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ARCHITECTURE ASIA Experiencing Malaysian-ness: The Embodiment of Identity in Contemporary Architecture MARCH 2025

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Contents

Editorial

David TEOH
Veronica NG

How does Malaysia's architecture capture the spirit of Malaysian-ness? What does it mean to experience Malaysian-ness? This special issue, Experiencing Malaysian-ness, delves into the innovative and contemporary dimensions of identity expressed through the country's evolving built environment. From avant-garde skyscrapers to community-driven urban spaces and further to microarchitecture, this issue showcases how modern architectural practices reinterpret and reshape the cultural, social, and environmental narratives of Malaysia. Malaysia's contemporary architecture becomes a medium for embodying cultural memory and collective belonging in an era of fluid identities and rapid change.

Rather than attempting to define Malaysian-ness in static or formal terms, this issue approaches it as a lived and experiential condition—something that can be felt, encountered, and inhabited. Through space, material, scale, and narrative, Malaysian architects today are offering new ways to articulate the local in a world increasingly shaped by transnational flows and standardised aesthetics.

To reflect this complexity, we organised the selected projects across a spectrum of five scales—XS (extra small), S (small), M (medium), L (large), and XL (extra large). This curatorial framework does more than represent physical dimensions; it allows us to examine how ideas of Malaysian identity play out differently across typologies, functions, and contexts. From intimate community spaces and adaptive reuse projects to corporate campuses and monumental towers, each project invites readers to consider how scale mediates experience, cultural meaning, and spatial agency.

At the XS scale, Temple of Togetherness by Bunga Design Atelier represents a poignant example of how architecture can nurture belonging in fractured urban conditions. Built as a small yet potent spiritual and social space, the Temple of Togetherness exemplifies how an architectural sculpture can facilitate social agency in an expansive urban park. Through rigour in exploring a habitable space with an unconventional material — penyapu lidi, a common cleaning tool found in Malaysian households, the designers created an ethereal and ephemeral form that brings people together in a tropical urban park.

Similarly, small-scale projects such as Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) Shelter Home and Ur-Mu 1 demonstrate that design excellence can emerge through constraints—whether they be budgetary, spatial, or programmatic—while still foregrounding human dignity, empathy, and context. WAO Shelter is a Corporate Social Responsibility Project by Veritas Architects. Being one of the first childcare center with Green certification, achieving the highest Platinum score, this modest yet innovative architecture provides a

dignified, supportive and regenerative environment for those less fortunate. Urban Museum Malaysia (URMU) 1 by DTLM Architect is an adaptive reuse of a 1950s modernist four-storey walk-up apartment building in Kuala Lumpur into a contemporary private gallery. Modest in its scale, the urban museum offers collections of Southeast Asian art and culture.

Moving into medium-scale works, Sama Square and Sentul Works exemplify how cultural hybridity is significant in contemporary Malaysian architecture. These projects reflect a growing design culture responsive to memory and modernity, where buildings no longer impose identity but allow it to unfold through time and use. Sama Square by TKAC Architects is a composition of a colourful ensemble of civic spaces that explores a new market and retail development paradigm, creating an inclusive and vibrant public realm for the community. In contrast, in collaboration with YTL Land & Development, Sentul Works by CPL Architects explores the adaptive reuse of a colonial-era railway administration building into a new contemporary heritage office. Oculus House by Wooi Architect explores similar themes within a domestic typology, using spatial layering and material tactility to reinterpret dwelling forms for contemporary domesticity. It pushes the boundaries of rethinking building on a steep site, while creating a tropical living environment that is naturally ventilated and washed with natural lighting.

We observe the complexities and contradictions of representing nationhood in architecture on large and extra-large scales. GDP Campus by GDP Architects speaks to the role of institutional architecture in shaping educational and cultural aspirations, while Bagan Hospital and Paramit Factory address questions of wellness, labour, and sustainability in the Malaysian industrial and healthcare landscapes. Finally, Merdeka 118—the tallest tower in Southeast Asia—stands as a powerful symbol of ambition, innovation, and global presence, yet also prompts critical reflection on scale, context, and meaning in architectural representation.

To complement the featured projects, this issue includes academic and reflective contributions from key Malaysian architectural and urban discourse voices. Eleena Jamil, in revisiting themes from her recent book Essence of Place, reflects on how place-based thinking and environmental responsiveness remain central to Malaysian design identity. Her essay invites us to look beyond aesthetics towards architectural practice's ethical and ecological dimensions. Lee Jia Ping offers insights into the evolving role of placemaking and the "creative city" in shaping more inclusive, participatory urban environments. In contrast, Ahmad Nazmi's exploration of "cities within a city" provides a layered understanding of Malaysian urbanism as a mosaic of historical, cultural, and socio-political forces. In this issue, David Teoh and Edric Choo share an insightful conversation with two prominent architectural and development figures. Tengku Dato' Ab. Aziz Tengku Mahmud, CEO of PNB Merdeka Ventures, and Ar. Farid Baharuddin, Principal of RSP Architects, share their insights and perspectives on the iconic Merdeka 118 and the surrounding precinct.

These contributions collectively underscore a shift in how architecture is practised and understood in Malaysia today. Designing buildings that merely reference tradition or mimic global trends is no longer enough. Instead, the challenge—and opportunity—lies in crafting spaces that resonate with the lived realities of a multicultural society, engage with local ecologies, and respond to the aspirations of a new generation. As revealed in these works, Malaysian-ness is not a fixed identity but an unfolding process shaped by hybridity, memory, and modernity.

Moreover, the issue draws attention to the experiential nature of architecture. Malaysian-ness, as felt in space, is not always visible. It may reside in the filtered light through timber louvres, in the softness of a courtyard breeze, in the echoes of communal laughter beneath a zinc roof. It is tactile, emotional, sensory—often implicit rather than declared. The architects featured in this issue are acutely aware of this. Their works show that identity is not only something we display but something we feel and inhabit.

In this spirit, Experiencing Malaysian-ness does not seek to offer a single definition of what Malaysian architecture is or should be. Instead, it embraces multiplicity, ambiguity, and dialogue. It invites readers to encounter the richness of Malaysian architectural practice as it unfolds across different contexts and scales, each with its own story.

As guest editors, it has been a privilege to curate this collection of works and voices. We hope this issue will serve as a provocation—an invitation to reimagine identity, culture, and place through the lens of contemporary design.

About the Guest Editor

David TEOH

David Teoh is a registered Architect in Malaysia and Australia and has worked on a broad range of projects as both a team player and a leader. His experience encompasses healthcare facilities, diplomatic facilities, commercial offices, institutional buildings and multi-residential buildings. Having worked in offices in Melbourne and Kuala Lumpur, David gained international experience through working on projects in Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and the UAE. He was the recipient of the AIA Glenn Murcutt Prize - Popular Choice Award for his final year design project and was formerly engaged in research and tutoring at the University of Melbourne. He currently serves as the Honorary Treasurer of the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) and also holds the following positions within the Institute: Editor-in-Chief of Architecture Malaysia (AM) Magazine; Chair of the Media & Publications Committee and Coordinator of the Professional Practice Thrust. In 2023, he was named one of the 40 under 40 Emerging Malaysian Architects by a jury convened by PAM.

Veronica NG

Veronica Ng is Professor and Head of the Department of Architecture at Sunway University, with research interests in place-making and contemporary Malaysian architecture. Her work is grounded in her PhD titled Re-thinking Place and extends into socio-spatial studies on migrant housing and purpose-driven learning in architecture education. Committed to bridging education, research, and real-world application, she champions empathetic, place-based design approaches that empower local communities and contribute to a sustainable urban future. They include the educational programme in Malaysia with Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and curated community-based projects such as PavilionNOW, SentulWorks, and the Kampong Baru Vernadoc Camp. As an avid writer, she has authored books and contributed regularly to Architecture Asia, World Architecture, Architecture Malaysia, and d+a. Actively engaged in editorial and curatorial work, Veronica serves on PAM's Media and Publication Committee and PAM Education Committee.

Cities Within a City: Notes on Neoliberalism and Kuala Lumpur's Archipelago Urbanization

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Nazmi Anuar is a partner at the research practice E9A and teaches at the School of Architecture, Building and Design, Taylor's University. His research interest is in the relationship between architectural form and the city. Nazmi Anuar holds a Bachelor of Architecture from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and a Postgraduate Masters in Architecture and Urban Design from The Berlage, TU Delft. He is the author of the book Background Frame Platform (2021) and co-author (with E9A) of the book Between Rail and River: Notes In Time On Kluang (2025).

Abstract
The city of Kuala Lumpur could be read as an agglomeration of large-scale developments. With their detachment from the immediate context, these developments – such as Mid Valley City, KL Eco City, Empire City etc. - could be read as isolated "city within the city" or "urban islands," which together generate the peculiar archipelago urbanization of Kuala Lumpur, where the city is fragmented and made up of the accumulation of many smaller cities. Kuala Lumpur is becoming a playground of speculative large-scale commercial development. Therefore, this article aims to explore this phenomenon in relation to an overview of neoliberal urbanization and the idea of the city as an archipelago based on theoretical methodology. Through a critical review of related theories and literature, the study identified the point of emergence of large-scale developments in Kuala Lumpur, their key characteristics, and their possible impact on the physical and social fabric of the city.

Keywords: neoliberalism, neoliberal urbanization, city within the city, urban islands, archipelago city.

Notes on Neoliberalism

1.1 The Developmental State: Neoliberalism and Malaysia

In his landmark study A Brief History of Neoliberalism, David Harvey defined neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism can also be understood as the intrusion of market dynamics into all aspects of life (Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy 2016) as a "new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility" (Springer, Birch, and Macleavy 2016) and a "political belief in the primacy of the market for governing human affairs" (Cupers, Gabrielsson, and Mattson 2020). In practice, neoliberalism has been commonly associated with market-oriented policies, which have been linked with various socio-political ills (Springer 2017).

Rather than a case of erosion of state power in the face of market forces - as is prevalent in the West - the Malaysian version of neoliberalism maintains and expands state power through active collaboration between the forces of the market and the "developmental state", which is defined as "the state that is understood to have prioritized national resources for investment in nurturing targeted industries through bureaucratic systems while maintaining state-led development of the market" (Chen and Shin 2019b). Malaysia's shift into the developmental state approach was dated by Chareonwongsak to the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 (Chareonwongsak 2021). Implemented in 1971 for economic restructuring after the racial riots of May 1969, the NEP has been argued to reveal "the determination of the government to enact quasi-neoliberal policies before the era of neoliberalism came to dominate the West" (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). Through the NEP, measures such as privatization and affirmative action were introduced to improve the economic standing of the Malays while furthering the interests of politicians and the elites (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). The entrenchment of neoliberalism as an economic ideology could be traced to the first administration of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (prime minister: 1981 – 2003), who instituted practices such as privatization, free market policies, and financial liberalization (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). The Fifth Malaysia Plan (1985 – 1990) launched what is referred to as Mahathir's "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Juego 2018), which is a mix of "authoritarianism, crony capitalism, and neoliberalism" implemented through "patronage politics, authoritarianism, and economic restructuring" (Juego 2018). As we shall see, the effects of neoliberalism on the urban fabric manifested themselves in the 1990s (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022).

Mid Valley City and KL Eco City, facing each other across the Klang River. Two examples of Kuala Lumpur's city within a city or urban islands. (author's photo)

1.2 Growth First: Neoliberal Urbanization and Kuala Lumpur

The link between the ideology of neoliberalism and the processes of urbanization was first identified by David Harvey in his seminal essay "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism" (Harvey 1989). Harvey argued how urbanization processes are shaped by capital circulation and accumulation, where there is a shift in urban governance from a focus on public good towards public–private partnerships and profit-driven agendas (U. Rossi and Vanolo 2015). Meanwhile, Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore elaborated how neoliberal urbanization can be defined as a process of market-driven urban development or transformation, guided by the political economic theory of neoliberalism. (Brenner and Theodore 2005). The scholars also introduced the concept of "creative destruction" to describe the "geographically uneven, socially regressive, and politically volatile trajectories of institutional/spatial change" occurring under neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

Guy Baeten further identified some of the "neoliberal planning policies and tools" as including the rise of Urban Development Projects, often carried out through forms of Public Private Partnerships (Baeten 2018). Baeten sees Urban Development Projects as a template for establishing new city districts, with "a mix of housing, offices, signature architecture, shopping malls, transport facilities, exhibition halls and cultural centres" (Baeten 2018). Private Partnerships are meanwhile seen as providing access for the private sector to public funding, while serving corporate interests. Baeten also noted how these projects are often disconnected from the rest of the urban fabric and are contributing to polarization within cities by displacing former inhabitants (Baeten 2018). Writing along similar lines, Chen and Shin noted how the pervasiveness of terms such as "urban redevelopment, regeneration, renewal, or renaissance" in urban policies could be linked to the hegemony of neoliberal urbanization through a heavier reliance on property development as the driver of growth (Chen and Shin 2019a).

Today, neoliberal urbanization is manifested in the city of Kuala Lumpur as a web of integrated transportation networks punctured by edifices of large-scale developments. These are fast becoming the identity of Kuala Lumpur. The way the city is developing could be understood in tandem with the intention of the government to position Kuala Lumpur as a global city (Kozlowski, Ujang, and Maulan 2017). This developmental model is driven largely by the property market, aided by an ongoing business-friendly political climate. These characteristics of Kuala Lumpur's development – chiefly the way in which the relationship between private developers and the state is reworked in favour of a "growth first" development agenda – are consistent with the accepted indicators of neoliberal urbanization (Baeten 2018), a process that could be understood as the theory of neoliberalism put in practice. Seen in this light, Kuala Lumpur's development could be understood as the formal manifestation of neoliberal urbanization. (U. Rossi 2019; Scott 2022; Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012).

Scholars have argued that "a neoliberal economy embedded in an authoritarian polity, as the de facto social regime in contemporary Malaysia" (Juego 2018) and that "there is a clear connection between the practice of governance and neoliberalism in the Malaysian planning system" (Marzukhi et al. 2017). These arguments establish the existing relationship between neoliberalism as a political ideology of governance, which in turn influences planning policy and the built environment. Meanwhile, the fast-track process of neoliberal urbanization has seriously impacted the identity, sense of place, and the urban fabric of Kuala Lumpur (Kozlowski, Ujang, and Maulan 2017) while generating built forms that are disconnected from the local context (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). The private property-driven development trend of Kuala Lumpur overlaps with the global spread of neoliberalism as a developmental ideology and has given rise to what is understood as "new forms of spatial and social polarization" (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015).

The ongoing process of neoliberal urbanization in Kuala Lumpur is manifested in large-scale developments with characteristics of a city within a city or urban islands. The accumulation of these various large-scale urban islands led to a condition of archipelago urbanization in Kuala Lumpur. To understand this fragmented condition of urbanization, two theories on architecture and the city are worth revisiting: the Green Archipelago by O.M. Ungers and Bigness by Rem Koolhaas.

Two Theories on the Archipelago and the Large Scale

2.1 O.M. Ungers and the City Within the City, or the Idea of Archipelago

The idea of looking at the city as an "archipelago" could be traced back to the German architect and theorist Oswald Mathias Ungers in his manifesto City Within the City: Berlin as a Green Archipelago (1977). The manifesto was developed with a team of student collaborators made up of Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff and Artur Ovaska at a Cornell University summer programme in Berlin. This manifesto was an attempt to deal with the depopulation of Berlin and as an "antithesis to the current planning theory that stems from a definition of the city as a single whole" (Ungers et al. 1977). Instead, the project reimagines Berlin as a collection of "urban islands," each with a different identity based on architectural form and the program contained within (Ungers et al. 1977). Ungers imagined these urban islands - selected based on their formal and historical significance within Berlin - becoming the points of further growth, while the area in between these islands is left undeveloped and will eventually revert to a green, natural state. In Ungers's own words: "These islands-in-the-city would, in other words, be divided from each other by strips of green, thus defining the framework of the city in the city and thereby explaining the metaphor of the city as a green archipelago" (Ungers et al. 1977).

O.M. Ungers, Berlin Archipelago, 1977 (UAA Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft, Köln.)

The fragmented nature of Berlin in the 1970s – yet to fully recover from the devastation of the Second World War – became the source of Ungers's new idea of the city, which is not guided by an overall masterplan but "composed of islands, each of which was conceived as a formally distinct micro-city" (Aureli 2011) or "a system of fragments"(Lara Schrijver 2006). In Ungers's vision, Berlin becomes "a city made of radically different parts juxtaposed in the same space" (Aureli 2011). These islands would serve as "pockets of meaning and significance" floating within the metropolitan landscape (Lara Schrijver 2006). In the Green Archipelago project, Ungers proposed the idea of a pluralistic – rather than uniform – idea of urbanization (Ungers et al. 1977). The islands of his archipelago city are not just points of formal density, but of collective spaces for people within the urban realm. As a collaborator in the Green Archipelago project, Rem Koolhaas would absorb the ideas of Ungers and soon develop his own theory on architecture and the city: Bigness.

2.2 Rem Koolhaas and Bigness, or A New Kind of City

The theory of Bigness was put forth by Rem Koolhaas in his essay "Bigness or the problem of Large" from his book S, M, L, XL (1995), a monographic compilation of writings as well as projects of his practice, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). Here, Koolhaas proposed that an architecture that has reached an extremely large scale becomes independent of the urban fabric and context (Koolhaas, 1995). Architecture is often thought of as the building blocks of traditional urban fabric or as the artefacts, which reflect the gradual evolution of the city, referred to by Aldo Rossi as the "construction of the city over time" (A. Rossi 1982). When the scale of architecture becomes so large, however, it generates what Koolhaas sees as an architecture, "which no longer needs the city" (Koolhaas, 1995). At the scale of Bigness, architecture breaks with the traditional idea of the city and through its scale and complexity alone it becomes itself a city, and coexists with the traditional city without connecting to it in any meaningful way . The lack of any contextual references means that this new architecture is free from tradition and could exploit the condition of tabula rasa, which resulted from the process of "creative destruction", identified by Brenner and Theodore as a key component of neoliberal urbanization (Brenner and Theodore 2002). For Koolhaas, a very large building containing a variety of programs in unexpected combinations will generate unexpected encounters in line with his idea of "a new kind of city". In his own words: "Bigness no longer needs the city: it competes with the city; it represents the city; it preempts the city; or better still, it is the city" (Koolhaas 1995). The architecture of Bigness breaks the traditionally complementary relationship between architecture and the city, becoming itself a city within the city, or an urban island. Koolhaas's theory on architecture and the city has been influential in the production of architecture since its publication, attracting both admiration and criticism. The programmatic mix promoted by Koolhaas in Bigness could be seen as an attempt to reclaim the idea of architecture as a social condenser, reclaiming the idea of the public and the collective within today's capitalist cities (Cooreman 2005). On the other hand, critics have pointed out the influence of Bigness on the production and justification of large, iconic buildings, or "urban monstrosities," often detached from their context (Marcos 2009). The idea of the large buildings that simply ignore their surrounding context, as argued by Koolhaas, has been criticised as an unethical position in the climate of the fractured process of contemporary urbanization and development (Marcos 2009). Bigness could be criticised as a theory that promotes large-scale developments, oblivious to the importance of the city as a public realm (Cooreman 2005; Otero-Pailos 2000). It could be argued that Bigness promotes and justifies the kind of large-scale, enclave developments now prevalent under neoliberal urbanization (Otero-Pailos 2000). Rem Koolhaas's theory of Bigness could today be linked to the form of architecture and development under neoliberal urbanization.

Kuala Lumpur's Archipelago Urbanization

3.1 From Colonial to Neoliberal: Kuala Lumpur's Urban Development Revisited

Today, a drive around Kuala Lumpur reveals an urban landscape punctured by edifices of large-scale developments. Kuala Lumpur doesn't appear to be a single city, but a collection of smaller cities such as Mid Valley City, KL Eco City, Empire City, and so forth. There doesn't appear to be a single centre but a collection of different centres such as Kuala Lumpur City Centre, KL Sentral, and Bukit Bintang City Centre. Considering this phenomenon, it could be argued that Kuala Lumpur cannot be read as one coherent, uniform city but rather a fragmented city made of many "islands" of large-scale developments, which together generate a form of archipelago urbanization. The Green Archipelago was Ungers's attempt at theorizing an emerging type of city based on the issues of urban fragmentation and depopulation facing Berlin in the 1970s (Ungers et al. 1977) . The idea of Kuala Lumpur as an archipelago city, meanwhile, is a description of an already existing phenomenon, not so much a theory but a retrospective reading of a condition that emerged under the influence of neoliberalism. How did this come to be? Founded as a tin-mining settlement at the confluence of the Gombak and Klang Rivers in 1857, Kuala Lumpur's growth has always been economically driven. The rivers were important means of transporting tin, while the early streets were meant to connect the river to the tin mining fields (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). In the early days, the bulk of the population was made up of Chinese migrants working in the mines, with their main settlement located in the area now known as Petaling Street. On the opposite bank of the Klang River were located the British administrators, who in 1884 founded the Selangor Club – now the Dataran Merdeka - as a social club for the colonial elites. The Malays, meanwhile, were a minority in the city until around 1900, when a piece of land north of the city was granted by the Sultan of Selangor as a permanent settlement for their community, now known as Kampung Baru. With the arrival of migrant workers from India at the beginning of the 20th century, the identity of Kuala Lumpur as an ethnically diverse, multicultural city was established (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). The early urban fabric of Kuala Lumpur was made up of a tapestry of shophouses, kampung houses, and colonial administrative buildings, some of which remain as landmarks today.

The growth of Kuala Lumpur from a colonial outpost to a major city was instigated by its becoming the capital of the newly independent Federation of Malaya in 1957. From the late 1950s onwards, significant portions of the traditional urban fabric, made up of a tapestry of shophouses and kampung houses, were removed to make way for a new development based on the architecture and urban ideas of modernism. The flurry of construction activity around the "Merdeka" or independence period led to the construction of national architecture icons such as the Bangunan Parlimen (Parliament Building), Stadium Merdeka (Merdeka Stadium), Stadium Negara (National Stadium), Masjid Negara (National Mosque), Muzium Negara (National Museum), Angkasapuri (National Broadcasting Center) and many more. These buildings, with their application of modernist principles adapted to local climatic conditions, represented the hopes and aspirations of a young, multicultural nation and became landmarks, not only for Kuala Lumpur but also for the nation.

Further expansion of the city into a metropolitan region took place in the 1960s with the founding of the satellite cities of Shah Alam and Petaling Jaya, which were developed to encourage and accommodate the migration of the Malay population from the rural to the urban areas (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). The growth of the industrial sector as a result of the economic restructuring under the New Economic Policy further accelerated the process of Kuala Lumpur's urbanization in the 1970s (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). Kuala Lumpur attained the status of a city in 1972, and the city council, Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), was established in 1974. During this period of development, the state retained control of the production of low-cost housing to house the growing population of city dwellers (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). Economic prosperity led to the growth of the city as a shopping destination, as attested by the construction of air-conditioned shopping centres such as Ampang Park, Wisma Central, Sungei Wang Plaza, and Bukit Bintang Plaza (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). The growth of shopping also led to the interiorization of the urban experience, where air-conditioned shopping centres started to become more popular retail destinations, compared to traditional shop houses and markets. Neoliberalism's impact on the urban growth of Kuala Lumpur and its metropolitan region first became apparent during the administration of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). The Fifth Malaysia Plan (1985), which initiated practices such as privatization, free market policies, and financial liberalization, helped Malaysia transition from a "state-dominated developmentalist approach towards a free-market model" (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). During this time, the state largely withdrew from its previous role in urban development; instead, it focused on intervening through financial regulations to encourage profit-driven development by the private sector (Tedong, Grant, and Wan Abd Aziz 2015). From then on, Kuala Lumpur was shaped by the commercial drive of the developers.

Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC). Development centered around a large, publicly accessible park. (Google Earth and photo by Xiao Liu)

3.2 Mega Projects: The Emergence of Kuala Lumpur's Urban Islands

The 1990s saw the emergence of mega projects such as Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), and the new administrative city of Putrajaya (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022). The development of KLCC, on a 100-acre site of the former Selangor Turf Club, was intended to be a city within a city. The development, consisting of the world-renowned Petronas Towers, corporate towers, a shopping mall, a convention centre, hotels, and luxury apartments, was composed around a 50-acre park and symbolized the ascendancy of commercial forces in shaping the city. The scale of the development presents a clear break from the surrounding urban fabric, establishing KLCC as a unique zone on its own. KLCC was the first of Kuala Lumpur's cities within a city, an island in the urban archipelago.

How do we recognize a development as a city within a city or an urban island? If we revisit Unger's project for the Green Archipelago of Berlin, we can see how the city within a city is defined as a building or a group of buildings that are large in scale and distinct in architectural form and program, embodying a strong and clear identity (Ungers et al. 1977). If we take KLCC as an example, it could be added that these islands act as focal points or attractors within a fragmented and disconnected urban landscape. Usually known as a "mixed development," they contain a multitude of different programs or development components that are largely commercial. A typical list of programs for one of these cities within the city includes shopping malls, office towers, hotels, and luxury apartments. These are sometimes complemented by other programs such as convention centres, transportation hubs, entertainment centres, and even indoor amusement parks. This mixture of unrelated programs can be related to Koolhaas's belief in the unexpected combination of programs as outlined in his theory of Bigness (Koolhaas 1995). Most of these developments are connected to public transportation networks but are primarily accessed by car, necessitating large areas for parking. Architecturally, these developments usually take the shape of a massive podium – usually containing parking and a shopping mall – topped by towers containing offices, hotels and apartments. Using the above characteristics as a guide, we can begin to identify and describe a few more examples of large-scale developments in Kuala Lumpur, which can be understood as cities within a city or urban islands.

Another mega project developed in Kuala Lumpur in the 1990s, which embodies the characteristics of a city within a city, is Mid Valley City. This is a large-scale commercial development anchored by Mid Valley Megamall and The Gardens Mall. Mid Valley Megamall is a six-storey mall with 4 million sqft of floor area, containing over 450 retail outlets and 11,000 carparks. It is integrated with a convention centre, two hotel towers, and four blocks of signature offices. The Gardens Mall, meanwhile, is a premium six-storey mall with over 200 retail outlets, integrated with two office towers, one hotel tower, and one service apartment tower. Both malls are linked internally and via an overhead bridge spanning the plaza between them. The Mid Valley City project broke ground in 1992 with the construction of Mid Valley Megamall and was completed in 2007 with the opening of The Gardens Mall. Although connected to the public transportation network through the Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) Komuter line, the Mid Valley City demonstrates a clear break in scale and connectivity from its surrounding urban fabric, embodying the characteristics of Bigness, where it "is no longer part of any urban tissue" (Koolhaas 1995). Surrounded by an intricate maze of elevated concrete driveways that provide ingress and egress into the multi-level parking zones, Mid Valley City is a self-contained world, a city within a city.

Mid Valley City. Development anchored by Mid Valley Megamall (right) and The Gardens Mall (left). (Google Earth and author's photo)

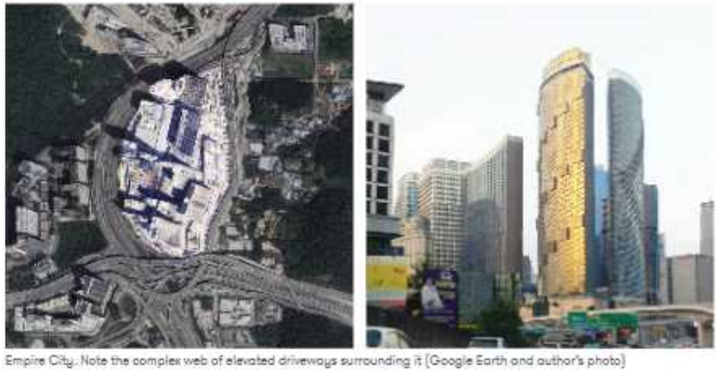
KL Sentral. Development centered around a rail transport hub. (Google Earth and author's photo)

The transport-oriented Kuala Lumpur Sentral (KL Sentral) also embodies the characteristics of an urban island. Developed on a 72-acre site in Brickfields, which was formerly the marshalling yard for KTM, KL Sentral is anchored by Stesen Sentral, the city's main rail transport hub. The station integrates various transportation services such as Rapid KL, KTM Komuter, KTM Intercity, KLIA Express, and KL Monorail. The master plan of the site, by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, envisions the development as a city within a city, centred on the transport hub of Stesen Sentral. Work on the massive development began in 1994, with the station operational in 2001. The remaining development components, consisting of corporate towers, office suites, hotels, luxury apartments, and a shopping mall, were mostly completed by 2015. The scale and density of KL Sentral, as well as the network of concrete driveways that surrounds it, disconnect it from the finer grain of the Brickfields neighbourhood, which borders it. Furthermore, a significant portion of the development was built on a concrete plinth above the railway, elevating it above the street level of the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, the sleek language of corporate architecture that adorns the buildings offers a striking contrast to the cultural vibrancy of Brickfields. Despite its connection to various rail networks, KL Sentral is still a somewhat detached island within Kuala Lumpur's urban archipelago.

The development in Kuala Lumpur followed a similar pattern throughout the 2000s, with the construction of more cities within the city. These included projects such as Berjaya Times Square, which houses an indoor amusement park, and KL Eco City, which is located adjacent to Mid Valley City on a site that formerly housed the Kampung Abdullah Hukum urban village. Other examples included Empire City, located on the edge between Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, which is surrounded by the most complex web of elevated driveways in the city. More recent examples include the Tun Razak Exchange (TRX), planned as a new financial hub around the upmarket Exchange TRX mall and Bukit Bintang City Centre (BBCC), built on the site of the former Pudu Jail, Kuala Lumpur's colonial-era prison complex. All these projects embody the characteristics of formal isolation and extremely large scale as described in the theories of Ungers and Koolhaas (Ungers et al. 1977; Koolhaas 1995). Based on the observations of these projects, it is possible to note the common traits of these cities within the city, which are as follows:

- Extremely large scale in relation to its immediate context.
- Disconnected and isolated from the rest of the urban fabric.
- Architectural emphasis on spectacular or novel characteristics: iconic towers, indoor theme park, ice-skating rink, roof gardens, etc.
- Commercially driven programs: shopping malls, offices, hotels, luxury apartments, etc.
- Heavily dependent on vehicular traffic despite the presence of public transport.

