay cultural group; Kuala Lumpur; newspaper photographs, New Straits Times.
9. Drawing; side elevation and interior section of Chinese temple by UTM students under supervision of Nik Mohamed; Penang; ink on vellum; UTM.
10. Drawing; floor plan, Chinese temple; Penang; ink on vellum; UTM.
11. Drawing; side elevation of Malay house, Melaka; ink on vellum; UTM.
12. Drawing; cross section showing wall panel location, Rumah Ibu Kelong, Kelantan; ink on vellum; UTM
13. Sketch; empty-void-and-tendrils floral decoration pattern; after a sketch by Nik Malik; ink on paper; BEB
14. Drawing; exploded view of window and panel decoration detail, Rumah Ibu Kelong; Kelantan; ink on vellum; UTM.
15. Drawing; wall decoration detail, Rumah Ibu Kelong; Kelantan; ink on vellum; UTM.
16. Rendering; proposed National Library as stylized tengkolok with mosaic tile surface suggesting songket (brocade) pattern; Kuala Lumpur; watercolor; Kumpulan Arkitek.

17. Rendering; Malayan Banking Headquarters, said to suggest Malay keris; Kuala Lumpur; watercolor; Hijjas Kasturi Associates Sendirian.

18. Sketch; keris and tengkolok; ink on paper; BEB

19. Photograph: model of Bank Bumiputera Headquarters, employing traditionally-styled banking building and modern tower block; Kuala Lumpur; Kumpulan Arkitek.

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