

The Architectural Thoughts of Hijjas Kasturi on the concept of a National Architectural Identity

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to present the thoughts of Hijjas Kasturi on national architectural identity for Malaysia. An interview session with him was held and questions of society and architecture were posed to elicit his unfettered views about the subject matter. Although there are a few writings that have described his buildings within this context of inquiry, none has been able to get up close and personal in relation to his private thoughts on this issue. Hijjas gave a clear insight into transforming the issue of culture, climate and clients into an expression of function and technology that presents a unique direction of design approach to a country that is struggling between modernity and conservatism.

Keywords: Function and technology, Hijjas Kasturi, national architectural identity, unique design approach

INTRODUCTION

Hijjas Kasturi is one of the most famous architects in Malaysia and is credited for iconic buildings such as the Maybank Head Quarters Building in Kuala Lumpur and the Menara Telekom in Petaling Jaya. He has

been practising for five decades after a short stint as an academic in what is now known as UiTM. This paper presents his thoughts on the question of national architectural identity based on an interview with him and the authors held at UCSI University in early 2018. This paper is important to reset the agenda for a national architectural identity that has recently resurfaced after 30 years.

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BACKGROUND

In the early days of independence, the search for a so called 'National Architectural Identity' was embraced by the first and

second generation architects in Malaysia when they returned home after completing their studies in Britain and Australia (Mursib & Tajuddin, 2016). They were aware Malaysia by virtue of its unique climate, landscape and culture was different. Even British statesmen like Sir Gerald Templer had issued a request to Architect Raymond Honey when he was designing the Dewan Jubli Intan in Johor just before independence (Rasdi, 2015). Many scholars and architects do not know that this was the first building ever attempted to answer the call for a new architecture for a young multiracial nation. Raymond Honey responded by amalgamating some elements of Chinese, Malay and Indian architecture based on Templer's suggestion. The exterior of the building resembled a Chinese temple while the interior finishes had Malay influence with timber trimmings and even carvings that had graced the traditional village homes. The Indian influence was noticeable from the massive symmetrical entrance recalling that of Moghul era.

Being an architect trained in the discipline of modernism, it must have been very hard for Raymond to incorporate traditional architectural elements into his design. Architects such as Lim Chong Keat and friends ignored the influence of culture and only factored in climate and local materials. Here the Corbusien Brute architecture of massive forms laced with sun shading fins and crates became the major vocabulary that spoke none of the idea of any ethnic supremacy (Yoong, 2007). The masterful display of the Parliament

house by Ivor Shipely marked a standard of design still waiting to be beaten by any local architect. The curious and exotic treatment of the sun shading device that became an iconic image as well as the subtle flow of mass and form to present a socialist architecture is a superb reflection of a mind deep in the idea of a universalist democracy. This design was followed by the international styled Masjid Negara imbued with subtle forms of Malay and Islamic traditional references but not to the extent of being literal. It is another masterful work also waiting to be beaten by any other local or foreign architect. The sweeping *serambi* or verandah and forest of hyper roof crowned with a folded slab umbrella present the difficult juxtaposition of modernism and expressionism. However, these two buildings were to be marked in contrast to Museum Negara with its dominant Malay roof form bordering on the dreaded dogma of revivalism. However, to his credit, the architect had placed the roof on a classical base with a Palladian proportion to recall perhaps the monumental language of great western architecture in order to honour the Malay heritage. This approach that presented the difficult juxtaposition of revivalism, classicism and modernist vocabulary is unique and provide a curiously possible approach for the designers of this country to study. However, this approach had then ushered in the literal revivalism of ethnic-centred architecture pieces that contributed to the country's intellectual architectural dilemma.

METHODS

The main methodology used was the interview method. Hijjas had not done many writings throughout his career and it was necessary to elicit information from him through a structured interview held at UCSI University on the 3rd of March 2016. A transcript of the interview was produced and a copy was given to him to verify the contents of his statements. A video recording was also made and uploaded on the YouTube under the heading 'Conversations with Hijjas Kasturi'.

The researcher posed two questions and Hijjas took about 80 minutes to answer them. The questions are as follows:

Question 1

Do you believe that a political and architectural identity of a nation must be manufactured by the executives? Or do you think that both identities ought to be natural and organic based on mutual understanding between races, faiths and cultures within a framework of democratic acceptance?