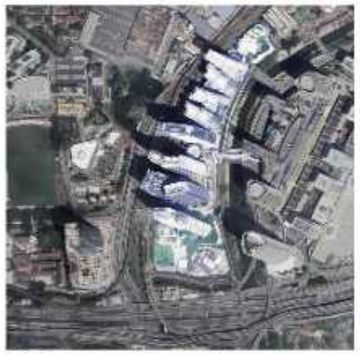
Historically, Kuala Lumpur has always been a city understood through elements of urban legibility such as public spaces and historical landmarks. Today, Kuala Lumpur is fast becoming a sprawling urban landscape dominated by the presence of various cities within the city. The accumulation of these large-scale developments - urban islands that dominate their surroundings - led to the fragmented characteristic of Kuala Lumpur's urbanization. Kuala Lumpur is an archipelago city. Here, however, the comparison with Ungers's conception of the archipelago city ends. Ungers had imagined the islands within the archipelago city as spaces containing the elements of public space for the collective (Lara Schrijver 2006). Kuala Lumpur's archipelago city, meanwhile, is a neoliberal edifice, driven by continuous growth and commercial development. They are signposts of a market-driven process of neoliberal urbanization and are spatial factors in the shaping of the public into passive "citizen-consumers" (Spencer 2016). Kuala Lumpur's fragmented urbanization could be understood as a version of Rem Koolhaas's "a new kind of city"(Koolhaas 1995). But what are the impacts of these kinds of developments on the physical and social fabric of the city?



Empire City. Note the complex web of elevated driveways surrounding it (Google Earth and author's photo)

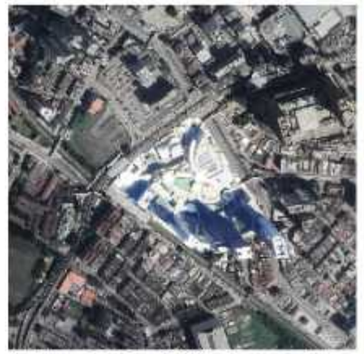
3.3 Enclave and Exclusion: Issues Concerning the Large-Scale

The theoretical ideas put forth in O.M. Ungers's City Within the City: Berlin as a Green Archipelago and in Rem Koolhaas's "Bigness" argued for the development of urban islands or large-scale architecture that are detached from the rest of the city fabric. For Ungers, the idea of the urban islands is in response to the depopulation of Berlin, while Koolhaas seeks the freedom from the traditional city through his argument for an architecture detached from the immediate context (Ungers et al. 1977; Koolhaas 1995). However, more recent studies by scholars have highlighted various problems concerning these kinds of developments. In a landmark study from the early 2000s, Erik Swyngedouw noted how large-scale developments have become one of the most common strategies for urban growth and competitiveness. The recent years have seen unparalleled urban growth through the implementation of large-scale projects globally (Eizenberg 2019). Swnygedouw and others have argued that these large-scale developments are often enabled by "exceptionality measures," which work around existing planning measures and involve other measures such as state intervention and deregulation (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). This method of undertaking development projects is a sign of the neoliberalization of urban governance, with a shift in focus from investments in welfare or public projects in favour of projects that will benefit the private sector (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). Large-scale projects rarely provide solutions for actual urban issues and problems affecting the many; rather, they are focused on providing assets for those with the means to accumulate (Eizenberg 2019). This leads to what has been observed as "new planning cultures, new private-public relations, new urban demographic transformations and novel environmental concerns" (Eizenberg 2019).

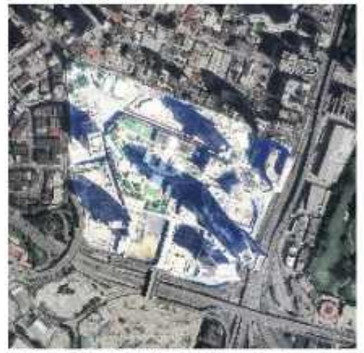


KL Eco City. A linear city of towers, built on a site that formerly housed the Kampung Abdullah Hukum urban village (Google Earth and author's photo)

Physically, large-scale developments are instrumental in shaping the image of the city (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). The boldness and supposedly novel elements of these developments are often used to market an image of progress and new ways of living (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002; Majerowitz and Allweil 2019). However, despite the surface appearance of progress, the outcome of the proliferation of large-scale developments is urban islands with enclave and exclusionary characteristics (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). According to Swyngedouw and others, these large-scale developments are "often self-contained, isolated, and disconnected from the general dynamics of the city" (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). The outcome of this process is the further fragmentation of the urban fabric, which brings with it problems such as socio-spatial disparity (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002), uneven spatial development (Peck, Brenner, and Theodore 2018), polarization of the city through "new real-estate dynamics" (Baeten 2018), unequal cities and inequality of access to housing (Chen and Shin 2019a), rapid uncontrolled urban expansion characterised by exclusive urban enclaves (Kozlowski, Huston, and Mohd Yusof 2022) as well as social exclusion and inequality, spatial fragmentation, and environmental deterioration (Su 2023).



Bukit Bintang City Centre (BBCC), built on the site of the former Pudu Jail, Kuala Lumpur's colonial era prison complex. (Google Earth and author's photo)

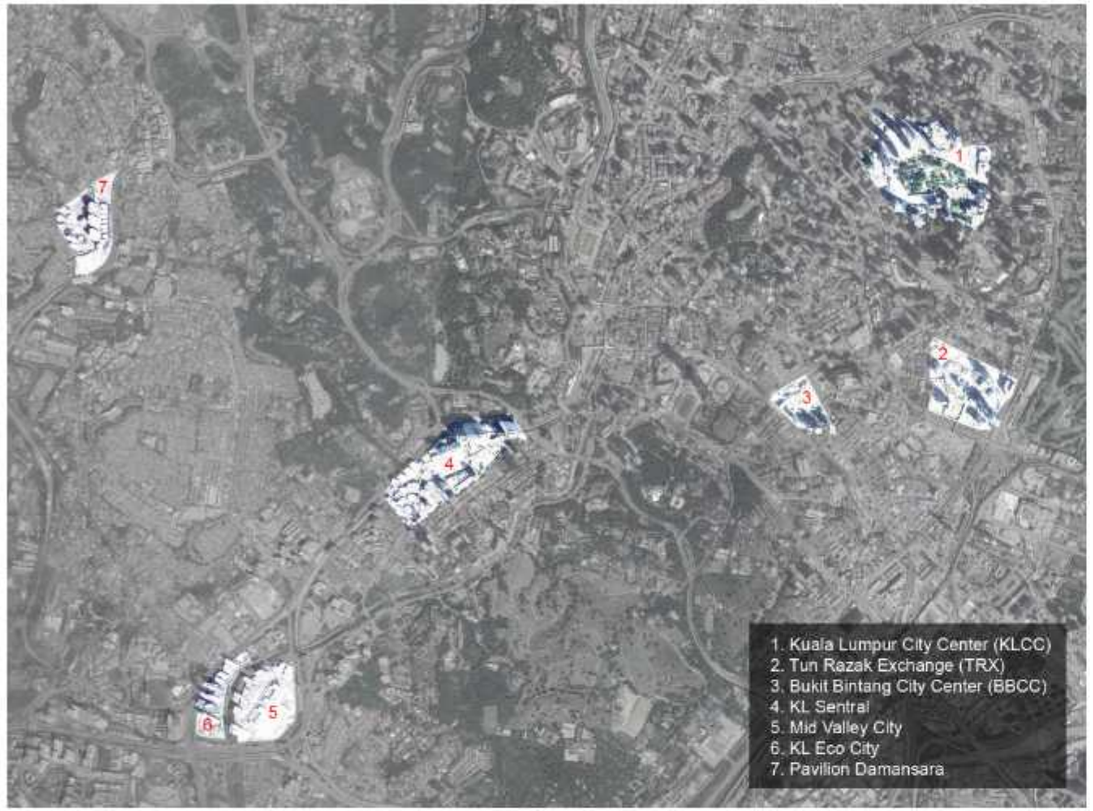


Tun Razak Exchange (TRX). An extensive urban plaza attempts to mitigate its relationship to the scale of the surrounding neighborhood. (Google Earth and author's photo)

Conclusion: The Archipelago City and Its Discontents

The entrenchment of neoliberalism as an economic ideology in Malaysia could be traced to the first administration of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (1981 – 2003), who instituted practices such as privatization, free market policies, and financial liberalization. From the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1985) onwards, the state largely withdrew from its previous role in urban development, encouraging profit-driven development by the private sector. These profit-driven developments led to the mushrooming of mega projects in the form of isolated cities within the city or urban islands within Kuala Lumpur.

Theoretical studies by O.M. Ungers and Rem Koolhaas had anticipated the emergence of this kind of detached, large-scale development. In Kuala Lumpur, these cities within the city could be identified by the following characteristics: extremely large scale in relation to its immediate context, disconnected and isolated from the rest of the urban fabric, architectural emphasis on spectacular or novel characteristics, commercially driven programs, and heavily dependent on vehicular traffic. Various studies from around the world demonstrated how these types of development led to the fragmented nature of the urban landscape and socio-spatial problems. In the case of Kuala Lumpur, this topic would benefit from further research on identifying other developments that fit the criteria of city within a city, how these developments are shaping the fabric of the city and behaviour of city dwellers, and on possible architectural strategies (such as the integration of publicly accessible parks or open spaces), which could better connect them to the urban fabric and public life in the city. Beyond the physical aspects, this research could potentially be expanded to investigate the socio-political impacts of large-scale urban developments.



Some of Kuala Lumpur's cities within the city / urban islands, seen together. (by the author)

Today, Kuala Lumpur is dominated by urban islands of high-density developments, which are commercially driven and isolated from the urban fabric. The proliferation of large-scale developments, turning Kuala Lumpur into an archipelago city, reinforces the fragmentation of the urban landscape and society. Rather than a city guided by history and public voices, Kuala Lumpur is becoming a playground of speculative commercial development. If in the past the identity of the city was defined by public spaces, historical buildings, and buildings that are national landmarks embodying our collective memory, today it is driven by the profit-driven motives of developers and the drive for continual growth. This new identity of the city is manifested through the presence of multiple cities within the city and the urban islands, which are the hallmarks of Kuala Lumpur as a neoliberal archipelago city.

Acknowledgement
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Responding to Place through Making in Architectural Practice

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Biography

Eleena Jamil is a Malaysian architect born in Penang. She graduated from the Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, in the UK. She joined the Cardiff architecture faculty as a teaching assistant while completing her MPhil and PhD postgraduate research. Her PhD thesis, titled "Rethinking Modernism: The Sugden House and the Mother's House", examined the idea of "ordinariness" and "vernacular imagery" as an alternative to the reductive limitations of modern architecture. Eleena set up her eponymous architectural practice in Kuala Lumpur in 2005 and focused on developing buildings within the context of Malaysia and Southeast Asia. She was shortlisted for Dezeen Architect of the Year 2018 and featured in 100 Women: Architects in Practice, published by RIBA in 2023. She has lectured widely and was recently appointed Adjunct Professor at the National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) and Taylor's University Malaysia.

Abstract

The relationship between a building and the place in which it is set is one of the key determinants of its cultural and social value. The faltering of this relationship due to international industrialization leads to the re-assessment of local architecture and its response to the essence of place. This article explores how expanding the role of architects to include active involvement in the making processes of architecture can encourage a continuity of form and space shaped by local climate, tradition, and material culture. It looks at how Eleena Jamil Architect, an architectural studio based in Malaysia, responds to place in small projects that it initiates and builds collaboratively with small teams of craftspeople, builders, students, and their teachers. The article begins with a literature review and the observation of scholars on the relationship between buildings, place, and typologies, as well as the significance of shaping built environments to the natural environments in the increasingly urgent issue of our planet's climate. It then proposes 'making' as an essential part of architectural practice, where ideas, contextualism and sustainable approaches could continue to develop in close interaction and association with the actual physical construction at the site. In the final part, five pavilion projects primarily produced by the studio are studied in terms of their responses to place in terms of their forms, techniques, and materiality.

Keywords: critical regionalism, contextual architecture, role of architects, co-creation, tradition, culture.

Introduction

Architecture is fundamentally a cultural and social enterprise. The relationship between a building and the place in which it is set is one of the key determinants of its cultural and social value. Things began to change in the 20th century as a result of international industrialization. In particular, the historic method of using a building's material and form to respond to place and climate was replaced by highly processed building materials and mechanical systems of heating, cooling, ventilation, and lighting. This development frequently manifested in a style of grids applied to large-scale urbanization and tall buildings with their sealed envelope and air-conditioning systems, dominating the skyline of major cities around the globe. The alarming rise in global temperatures and prevalent extreme weather conditions raise serious concerns about how we should develop our cities. Reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions in building operations is no longer sufficient to reduce the prevailing problems brought on by climate change. Serious considerations must be given to pre-construction processes, such as the materials we build with, where and how they are sourced, and the amount of energy required to transform them from their original state to one that can be used in construction. It is also essential to evaluate critically whether building anew is necessary in the first place.

This article explores how Eleena Jamil Architect, an architectural studio based in Malaysia, responds to place in small pavilion projects that it initiates and builds collaboratively with small teams of craftspeople, builders, students and their teachers. The article begins with a literature review and the observation of scholars on the relationship between buildings, place, and typologies, as well as the significance of shaping built environments in response to the natural environments in the increasingly urgent issue of our planet's climate. It then proposes 'making' as an essential part of architectural practice, where ideas, contextualism and sustainable approaches could continue to develop in close interaction and association with the actual physical construction at the site. In the final part, five pavilion projects primarily produced by the studio are examined in terms of their responses to place in terms of their forms, techniques, and materiality.

Responding to Essence of Place

With buildings now part of the problem, seeking solutions that work with a place rather than against it is crucial. How can architecture truly ground itself to place? Anglo-American critic and historian Kenneth Frampton offered an alternative to the threat of universalisation he witnessed with his 1983 Perspecta article titled Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance. For him, grounded architecture could develop within the specific conditions of a local context: an approach in which climate, context and tectonics are so embedded in local material conditions and cultures as to resist universalisation and homogeneity. He cited the work of architects such as Jørn Utzon's Bagsvaerd Church in Copenhagen of 1976 as containing complex meaning that achieves a "self-conscious synthesis between universal civilisation and world culture, " and Alvar Aalto's Saynatsalo Town Hall of 1952 for its 'tactile sensitivity' to its context which complements the sensory experience.

In his book *The Environmental Tradition: Studies in the Architecture of Environment*, academic and architect Dean Hawkes expressed a parallel sentiment when he wrote about designing for the climate rather than against it with a historical perspective, which can indicate how to address new environmental priorities. He also wrote about the importance of typologies in contemporary design. He described typologies as containing within them the logic of form, and responses connected with reason and use, which create deep bonds with place and climate and allow us to start from a position of knowledge rather than from the beginning. From here, we can review solutions from the past and begin to analyse, dissect and improve designs based on contemporary concerns. He elucidated that "... the great value of typology, as opposed to singular types, in the production of new designs is that it constitutes a store of alternatives from which the starting point for the development of a promising solution might be drawn."

In a keynote lecture presented at the 12th International Docomomo Conference in Espoo, Finland, in August 2012, renowned Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, spoke of the importance of buildings being rooted in the historicity of their place, and of contributing to a sense of cultural continuum:

"The first responsibility of the architect is always to the inherited landscape or urban setting; a profound building has to enhance its wider context and give it new meanings and aesthetic qualities. Responsible architecture improves the landscape of its location and gives its lesser architectural neighbours new qualities instead of degrading them. It always enters a dialogue with existent conditions; profound buildings are not self-centred monologues."

Frampton, Hawkes, and Pallasmaa propositioned several ways of creating meaningful architecture in response to place. For them, continuity is necessary for consistency and strength of architecture, but this does not mean an absolute commitment to past culture, tradition, and values. Avoiding and limiting creativity and innovation as a form of respect for tradition disregards the primary purpose of architecture, that is, to create lively and dynamic built environments responsive to new human needs.

Place-responsive contemporary architecture carries with it the identity of its community, distinguishing a place from another. It contains the message, concept, and characteristics attributed to the place where it was conceived. Therefore, it depends on the geography, traditions, insights, and knowledge of the community and its history. It can show all these dependencies while reacting to technology and society's transformative and continuous development.

The Malay House

Tanggam detail in a Malay House

About Making

The origins of the architecture profession lie in the craft of making. Before it was considered a profession, architecture was practiced in close association with a building's physical construction on-site. For example, in Southeast Asia, the making of a traditional Malay house was carried out without drawings and was considered a manual occupation. A sophisticated form of rural domestic architecture, the Malay house consisted of modular rectangular volumes raised on stilts and was built by the traditional tukang or craftsperson, who acted as both architect and maker, assisted by a team of apprentices and local community members.

Practising a highly ordered building process that reflected a set of rituals and local beliefs, and using anthropometric proportions, the tukang was well versed in the interlocking timber- jointing technique known as tanggam. They would also have had a deep knowledge of the local environment and natural building materials, including timber, rattan and thatch, and known where and how to source them. In addition to these skills, they were a master carver who produced intricate ornamental carvings and understood their aesthetic principles and meanings.

For the tukang, ideas, forms and their execution were perceived as a single organic process. Like many other craftspeople, they picked up their craft through rigorous apprenticeship, often at a very young age, gradually developing manual dexterity and an intuitive sense of tools, materials, structure, proportion and aesthetics, until they became a holistic building expert. In contrast, the practice of modern architecture is a three-fold process: analysing, imagining, and making. An architect analyses by collecting, documenting and mapping information, and then reflecting on and synthesising it. Following this, the results are translated into imagined forms and spaces using sketching, drawing, and model-making. Juhani Pallasmaa described the process as follows:

"While drawing, a mature designer and architect is not focused on the lines of the drawing, as he is envisioning the object itself, and in his mind holding the object in his hand and occupying the space being designed. During the design process, the architect occupies the very structure that the lines of the drawing represent ... The architect moves about freely in the imagined structure, however large and complex it may be, as if walking in a building and touching all its surfaces and sensing their materiality and texture."

This idea of architectural thinking and exploration through making can be extended beyond the'three-fold process' to on-site construction and its processes. The connection to activities at the site can reinforce the connection between architectural practice and the realities of making – between idea and matter, form and its execution. This approach is akin to that of the craftsman, where craftsmanship arises from manual skill training and experience in the actual making processes. In his book *The Craftsman*, the cultural historian Richard Sennet narrates this when he wrote,

"Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking, his dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding."

In 2014, the architecture studio was invited to exhibit some of their bamboo projects at Palazzo Bembo in Venice, as part of a concurrent programme of the 14th Architecture Biennale. They displayed miniature bamboo models and life-sized mock-ups supported by detailed drawings and images, all of which told a story about making. Built with satay sticks, the models were used to examine specific aspects of our architectural projects, such as structural composition and tectonics and how they affect the overall concept of a building, while also helping to externalise ideas and put them into practice on a diminutive scale.

Not far from the little exhibit, at the Arsenale, was the Indonesian national exhibition, Ketukangan: Kesadaran Material, meaning 'Craftsmanship: Material Consciousness'.

Against the persistent sound of building tools in use, the making of structures was explored through six common materials: timber, bamboo, brick, stone, concrete, and steel. Using text, moving images, and sound, the exhibition revealed how the craftsmanship and labour involved in handling each material has become an influence in developing the nation's architecture. These were found to have strong affinities with the studio's bamboo display, where making was exposed as an instinctive way of working with materials that are cultivated, produced, selected and applied by local people in their own environment, using tools and techniques they have developed.

The process of thinking and exploring ideas through making is not explicitly expressed in the studio's practice of architecture, but it remains an essential aspect of its daily architectural activity. In 2021, during the Covid pandemic, the lull of this period permitted the opportunity to think more deeply about making, craftsmanship and the architect's role. With a grant called 'Connections through Culture', provided by the British Council, the studio embarked on a project that explores making and the craft of building in relation to material culture, building processes and engagement with local communities.

A tukang working on timber house railing in a Malay House

The project began by recording conversations with three Malaysian tukangs, who are still practising the traditional method of building timber houses, to develop an understanding of their role, process and worldview. From this point of departure, 'making' was explored in the work of contemporary architects and designers in the broader region of Southeast Asia, and in Britain. We spoke to Patcharada Inplang and Varudh Varavarn in Thailand, and Andy Rahman, Florian Heinzelmann and Daliana Suryawinata in Indonesia, while in the UK we consulted Rodrigo Garcia Gonzalez, Amin Taha and members of the 121 Collective. There is an underlying commonality in the work of these practitioners, where each seeks to reference their distinctive culture, tradition, building method and climate through sustainable practices.

A few common threads emerged from these conversations: a conscious effort to explore and experiment with local and sustainable materials and building techniques, to be highly involved in the making processes and to collaborate with local craftspeople to reach a deeper understanding of how to use them. These attitudes, and the work they produce, illustrate that working with what is at hand does not necessarily mean going back to pre-industrial ways, but, rather, opens up new possibilities for a post-industrial age while keeping local material culture and vernacular traditions dynamic.

This close connection with making was the default in architecture until the modern era's transition to specialization and separation of design from the building process. Today, architects work in isolation away from the construction site, in their studio, with employees producing drawings and specifications instead of being directly immersed in the materials and process of making. Moreover, architectural education, with its growing emphasis on intellectualism and theoretical thinking, has created an additional distance between the studio and the construction site, further diluting the principles of craft in the architect's work.

The process of architectural design has also changed considerably with technology. It is now possible to design a complete building in a matter of weeks using computer modelling software, without having to consider how building components are made, who made them or where they originated. Built into this software are standard building element catalogues, which enable three-dimensional walls, doors, windows, roofs, gutters, etc, to be added quickly to a building. Visualisations are accessible at the click of a button, with extraordinarily little room left to the imagination. When turning designs into physical buildings, this way of working has a trickle- down effect, encouraging the quick assembly of generic components, often high in embodied energy and made from materials extracted or produced in far-off places, to simplify the construction process.

Process of Making in Practice

Construction methods in Malaysia and, indeed, Southeast Asia primarily revolve around the same techniques: a structure of columns, beams and floors made of reinforced concrete and infill walls made with masonry blocks. This method of construction is extensive due to its low cost and easy execution at site by low-skilled workers. Concrete is responsible for around eight percent of all global carbon emissions, where most of its emissions are released in its process of production.

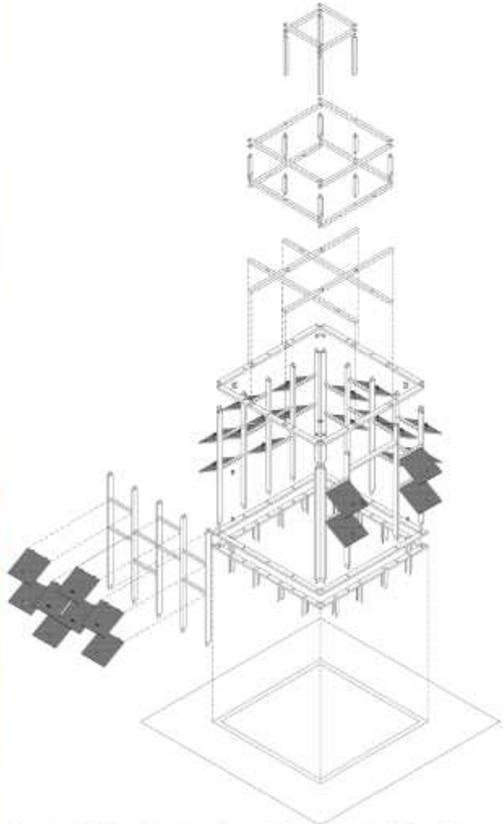
More sustainable and less ecologically damaging building techniques can be found in vernacular examples. Traditional Malay houses are built in direct response to climate that roots them in local construction techniques and natural material culture. They are made from thriving natural vegetation such as bamboo, timber and palm leaves. Their floors are raised on stilts to keep it dry, and a framed system holds up a steeply pitched roof with low overhangs to expel rainwater and protect the interior from direct sun. The house uses a clever modular system that permits future extensions and is put together using an interlocking jointing system known locally as tanggam, allowing the house to be dismantled and moved to a new location when required. This vernacular technique is seldom in practice today, threatened by the desire for concrete and masonry which have come to symbolise social status; timber, bamboo and woven leaves are often seen as the material of those who do not have the means to build with concrete – even though concrete is now widely available and increasingly affordable.

The opportunities to explore, experiment and innovate using local and sustainable materials and building techniques are few and far between. It is very rare to come across commissioning clients willing to fund the exploration of new techniques and natural materials such as timber and bamboo in their projects, often citing problematic issues associated with durability, complexity, and perception — bamboo, for example, being regarded as a poor man's building material. Small pavilions mentioned in this article present opportunities to explore what large projects could not. Their small size and inevitable low costs permit the architectural studio to become more than a designer. In almost all pavilion projects undertaken, the studio initiates and builds by working collaboratively with small teams of craftspeople, builders, students and volunteers in a way that gives greater control over design and innovation, leading to the exploration of the potential of traditional methods and materials in contemporary forms. Besides working in the studio, team members spend considerable time at the construction material yards, workshops, and construction sites. There, they are directly involved in exploring materials and techniques with those who actively build the structures.

This approach includes a strong tendency to work with materials in their "as-found" state like they were in vernacular exemplars, which usually means as they are delivered, or in their early condition when first applied and before extra layers or coatings are added: unclad steel structures, bare concrete, clay bricks, wood and bamboo. Rather than imposing a preconceived idea or unnatural appearance on materials, we prefer to work to their unwritten rules, allowing each substance to fully express its individuality and physicality. Few of these materials are available in off-the-shelf prefabricated forms, and working with them is therefore based on the craftsperson's knowledge and dexterity, stemming from their usage in vernacular architecture. The contemporary architectural and construction industries believe this way of working belongs to the past, as it adds time and complexity. The studio, on the other hand, finds it enriching and prefers to celebrate a relationship with the construction team that is collaborative rather than authoritative and that avoids directing or controlling their activities.

Eleena Jamil Architect, The Shadow Garden Pavilion, 2016

Eleena Jamil Architect, Detail axonometric of the Shadow Garden Pavilion, 2016)



Eleena Jamil Architect, Students working on the Shadow Garden Pavilion, 2016

The traditional tanggam method used in Malay houses was adopted in the Shadow Garden Pavilion project, completed in 2016. The idea of growth, flexibility and impermanence is intrinsic to the timber architecture of this region, where sections cut from local Merbau wood are interlocked without the use of nails, screws or fasteners, to form a stable framed structure. A group of architecture students and lecturers from Taylor's University volunteered to help with the building work, and together with the studio, developed a series of mortise and tenon, dovetail, and keyed joints to create a timber structure based on the tanggam method, so it could be quickly assembled and dismantled on-site. Drawings illustrate the joints in great detail so that students, after going through a two-day woodworking course at the university workshop, could cut timber sections to create an array detail. Fabrication and assembly of the entire wooden structure took about three weeks to complete.

Eleena Jamil Architect, The making of Meranti Pavilion in the workshop in Selangor Malaysia, 2017

Eleena Jamil Architect, Meranti Pavilion, in the workshop in Selangor Malaysia, 2017

A similar concept was used for the Meranti Pavilion (2017). Here, the pavilion needed to be designed in a way that would enable it to be moved from a workshop in Malaysia, where it was fabricated, to an exhibition hall in Orlando, Florida, for about three weeks, after which it would be dismantled and stored until required again. By working in close collaboration with skilled local carpenters, a series of standardised, modular components made from local Meranti wood was designed and fabricated. At the same time, several mock-ups were produced to determine the shape, size and weight of a module that could be easily handled and packed tightly into a shipping crate. The use of a simple interlocking joint system permitted the modules to be assembled quickly to form a 4 x 4 metre rectangular enclosure in less than 24 hours, using basic tools such as power drills and screwdrivers, and, if necessary, to be reassembled in different configurations, much like Lego bricks.

Eleena Jamil Architect, WUF09 Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur, 2018

Eleena Jamil Architect, Volunteers working on the WUF09 Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur, 2018

Eleena Jamil Architect, Craft students working on IKN Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur, 2019

Similar to timber, bamboo is one of the oldest building resources but was never developed into a modern construction material. The interest in bamboo as building material led the studio to experiment with rings for the World Urban Forum 09 (WUF09) Pavilion, built in 2018 for an urban forum event organised by UN-Habitat in Kuala Lumpur. The different-sized and -shaped rings were cut from whole culms, cast off from another project, and packed tightly between vertical and horizontal bamboo frames to form wall claddings. Coloured panels were then meticulously inserted into the small circular openings, resulting in embellished screens rich with texture. Here, a very old building material, rarely used in modern construction, was therefore reimagined as part of a new making system. Similar interesting formations are seen in our IKN Pavilion, built in 2019, which was designed and constructed with craft students studying textile, metal, and wood crafts at a local craft institute. The students were asked to "adorn" a series of upright bamboo frames using their skills in innovative ways. Provided with bamboo, rattan, and hemp rope, in addition to a host of leftover craft materials teeming with hues and textures they found around their studios, they experimented with different techniques, such as weaving, plaiting and lashing. This collaborative and creative exchange generated interesting making methods that could be adapted to more complex applications.

Eleena Jamil Architect, Duduk-Duduk Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur, 2024

Eleena Jamil Architect, Students working on the Duduk-Duduk Pavilion at their university workshop, Kuala Lumpur, 2024

In the Duduk-Duduk Pavilion completed in 2024, bamboo was again explored, this time with timber in designing a small structure derived from traditional wakaf structures. Wakafs are small pavilions that act as public shelters made from local natural materials with raised floors and large overhanging roofs. The Duduk-Duduk is made from timber sections supported off the ground by a steel frame. The structure supports four wooden seats with angled back support. The roof is steeply pitched with a large overhang and is covered with flattened bamboo panels, locally known as pelupuh. The pelupuh, produced from local bamboo, was cut into uniform sizes with a tapered bottom edge to create individual shingles. These shingles, pigmented in three different vibrant colours, were then arranged on the roof battens in a random array of colours. This creates an interesting and lively roof covering that beautifully reflects the verdant park's greens and yellows. The pavilion was built in collaboration with students from the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Students worked under the studio's and university workshop tutors' supervision to fabricate the pavilion. Most of the work was carried out at the workshop, with a final 3-day assembly at the site. This collaborative process spanned about four weeks, with the students working on days that they did not have lectures to attend.
The active involvement in building activities means that design development does not end before construction begins, but continues alongside it and trickles into the making process. For example, in the Bamboo Playhouse project (2015), the studio team worked with skilled craftspeople versed in traditional bamboo jointing methods, using natural rope lashings to joint culms. Typically, rope lashings will decay and loosen over time, so a more durable solution was required. Working closely with the workers on-site as building work progressed, more efficient and durable jointing methods were created where lashings were combined with bolting and clamping. Prototypes and full-scale mock-ups were also made to convey exactly what was required. This exchange resulted in increased knowledge and safer, more resilient structures based on local materials.

Conclusion

The strategies described above can be considered part of a laissez-faire attitude that prevents a predetermined final state, and allows motivation and innovation to continue in tandem with the building process. Such an open-ended approach is easier to adopt in small-scale, self-built or self-managed projects, unlike more formal and highly controlled procedures such as a production line, where tasks are compartmentalised and conform to specific programmes. Though efficient, this more formal system depends on machine-fabricated and standardised building components. In contrast to this, the cultural continuity and environmental awareness embodied in a form of making that is rooted in local methods can offer valuable insights into reimagining modern building practices. The making process involved in our timber and bamboo pavilions shapes form and construction beyond the aesthetic dimension, and allows us to tap into the skills and knowledge of traditional makers. Working in such a manner enriches architecture and catalyses a more profound social and cultural engagement between architect, maker, building user and the public realm.

