

Modernity, Nation and Urban-Architectural Form

Shireen Jahn Kassim • Norwina
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Editors

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The Dynamics and Dialectics of
National Identity vs Regionalism
in a Tropical City

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Preface

The book attempts to frame a series of perspectives, writings, debates, and discourses around the issue of 'national' versus 'regional' identity in architectural expression and urban language in a developing tropical Asian city. Through a range of typologies that characterise modern life a series of discussions and frame works of present and past thoughts are framed. In Asia, large buildings with urban and modern functions characterise the rise of urbanisation. The focus is on Malaysia, and the discussions aims to bring to light how physical and symbolic structures can be read against the dynamics of a nation's history and post-colonial trajectory. Malaysia in general, and its capital city Kuala Lumpur in particular, have become an ideal ground for such a confluence and convergence of issues and idealisms. As a young nation with its own vernacular tradition arising from its local geography, it also boasts a unique and multicultural population. Malaysia seems locked in a constant state of negotiation and convergence due to a population of which 53% is comprised of Malay native backgrounds, while Chinese, Indian and other minority races constitute the remaining 47%. The dilemmas that it has weathered since independence are inscribed in its physical landscape, and these deserve attention and study.

During the decades after independence, which was achieved in 1957, the architecture and urban forms of Malaysia's capital city, Kuala

Lumpur, have become a field of exploration and breeding ground of new vocabularies. These represent variants in a continuous attempt at reflecting society's ever-present need for differentiation, a sense of independence and identity. They perhaps constitute an ever-present thread of anxiety, as in many modern nation-states in South East Asia. They are constantly negotiating a stance to appease and unify an increasingly diverse and multicultural population. The vernacular architecture of Malaysia is at times accepted as the fundamental basis of identity in the nation, as it is rooted in the traditions of the Malay world, yet at certain times, there is demand for a 'national' architecture that must somehow transcend 'cultural roots' and reach, capture and 'touch' more universal values and ideals. These must consequently result in forms that can be acceptable to, and appease, all races. The authors hence have attempted to trace past discourses and case studies, and have structured the discourse according to key typologies in urban architecture. It is hoped this framework creates a fresh viewpoint and captures moments in the history of the nation; including thresholds of key forms eras when help shape the nation's independence. These represent a trajectory of maturity, and how architecture and urban elements are physical inscriptions that represent the identity of a people and their collective consciousness.

A multiracial country such as Malaysia is thus constantly faced with the issue of cultural representation and identity. A 'national' architecture must be deemed as one not explicitly making specific and direct reference to the symbols of one race above the other. A recurring debate in Malaysia is how to reach such a consensus as to what constitutes the architectural language of 'Malaysian architecture' that is acceptable and able to represent all races. There have been a range of efforts made by various stakeholders, since independence, to incorporate principles in the development of 'national Malaysian architecture'. This include guidelines that regard Malaysia as an entity that has a neutral tone, although local traditions are multi-cultural and Malay cultural forms remain basic expressions of a range of localities' traditional legacies. Many of Malaysia's national buildings have been inspired by Malay forms, idioms and references. The Malaysian Architectural Policy (MAP), initiated by Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) in 2009 towards Malaysian Vision 2020, was an effort

to outline the principles of a 'Malaysian architecture'. Some of the guidelines are a result of how, since independence and in only a short span of decades, architects and urban designers have sought to instil or instigate a Malaysian identity. This is done either by alluding to elements of tradition or by syncretising elements of multicultural sources towards a combined representation of national identity.

The context and realities of a multicultural society are challenging. Using broad themes, basic urban typologies of the modern nation, the book presents a discussion of how architectural language has evolved and has been appropriated towards the reinvention of identity through 'regionalism'. The focus on architectural language is a crucial one as it links physical outcomes of urbanism with the ideals, intentions, dilemmas and dichotomies of a multicultural society in the scenario of rapid development in tropical Asia.

The physical nuances of architecture and urban form are thus reflections of these negotiations, and recall a certain idealism. At times, perhaps they indicate different extents of insecurity and immaturity. Yet debates are constantly raging, fuelled by developments in the region and the more global movements of design. The forms are mostly explorations by architects and urbanists and are symptomatic of the perennial search for identity and regional assertion. Some argue that 'local' identity must refer to the vernacular roots of a place, while others posit that a struggle must be forged to reflect a more neutral position in terms of physical expression. This book is thus an attempt to refine and document this unique intersections and junctures through the Malaysian cases that symbolise this debate.