Reaching New Heights: The Story Behind Merdeka 118 Interview with Dato' Tengku Ab. Aziz and Ar. Ahmad Farid Baharuddin

DATO' TENGKU AB. AZIZ TENGKU MAHMUD (TA), CEO OF PNB MERDEKA VENTURES,
AHMAD FARID BAHARUDDIN (FB), PRINCIPAL OF RSP ARCHITECTS —SHARE THEIR INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICONIC MERDEKA 118 AND THE SURROUNDING PRECINCT.
Interview by David TEOH and Edric CHOO
Monday, 3rd March 2026, 2.30 pm – 3.30 pm, Kelambi, Level 92, Merdeka 118
Photography by GarisPXL

Rising 678 metres above Kuala Lumpur, Merdeka 118 is the world's second-tallest building and a striking new symbol of Malaysia's ambition. Developed by PNB Merdeka Ventures, a subsidiary of Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB) — a state-owned investment company — the tower anchors a 19-acre precinct on the historic site of Merdeka Park, next to Stadium Merdeka where the nation's independence was declared in 1957. Blending heritage, public spaces, retail, hospitality, and workplaces, Merdeka 118 is reshaping the southern edge of the city's historic core.

The architects of this tower are Fender Katsalidis, an internationally acclaimed Australian architecture studio behind landmarks such as the Eureka Tower in Melbourne, and RSP Architects Sdn Bhd, one of Malaysia's leading architectural practices with an extensive portfolio of major developments. Together, they have delivered a design that fuses global expertise with local insight, creating a tower that is both technically ambitious and deeply rooted in its cultural context.

In this feature, we speak with Dato' Tengku Ab. Aziz Tengku Mahmud (TA), CEO of PNB Merdeka Ventures, and Ar. Ahmad Farid Baharuddin (FB), Principal of RSP Architects, to share their insights on this landmark project and its surrounding precinct. Guiding the conversation are Ar. David Teoh (DT) and Ar. Edric Choo (EC).

INCEPTION

DT *Tell us what inspired PNB to eventually decide upon the current development masterplan, which includes the iconic Merdeka 118.*

TA We went through a long process to determine what kind of development we wanted to implement in this area. Out of the 40 acres, a portion is dedicated to heritage, which is a state matter. So, what can we do with the remaining space? How do we create a project that respects the past while also having the potential for economic growth in the future?

Initially, we could have started with a series of 60-storey buildings, just like a typical development, but in 2010, we decided to take a different approach. Once we had that in mind, it completely changed the parameters. Having a 118-storey tower in place meant that the urban design and overall development had to be viewed in that context. We wanted to consolidate multiple smaller buildings into one iconic tower, optimising space and respecting the heritage elements.

PNB wanted to create a landmark that reflects Malaysia's heritage while driving economic growth. The master plan was inspired by the historical significance of Stadium Merdeka and the need for a modern, world-class development that also benefits the community. Merdeka 118 was designed to celebrate the nation's past while shaping its future, providing commercial spaces, cultural attractions, and improved public areas.

EC *Was this project initiated by the Malaysian Government or mooted by PNB?*

TA This project was initiated by PNB as part of its long-term investment strategy. It was developed to create a meaningful landmark while contributing to economic and community growth. Yes, since this was a significant undertaking, we needed to secure the government's support. It wasn't initiated by the federal government, but something we thought was necessary to generate economic activity. We also had many meetings with Kuala Lumpur City Hall to have their support, along with other authorities. Once we received the necessary endorsements, it provided the green light for the project to move forward.

EC *Did PNB specify the site for the various components, or was it left to the Architect?*

TA PNB earmarked this location and established the overall vision and key site requirements for the development. While the architects were given a clear brief, they also had the creative freedom to design the mixed-use development that achieves optimal design, functionality, and seamless integration with the surrounding area.


Ar. Ahmad Farid Baharuddin, Principal of RSP Architects


Dato' Tengku Ab. Aziz Tengku Mahmud, CEO of PNB Merdeka Ventures


Ar. David Teoh


Ar. Edric Choo

SELECTION OF ARCHITECTS

EC *How did PNB decide on the architects and consultant team for the project? Was there a competition — if so, what was the nature of the competition?*
TA PNB selected the architects and consultants through a rigorous evaluation process to ensure the best expertise for the project, and Fender Katsalidis (FK) was appointed. It had to be an iconic development, which is how the height of the tower came about - starting with 60 storeys, followed by 100, and finally 118 with transfer floors, mechanical floors, and an observation deck, amongst others. Fender Katsalidis submitted five designs, and the Board approved the diamond- shaped crystalline concept.
We didn't start with a competition because we had a very tight six-month timeframe. Instead, we identified international architects who had to create a global masterpiece. Given the scale of the investment, we had to ensure that we were making the right decision.

EC *Why was there such urgency in making this decision?*
TA In 2010, the country was heading toward a possible economic downturn. At that time, the government decided to introduce two key projects to stimulate the economy: one was a series of highways, and the other was this building project. It was a strategic move to pump investments into the economy while ensuring long-term viability.
DT *How did RSP first get involved in this project? Did RSP participate jointly with FKA?*
FB We were appointed separately by the Client due to our project portfolio and track record, as we had been involved in many other high-rise buildings in Malaysia, including the Felda Headquarters, a 60-storey building, and the NAZA Headquarters, also a 60-storey building. Under construction is the 8 Conlay Development, consisting of the 72-storey Kempinsky Hotel and the 61 and 66-storey Residential Apartments.

DIVISION OF SCOPE

DT *Generally, how were responsibilities divided between FKA and RSP?*
FB At the beginning of the project, FKA takes the lead in the Concept and Schematic Design phases, focusing on the overall architectural vision, spatial planning, and fundamental design concepts. Their involvement is nearly 100% at this stage, while RSP remainsed in the background. Since RSP's role is more technical—ensuring the project complies with local codes and regulations—we stepped in later, when the detailed design and compliance became more critical. A key part of our role at this stage is advising FKA on local requirements to bridge the gap between design intent and Construction implementation.
As the project moved into the Design Development phase, the balance began to shift. While FKA remained actively involved, RSP started taking on more responsibility, especially in the Construction Documentation phase, where we prepared the project specifications and tender documents. At this point, detailed drawings and specifications are developed, building upon FKA's original design intent and specifications.
When it comes to local compliance, most decisions are left to RSP. As the Principal Submitting Person (PSP) to the local authorities, we worked closely with the rest of the consultant team to obtain approvals and ensured the building complied with all relevant regulatory requirements.
As the project neared completion, RSP took over all remaining coordination works. If any major design changes were required, we would consult with FKA to ensure that everything remained true to the original design intent. By the time the project reached the Construction Administration and Post-Construction phases, RSP was fully in control, overseeing execution, quality control, and final adjustments. RSP would go through and arrange all the necessary authority inspections, especially City Hall and the Fire and Rescue Department, while FKA's involvement was reduced. Both firms work closely together, combining our strengths and expertise to keep the process running smoothly from start to finish.
DT *Could you describe the working arrangements at the outset, and what the working relationship was like throughout the entire process?*
FB During construction, FKA would have a full-time representative in Malaysia to oversee the development of the building and the construction detailing. Both firms work closely together, combining their expertise to ensure a smooth process from start to finish. For example, both are responsible for responding to the contractor's Requests for Information (RFI) and reviewing architectural detailing during the shop drawing review.
Regular coordination meetings and workshops, organised by either the Project Manager or the contractor, keep both firms actively engaged in the process. Even during the pandemic, coordination continued seamlessly through online meetings, with frequent communication maintained via digital platforms. This ensured that all project information remained well-documented, transparent, and accessible to the Client as part of the project's audit trail.

CONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES

DT *From the Architect's perspective, what were the challenges faced when constructing this supertall tower?*
FB One of the biggest challenges in building a supertall tower is the structure of the building. For a project above 70 stories, it was a good practice to have some form of checks and balances in the structure design.
So, the Concept Structure Engineer, Thornton Tomasetti, the engineer from New York, had their design peer-reviewed by Leslie Robertson, who designed the World Trade Center. The wind tunnel study, which was also a requirement, was done by RWDI - Rowan Williams Davies & Irwin from Canada and had their work peer-reviewed by CPP Cermak Peterka Peterson from Australia.
The stiffness of the core wall is not always sufficient to resist wind load and seismic forces. Tall buildings tend to sway and twist due to wind loads and wind pressures on the façade.
Therefore, the Engineers have incorporated belt trusses and outriggers to reduce the lateral drift and to control deflection. We have single-storey belt trusses located at Levels 26-26, 60-61, and 96-97, and three-storey belt trusses located at Levels 40-43, 76-78, and 113-116.
There are also 8 mega columns measuring 4.6 × 6m that were introduced along the perimeter to provide additional stiffness.
The other challenge was obtaining Fire Department approvals. This was especially critical for our project, as it's the first of its kind in Malaysia and the second-tallest tower in the world.
A major hurdle was getting the local Fire Department to be familiar with the unique fire evacuation system designed for the tower. The OEO (Occupant Evacuation Operations) Lifts are specially designed for evacuation. This is an innovation from the ICC International Building Code 2009, NFPA 101 Life Safety Code, and ASME A17.1: Safety Code for Elevators and Escalators, introduced after the collapse of the World Trade Center.
Evacuation using the staircase alone would take hours and would not be advisable, especially for individuals with disabilities. The OEO passenger lift system reduces the overall building evacuation time compared to using only the required exit staircases.
Priority is given to the Fire Floor where the Alarm Floor is triggered, followed by the floor above and the floor below. Occupants are evacuated to a Point of Safety in the building identified as the 'Sky Lobby'. We have Sky Lobbies at Levels 40 & 41 and Levels 75 & 76.
Since nothing like this had been implemented in Malaysia before, we had to work closely with the Fire Department to ensure they fully understood how it worked. We had to conduct multiple presentations with our Fire Engineer to walk them through the system and address any concerns.
Thankfully, the Fire Department was highly supportive throughout the process, which helped us secure the fire safety approvals on time. Inspections and clearances for the project's first Partial CCC also went smoothly, keeping things on track.
DT *From the Client's perspective, what would you deem wereto be the major challenges for the Merdeka 118 project?*
TA While every project presents its unique set of challenges, building next to two heritage stadiums required a more careful approach, putting in place appropriate safety and construction mitigating plans.
The financial challenge of constructing Merdeka 118 was overcoming potential cost overruns despite a 6-month delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was achieved through a transparent tender process and effective commercial management, which kept costs within contingencies.
Construction challenges were tackled through collaboration with partners and authorities, securing extended working hours to maintain project timelines and boost productivity. Technical hurdles, such as supporting the tower's weight on deep-bore piles near sensitive structures, were overcome with strategic planning and the use of a cofferdam. Design complexities were addressed by incorporating sustainable technologies and high-speed lifts to ensure efficiency and safety.
EC *How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the progress of the works?*
TA By the time COVID-19 hit, most of our contracts were already in place, and 90% of the materials had been procured. This helped us avoid major logistical delays. However, the pandemic did force a temporary halt in construction, and we had to ensure security at the site during that period.

Merdeka 118 inauguration on 10 January 2024 by the King of Malaysia, Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah. Also present were PNB Group chairman Tan Sri Raja Arshad Raja Tun Uda (left) and PNB Group president and chief executive Ahmad Zulqarnain Onn

INNOVATION

DT *What do you deem to be the major innovations introduced in this project?; Ccould you name innovations that were the world's firsts and innovations that were new to Malaysia?*
FB Wind engineering played a crucial role. We conducted extensive wind tunnel testing to optimise the design and reduce wind loads. The tower's unique shape helps break up wind patterns, making the structure more stable.
We also introduced advanced fire evacuation systems. Instead of requiring all floors to evacuate at once, we designed a staggered evacuation plan that allows people to move safely to the point of safety (sky lobby) before proceeding further down. This system is based on international best practices and was validated by fire engineers from the U.S.

TA The Merdeka 118 project features several key innovations in design, engineering, and sustainability. It integrates advanced building technologies and sustainable solutions, some of which are new to Malaysia, enhancing efficiency and the overall experience for both visitors and those based in the tower.
Designed with a forward-thinking approach, Merdeka 118 remains relevant a decade after its inception, demonstrating how architectural vision can stand the test of time. It is also built with cutting-edge safety features, including an evacuation lift system designed for use during emergencies, a first of its kind in the country. Merdeka 118 tower is now LEED Platinum certified and is actively working towards GBI and GreenRE certifications, reinforcing its commitment to sustainability and environmental responsibility.

URBAN CONTEXT

EC *How do you see this tower in relation to the urban context and the surrounding neighbourhood?*
FB This tower is located in the heart of KL, in Petaling Street, one of Kuala Lumpur's most famous tourist spots, and it's right next to Stadium Negara and Stadium Merdeka, and Chin Woo Stadium, which are important national landmarks.
It is also part of the Golden Triangle, in the heart of the city's modern business and shopping districts. Chinatown is located on Petaling Street, featuring smaller, unique shops and numerous local restaurants that attract not only locals but also tourists seeking a unique experience in Kuala Lumpur.
I see the tower as a kind of bridge between these two areas: the traditional, lively atmosphere of Petaling Street and the sleek, modern vibe of the business district. Bringing them together with a prominent new tower like this one will help shape a more connected and dynamic urban space for the city as it continues to grow and develop.
DT *Does the tower draw inspiration from the local context or architecture?*

FB Yes, the design of the tower seamlessly incorporates elements of local architecture, reflecting a deep connection to the region's cultural heritage. The building's unique faceted façade, resembling an elongated crystalline diamond, is inspired by traditional attire, particularly the intricate songket motif, which features triangulated and crystalline patterns. This design language extends throughout the interior, including the main foyer, where triangulated patterns are also evident. The main reception desk in the lobby draws influence from the Minangkabau roof of Negeri Sembilan. This iconic roof, a hallmark of traditional Malay architecture, has profoundly shaped vernacular design in Malaysia. Its sweeping, curved shape has become a symbol of cultural identity and plays an essential role in the history of Malaysian architecture.
During the recent UIAKL Forum, an audience member asked Karl Fender if the tower's iconic form was inspired by the image of Tunku Abdul Rahman. While the silhouette of the building does indeed bear a resemblance to Tunku Abdul Rahman raising his hand in the Declaration of Independence, it was ultimately concluded that this similarity is purely coincidental. Nonetheless, this interpretation has captured the public imagination, sparking widespread discussion. As a result, it has added sentimental value to the tower, especially given its proximity to heritage buildings and its connection to the memory of our first Prime Minister.

(From left) Ar. Farid Baharuddin, Dato' Tengku Abdul Aziz Tengku Mahmud, Ar. Edric Choo and Ar. David Teoh

ECONOMIC IMPACT

DT *What do you anticipate to be the economic benefit of this project to Malaysia's economy?*
TA The transformation of this historic part of Kuala Lumpur began as early as 2016, with new developments bringing fresh energy to the area. Boutique hotels, sleek residences, vibrant restaurants, and charming cafés now line the streets, while once-forgotten back lanes have been reimagined as pedestrian-friendly, "Insta-worthy" spots. Merdeka 118 builds on this revitalisation, further elevating the area's appeal as a hub for tourism, leisure, and hospitality. Its presence strengthens local businesses, attracts visitors, and enhances the city's global profile. Through initiatives like the Community Grants Programme, Merdeka 118 also fosters growth and resilience within the surrounding community, ensuring lasting economic benefits for the country.
EC *Do you foresee any economic spin-off from the innovations introduced in this project that would be of benefit to our country?*
TA Merdeka 118 is poised to become a global destination, attracting both local and international investments while boosting the tourism, retail, hospitality, and cultural industries. Its presence strengthens Kuala Lumpur's position as a dynamic economic hub, driving business growth and creating job opportunities across multiple sectors.
The revitalisation of the surrounding area, supported by improved infrastructure and community-driven initiatives, fosters entrepreneurship and enhances commercial activities. The integration of the Merdeka Textile Museum (MTM) further elevates the precinct's cultural and historical significance, making it a key attraction for visitors. As a new architectural landmark, it complements the Kuala Lumpur skyline and serves as a catalyst for long-term economic growth.

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE PROJECT

DT *What aspects of the building are you most proud of, apart from the fact that it is the second2nd- tTallest tTower in the world?*
FB Aside from being the second-tallest tower in the world, what I'm most proud of is how it dominates the city skyline. The building features a unique, faceted, slender form, resembling an elongated crystalline diamond. Its 40-story spire is also distinct in both shape and structure.
When fully completed, with all its attractions, this tower will be even more remarkable. Imagine standing on the Glass Floor at Level 40, taking the Observation Deck Lift from Level 1 to Level 118 at an exhilarating speed of 8 meters per second, reaching the top in just 78 seconds. You'll also be able to step into the glass capsules on the east and west sides of Level 116M, 496 meters above ground. For the adventurous, there's the Edge Walk, a 30-meter glass floor outside the building, and the opportunity to climb the spire to 666 meters, where you can enjoy a 360-degree view of the KL skyline. These experiences will undoubtedly make you want to visit the tower again and again.
Currently, the tower stands alone, as the surrounding phases, including the residential towers on the East and West, are still under development. As a result, it captures the attention of the entire city and has already established itself as a landmark. It's a symbol that places Malaysia on the global map.
A unique architectural detail that might go unnoticed is that the tower's spire points north. So, if you ever find yourself lost in the city, simply look up, and you'll know which way to go!
EC *What are your aspirations for Merdeka 118 and the entire precinct? How would you like the entire development to be perceived, appreciated or utilised?*
TA Merdeka 118 was envisioned as a catalyst for change, driving economic revitalisation and growth for the surrounding area. It also reflects our commitment to sustainability in its design, architecture, and construction, making it a forward-thinking workplace of the future.
The Merdeka 118 precinct will be a landmark that seamlessly integrates culture, history, community, and business. Our aspiration is for Merdeka 118 to be a global destination that represents Malaysia's rich heritage.
We didn't want this tower to stand out as an isolated structure. Instead, we ensured that it integrates seamlessly into the surrounding infrastructure. Roads were reconfigured to improve accessibility, and we engaged with the local community from the outset to address their concerns.
This project also rejuvenates the Merdeka Stadium area, which had been underutilised for years. By incorporating mixed-use elements such as residential, retail, and hotel components, we have created a vibrant, 24-hour precinct rather than a simple 9-to-5 business district.

LESSONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

DT *What lessons from this collaboration and project have you internalised in your practice?*
FB Working with multiple local and international consultants has taught us the importance of clearly understanding each other's roles, responsibilities, and limitations. This helps avoid discrepancies, especially when producing drawings, documents and specifications. In a large-scale project like this, where multiple specialists are involved, defining the scope from the start is also crucial.
As the project evolves, it's important to check in periodically to ensure everyone is aligned with their original responsibilities. But above all, clear and open communication, along with strong coordination at both macro and micro levels, is key. Within our architectural team, we've applied the same approach internally to stay organised and deliver the best possible service to our clients.
DT *Are you optimistic about the prospects of Malaysian architecture firms to be world-class — and be able to compete on the same footing globally? What urgently needs to be done for our profession to thrive?*
FB I'm definitely optimistic about the future. Malaysian architecture firms have all the tools they need to become world-class players. We have the knowledge, expertise, and talent to compete on the global stage. Many Malaysian architects are already involved in international projects, which is proof that our capabilities are recognised and valued worldwide.
The key is to shift our mindset. As local architects, we need to believe that we are just as capable as anyone else out there. With the right opportunities, we can shape the architectural landscape both in Malaysia and abroad.
The rapid advancement of technology, coupled with the wealth of knowledge now at our fingertips — particularly with new building materials and advanced design software—means there's no limit to what we can achieve. The sky's the limit.
All we need to do is continue learning and applying this knowledge to our projects.
TA With the right exposure and collaboration, local firms can continue to grow and compete on a global scale. Encouraging innovation and fostering partnerships with international experts will further strengthen Malaysia's architectural landscape.
EC *Will Malaysia see another super-tall skyscraper in the future?*
TA That depends on feasibility. If there is demand and economic justification for another tower, it could happen. But for now, we are proud that Merdeka 118 is completed and will have lasting benefits for the city.

Experiencing Malaysian-ness The embodiment of identity in Placemaking

Jia-Ping LEE, Director, Pollin8 Sdn Bhd & Start-up Board Member of Placemakingx
Email: jiaping@placemakingx.org

Author's Biography

Jia-Ping is a director of Pollin8 Sdn Bhd, an urban rejuvenator and place brand strategy consultancy. As a result of her rejuvenation work on the Kuala Lumpur heritage core as Think City's Programme Director (semi government firm), she has now taken the lead in advocating human-centric place brands via placemaking, not only in Malaysia but also the South East Asian region.

Jia-Ping has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from the University of Melbourne, Australia and guest lectures at University Malaya and University of Melbourne (School of Architecture). In 2019, she was the key note speaker at Convention in The D, organised by the Michigan Municipal League, Detroit Michigan.

Abstract

This article explores the concept of "Malaysian-ness" as an evolving and embodied identity expressed through the practice of placemaking. Rooted in Malaysia's rich multicultural heritage—shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and cultural fusion—the essay highlights how early diasporic communities were the country's original placemakers, crafting spaces that reflected a deep sense of belonging, diversity, and community. Contemporary placemaking in Malaysia builds on this legacy by emphasizing context, cultural relevance, and community engagement. Case studies from George Town, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur demonstrate how place-led development can foster cultural preservation, creative economies, and inclusive public spaces. Through historical insights and modern examples, the article underscores placemaking as a tool for sustaining Malaysian identity, encouraging community cohesion, and celebrating the country's dynamic cultural tapestry.

Experiencing Malaysian-ness: The Embodiment of Identity in Placemaking

The concept of Malaysian-ness conjures a vibrant mosaic of images, words, and a symphony of sounds in my mind. What makes Malaysia extraordinary is its intricate tapestry of ethnicities and cultures—a richness we embodied long before "diversity" and "inclusion" became global buzzwords.

Our multicultural roots trace back centuries, from the 15th-century prominence of Malacca under Parameswara[1] to the 18th-century establishment of Penang and Singapore as free ports by the British East India Company. Over time, the port cities welcomed traders and settlers from across the globe—India (Tamils, Punjabis, Malayalees, Telugus), China (Hakkas, Cantonese, Hokkiens, Hainanese, Fuchows), Armenia, the Baghdadi Jewish community, Portugal, England, the Netherlands, and beyond.

This fusion of peoples, interwoven with local traditions, blossomed into a profound cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—shaping everything from architecture to the very fabric of our social life.

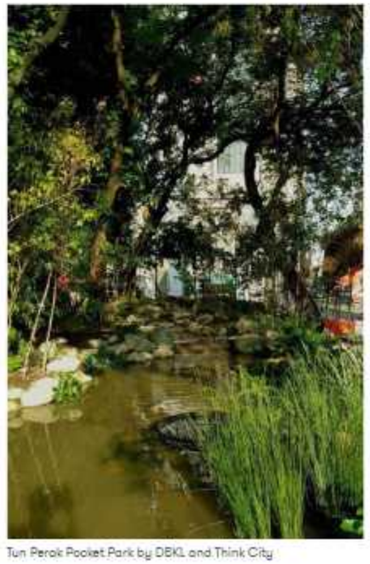
This cultural diversity infused our social life with depth, energy, and an irresistible allure. If placemaking is the art of creating spaces that foster community, identity, and belonging, then I believe the early diasporic communities were the nation's original placemakers—crafting vibrant spaces that still captivate us today. Their legacy lives on, most tangibly in the UNESCO World Heritage cities of Malacca and Penang, where their contributions continue to be celebrated and enjoyed.

From the bustling kopitiams (coffeeshops) where languages and flavors blend effortlessly, to the harmonious coexistence of temples, mosques, and colonial shophouses, our places tell a story of adaptation and unity. The vibrant pasar malam (night markets), the rhythmic calls to prayer mingling with temple bells, and the ornate craftsmanship of Peranakan[2] tiles all contribute to an environment that feels distinctly Malaysian—warm, layered, and alive.

The early traders, settlers, and local communities were our first placemakers, creating nodes of exchange that evolved into thriving cultural hubs. Today, this legacy lives on, where every street corner whispers tales of convergence. But Malaysian-ness isn't confined to heritage zones; it thrives in modern spaces that embrace rojak creativity—mamak stalls under skyscrapers, contemporary art infused with batik motifs, and public squares where festivals of every ethnicity unfold.

Malaysian-ness, therefore, is not a monolithic concept but a dynamic interplay of traditions, values, and aesthetics. Contemporary places and placemaking in Malaysia seek to capture this diversity while fostering a sense of community, unity, shared identity and belonging.

Tun Perak Fountain



Tun Perak Pocket Park by DBKL and Think City

Placemaking in Malaysia

Contemporary placemaking in Malaysia goes beyond aesthetics; it is about creating places that tell stories, evoke emotions, and foster connections, all set in a specific location. Placemaking is about the creation of a place that is relevant to the community that resides and works there. Hence the term Malaysian-ness is not easily defined and differs from place to place depending on the existing communities. Cities in Penang are vastly different in character from those in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Ipoh. Each has their own uniqueness which, when captured, distilled and bottled correctly and with care, will result in a place that not only attracts visitors but also talent. This is very important in smaller towns where many are losing their talent to bigger cities and more developed countries.

The idea of contemporary Placemaking was introduced by two alternative thinkers—William H Whyte[3], and Fred Kent of Project for Public Spaces[4] (PPS) in the 70s. Through his keen observation of social behaviour in public spaces, Whyte, an urbanist, sociologist, organizational analyst, journalist and people-watcher, concluded that—*What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people*[5]. Through the reimagining of Bryant Park with Fred Kent of PPS in the 1980s, the practice of placemaking took off with Kent declaring—*If you plan cities for cars and traffic, you get cars and traffic, if you plan for people and places, you get people and places.*

In Malaysia, one of the first developers to practice placemaking (before the term was made popular) was Sunrise and the development of the Mont Kiara precinct which was previously a rubber estate. This high density area introduced the practice of community development by introducing art spaces within their condominium grounds. These spaces together with micro retail, were run by artists and small businesses, became popular with both the expatriate and local communities. Together with great education and social infrastructure, Mont Kiara quickly became a sought-after address in Kuala Lumpur.

In the 2010s, placemaking gained attraction within two large organisations namely Think City (a semi-government urban Think and Do tank) and Gamuda Land. It was at this juncture that the term placemaking started to penetrate the market. Think City was influenced by Fred Kent of PPS and Gamuda Land, who created a placemaking department then led by Mardiana Rahayu Tukiran who supported Think City's advocacy of placemaking. Both understood that for placemaking to succeed, context was everything. The placemakers in Think City were trained by PPS and they started to put into practice some of their methodologies in rejuvenating parts of George Town. But before we delve deeper into Think City, we must first rewind the clock back to 2008 when both Malacca and George Town were jointly awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

George Town Penang—A Place Led Case Study

In 2008 Khazanah (the sovereign wealth fund of Malaysia) commissioned a masterplan titled The George Town Transformation Programme (GTTP). GTTP called for a Penang-centric approach that sought to restore the city to its former glory from a Penang perspective as opposed to a homogenous western aesthetic approach. So what were the key elements of this Penang-ness? One of the main aspects was the imperative to ensure that the local community was, as much as possible, not be displaced by any future rejuvenation and that the "Place" that they were familiar with would still exist and not be wiped out by modern transformation.

One such example was the existence of street vendors—it was unanimously agreed by the Malaysians in the GTTP team (myself included) that these street vendors be allowed to continue their operations as much as possible, as they were as vital to the place's identity as the historic buildings. Any move to relocate them into a covered hawker centre would not be considered. The guidelines, set out by UNESCO were also another aspect of cultural and social preservation that has kept the core historic zone of George Town pretty much intact.

Another great placemaking success in George Town, located in the buffer zone is Hin Bus Station. Previously one of the city's most stylish private stations, it was shuttered in 1999. An early adopter of placemaking, Hin Bus Station led by Tan Shih Thoe, has successfully built a great place for the craft and artisanal community and to become a must-visit place. This flourishing started with a then little known figure Ernest Zacharevic who decided the place was ideal for an exhibition title—Art Is Rubbish is Art. Zacharevic who has since become an icon is credited with the revival of George Town through his charming wall murals throughout the core zone. The success of his art was due to the fact that he was able to capture the charm of Penang through the depiction of local children at play. Hin Bus Station has also been a key community builder in creating the local artisan market which sees a myriad of offerings from crafts, to works of art to a diverse array of food ranging from coffee to oysters!. Come weekends, the place is filled with families and individuals who come to partake in the lively atmosphere and to mix with fellow creatives or be inspired by the creativity that is on display. Credit is due to them for the fact that they were able to survive despite the Covid lockdown and now 12 years on, they have emerged stronger than ever through the brilliant collaboration with architect Mei Chee Seong to create Co-Ex an adjacent space which was built on an old scrap yard. Most of the material used has been recycled from either the yard or sourced within Penang.

Mei is what one would term a modern "junzi" 君子—an accomplished gentleman who embodies the Confucian ideals of wisdom, integrity, respect, self-cultivation (a commitment to learning) and a skill in the four arts which in those times meant playing an instrument (qin), playing go, calligraphy and painting.

This glimpse into Mei's character perhaps provides us with a clue to the philosophy of COEX which serves to bring together Community and Experiences, Collaborations and Exchanges, Co-design and Experts and so on.

Co-Ex houses Mei's architectural practice as well as his watercolour paintings. Once a day, he has been known to demonstrate his coffee knowledge by serving his guests with hand poured coffee he has roasted. He and his team also curates a whole host of programmes that builds communities—from black and white Cantonese movie nights for the elderly community, to dances, to live indie music performances. COEX also houses amongst others, a coffee shop, an incense shop, a heritage ceramic shop and a bookshop.

In placemaking, partnerships and collaborations are deemed crucial for bonding and success. Thus, these two collaborations between COEX and Hin Bus have created another layer of offering for the community at large as well as paying customers—a win-win for all.

COEX

Kuala Lumpur

After their successful grant programme in George Town, Think City was tasked by Khazanah to expand to Kuala Lumpur (KL) in 2016. The heritage core of KL was rapidly hollowing out and local residents and business owners started to leave the city for newer suburbs. The financial district which was primarily located there wasere also set to relocate to the new hub called TRX located roughly 4.7km away. This vacuum was filled by an influx of male- only migrant residents and businesses. Although the migrant community provided a different vibrancy, it was however at the expense of diversity. The shops and services offered in the city were only catering to one group of residents to with the exclusion of many locals still living and working there, and foreign visitors. Thus Think City used placemaking as a tool to entice locals back by adding some diversity back into a once thriving area.

Kuala Lumpur 2014 – Space Use disparity.

Working together with the City Hall of KL (DBKL), Think City started to transform small pockets of spaces into mini gardens and cultural spaces to create a level of excitement back into the city. In 2014, Think City signed a Memorandum of Understand (MOU) with PPS and the event was graced by Fred Kent. This MOU led to a series of mentorships and workshops by PPS and, many of these initiatives were guided to some extent by PPS' Lighter, Quicker and Cheaper (LQC) approach.

Think City transformed spaces into pocket parks and exhibition spaces—Medan Pasar, the site of KL's first wet market, was transformed into a micro housing exhibition space during the World Urban Forum in Feb 2018. Two micro houses were built on the square to address the lack of housing issue in the heritage core of the city centre. One micro house built by Think City was designed by Tetawowe Architects and incorporated the use of sustainable materials such as recycled UHT boxes for the external walls and roof. Whilst the other micro house built by DBKL showcased how one could fit micro apartments into abandoned buildings. DBKL and Think City also collaborated on rejuvenating an old fountain with the help of Ng Seksan to an urban oasis.

To attract more visitors back into KL, DBKL also started to close roads to facilitate a food market in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad building on Jalan Raja, one of the most iconic streets of KL.

Arts on the Move—Live Drawing

Another LQC approach that became a mainstay, was to transform the Masjid Jamek Light Rail Transit (LRT) station into a performing and visual art space through the "Arts On the Move" programme which ran from 2017-2019 and rebooted in 2023, making it the world's longest curated performing and visual arts programme in a transit station. The key criteria for the curation was—it had to have 90% local content and artists. Within that 90%, there would be some heritage components in the performance thus ensuring the continuation of local art forms such as dikir barat, Chinese Opera, Malay, Chinese, Indian and East Malaysian traditional dances. These were juxtaposed with contemporary art forms such as doodling, live contemporary drawing and place-based photography to ensure relevancy amongst the younger audience.

Arts on the Move Doodle

Arts on the Move Dikir Barat Performance Think City. Photo by Susie Kukathas

Another success story for placemaking is the creation of the Entrepreneur Matching Grant which seeded places like Zhongshan Creative Hub in Kampung Attap and Kwai Chai Hong in Chinatown.

Of the two, Zhongshan is my favourite as the building itself has great character and the curation of the place done artfully by Liza Ho, has managed to retain the building's charming yet quirky character. Since its launch in 2018, it has retained 100% occupancy and has expanded into another building called the Zhongshan Annex. Both the original building and the annex is home to 2 record shops (one for hip hop lovers and the other for punk rock aficionados), one lifestyle beauty/wellness store, a bespoke stationary store, a sourdough bakery and restaurant, 2 restaurants and a bar, a bespoke tailor, a design archive, two design consultancies, a community library, two fine artists' studios, a recording artist's studio and a lawyer's office. And of course, there is a quaint little nook which has my favourite coffee corner called Piu Piu Piu Café and an art gallery called The Back Room.

This together with quarterly festivals and parties, creates a great place where the young, hip and the slightly alternative crowd can 'hang'.

Zhongshan exterior


zhongshan-Central Spine

Bangsar—A Case Study

It would be remiss of me not to mention two successful placemaking projects in the upscale suburb of Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. One project was Kebun Kebun Bangsar (KKB) which is an urban farm and garden situated beneath the electricity pylons. The brainchild of Ng Seksan, a renowned landscape architect who wanted to increase the availability of public spaces. This 7-acre garden was given a Think City grant and opened in 2018 and within a few years was self-sustaining. One of the keys to their success was the cows who were brought in to maintain the grass and provide fertiliser. These cows helped KKB cut its operating costs by ¾ enabling it to thrive utilising the permaculture farming method. The farm with its refugee running vegetable plots and education programmes, has been amazingly successful and has inspired a few others to start their own initiative. In 2023, Garden Futures selected KKB as one of six extraordinary gardens of the world[6].

Kebun Kebun Bangsar

APW in Bangsar is also a noteworthy mention. A former printing factory turned into a creative campus full of eateries, creative outlets and offices. Here contemporary architects in Malaysia such as Studio Bikin and POW Studio are reimagining traditional design principles to create spaces that resonate with modern sensibilities while staying rooted in cultural heritage.

Helmed by Ee Soon Wei, APW has gone through a few iterations. The first consisted of a few large restaurants, offices and a co-working space. The pandemic created the need for another rethink as co-working was eschewed in favour of Working from Home. The latest iteration, with smaller shops, I feel is the best one yet. In 2024, APW gain international recognition with the opening of the Coach experience store and café. This Coach concept store is one of the kind in Asia and the first to be located in a non-mall premise. In a lovely nod to APW, Coach has embedded the history of APW into its store display, providing context to both their shared history and love of their craft.

APW before Rejuvenation

APW after Rejuvenation

APW before Rejuvenation

APW after Rejuvenation

Ipoh

Ipoh old town has been going through a resurgence in the last decade. It is a charming town which was the centre for tin mining and slowly lost its allure when the mines closed and the call of KL and Penang became too enticing for the young.

However, Ipoh now has a whole host of placemakers hoping to put their home back on the map. There is an organisation called P-Lab led by Chok Yen Hau that looks at bringing to light all that is charming in secondary cities.

Chok, a former journalist, took his fascination for stories to the next step. Instead of just writing about people and places, he decided to form PLab, relocate his whole family to Ipoh, to see what would happen if he curated experiences instead. In his journey, he was deeply inspired by Ho Pei Chun from Skyyard, one of Taiwan's most beautiful homestays. Ho's placemaking method of discovering the special elements that made up the DNA of the place and then put them all together in a series of programmes or collaborations to create something magical where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Chok then spent his time discovering the artisans and the cultural leaders in Ipoh and helped create awareness for their products or their businesses.

Inspired by Ho, one of Chok's first projects was putting together an organic farmer called Ah Niao, together with Vooi Yam, a potter, and Sam who has worked at a Michelin star restaurant in the United Kingdom. Together they created a dining experience that touched a Taiwanese journalist who then wrote an article about her Ipoh experience. Buoyed by this, Chok began to put together more collaborations by focusing on visits to local operators across various industries, including traditional trades, artisanal crafts, and other community-based businesses. In the 7 years he and his team have created what he terms as Impact tourism where customized tours for placemaking teams and University Social Responsibility (USR) teams are designed so that the local to global theme can spread.

Chok Yen Hau and Photos of Community events and Community Artisans courtesy of PLab

Conclusion

Malaysia is a place where placemakers thrive. Its richness and unique sense of place is woven from the interplay of cultures, histories, and traditions that have shaped its identity. Whether it is a Malaysian rejuvenating a heritage enclave, opening a scone shop in Ipoh or an upscale laksa store in KL, true Malaysian placemaking goes beyond physical design—it captures the soul of our shared heritage, where diversity is not just acknowledged but celebrated as the very essence of belonging.

To design places that encapsulate this whilst allowing room for other cultures is the epitome of being Malaysian. Afterall, we have been opening our doors to welcome the world since the 15th century. Being open, warm and welcoming are quintessential Malaysian traits that entice talents to stay or attracts them to relocate here.

The concept of Malaysian-ness is thus, to honour this living and ever evolving tapestry. It means crafting places that invite shared experiences, reflect multicultural narratives, and foster organic connections—because in Malaysia, place is not just where we are, but who we are together.

Coach at APW

Footnotes

1. Parameswara (1344 – c. 1414), thought to be the same person named in the Malay Annals as Iskandar Shah, was the last king of Singapura and the founder of Malacca. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parameswara_of_Malacca

2.The Peranakan Chinese are an ethnic group defined by their genealogical descent from the first waves of Southern Chinese settlers to maritime Southeast Asia. The Peranakan Chinese are often simply referred to as the Peranakans.[a][6] Peranakan culture, especially in the dominant Peranakan centres of Malacca, Singapore, Penang, Phuket, and Tangerang, is characterized by its unique hybridization of ancient Chinese culture with the local cultures of the Nusantara region, the result of a centuries-long history of transculturation and interracial marriage. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peranakan_Chinese

3.William H. (Holly) Whyte (1917-1999) is the mentor of Project for Public Spaces because of his seminal work in the study of human behavior in urban settings. While working with the New York City Planning Commission in 1969, Whyte began to wonder how newly planned city spaces were actually working out—something that no one had previously researched. This curiosity led to the Street Life Project, a pioneering study of pedestrian behavior and city dynamics. Source: https://www.pps.org/article/wwhyte

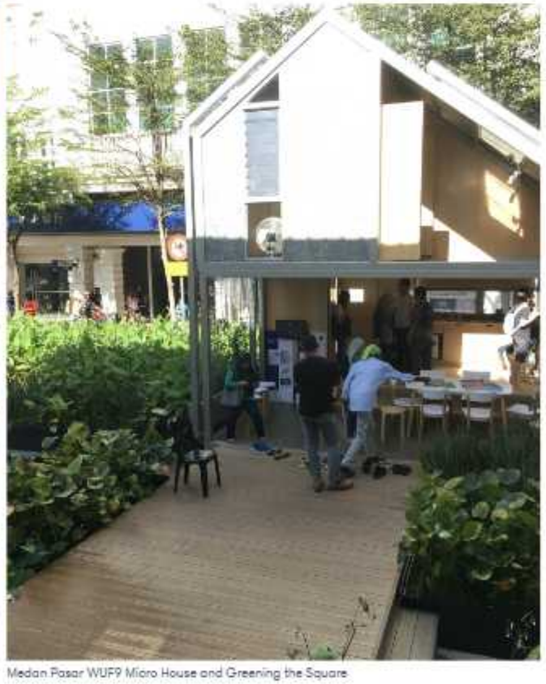
4.Fred Kent, founder and former president of Project for Public Spaces, speaks widely on public spaces and placemaking, and is working on two placemaking initiatives—The Social Life Project and PlacemakingX. He is a leading authority on revitalizing city spaces and one of the foremost thinkers in livability, smart growth and the future of the city. Source: https://www.pps.org/people/fkent

5.Source: https://www.pps.org/article/wwhyte

6.See https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230505-five-extraordinary-gardens-around-the-world

World Urban Forum 2019 - Water based garden for the Micro houses

Medan Pasar WUF9 Micro Houses and Greening the Square



Medan Pasar WUF9 Micro House and Greening the Square

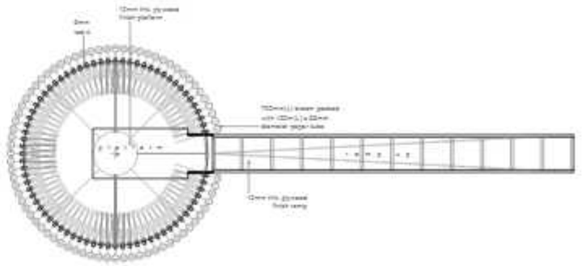
Rambut Rambut / Temple of Togetherness

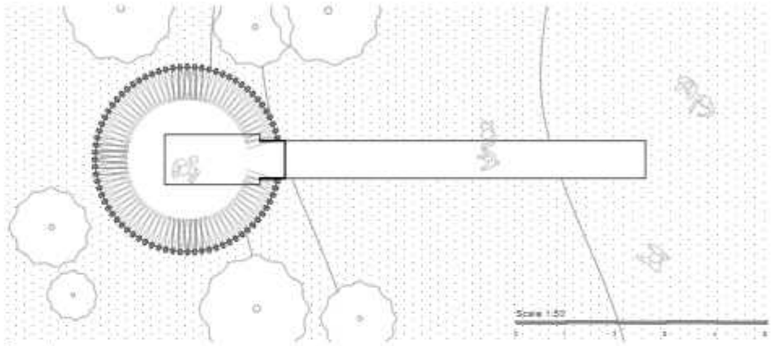
View inside the installation

Landscape Architecture Firm: Bunga Design Atelier
Principal Designer: Mior Aizuddin FAHMI
Design Team: Mohamad Al-HAFIZ, Aliqhwan AZRAEI, Nik Nur AZLIN, and few other students/volunteers / strangers
Location: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Area: 14.86 sq.m
Completion Date: 2023
Photography: Bunga Design Atelier

A temple is a place of sanctity and devotion, created specifically for the act of worship. It serves as a sacred space where individuals seek solace, reflection, and connection, not only with the divine but also with one another. In this spirit, Rambu(T) Rambu(T) emerges as a unique architectural installation that cherishes and honors the essence of togetherness, a celebration of unity, friendship, and mutual understanding among people.

Front view of the installation





Floor plan

Situated within the expansive landscape of Titiwangsa's urban park in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Rambu(T) Rambu(T) is not merely a structure, it is an outdoor sculpture designed to offer a serene retreat amid the bustling city. Anchored by an 880mm-diameter concrete-filled culvert embedded into the ground, this seemingly modest yet profound temple rises to a height of 4m. At its entrance, a 4m-long ramp extends outward, serving as a welcoming invitation to visitors, urging them to step forward and become part of the space. This invitation is not just physical but symbolic, an open call to immerse oneself in an experience of contemplation and connection.

Upon ascending the ramp and reaching the core of the installation, visitors find themselves in an environment unlike any other. The interior, enveloped in stillness and simplicity, gently encourages visitors to pause and reflect. This quiet emptiness invites a moment of introspection while also fostering an awareness of others who share the space. In this shared silence, a subtle yet meaningful sense of connection emerges, reminding visitors of the quiet strength found in unity.

What makes Rambu(T) Rambu(T) particularly distinctive is its unconventional choice of materials. The primary component of the sculpture is a simple yet universally recognizable household item in Malaysia, the 'penyapu lidi' or broomstick. This choice posed an initial challenge, as broomsticks are not conventional building materials. A creative and economical solution was devised to transform them into a functional architectural element. Paper tubes were utilized to form baton-like components, onto which precise puncture marks for metal rods were mapped out. Once assembled, these elements formed a strong diagrid structure emerging with no beginning or end, a perfect circle. This formation not only embodies unity but also serves as a visual metaphor for the seamless connection between people and communities.

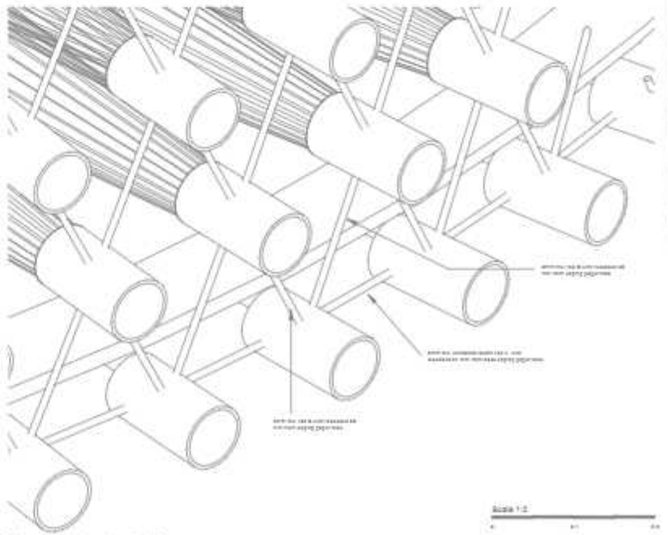
Overall view of the installation

The construction of Rambu(T) Rambu(T) was a collaborative effort, staying true to the ethos of Do-It-Together (DIT). A diverse group of talented individuals came together to bring the vision to life, ensuring representation across various demographics. This collective effort emphasized the importance of inclusivity, reinforcing the notion that the temple was made not just for a singular group but for everyone. With a large number of participants involved, it became essential to establish a clear and efficient system of coordination. Effective communication and organization ensured that each contributor was aligned with the common goal, resulting in a cohesive and meaningful outcome.

Close-up view of the broomstick structure

Entrance to the installation

Visitor enters via a long ramp



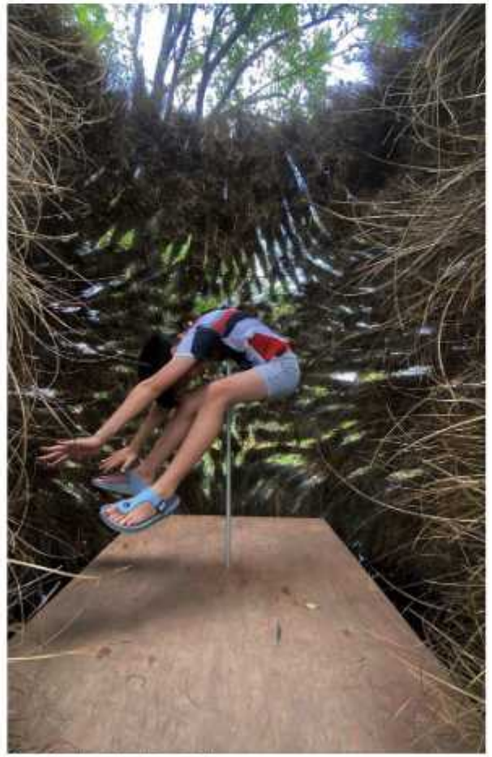
Broomstick structure detail

Rambu(T) Rambu(T) is more than an architectural feat, it is a testament to the power of unity and shared purpose. It stands as a reminder of the sanctity of human connection, inviting visitors to experience togetherness in its purest form. Made together and to be appreciated together, the sculpture will sit in its chosen context for years to come, in the hope that visitors will leave with a new understanding of how precious and sacred our unity is.

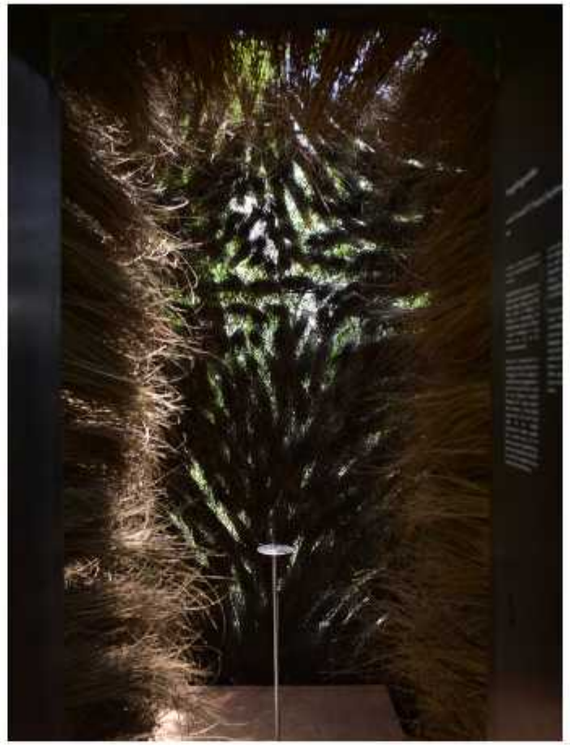
Close-up view of the façade

View at night

View inside the installation



View of a visitor inside the installation

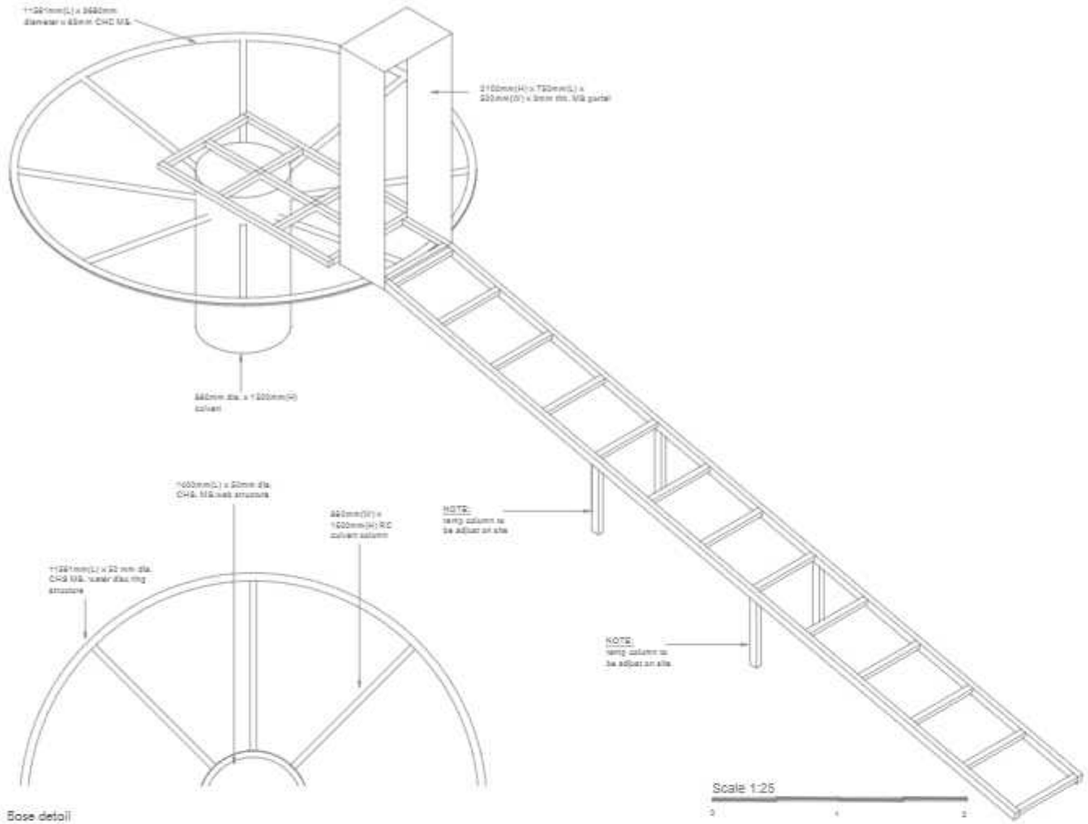


View inside the installation

Some graphic works on the entrance portal

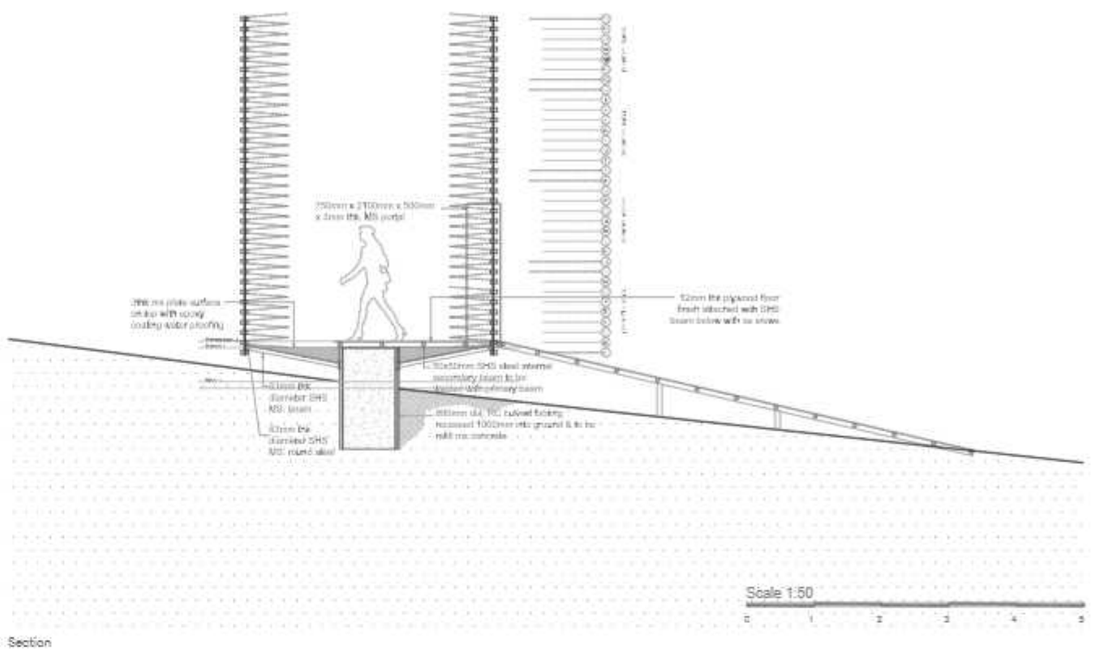
Process of making the broomstick baton

Materials involved in making the broomstick baton

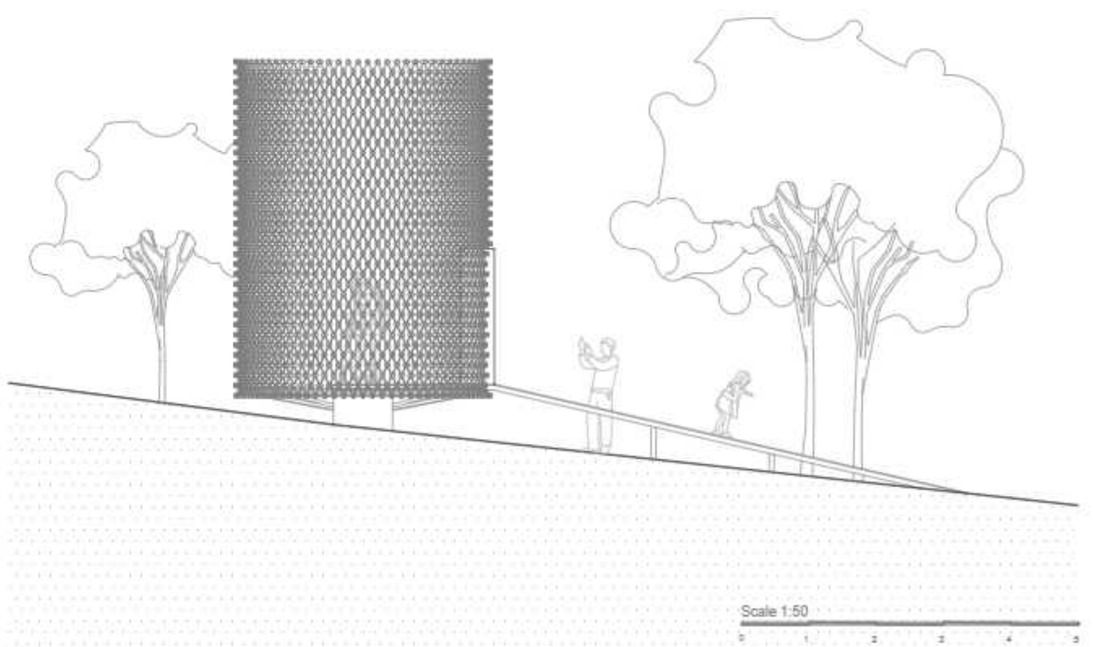


Base detail

Visitors going up the ramp to enter the space



Section



Elevation

Women's Aid Organization Shelter Home

Entrance view of the shelter

Architecture Firm: VERITAS Architects
Principal Architect: Syah KAMARUDDIN
Design Team: CHOONG Wei Li
Location: Klang Valley, Malaysia
Area: 629.65 sq.m
Completion Date: January 2022
Photography: WILBER

The WAO Shelter Home is a Corporate Social Responsibility project to rebuild a 1960s house that had been struck by lightning and partly destroyed by fire. The house much deteriorated and due to its condition, it needed extensive rebuilding. The burnt roof tiles were salvaged from the partially demolished house. The existing house was a safe home for rescued children under eighteen, who found refuge within its walls.
The design idea is to keep portions of the old structure for the administration zone and create two-storey annexes for the residential zone. In between, the administration and residential zones share a green courtyard serving as a communal space.
The WAO Shelter home is one of the first childcare centers with green certification achieving the highest Platinum score to date. The house design focuses on its passive and active cooling strategies, recycled materials, and optimized use of renewable energy.

Pocket garden connecting interior spaces

Bamboo lined concrete feature wall made with hard-cut bamboo formwork form donated bamboo stems

Perforated fence of concrete blocks allow ventilation into courtyard

Discarded free material samples eg. marble tiles collected form various developers/ architect suppliers and repurposed at entrance foyer

Social spaces by the slope for various events

The house is oriented to enable good daylight penetration with minimum solar heat gain even with large openings at the ground. Cross ventilation breezes and convective airflows were achieved via the central courtyard and permeable screen walls. Besides the main rooms, wet areas i.e. toilets, bathrooms, and kitchens were designed with operable windows and vent walls for natural ventilation and daylighting.
To reduce the impact of internal air pollutants emitted by finishes on occupant health, low VOC paints, environmentally friendly adhesives were used as interior surface finishes. Besides, several certified green label products were used such as lightweight wall panels and mineral roof tile.
With the limited budget valued at approximately RM180 per square foot, the new shelter home reused various recyclable materials such as the rejected porcelain tiles and sample marble tiles from the developers, excess stock sanitary ware and fittings from the suppliers, and the burnt roof tiles from the fire-damaged house to create a new protective interior screen wall.
The Home was the result of a six-year project with a limited budget; the new two-and-a-half-storey children's home finally marked its completion on 20 January, 2022, with a total built-up of 6700 square feet. Despite the pandemic and 2 major lockdowns, the shelter is a beacon of hope, just like the burnt roof tile screen wall, which symbolizes a gesture of recovery, regeneration, and resilience. It is hoped that this calm and sheltered environment will inspire the children who have suffered domestic abuse and violence and inspire people to create a more supportive and regenerative environment for those less fortunate.

Hand-crafted protective screen

The threshold doorway transitions to a calm, secured haven for abused children

Internal courtyard linking public and private secured spaces for shelter residents

Hand-crafted perforated wall constructed by recycled material

Backyard amphitheatre for outdoor learning promotes social interaction

Window to wall ratio optimized for maximum thermal comfort and low energy usage

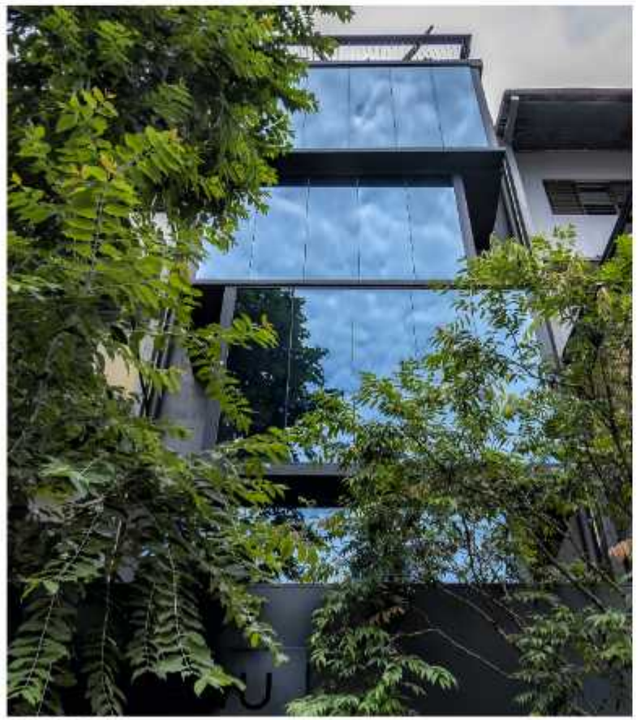
Natural lit & well ventilated corridor connecting all rooms at upper floors

UR-MU @ Bukit Bintang

Porte Cochere

Architecture Firm:	DRTAN LM Architect
Architect:	TAN Loke Mun
Year Completed:	2022
Land size:	150.0 sq.m
Built-up:	646.6 sq.m
Photographer:	LIN Ho

The Urban Museum at Jalan Bedara or Ur-Mu is a purpose-built contemporary art museum that features selected artworks and eclectic objects from the collection of a private art patron. Located in one of the last remaining residential areas in the Golden Triangle, it is right in the heart of the city centre. Ur-Mu opened its doors to the public in May 2022.
Ur-Mu is housed in a 1950s modernist four-storey walk-up apartment building comprising eight two-bedroom flats; the original layout remains intact, with additions including a lobby, roof-top garden, lift, washroom for the disabled, and new façade.