Hence the book summarizes key issues in past theoretical debates, writings, key case studies and discourses that are often linked with threads of modernity. These are distilled as it discusses the means of how the case studies encapsulate theory and practice in the context of the nation. Key points deriving from past writings and case studies are grouped according to major typologies and functions which constitute basic elements of urbanism in a city. The structures are then linked to readings, interpretations and intentions. They reflect the different facets of a tropical city and the social, political dynamics of the creation of this city.

To achieve this, the book is divided into 12 chapters. Chapter 1 presents past theories and developments definitions including review of operational key terms in past discourses and terminologies. As it attempts to summarize key points in past discussions and writings, the framework of Malaysia and its scope and boundaries are clarified. Chapter 2 begins the trajectory of building typologies characteristic of modernity and the modern world beginning with the mosque. As Chapter 1 starts by outlining several key definitions and summarising past theoretical writings, propositions, debates and frameworks, Chapter 2 begins to frame the journey in time, which commences with the colonial era and views the 'eclectic' language of the mosque as part of a nation's initial trajectory of modernity. Several iconic mosques are discussed as reflections of key thresholds in Malaysia's development. Chapter 3 begins the story of the International style of the post-independence era in earnest, and its role in expressing and elevating national projects of the 1960s that ultimately produced tropicalised variations of the International style. The rapid diffusion of the International style was forged during a time when local architects came home from abroad and extended Modernist ideals and trends. Chapter 4 uses the case studies of museums and convention centres as frames of reference to discuss the rise of a more emotive, and idiosyncratic approach to fulfil the need for monumentality in the Asian city. These include references and expressions of cultural traditions from the malay world in Modernist typologies. These typologies are similar due to their size, volumetric form and key spaces – and through these, the world had witnessed how vernacular identity became a means to an end, and the key strategy of monumentalising the vernacular in the Asian city. It represented a more assertive language to reflect identities through inflections in form, space, programme and structure. Chapter 5 highlights the ability of construction expression or tectonics to express a subtler yet powerful form of regionalism and uses the university buildings as a typology, focusing on key structures and tracing the evolution of their changes and developments in architectural stylistic trends in this typology including the years of Islamic renaissance and its hybrid offshoot, the Arab-Islamic expression in public buildings. Chapter 6 begins the discussion of elements of identity in tropical urbanism in Malaysia, focusing on public spaces and their evolution, and highlighting the role

of walkways and greenery in outlining a unique identity for urbanism in the tropics. Chapter 7 moves to the specific case of Putrajaya in an attempt at a critical review of both language and the problem of the centre, focusing on the criticism, contestation and debate on the Putrajaya Boulevard, the core centre of the Putrajaya masterplan. Chapter 8 dissects how regional and national identity were conflated in a ubiquitous building type, the high rise, which has become a status symbol in Asia, and of nations worldwide. Chapter 9 highlights the transport hub or 'terminus' typology – train stations and airports – as a way of charting the evolution of key 'landmark' buildings, which are increasingly recognised as icons and gateways to Asian regions and cities. Chapter 10 proposes a review of current issues in urbanism for the urban core i.e. the tropical metropolis in which climatic goals are crucial in an overall cultural framework that can contribute towards preserving and creating identities, yet folded into the agenda process of realising sustainable targets for the future. Chapter 11 frames the discussion around 'syncretization' and how it is used as a means of regional and national identity in cities and goes into the ability of syncretism as a means of unifying diverse populations. Chapter 12 concludes by highlighting the key points in the book using broad themes and highlights how urban elements and typologies of the city, contain a summary of issues and insights it is the field in which forms were appropriated towards the reinvention of identity and 'regionalism' in the city.

The issue of identity in architecture is characteristic of any emerging state or society. Conflicts and dichotomies are fraught with agendas and often converge onto the city. Tensions become manifested and inscribed into its physical fabric and structures. A struggle towards an established identity is a struggle that constantly exist on two levels; at one level, regional inflections are formulated as localised forms of internationalised structures which embody the global diffusion of the International style. It is a language embraced by multinational corporations, and as nations were anxious to modernise and portray a progressive stance, the language was embraced due to the prevalence of cast-in situ concrete technology. Gradually, architects fought for a more regional identity through a localisation of these global forms and archetypes. At the second level, there is a continuous search for more assertive emotional symbols which can forge

a collective consciousness and idealisms in a nation. Particularly in the post-colonial era, nations have sought to strengthen their independence, and architecture is seen as a tool for consolidating and unifying a disparate population within a post-colonial context of an tropical Asian nation.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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2017

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