Facade Detail & Green

Facing Jalan Bedara

Fenestration Act As a Projection Screen Of The Surrounding Trees And Sky

Encapsulating Sculpture Garden Into The Interior Lounge

The industrial steel and red brick entry and modern staggered glazed cubic form immediately stand out from the rest of the neighbours, but still pay homage to its surrounding scale. It offers a glimpse of how the low-density urban townscape might evolve in the future. The museum, which displays the collector's eclectic taste, features over 100 artworks by artists mainly from Malaysia as well as from the surrounding region.

The experience at Ur-Mu has been designed to keep each visitor in mind, making it a space that is accessible to all. Each floor is divided into two sections. Categorised thematically, the artworks have been curated for the sections on every floor in accordance with their corresponding narratives. As visitors enter the lobby on the ground floor, a Banksy welcome mat on the ceiling provides an unconventional greeting.

The interior of the space is designed with the sculptures and artworks displayed along the wall of a sky-lit ceiling in accordance with Brâncuși's concept of spatial arrangements, creating "mobile groups" regularly rearranging the sculptures on display to demonstrate spatial relationships and to emphasise the interconnectivity of the pieces. Stepping outside onto the rooftop terrace, visitors will be in awe of the commissioned outdoor sculpture by Abdul Multhalib Musa titled Wing It! The large-scale sculpture complements the city skyline with a spectacular view of the Kuala Lumpur Tower and the bohemian neighbourhood below.

The rooftop garden is called "Made's Garden". Adopting Made's design philosophy of embracing architectural ideals and the splendour of tropical flora, coupled with breathtaking views, constitutes the success of Balinese gardens. In the interior section of the rooftop is the "Sculpture Lounge," featuring an eclectic selection of freestanding three-dimensional artworks, wall sculptures, and two-dimensional artworks.

Soulpture Lounge

Soulpture Wing It! Overlooking The City Skyline

Outdoor Furniture Detail

Ventilation Oculus

Gallery - Framing Modernity

Amenities

Perforated Stairs For Stack Effect Ventilation

Gallery Overlooking Back Alley

Gallery-Raksasa

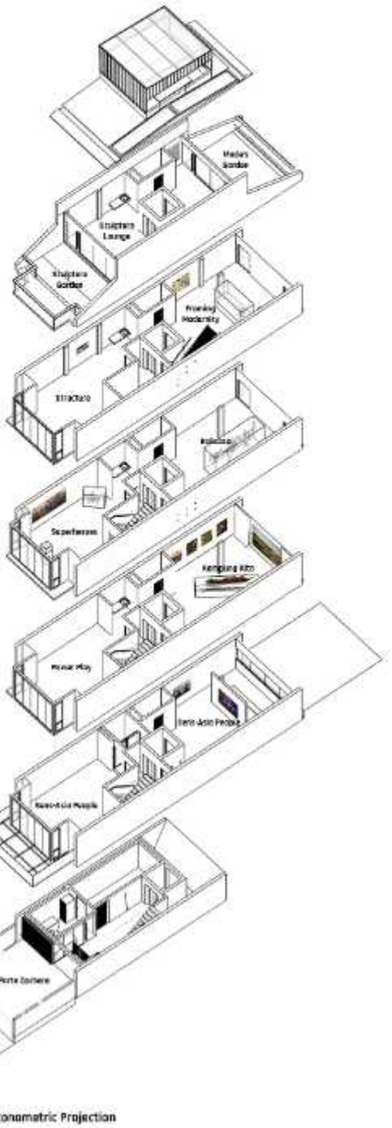
Gallery Transition

Accentuating The Reality Of Kuala Lumpur's Back Lanes Through a Set Of Decal Graphics Titled "The Rat Race"

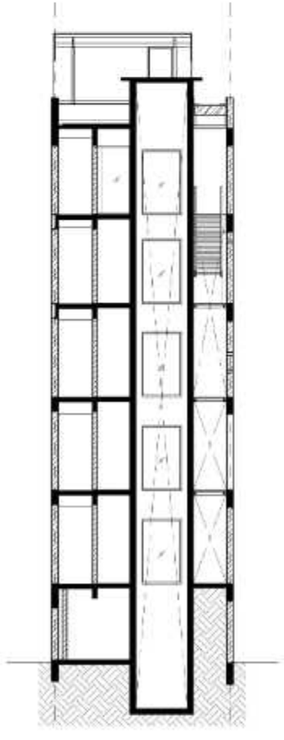
Integral Seating Placement For Visitor To Pause & Interact With The Arts

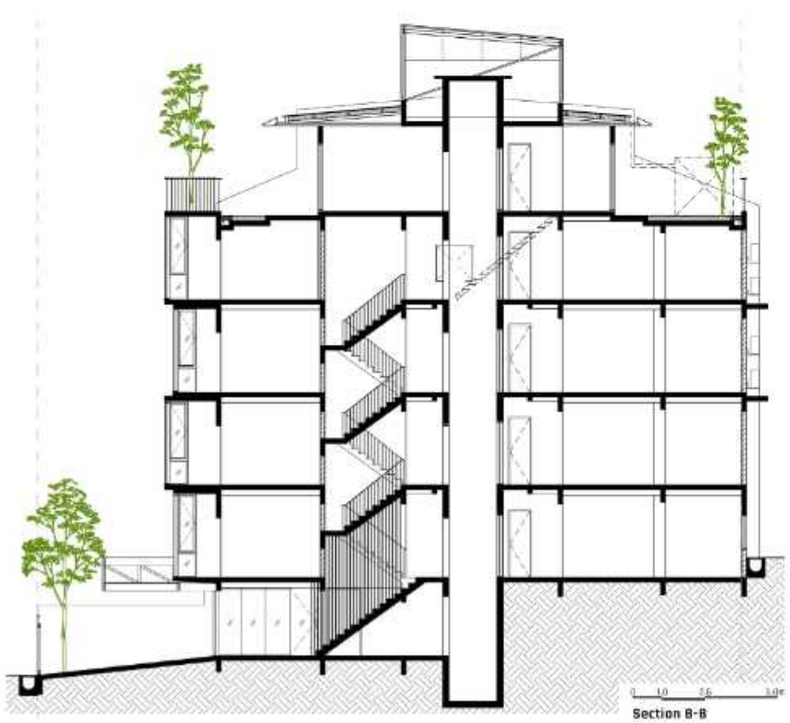
Front Elevation

Rear Elevation



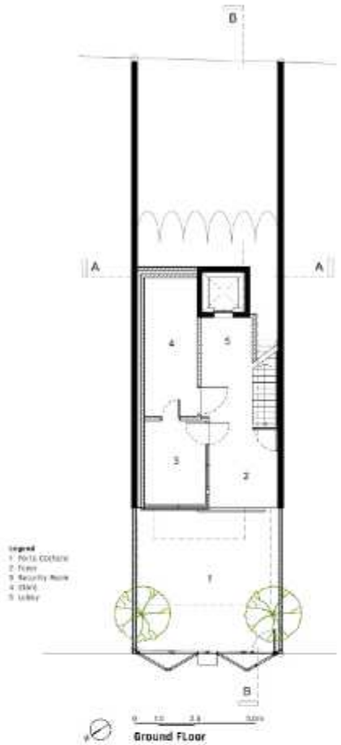
Axonometric Projection





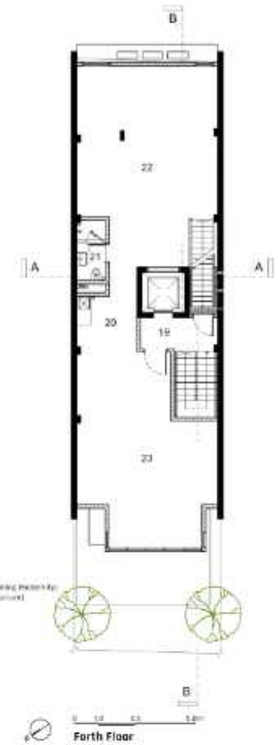
Section B-B

Section A-A

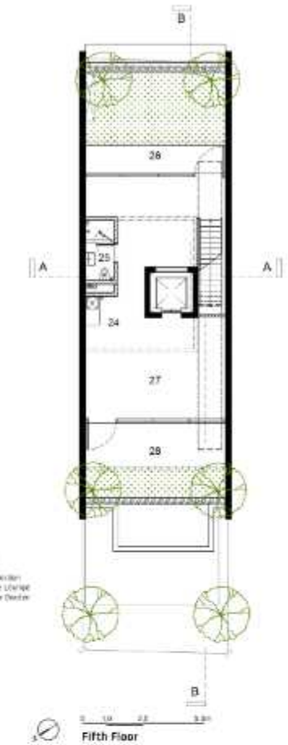


Ground FLoor

First Floor



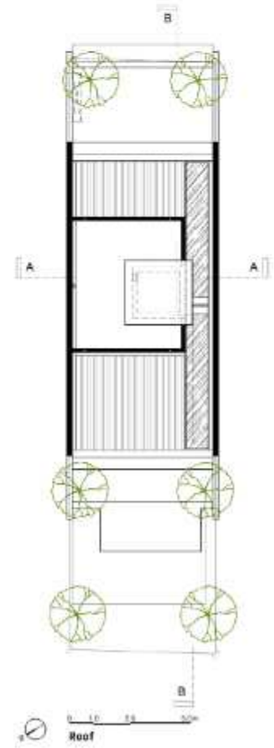
Forth Floor



Fifth Floor

Second Floor

Third Floor



Roof

Sama Square

SAMA-SAMA A one-stop community cum commercial mixed development, SAMA Square is a flagship project bringing together a whole fleet of programs.

Architecture Firm: TKCA Architects Sdn Bhd
Principal Architect: Rien TAN
Design Team: TAN Kwon Chong, LAM Chee Hau
Location: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Completion Date: December, 2023
Area: 16,794.16 sq.m
Photographer: HeartPatrick, TKCA Architects

SAMA Square: Reinventing Urban Connectivity in Setapak

Nestled in the vibrant heart of Setapak, SAMA Square emerges as a groundbreaking landmark, pioneering a new paradigm in community and Commercial development. This project epitomizes the spirit of unity and communal engagement, encapsulated in its name, "SAMA SQUARE," which translates to "togetherness." As a beacon of community and multi-generational interaction, SAMA Square invites the residents of Kampung Baru Air Panas and beyond to celebrate life in its myriad forms, from shopping and dining to leisure and activities, all accessible from its strategic location at Setapak.

Unveiling the Heartbeat of Setapak

SAMA Square is thoughtfully segmented into three distinct zones: the Main Market Building, offering a plethora of dining and shopping experiences; the Open Street People Plaza, a dynamic space for pop-up events and gatherings; and the Retail Village, a curated collection of shops, eateries, and service outlets designed to cater to every need and desire.

Design Ethos: A Canvas of Urban Vitality

SAMA Square is a bold response to the challenges and opportunities of urban living in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur. By adopting a 'club sandwich' approach to its design, the project maximizes the use of its ground plane, creating a layered experience of public plazas, markets, and retail spaces that not only enriches the urban fabric but also promotes sustainable and vibrant community interactions.

Splash of Colour Aerial View of SAMA Square showing Vibrantly Colored Retail and Market Spaces Uniting Under One Roof.

Celebrating Vibrancy of Life: The Heart of Community Engagement
The overarching planning concept of SAMA Square is to empower and engage the local community through an integrated design that fosters social interaction, supports active lifestyles, and encourages a dynamic interplay of public and private spaces. This vision comes to life in the People's Plaza, a central hub that connects various elements of the project, creating a seamless flow between the food court, market, and retail village.

Masterplan: Weaving Community Threads Through Innovative Design
Through its comprehensive mix of amenities with colourful metal decking roof and facade for community markets, retail villages, and pocket gardens, SAMA Square is poised to become a pulsating heart of the community.

Retails Entrance A place where everyone gets together and celebrate life.

Drop Off of Retails Village Drop off area allowing easy access into the retail & market area.

A Tapestry of Spaces: From People's Plaza to Urban Retreats
The market at SAMA Square is a revolutionary space that transcends traditional market experiences. It is a hub of freshness and variety, housing fashion wear, coffee roasteries, and food courts alongside bakeries and patisseries. The market's design, with its translucent facades and strategic lighting, creates an ambiance that is both inviting and innovative, fostering a unique shopping and dining experience that extends into the evening hours.

A sustainable Market: A Beacon of Light and Life
"SAMA SQUARE" redefines the marketplace, setting new standards for cleanliness, organization, and accessibility. The modular stall design and linear organization streamline operations and enhance the shopping experience, connecting seamlessly with residential areas and providing easy access for all. The development is meticulously designed to optimize rainwater harvesting, passive ventilation and natural lighting, catering specifically to the tropical climate. This approach not only enhances comfort but also promotes sustainable design by significantly reducing energy consumption.

Conclusion: SAMA Square - Where Every Day Is a Celebration of Community
SAMA Square stands as a monument to community, vibrancy, and innovation in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur. Through its thoughtful design, strategic planning, and commitment to inclusivity, SAMA Square not only meets the needs of its community but also inspires a new vision for urban living.

People Plaza Market place with community & people's plaza connecting the food kiosks and clustered landscape retail villages.

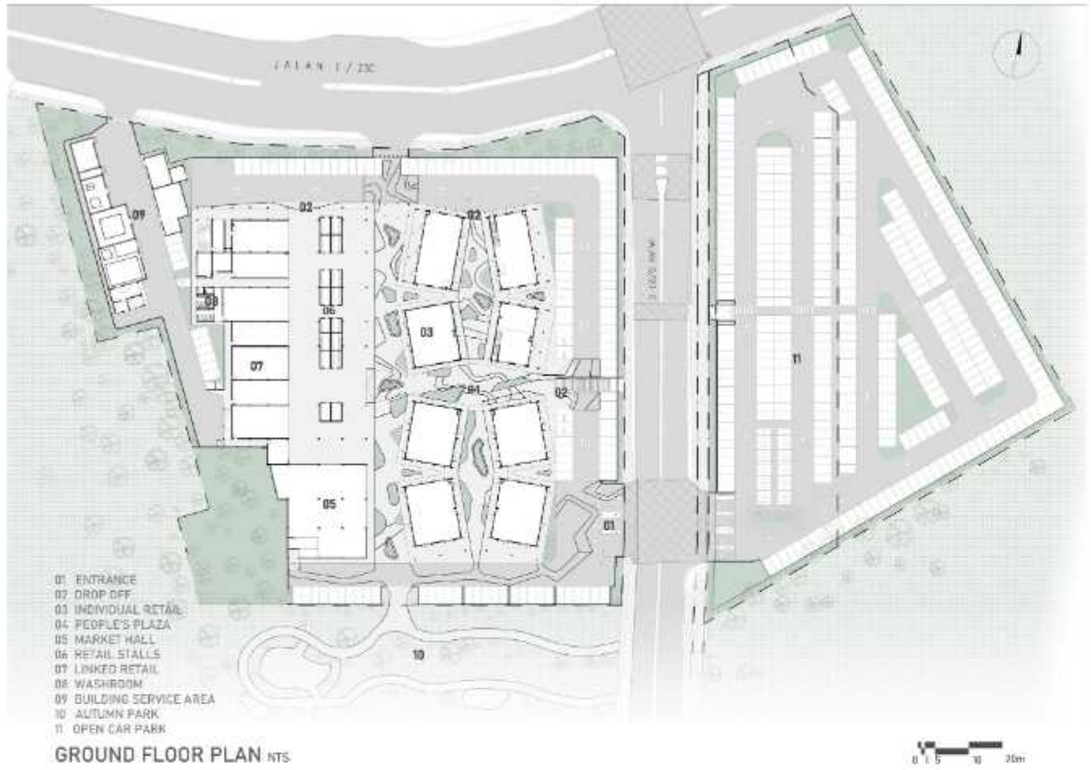
Individual Retail Village : Independent Facade details of the retail units with layering of vibrant colors.

Community Entrance : People's plaza connecting the sheltered tropical community market, food stalls and clustered landscaped retails

Market Internal Food Kiosks : Redefining the market experience through innovative open-air market

Market Place : Market place with passive design through natural light and cross ventilation

Vibrant Market Place : Colourful Market place overlooking the people's plaza with the play of shadow & Light



GROUND FLOOR PLAN NTS

Ground Floor Plan

SECTION NTS

"Section illustrating the tropical design featuring a high-ceiling market space, complemented by pocket gardens surrounding the retail units."

NORTH ELEVATION NTS

"Front elevation (North Elevation) showcasing the community entrance."

Design development and strategy

Sentul Works

Sentul Works Front Elevation

Architecture Firm: O2 Design Atelier + Choo Poo Liang Architect
Architect: Edrio CHOO Poo Liang
Year Completed: 2021
Land size: 9688.33 sq.m
Built up: 3,703.07 sq.m
Photographer: David Yeow Photography

Sentul Works is nestled within the extended park setting of Sentul Park in Sentul West, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where the Federated Malay State Railway (FMSR) rail complexes were established in 1904. The century-old colonial building was formerly the headquarters of FMSR under British rule.

Existing ruin of Sentul Works: Aerial View

Existing remaining party brick wall

Existing ruin of Sentul Works: Courtyard View

Existing ruin of Sentul Works: South East View

Rear View of Sentul Works

For years, this colonial building with its distinctive brick-and-concrete arched-colonnades façade stood prominently as a hollow shell amidst the leafy canopy of the park's big old trees until YTL land Design Group spearheaded its restoration to create a unique atmosphere for a compatible new use as a modern office building. The brief to the architect was to ensure that building adaptations do not deviate materially from the building's original architecture. The "new" must not overwhelm the "old"; ideally, both elements should coexist to express a fresh aesthetic reflecting the building's age and heritage.

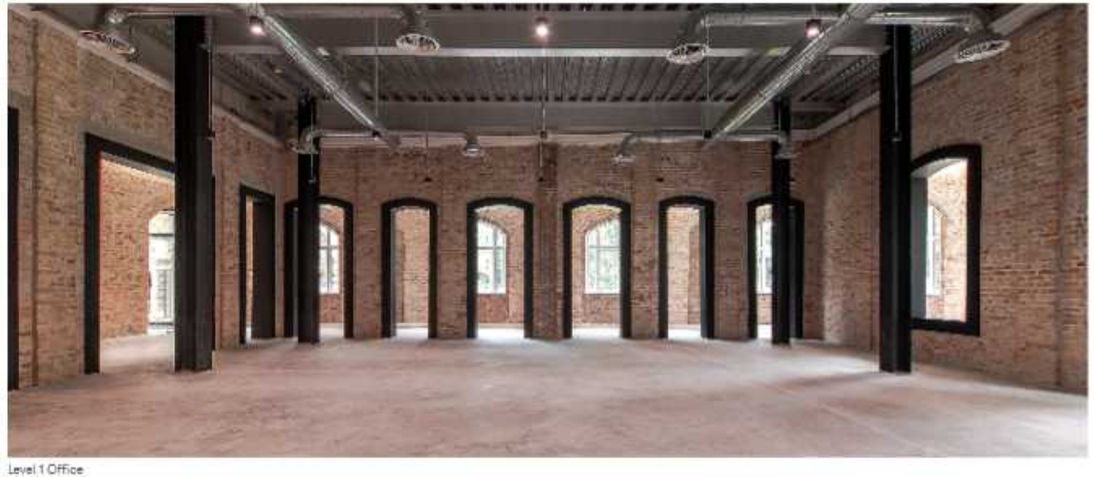
The original layout of the Sentul Works consists of 2 main spaces separated by a central double volume hallway. Adapting to the original symmetry of the building interior, the new free-plan office spaces are flanked around the original hallway, which now serve as a double volume central atrium. A bridge on the first floor links the office floor plates at both sides. Visual connection is established between tenants on the ground and first floor within the working environment without compromise on privacy. The interior of the office is planned as a flexible free plan, giving tenants maximum adaptability according to their working needs.

Centre Atrium

Green wall Reception

Aerial View

Ground Floor Office



Level 1 Office

Level 2 Office

1st floor Mezzanine

Main staircase

Pop Out Balcony

Toilet

New and Old

The new extended second and third floors form a new mass rising from the majestic colonial form at the base. Steel posts and beam structures supporting the new floor slabs lightly raise from the ground, well-integrated, and yet structurally independent from the colonial structure. This, at the same time, brought the architecture challenge of creating a relationship between the old and the new. The new mass is made recessed inwards from the main colonial block below as a means to preserve the scale and presence of the old.
Corten steel which is used as an external building surface for the projected new mass above the existing building structure blends harmoniously with the exposed steel frame skeleton of the adjacent old railway workshops. The Corten cladding gives a modern cutting-edge outlook and yet embodies a rich warm texture that resonates with the surrounding old rustic material palettes.

View toward Atrium box

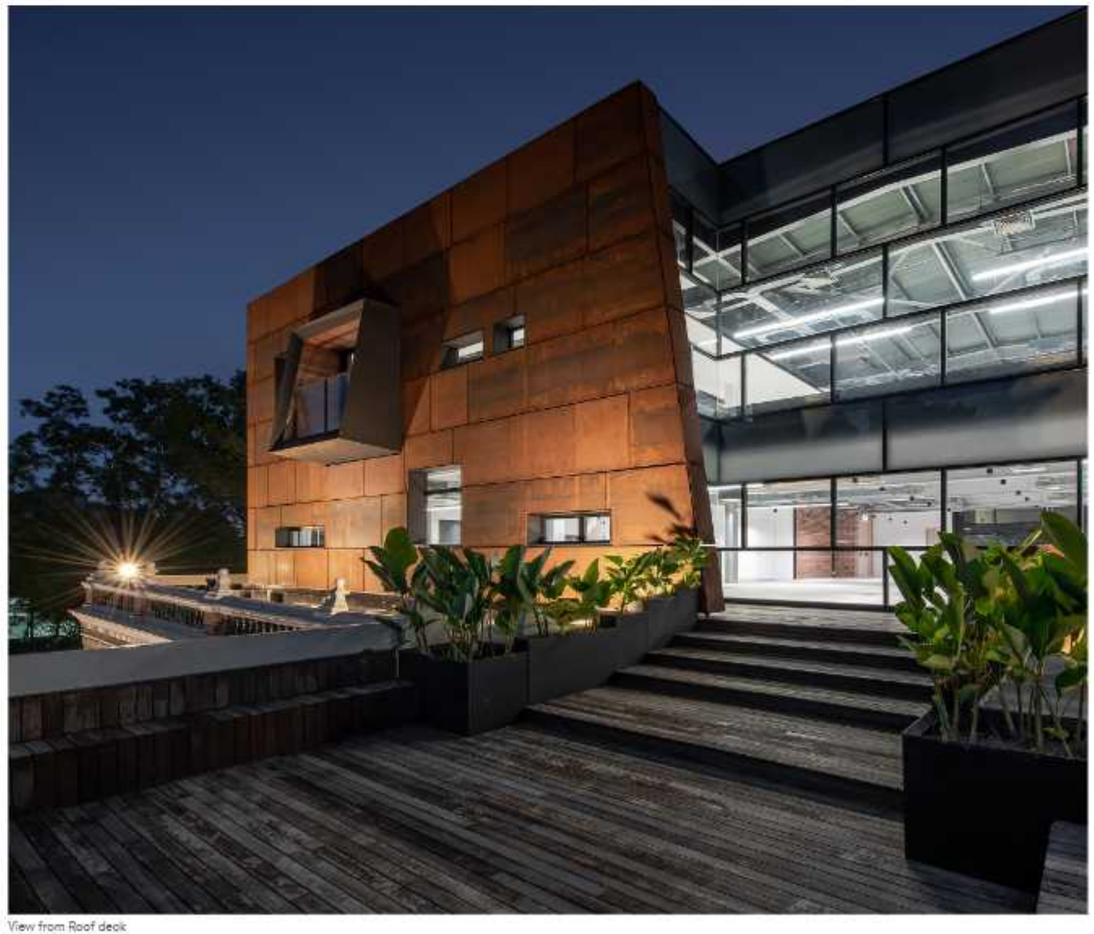
View from link bridge

Northwest View

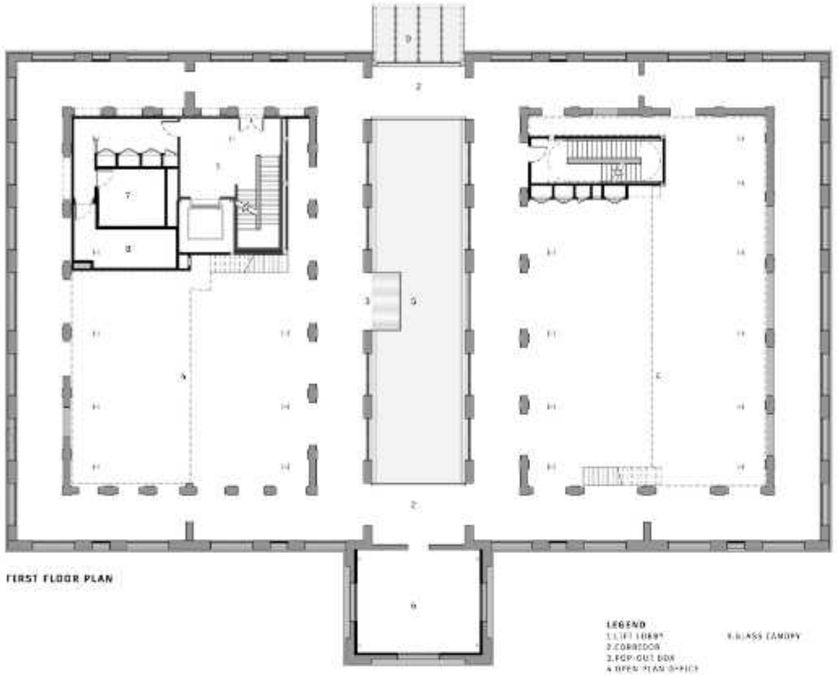
South West View

A central glass curtain wall breaks the homogeneity of the Corten-clad new mass. The façade break enhances the quality of modern abstraction and conformity to the domineering and symmetrical colonial architecture below.
Office tenants are visually linked to the surrounding context by the window openings on the new Corten-clad building skin. Tranquil greenery is brought into the office interior through thoughtfully craved-out window openings.
The overall gridline is generated by superimposing 3 grids, including the original façade brick arched colonnades grid, an enlarged colonial brick laying pattern grid, and a new internal steel column grid.
A number of balconies and bay windows are strategically added to some of the openings between the grid projecting towards the historical railway workshops to the north, the lush park setting to the west, the YTL land sales gallery to the south-west and the iconic soaring towers of The Fennel by YTL Land towards the east. The balconies and pop-out windows create surprises and contribute to the overall abstraction of the upper mass in contrast to the formal language of the colonial architecture below.

Right View

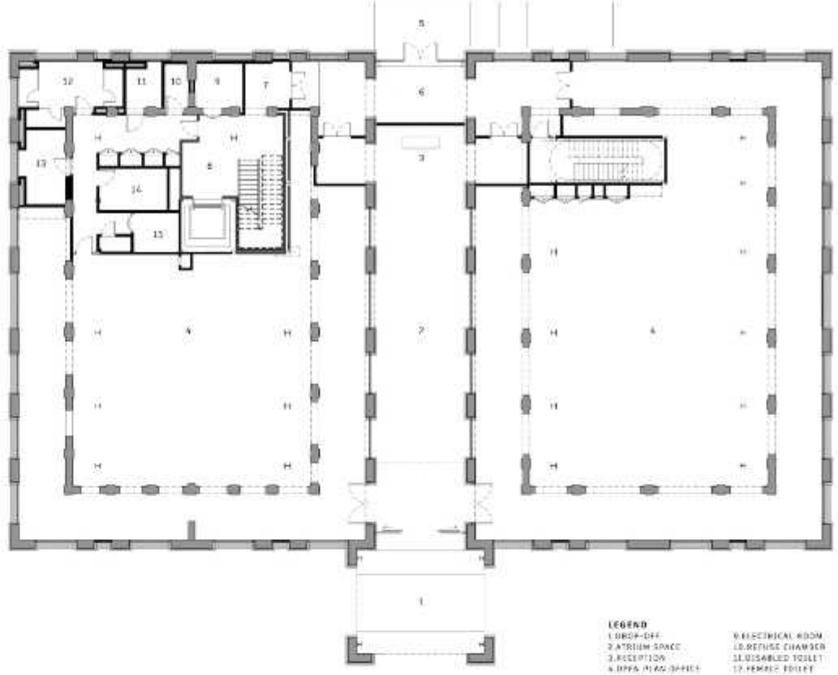


View from Roof deck

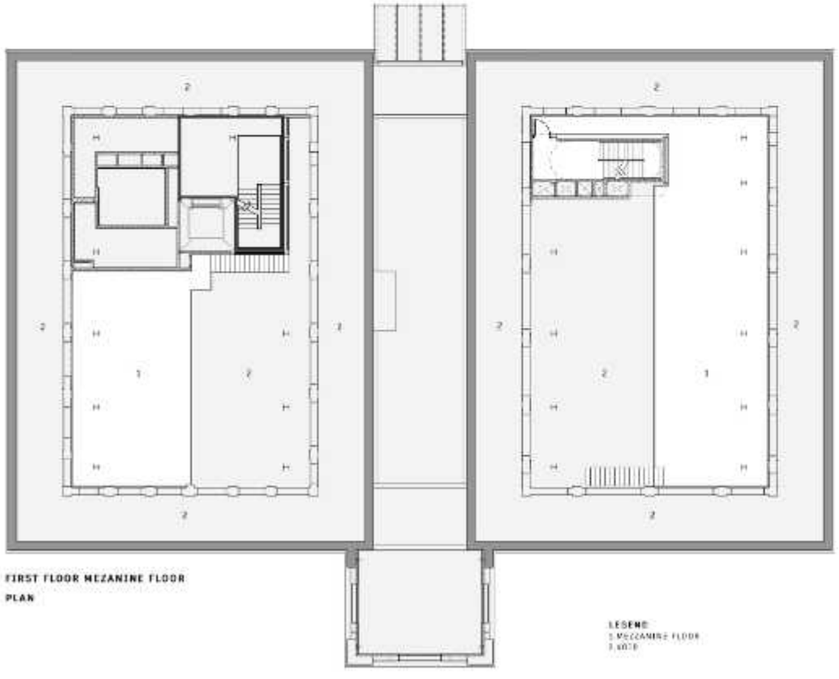


FIRST FLOOR PLAN

LEGEND
1.LIFT LOBBY
2.CORRIDOR
3.POP-OUT BOX
4.OPEN PLAN SPACE
5.VOID
6.MEETING ROOM
7.FEMALE TOILET
8.MALE TOILET
9.GLASS CANOPY

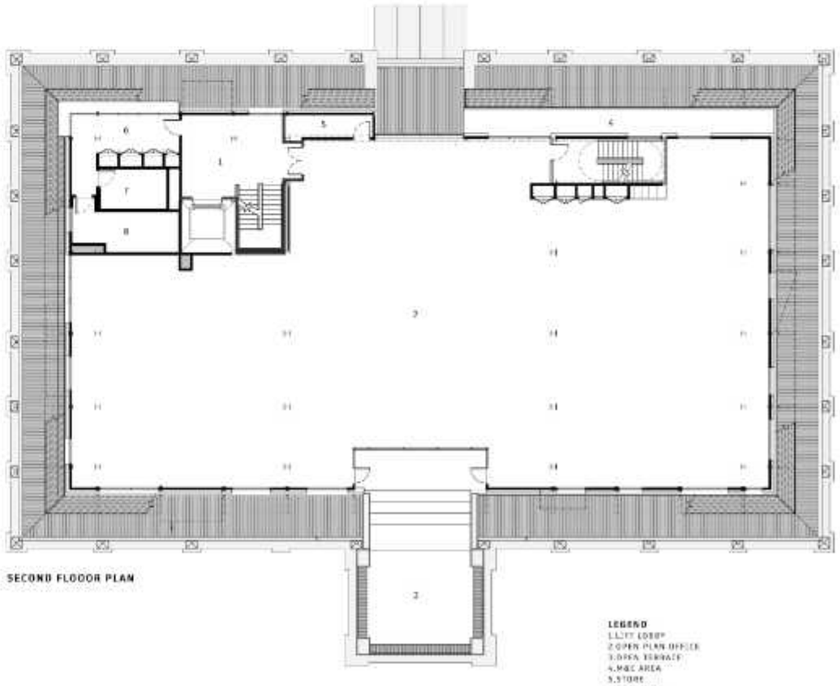


LEGEND
1.LOBBY-OFF
2.ATRIUM SPACE
3.RECEPTION
4.OPEN PLAN SPACES
5.REAR ENTRANCE
6.ENTRANCE LOBBY
7.FOYER
8.LIFT LOBBY
9.ELECTRICAL ROOM
10.REFUSE CHAMBER
11.DISABLED TOILET
12.FEMALE TOILET
13.MALE TOILET
14.SECURITY ROOM
15.TELECOMMUNICATION ROOM



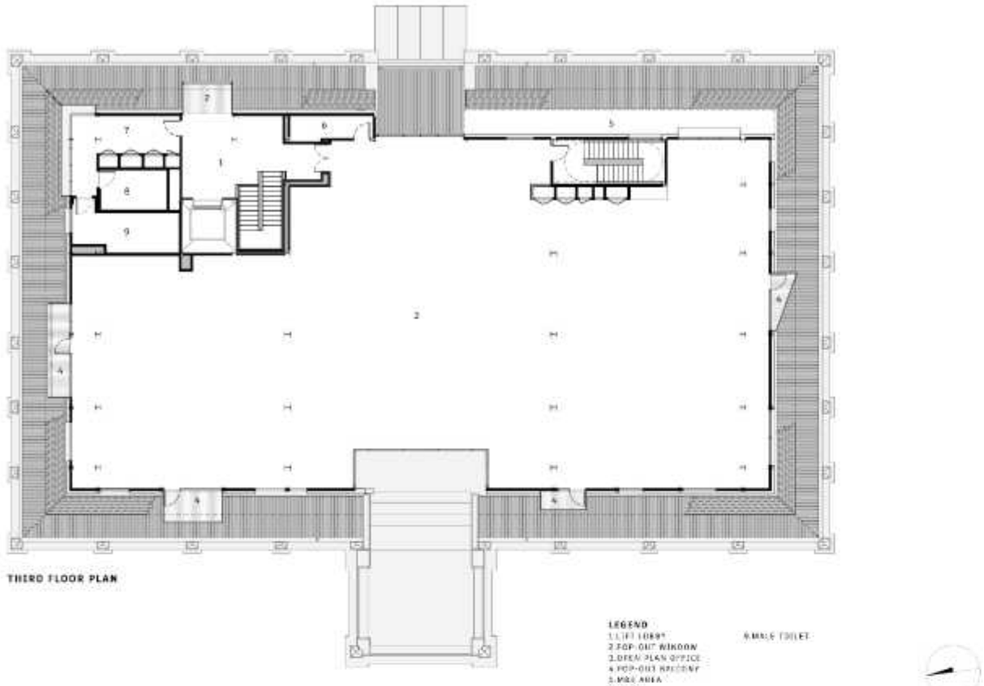
FIRST FLOOR MEZANINE FLOOR
PLAN

LEGEND
1.MEZZANINE FLOOR
2.VOID



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

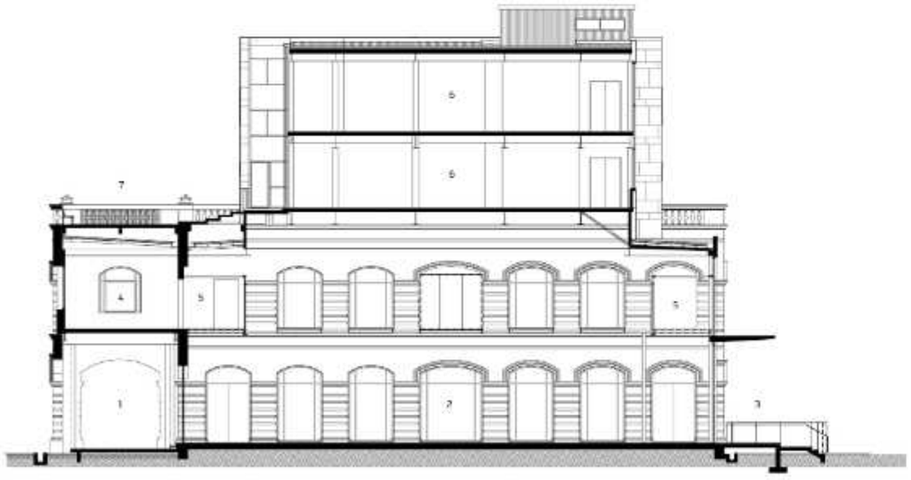
LEGEND
1.LIFT LOBBY
2.OPEN PLAN OFFICE
3.OPEN TERRACE
4.M&E AREA
5.STORE
6.CORRIDOR
7.FEMALE TOILET
8.MALE TOILET



THIRD FLOOR PLAN

LEGEND
1.LIFT LOBBY
2.POP-OUT WINDOW
3.OPEN PLAN OFFICE
4.POP-OUT BALCONY
5.MEZ AREA
6.STORE
7.CORRIDOR
8.FEMALE TOILET
9.MALE TOILET

0 1 2 3 4 5 10



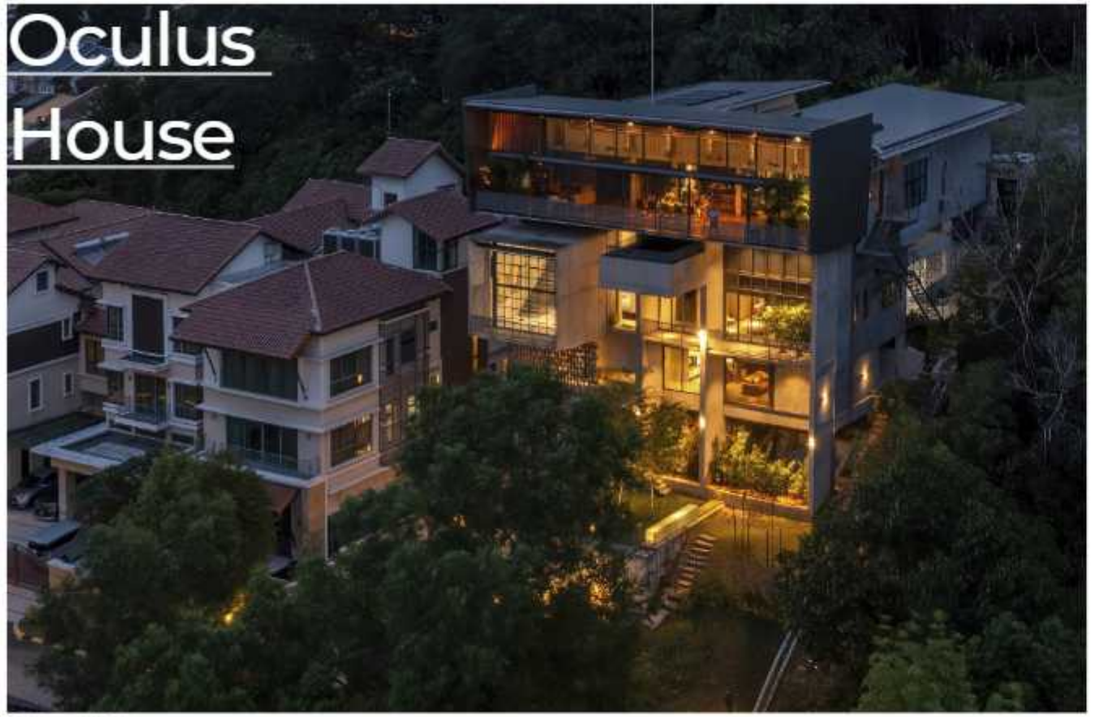
SECTION

LEGEND
1.ROOF OFF
2.ATRIUM
3.REAR ENTRANCE
4.MEETING ROOM
5.BRIDGE
6.OPEN PLAN OFFICE
7.Roof Terrace

0 1 2 3 4 5 10

Sentul Works sketch, 2019

Oculus House



Front in context-night

Architecture Firm: WOOI ARCHITECT	
Principal Architect: WOOI Lok Kuang	
Design Team: WOOI Lok Kuang	
Location: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	
Area: 864 sq.m	
Completion Date: June 2022	
Photography: SIM Yong Wah	

Harmonizing Identity and Nature- A Contemporary Malaysian Residence

—— By Ar. Wooi Lok Kuang

Front-Day Scene

Nestled within a guarded hillside enclave, a Malaysian home stands as a quiet manifesto of place and purpose. Crafted for a couple deeply connected to the natural world—a former pilot and diving instructor turned underwater photographer, and his wife, a wildlife enthusiast—the residence weaves together ecological sensitivity, adaptive design, and the lived ethos of its inhabitants. It reflects not just architectural intent but the soul of a nation where tradition and modernity coexist.

A Dialogue with the Land

The house responds to its sloped terrain with humility. By aligning the main living space with the elevated green reserve behind it, the structure avoids aggressive earthworks, embracing the topography rather than conquering it. This strategy reduces the need for retaining walls—a sustainable choice that honors Malaysia's tropical landscapes, where architecture often dances with the land rather than dominates it. The gallery, positioned a level below, frames daily life against a backdrop of foliage and cityscape, while a minimalist staircase and discreet lift blend into the hillside. Such design gestures echo a broader regional philosophy of building with nature, seen in vernacular architecture across Southeast Asia that prioritizes environmental symbiosis.

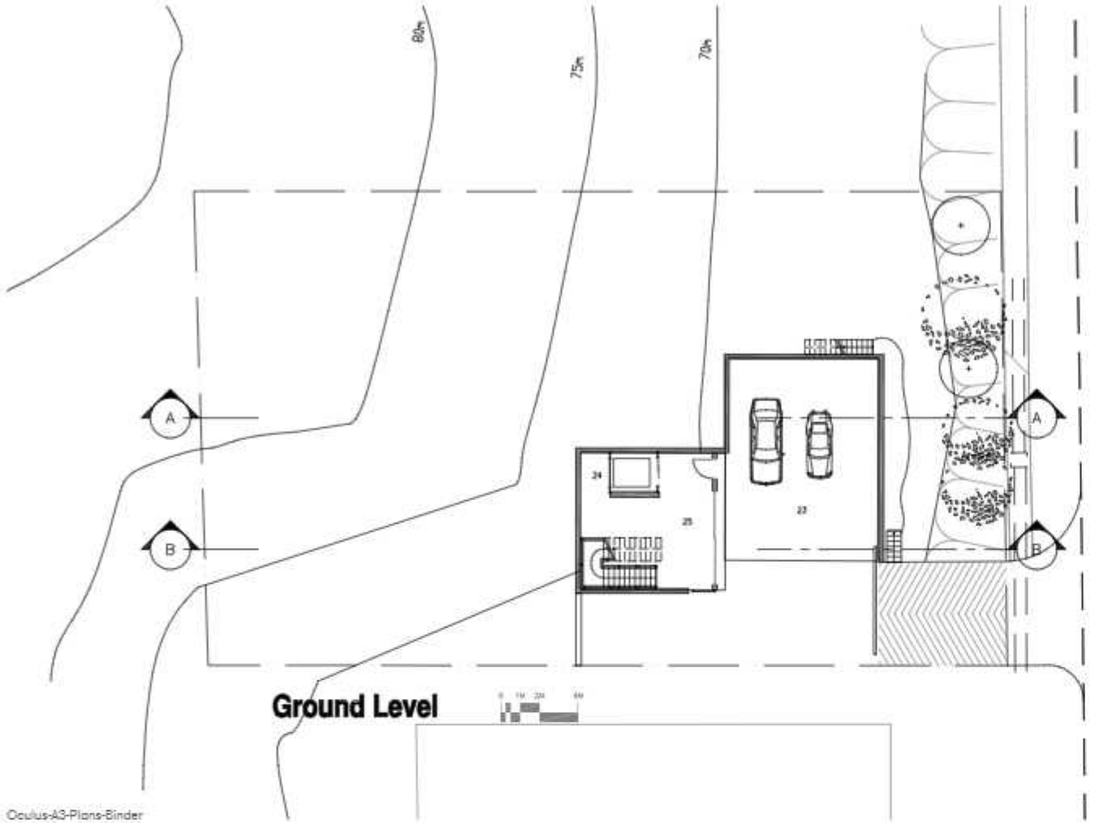
Material Honesty, Cultural Resonance

Raw concrete, polished terrazzo, and Yellow Balau timber—a hardwood native to Malaysia—anchor the home's aesthetic. The timber envelops interiors in warmth, its grain echoing the surrounding green reserve, while exposed concrete grounds the space in simplicity. These choices reflect a broader architectural shift in Malaysia, where vernacular materials are reinterpreted through modern techniques. The tactile richness of wood and stone speaks to a collective memory of craftsmanship, even as their application remains resolutely contemporary.

Fluidity In Form and Function

The house adapts to climate and ritual with ingenuity. A 6-meter-square steel wall folds open to merge gallery and landscape, while retractable canopies and sliding glass doors invite breezes and light. On the rooftop, a fish pond doubles as a plunge pool, its water recycled to nourish a hidden garden below—a self-sustaining loop that transforms residual space into a productive urban farm. This garden, a casual retreat for family gatherings, channels the communal spirit of traditional kampung villages, reimagined for urban life. Blurring indoors and out, the design embraces Malaysia's humid climate, using passive strategies to cool and shade without sacrificing openness.

Front-Night Scene



Oculus-A3-Plans-Binder

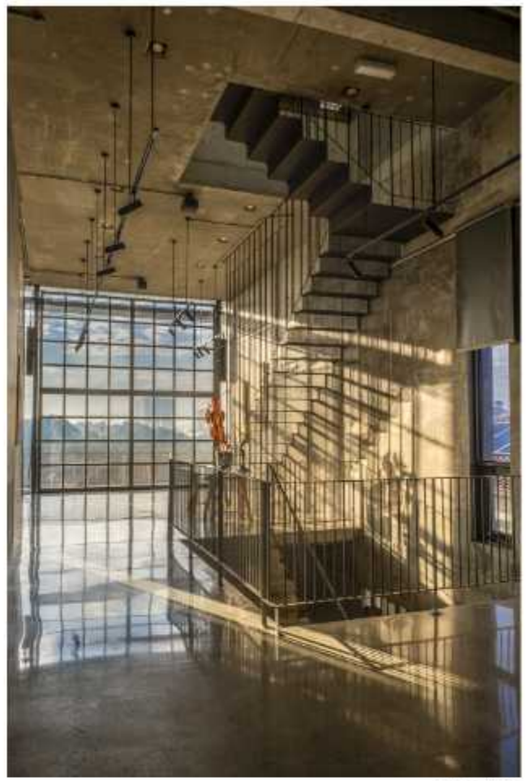
Front-Night Scene

A Shared Vision

At its core, the home is a collaboration. The clients' passions—photography, travel, ecology—guided its layout. Exhibition spaces for their work become storytelling canvases, while flexible zones accommodate both solitude and socializing. The architects' trust in the clients' vision mirrors Malaysia's cultural emphasis on collective creation, where dialogue shapes outcomes.

Conclusion: Architecture as Living Culture

This residence transcends mere structure to become a mirror of its context—geographic, cultural, and personal. It avoids nostalgia, instead fusing innovation with tradition to address modern challenges: sustainability, urban density, and the search for belonging. Like Malaysia itself, the house resists static definitions. It is both sanctuary and laboratory, rooted in its terrain yet open to change. In an age of globalization, such spaces remind us that identity is not preserved in amber but cultivated through daily rituals, materials that weather with time, and a willingness to listen to the land, the climate, and the stories of those who dwell within.



Gallery interior

Gallery interior

Living Interior

Living-Library Interio

Living Interior

Natural Pond-Rain Scene

Natural Pond-Day Scene

GDP Campus

The facade delivers an integrated solution, maximizing daylight, respecting the neighborhood, and embracing passive design with exposed concrete finishes.

Architecture Firm:	GDP Architects Sdn. Bhd.
Principal Architect:	Directors of GDP
Design Team:	Senior Designers of GDP
Location:	Bukit Damansara, Kuala Lumpur
Area:	9104.6 sq.m (built up area)
Completion Date:	21 June 2024
Photography:	GDP Architects Sdn. Bhd.

After three decades of collaborative growth, GDP Architects has consolidated its creative ecosystem under a single roof in Kuala Lumpur. Their new headquarters, the GDP Campus, in Bukit Damansara, unifies seven specialized studios that were previously scattered across satellite offices throughout the suburb, creating a coherent spatial narrative that reflects the firm's integrated design philosophy while embodying Malaysia's rich cultural tapestry.
Founded in 1990, GDP Architects has grown to become one of Malaysia's leading architectural practices, renowned for projects that blend innovative design with contextual sensitivity. With a portfolio spanning residential, commercial, institutional, and master planning works, the firm's interdisciplinary approach has consistently delivered environments that respond thoughtfully to both client needs and broader social contexts.

The void beneath the sun louvers forms a sculptural, greenery-filled space, reflecting GDP's values of people, culture, and forward-thinking design.

Occupying a modest 0.344-acre site along Jalan Setiabakti, the project establishes a distinctive architectural presence among surrounding residences and shops in a mature neighborhood. The quiet setting, adjacent to a primary school, demands a contextually responsive approach that respects its neighborhood character while embodying the practice's forward-thinking aspirations.
The 8-storey structure transcends conventional office typology through strategic spatial interventions. Double-height voids, mezzanine insertions, and cascading terraced gardens transform standard floor plates. Expansive curtain walling floods the workspace with natural light. This spatial composition manifests GDP's collaborative ethos, deliberately eschewing traditional corner offices and hierarchical arrangements in favor of fluid, open-plan studios that facilitate cross-disciplinary exchange. The design choreographs circulation to encourage spontaneous encounters while providing varied settings that support different modes of thought and interaction.
The building's development, like many initiatives within GDP Architects, evolved organically after the team discovered the property through serendipity. The final design emerged as a product of countless voices - a team effort reflecting the firm's collaborative approach to practice. Ergonomic, thoughtfully designed furnishings and precisely calibrated temperature and clean air control systems create a workspace that prioritizes comfort and well-being.
GDP Campus unites architects, engineers, planners, researchers, graphic designers, and model makers, dissolving traditional disciplinary boundaries and addressing the previous challenge of departmental isolation. Functioning more as a contemporary academic setting than a corporate office, the building promotes a culture of ideation and continuous dialogue exchange.

Front Elevation and Main Drop-Off of GDP Campus

Lush Greenery at Level 6 Garden Terrace

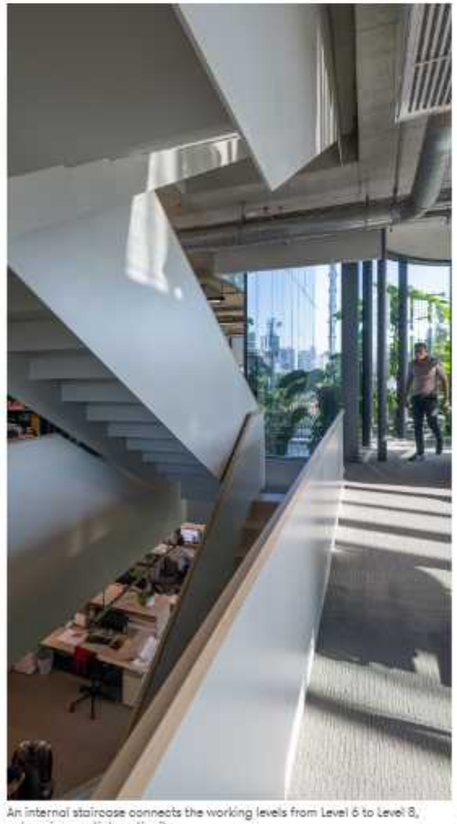
GDP's community engagement extends beyond its own practice through a public gallery space on the fourth floor, which hosts curated design exhibitions focusing on Malaysian artists and designers. The top garden space has been thoughtfully reimagined as a vibrant staff canteen where nature meets nourishment. More than just a dining area, this space serves as a communal hub that promotes well-being, collaboration, and a sense of belonging among team members.

This new home represents both culmination and beginning - a physical expression of GDP's collaborative values and a platform for discovering new frontiers in integrated design practice that responds to Malaysia's building industry. As the firm looks toward its fourth decade, the GDP Campus provides not just shelter for its operations but inspiration for its future.

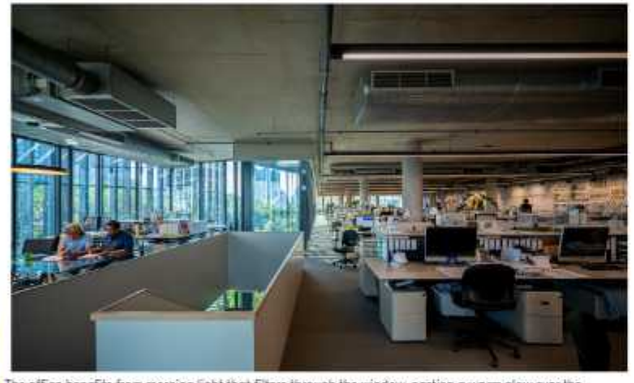
Multifunctional Event Space and Gallery at Level 4

Level 9 Lunch Area and Multifunctional Event Space

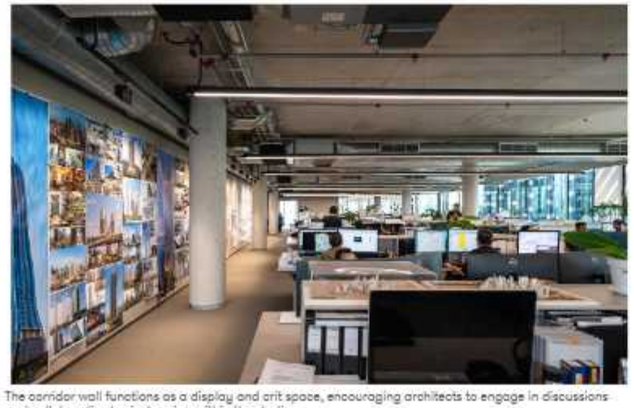
The library overlooks the exhibition space below, fostering visual connectivity between spaces.



An internal staircase connects the working levels from Level 6 to Level 8, enhancing spatial continuity.



The office benefits from morning light that filters through the window, casting a warm glow over the capsule and workstation.



The corridor wall functions as a display and art space, encouraging architects to engage in discussions and collaborative brainstorming within the studios.

The ramp at the staff parking levels features vent block walls that provide natural ventilation and daylight, while the material remains raw.

An informal discussion space at the meeting level enjoys natural lighting and an open view across the adjacent school field.

A minimalist staircase with timber treads meets an exposed concrete wall, marked with floor numbering at all levels.

At the base of the staircase, a metal plate marks the transition from the timber stairs to the concrete wall.

Factory in the Forest

Front in context-night

Architecture Firm: Design Unit Architects Sdn Bhd
Principal Architect: John BULCOCK, CHIN Kuen Cheng
Website: http://designunit.com.my/
Contact e-mail: info@designunit.com.my
Firm Location: 8th Floor, Syed Kechik Building, Jalan Kapas, Bangsar, 69100 Kuala Lumpur
Project Location: Penang, Malaysia
Area: 16060.29 sq.m
Completion Date: Jan 2017

Credits
Clients: Tecan CDMO Solutions PN Sdn. Bhd.
Architect: Design Unit Architects Sdn Bhd
Engineering & Construction: Web Structures Sdn Bhd
Mechanical & Electrical Engineer: Perunding Eagles Engineers Sdn Bhd
Project Management: JLL Sdn Bhd
Environment Consultants: IEN Consultants Sdn Bhd
Main Contractor: South Island Building Sdn Bhd
Photography: LIN HO Photography

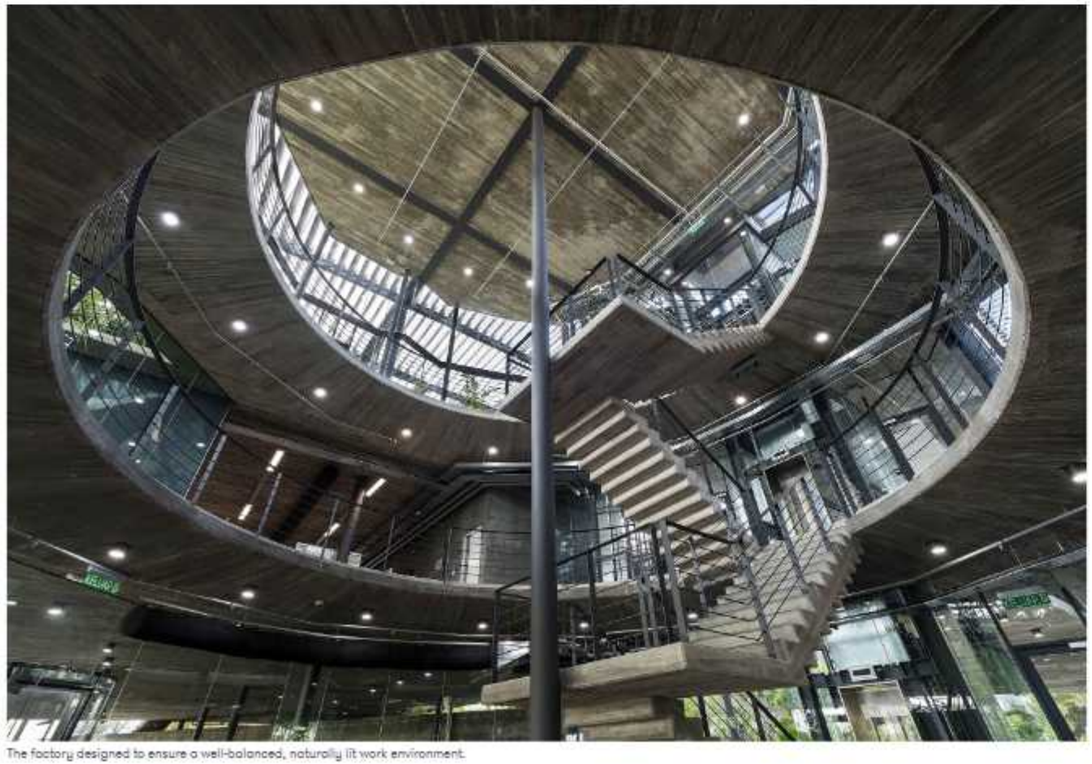
As an architectural competition winning entry for an electronics manufacturing plant, this site is conceived as a forest that penetrates, surrounds & steps over the building creating maximum contact with nature – green, breeze, scent, sound, touch.
A canopy supported by a 'forest' of columns creates unity to office & courtyard while giving protection from the tropical sun. Office levels give access to roof gardens and staff are encouraged out for breaks, meetings or just contemplation.
A green courtyard separates the office & factory with views and access from both. A bridge over the courtyard links the office & production, and this circulation route becomes a space for meetings, breaks & lectures.
The factory has views to landscape and the sky condition through full height and clerestory glazing with the glazing protected from the sun by free-standing off-form concrete fins and roof louvers.
Rainwater cascades from roof spouts – heightening awareness of tropical storms – to storage tanks for landscape irrigation.
The plant receives natural diffused light across the entire factory floor reducing dependency on artificial lighting that, combined with chilled water floor slab cooling & cutting-edge air-conditioning technology, reduces energy consumption to half that of a conventional plant of similar size.
Structure & materials are expressed: off-form reinforced concrete and steel structure, glazing and landscape. With this small palette of materials, the building explains to us what it is, what it is made of & how it is put together.
The approach was to create a stimulating & meaningful working environment for all employees – the forest to be the face of the building & company. Forests, critical for both macro & microclimates are also vital for our psychological well-being.

Sustainability
From project onset, the client wanted an energy efficient and climatically responsive building. The cardinal sustainable design principles were energy efficiency, water efficiency, daylighting and biophilia – the fundamental human need for connection to nature.
The building is designed to shield against the hot & glaring tropical sun, while allowing diffused natural daylight to filter into the building. The office & courtyard are shaded by a louver canopy designed to provide effective solar protection during the hottest part of the day.
The factory skylight design was optimized to achieve an evenly day-lit work environment. The simulations and daylight measurements in operation show that the factory floor achieves an evenly day-lit work environment without glare throughout the year. Dimmable daylight responsive LED lighting and individual task lighting ensure that the required light levels are always obtained.
An innovative radiant floor cooling system works with embedded PEX pipes in the concrete slabs throughout the factory & office. By cooling down the slabs to about 21°C, this structural element of the building doubles up as part of the cooling system. The higher chilled water temperature and the water-borne cooling transport make the radiant floor slab cooling twice as energy efficient as conventional air-conditioning.

Link-bridge connection to factory across courtyard from second floor spice garden.

Shading canopy over vegetation and the factory

The building is designed to shield against the hot & glaring tropical sun, while allowing diffused natural daylight to filter into the building.



The factory designed to ensure a well-balanced, naturally lit work environment.

Meeting places in courtyard. Link-bridge connects to office and first and second floor roof gardens.

Tight integration of landscape and shading devices mitigates the micro-climate experienced by the enclosure and reduces urban heat-island effect.

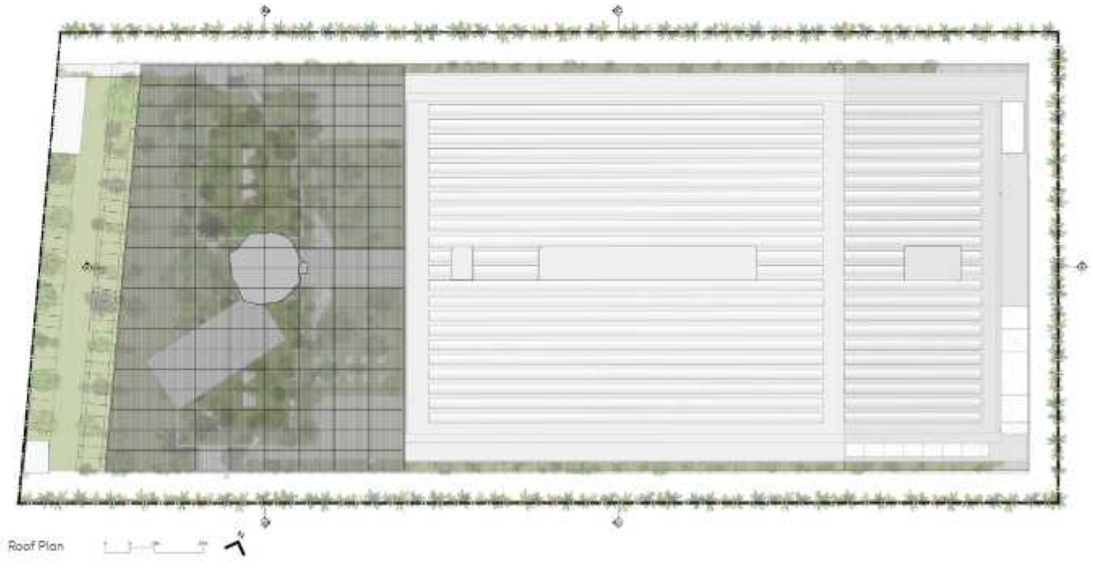
Off-form concrete fins conceal and shade service areas.

Route to lobby from production under Link-bridge.

The simulations and daylight measurements in operation show that the factory floor achieves an evenly day-lit work environment without glare throughout the year.

Rainwater is captured on roof gardens, freely falls to pebble-filled catchment sumps, and is directed to storage tanks.

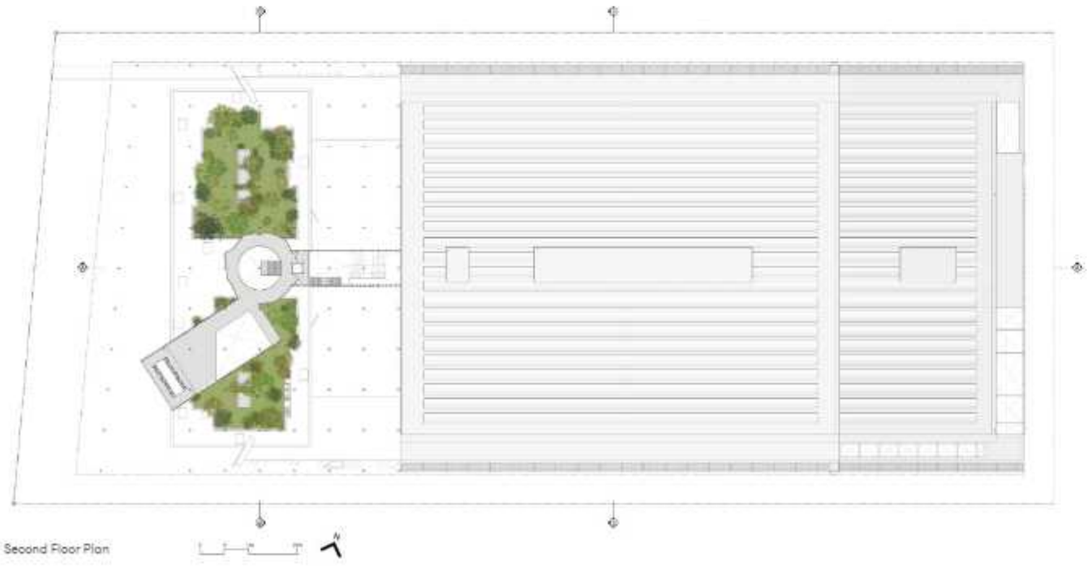
Site Plan.



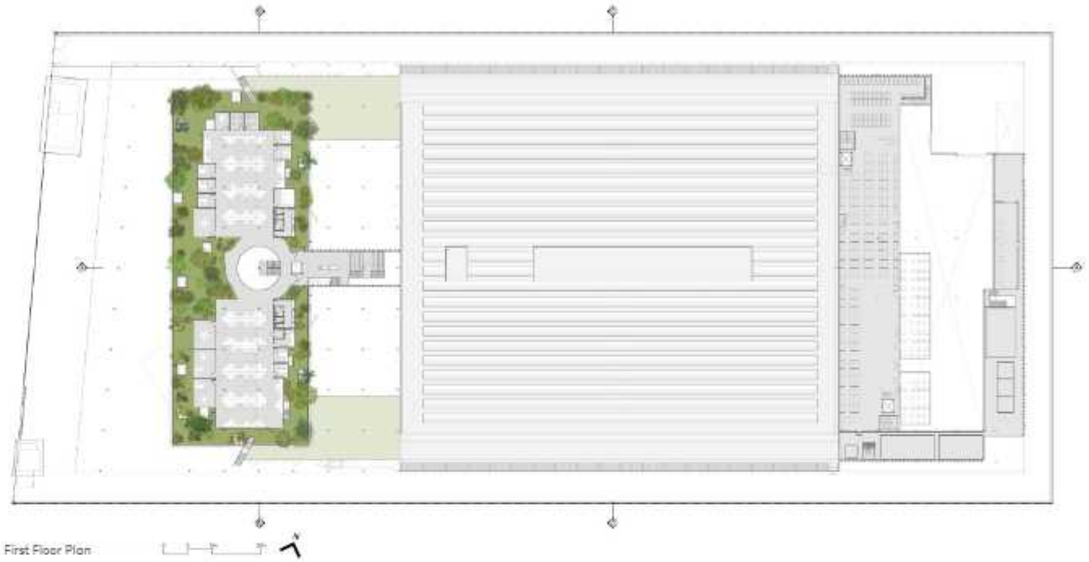
Roof Plan

Ground Floor Plan

Side South East Elevation



Second Floor Plan



First Floor Plan

Section A-A

Section B-B

Section C-C

Typical Section: Rainwater Spouts

The Expansion of Bagan Specialist Centre

The recently upgraded park is the new forecourt for the hospital

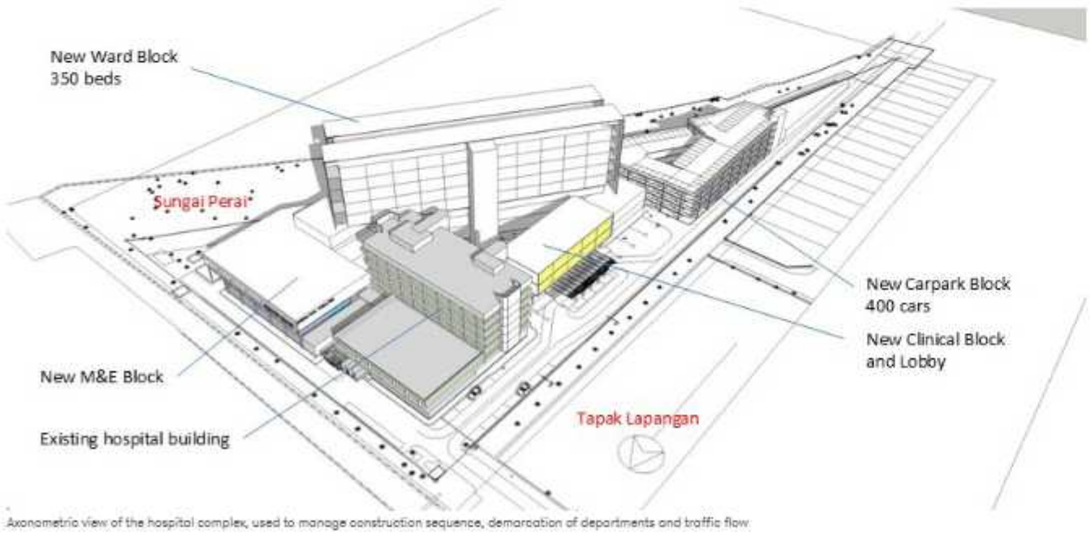
1986 – construction began for the original Bagan Specialist Centre

Architecture Firm:	MINWEE Architect
Principal Architect:	WEE Hii Min
Design Team:	WEE Hii Min, LEONG Gian Wen, LEE Peng Hui, CHIAM Tat Hong, Fiona LAW, Claudia LAW, George LEE
Location:	Penang, Malaysia
Area:	67634.06 sq.m
Completion Date:	April 2024
Photography:	Daniel YAM, Sean WEE, CK TAN, Jenny CHOW

Background

The Bagan Specialist Centre is a private hospital built in the 1980s in Butterworth, Penang, on a triangular site with its long side along the Perai River, and the existing six-storey hospital at the widest edge of the site. Since its inception, it has been providing affordable care for the residents of the area.

The expansion more than doubles its bed capacity from 150 to 350 beds, and includes a new Cancer Care Centre with Radiotherapy bunker and Chemotherapy Department. Other new facilities include a new Car Park Block, nine operating theatres, 40 specialist clinics, a cafeteria and four training rooms.



Axonometric view of the hospital complex, used to manage construction sequence, demarcation of departments and traffic flow

Brief

The hospital has been providing affordable healthcare since its inception, and our client wanted to continue her father's legacy. She is a strong proponent of Lean Management principles, a key driver behind the project's direction.

The project brief is comprehensive and made more complex by several factors:

- The triangular site with the existing hospital anchored at the widest end tapers to a point 320 meters away.
- The existing hospital remained operational during the entire construction period.
- Construction, hospital operations, and approvals are carried out following a strict sequence.

Planning

With the existing hospital as the cornerstone, the new nine-storey Ward Block is aligned with the river, while the Front Clinical Block faces the park and the main road. Service spaces are plugged into leftover spaces: a car park block occupies the narrowest corner of the site, while an M&E Block fills the gap between the new and old wards. The existing hospital is later linked up with the OT Block, completing the ring of buildings framing a triangular planted courtyard in the heart of the hospital complex.

Strategies

The architectural scheme is a balance between complying with medical flow/requirements and five over-arching design strategies:

1. Shade
2. Permeability
3. Thresholds
4. Sufficiency
5. Community

These are simple tenets for building in the tropics; we employ them intuitively when designing houses and smaller projects. They are in fact more important in public buildings for the gains in comfort and reduction in construction and operations costs.

The recently upgraded park is the new forecourt for the hospital

Shade
In the tropics, shade is king.
We often think of this in terms of roofing, but the shading of vertical surfaces is equally important to reduce heat through windows and walls. The west-facing Front Block has large-angle fin walls that minimize glare while allowing views out and daylight to filter in.
The Ward Block employs vertical fins to shield against the morning sun without sacrificing views of the river and beyond.
The service blocks use more robust elements for shade: vent-blocks for the MSE Block and galvanised Z-purlins for the car park structure.
Elsewhere, circulation corridors are wide enough to be shady, and when needed, awnings are introduced to shade without limiting daylight into the rooms.

Permeability
While medical planning contends with 'clean and dirty flow' , we ensure there are means for air flow: naturally ventilated lift lobbies, public corridors and even the main entrance lobby. Sections of the hospital's ground floor are open into the central courtyard, allowing air and views to permeate. This approach lowers the cost of operations and the risk of airborne infections.

Thresholds
The transitional space between the outside and inside, which allows the eyes to adjust to the light, enables perspiration to evaporate slightly, or allows us to put away our umbrellas before entering the building. In local culture, the ritual of removing our shoes is a physical act as well as a psychological one to pause, calm the mind and prepare for the task ahead. The central courtyard of the hospital is one such threshold for both mind and body.

Sufficiency
A relevant strategy for the project takes into account its location and demographics, where there is a culture of practical sufficiency. Using a few hard-working materials and systems to frame the overall architecture, using less to do more, and if we can do without, we do just that. Lift lobbies and common areas are naturally ventilated and lit, most out-patient departments are supported by outdoor corridors and stairs, and ceiling heights are mostly 3.2 meters to promote air circulation.

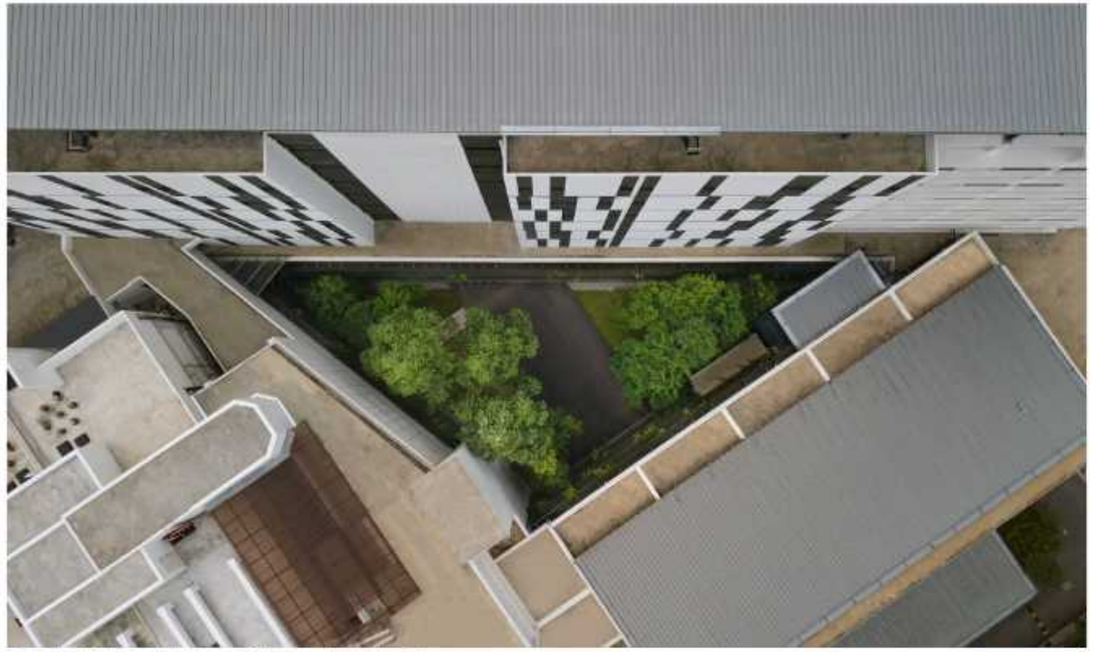
Community
Another strategy responds to the local context, where the pace of life is slower than that of its island sister - since people are more prone to stop and have a chat or share a meal. We created small pockets for the community to gather amidst the workday in the form of small interventions throughout the hospital. These small projects are often opportunities to reuse old hospital equipment, such as turning hospital screens into library shelves and so forth. This is in keeping with the notion of sufficiency and a way to link the past with the present.
We obtained permission to upgrade the open space in front of the hospital into a community garden and playing field. Our client sees this as a contribution to the local community, of which the Bagan Specialist Centre has been a part for almost 40 years.
Of the five strategies, the first three are climatic responses which are quite 'universal' to our region. It is the last two that shape the project and fit it into its local context and make it 'unique' to that site. And that is perhaps the most rewarding part of our contribution to architecture in a small town in Malaysia.



Construction involved mock-ups and testing of ideas and templates

The Existing Block anchors the site, while the new Ward Block is the backdrop of the complex

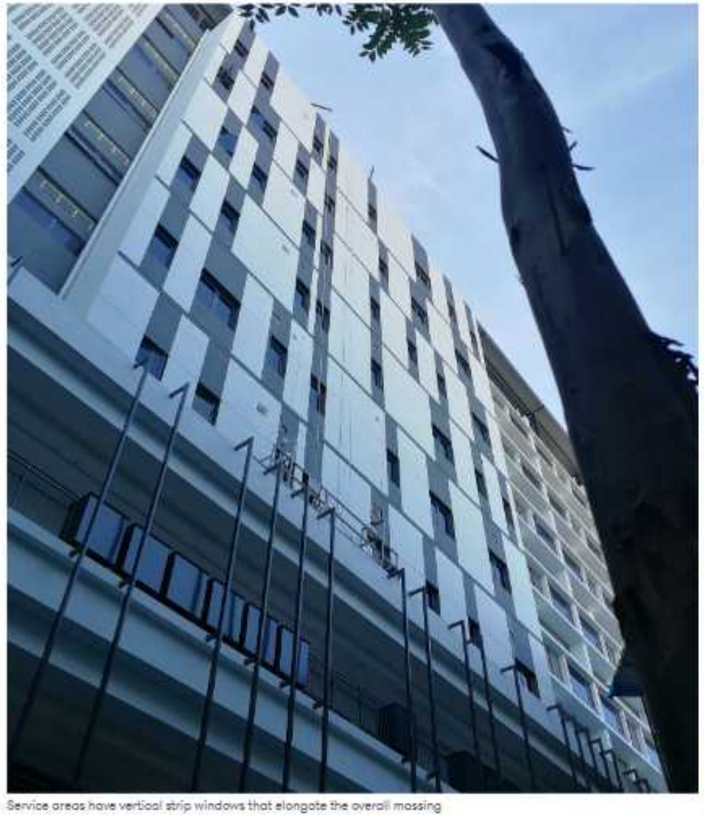

The courtyard offers the wards, clinics, and training rooms with views of trees



The courtyard is the threshold for many of the spaces within the hospital

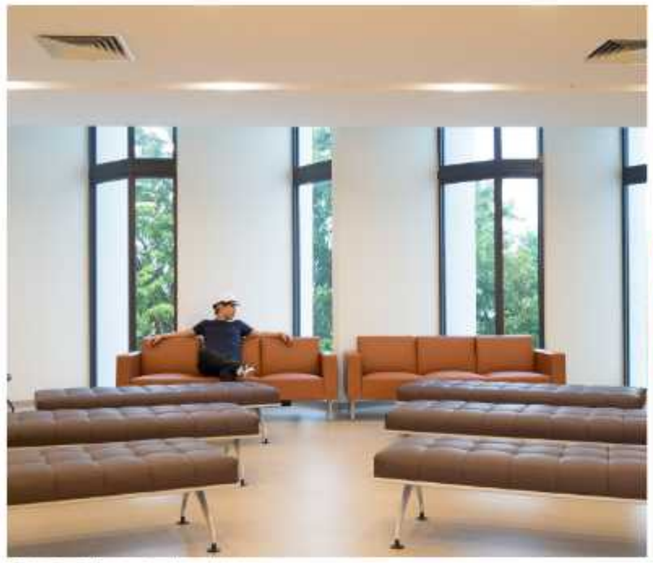
Vertical fins to reduce heat from the morning sun without sacrificing views of the river

Painted plaster panels articulate the service areas of the Ward Block



Service areas have vertical strip windows that elongate the overall massing

The river elevation of the Ward Block



Naturally ventilated main entrance lobby

The west facing windows and their views

The west-facing windows and their views

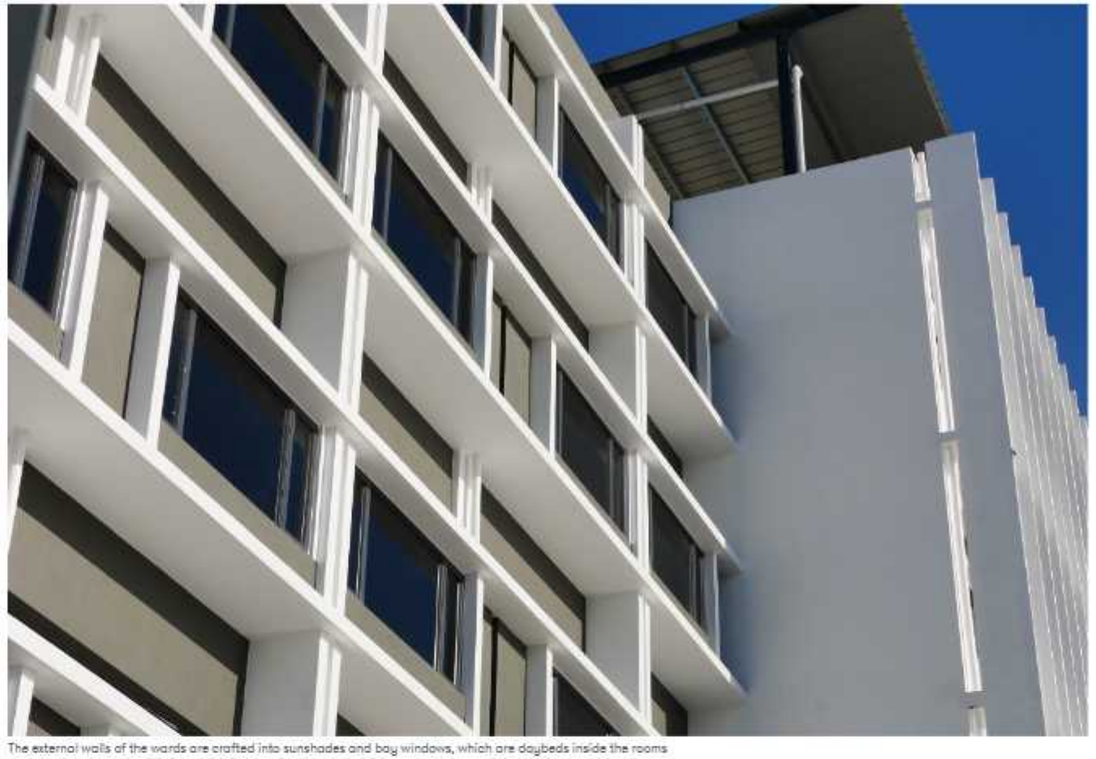
The west-facing windows and their views

The service buildings use more utilitarian elements to provide sun shading

Corridors are protected from rain without sacrificing daylight

Staff circulation is usually naturally ventilated and built using simple systems

The central courtyard is unique in most local hospitals; here it assumes the role of a town square and an entry point to various parts of the hospital complex

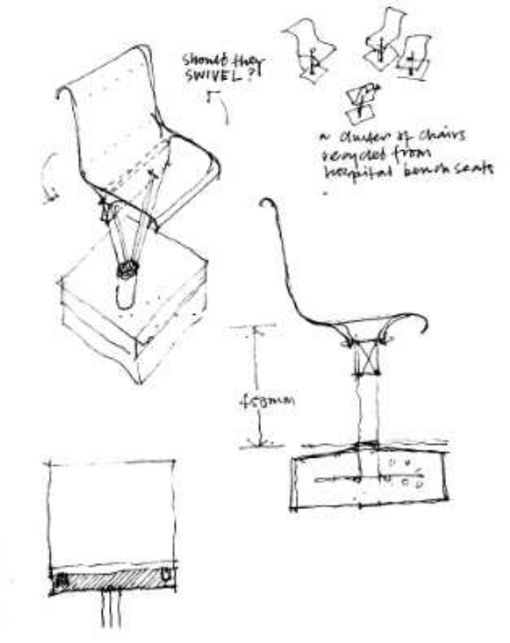


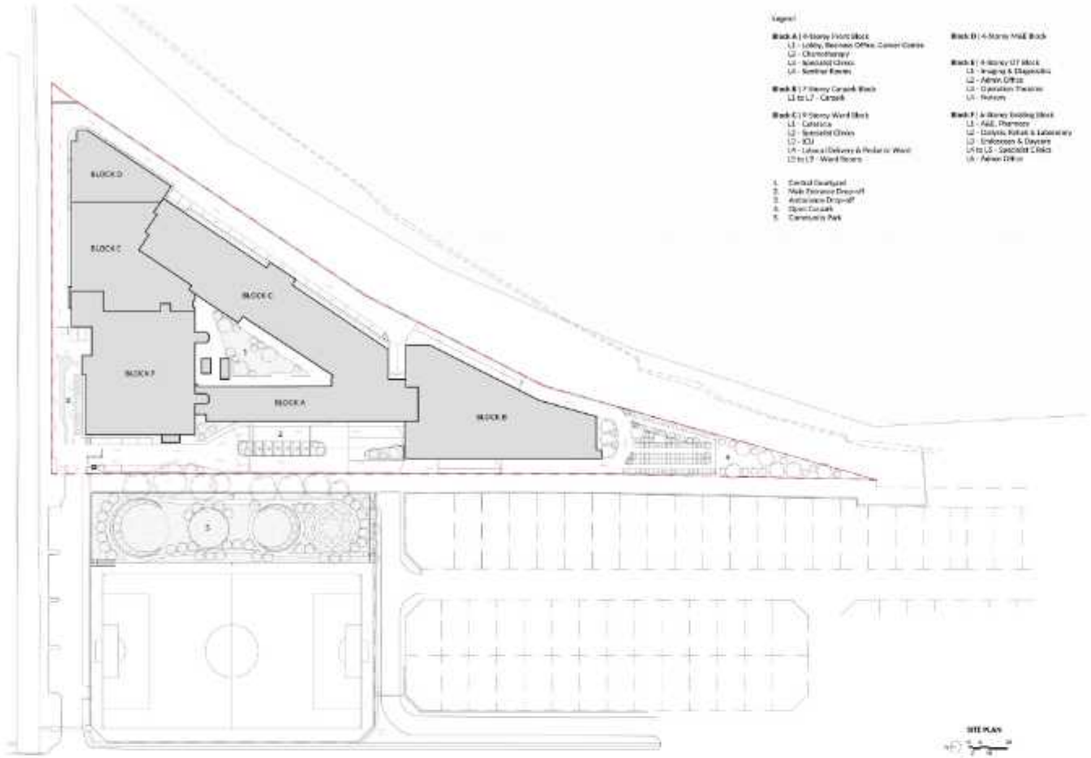
The external walls of the wards are crafted into sunshades and bay windows, which are daybeds inside the rooms

Wider corridors take on another role, serving as spaces for waiting and occasional stopping, such as in this mini library outside the clinics

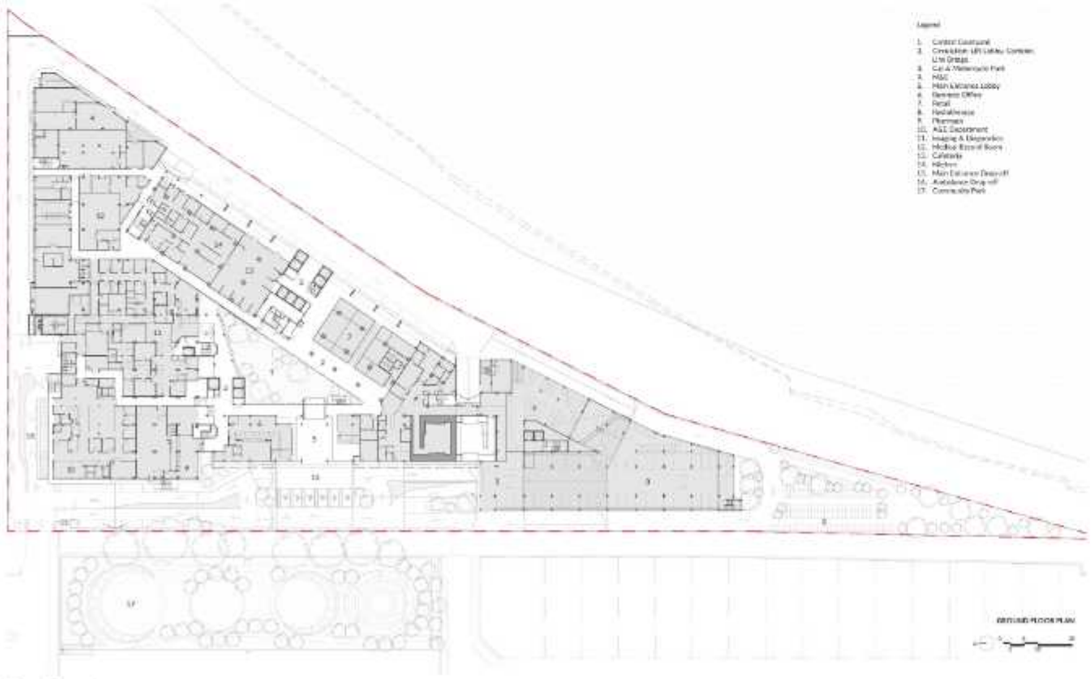
The former wards were renovated into offices; they use the same finishes as the hospital with touches of timber for warmth

Decommissioned link chairs become individual garden seats

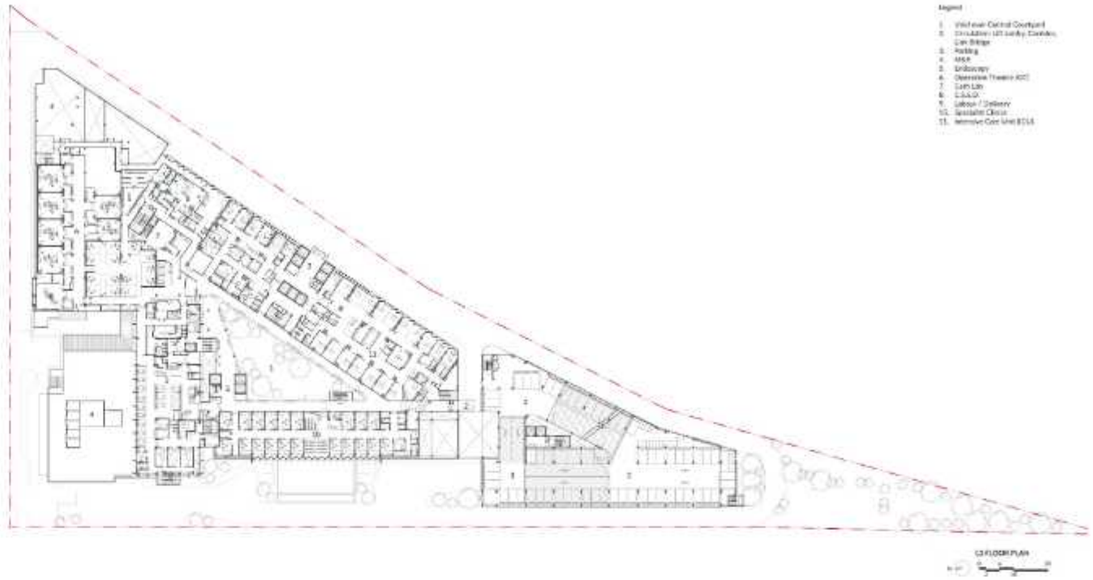




Site plan



Ground floor plan



L3 floor plan

Section A-A & B-B

MERDEKA 118

'Look at 118' - a ground-level visitor centre for the tower.

Design Architect: Fender Katsalidis
Executive Architect of Record: RSP Architects Sdn. Bhd.
Project Principal: Hud Abu BAKAR
Lead Project Director: Ahmad Farid BAHARUDDIN
Completion Date: 2023
Land Size: 18.96 acres
Area: 292,000 sq.m
Photographer: DKM2/Pixelaw Photography

More than just a skyscraper, Merdeka 118 is a celebration of Malaysian ambition and innovation in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. At 678.9 metres tall, this proud landmark is the centrepiece of a 6.36-hectare urban revitalisation precinct around Stadium Merdeka, the historical site of Tunku Abdul Rahman's 1957 declaration of Malaysian independence. Spanning over 3.1 million square feet of floor area, the Merdeka 118 tower includes 1.7 million square feet of premium office accommodation, the new six-star Park Hyatt Kuala Lumpur Hotel, and Southeast Asia's highest Observation Deck.

Diamond in plan, Merdeka 118 is sited on axis with neighbouring Stadium Negara to the east, and a new four-acre linear water park, designed by Boston's Sasaki Associates. This car-free recreational area is designed to promote vibrant community interaction within the city for people of all ages and backgrounds. It will also create an important visual alliance with the revered Petronas Towers and the Kuala Lumpur Tower.

By articulating the tower's structural pathways with a combination of differentiated glazing and illumination, its crystalline form reveals itself, day and night, as a unified composition of disparate facets and patterns. The sculptural arrangement of triangular faceted glass planes is inspired by traditional patterns inherent in Malaysian art and craft, whilst also serving as a metaphor for the rich ethnic and cultural mix that defines the Malaysian nation. The design language of the tower element carries through to the podium exterior and the dual lobby levels of its interior. Lit via dramatic skylighting, the immense volumes of these lobbies appear as if carved from solid travertine; the lower, to the north, connects via escalators to the larger, more formal space to the south, notable for its soaring 36-storey atrium.

Merdeka 118 from Look at 118

Developed for PNB Merdeka Ventures Sdn. Berhad (PMVSB), a wholly-owned subsidiary of Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB), project collaborators included an extensive team of local and international design consultants. The tower was designed by Australian Architect FK in close collaboration with Executive Architect of Records RSP Architects Kuala Lumpur, design engineering firms Robert Bird Group and LERA (New York), and a host of other leading industry consultants. Its completion as the world's second-tallest building celebrates the years of planning, problem-solving, collaboration and human endeavour required to realise a building of such ambition and complexity.

Working on a site of this scale required the project team to work closely with local authorities to improve the overall urban environment. The infrastructure surrounding the site was significantly upgraded to ensure a smooth vehicular and pedestrian experience in and around the precinct. Significant technical innovations embedded in the design ensure a sustainable, future-focused, and highly adaptable workplace that meets the ever-evolving demands of contemporary business. The carefully crafted plan shape, hybrid belt truss structure and faceted form efficiently distribute lateral wind loads whilst providing contiguous office floorplates unencumbered by columns.

Merdeka 118 is the tallest LEED Platinum (BD+C) building in the world, redefining sustainability expectations for mega-tall towers and achieving 28% operational energy use reduction, 32% potable water use reduction, 95% construction waste diversion, and 55% open space provision. The broader precinct development is also notable for its seamless integration with KL's public transport infrastructure, as well as its diverse range of uses and accommodations on a single development site.

Upon completion, the entire precinct will offer 1.4 million square feet of retail space, Merdeka Mall, Oakwood Premier Serviced Residens, two Residential Towers, Look at 118 Gallery and Textile Museum, PNB Little M Childcare Centre and a Mosque. Despite the complexity of the project, the team has developed a comprehensive master plan that will support the anticipated over 16,000 daily users, including residents, workers, and visitors. This included planning and incorporating 1.6km of new underground access roads to ensure the various uses are functionally serviced, maintained, and supported.

While many elements of the development are still under construction, the positive impact on the local community is already evident. Improvements to the surrounding infrastructure and public spaces have enhanced the overall experience for its users.

Completing a triumvirate of super-tall urban markers with Petronas Twin Towers and Kuala Lumpur Tower, Merdeka 118 has added an aspirational sense of new place to the city's identity, and at the same time, enabled much-needed major improvements to the pedestrian and traffic infrastructure of the area.

Atrium bathed in light

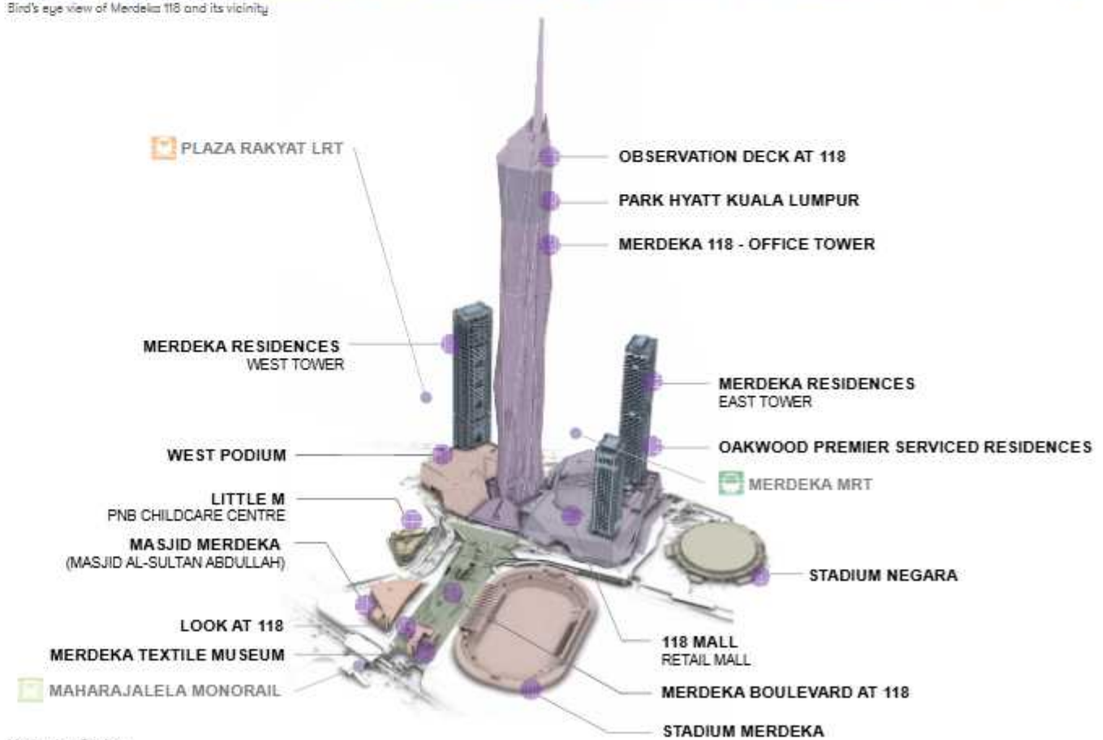
Merdeka 118 Atrium

Atrium skylight

Merdeka 118 tower

Aerial view of Look at 118

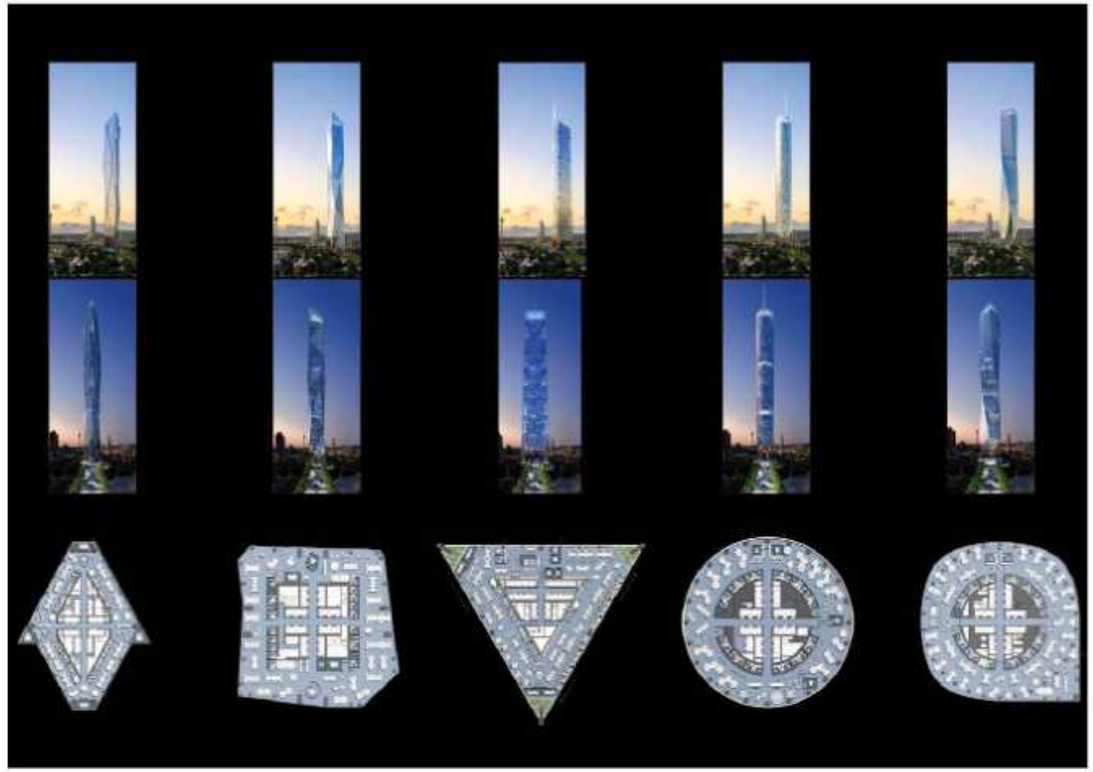
Bird's eye view of Merdeka 118 and its vicinity



Masterplan -3d view

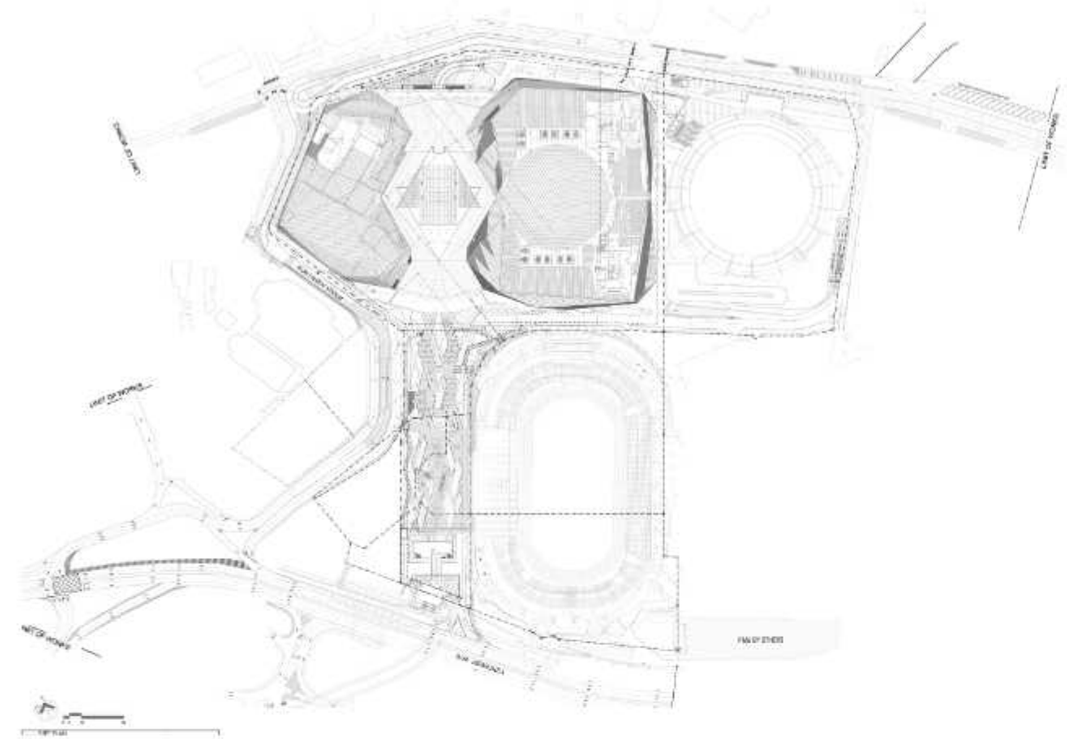
Construction stages

Tower view from SM

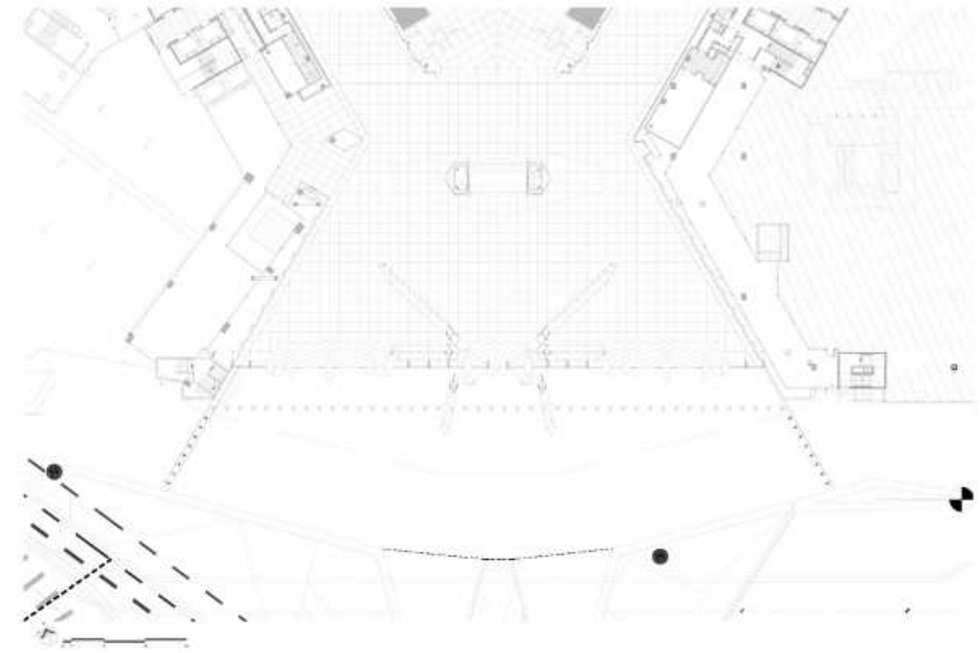


Karl Fender 118 concept

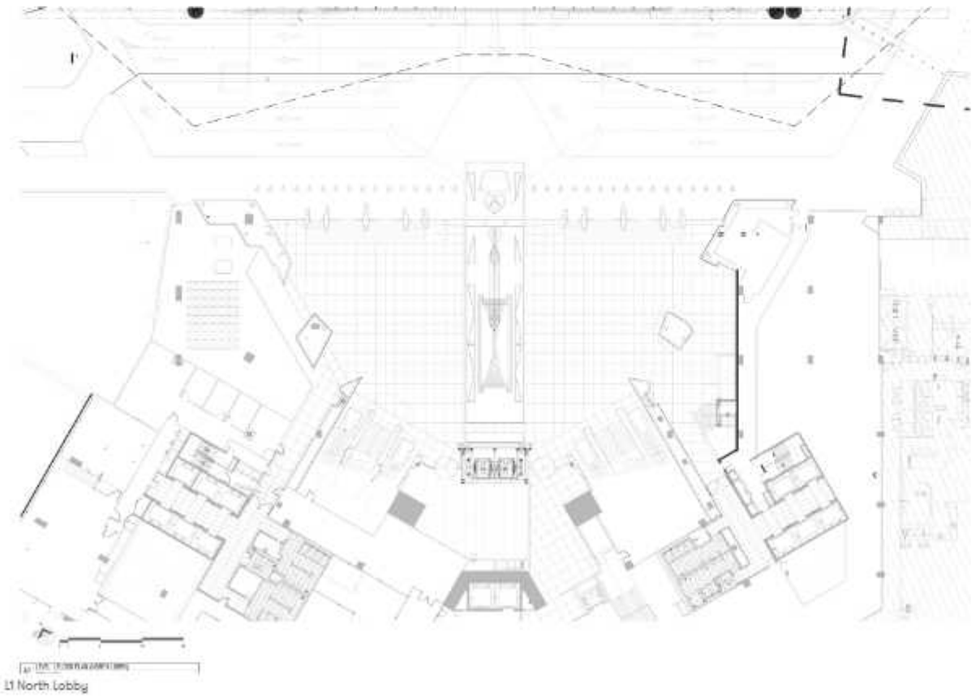
Look at 118



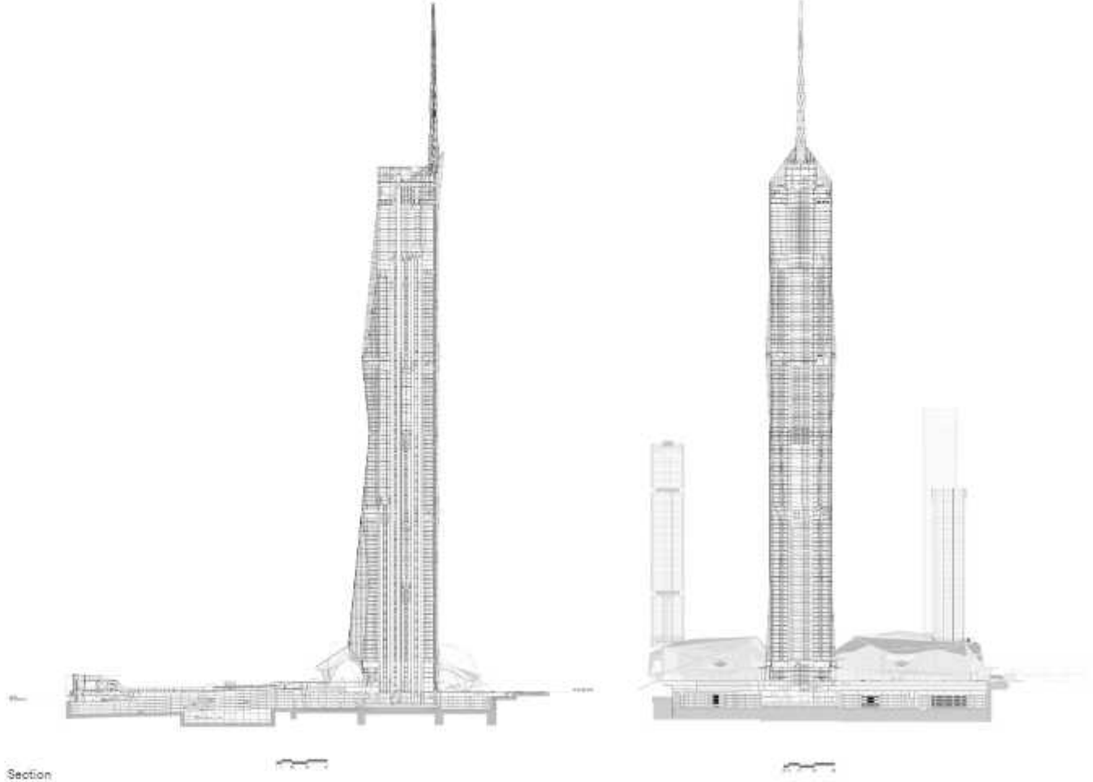
Site Plan



L4 South Lobby



L1 North Lobby



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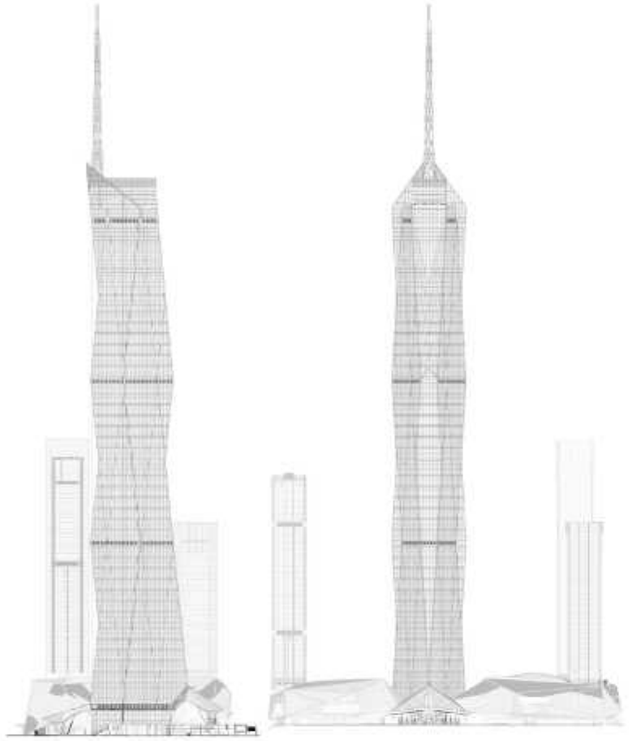
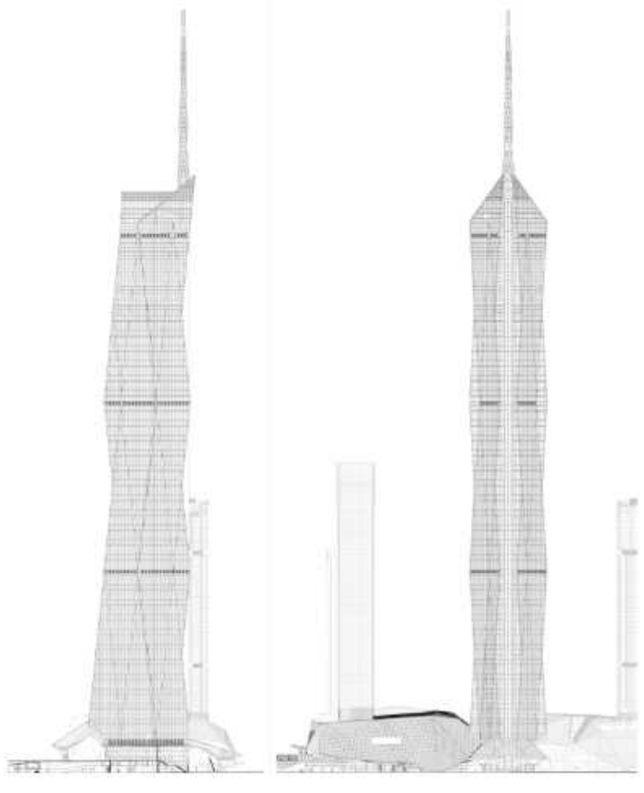
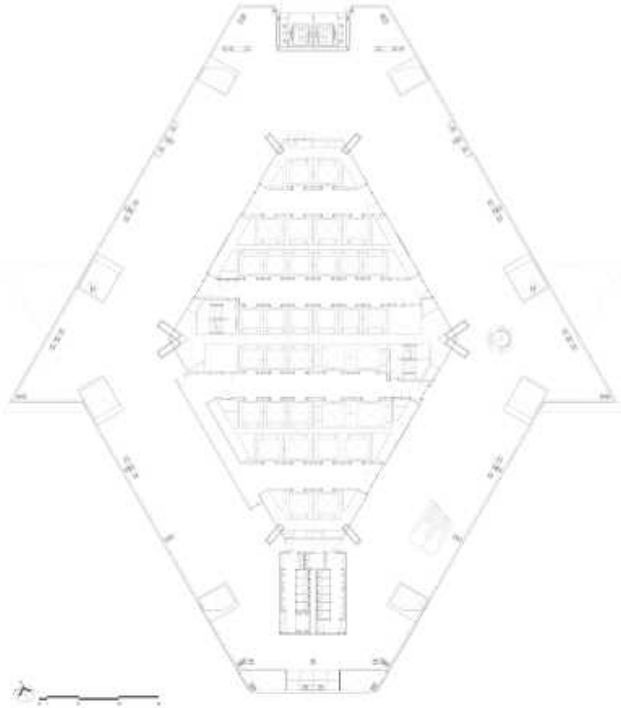


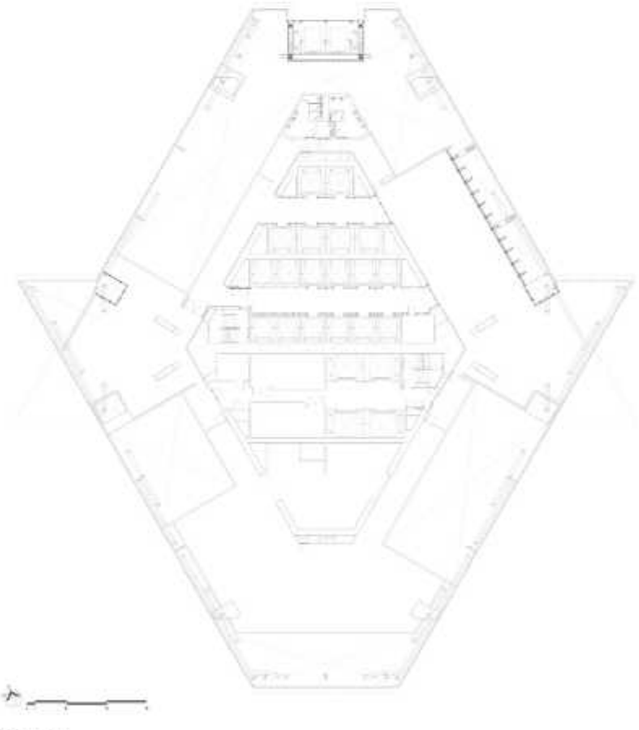
Elevations



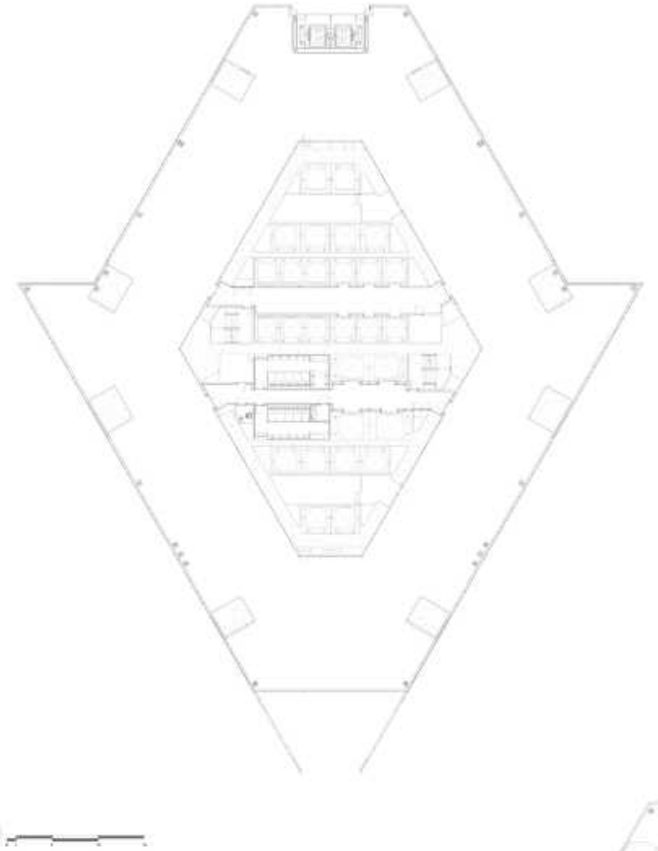
Elevations



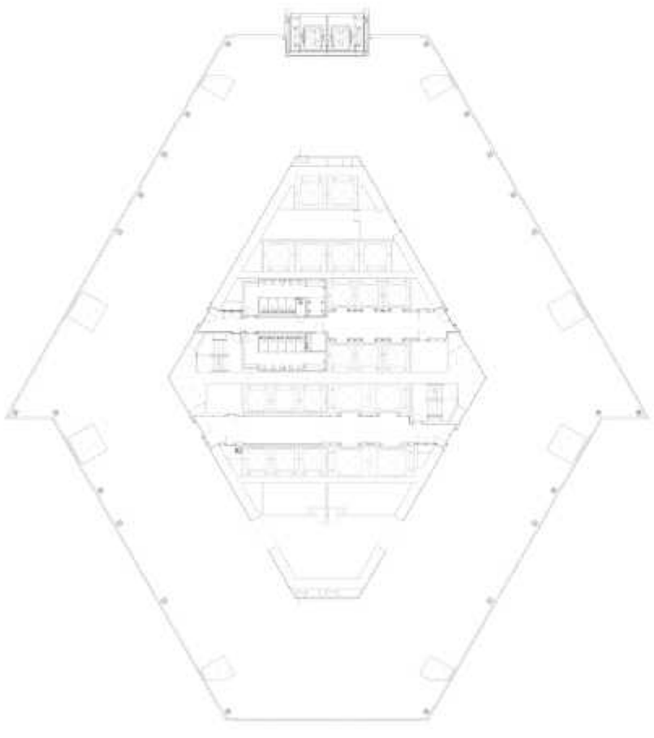
L40 Sky Lobby



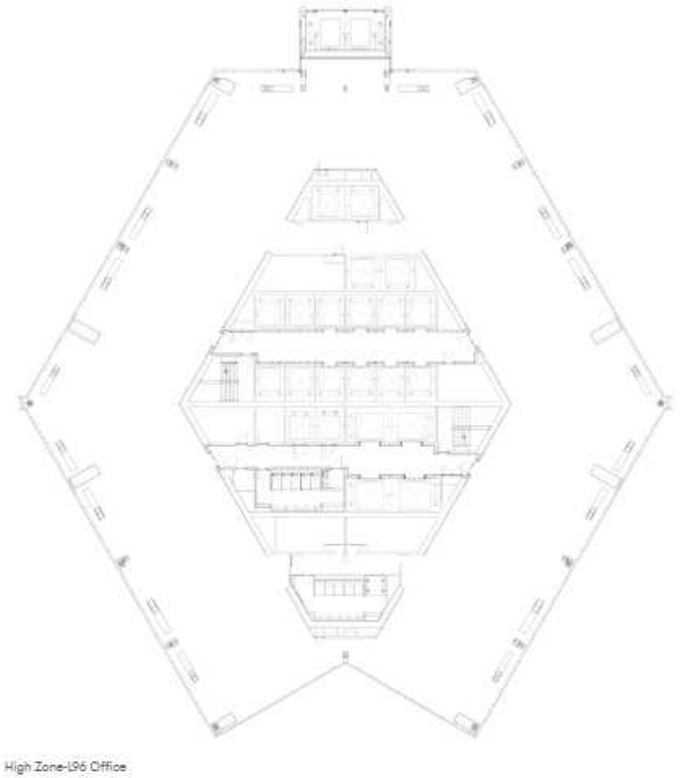
L76 Sky Lobby



Low Zone-L10 Office



Mid Zone-L52 Office



High Zone-L96 Office

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