Question 2

Do you think Malay Revivalism as seen in the architecture of Bank Bumiputra, Muzium Losong and the PWTC as important approaches to Natural Identity? Do you think that we should revisit and reinterpret the Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (National Culture Policy) of 1971 concerning the emphasis on Malayness and Islamic symbols?

The transcript of the conversation is examined by content analysis in order to understand better Hijjas' private views on nation building as well as architecture for the nation.

The interview focused on three main structures of his creative impulses, namely Maybank Building, Maybank Training Centre and the Rimbun Dahan Private Residence.

RESULTS

Hijjas is a modernist but in order to make his modern vocabulary acceptable to his clients who were mostly Malay statesmen bred in the kampong but educated in the west, he had to fall back on the Vitruvian dictum *firmatas, utilitas et venustas*. This dictum was loosely translated by British historians as Strength, Function and Beauty. According to Hijjas:

"In my design philosophy, I have three things that I adhere to. One is rationale, second is economics and third is aesthetics. Rationale is about site analysis, climate, what the building is for, ingress and egress, what is the building's relationship with its surroundings and neighbours. Economics is not about just money, rather it is about the plan. Buildings must be designed with the form and plan in the most economical manner without wastage. You can speak of economy of space, economy of using materials, economy of structure and construction. For instance, we don't

manufacture steel, so concrete is the most economic material for construction and structure. Then there is the economics of maintenance like using air conditioning. The last is aesthetics, although sometimes it can be the first thing.”

The Maybank Building in KL exemplifies his design philosophy aptly. He had endeavoured to create a soaring building clean of column or beam lines to evoke an awe-inspiring image of the bank. His idea of being economical involved saving the hill and placing the escalator outside. His interpretation of climate and heritage culminated in the prism space truss roof that cascade down the hill from the top. He presented the client with an off-centre core that gave maximum space usage and with floor slabs cantilevered a few feet away from the perimeter beam. The idea of the ‘Keris’ was never in his agenda but it was made an icon by those who sought to use a dominant race approach to Malaysian identity.



Figure 1. Maybank HQ in Kuala Lumpur

In his discourse, Hijjas vehemently rejects revivalism of such buildings such as headquarters of Bank Bumiputra in Kuala Lumpur, Perdana Putra in Putrajaya and even Muzium Negara. To him, politically manufacturing an identity by amalgamating styles, especially based on a single ethnic group, is something to be avoided by serious designers:

“Manufactured identity is wrong. A good example is Bank Bumiputra. The architects copied the traditional elements of Kelantanese architecture and built them using concrete! The Kelantanese craftsmen used timber and it is a different material than concrete. The architects have no imagination to translate wood into concrete and have not even considered the scale of the building.”

“One cannot move backwards in a creation of art or architecture. We must always move forward. Even if Malaysia is not a plural society, take away the Chinese and the Indians, it is still wrong to repeat tradition blindly. What should we do in the future? That’s how a creative person should be. If not, we would still be thinking in the same way, what the Malays call ‘kolot’.”

“How can you do Minangkabau architecture for a national identity? That is only one ethnic group. Perhaps the Minister was from Minangkabau and the architect just wanted to please him. This is not the way. That is why I am so ashamed of Malaysia’s architectural pavilion in Shanghai. But today, one

of the best exhibition in Milan is our design and they say finally, Malaysia has arrived.”

Hijjas believes strongly in the creative impulse of reinterpreting traditions through

the solutions of technology and economics. The climate and the materials in the local landscape are clues for the artist to form his masterpiece. The best work that represents this type of architecture is the Maybank Training Centre in Bangi.



Figure 2. Maybank training centre in Bangi

In mass, the form hails to the *bumbung panjang* or gable roof of the traditional Malay past but upon scrutiny, it is a series of massive portal frames in prism form that roofed the outside space and the inside. The Malay verandah or *serambi* is given a new interpretation of a shaded court with the roof being a major part of the interior. This is attested by his following statement on the use of history in contemporary design:

“History must be seen in the context of relevant use of technology and needs of time. There must be reinterpretation and creative solutions. We have good examples of that in the colonial architecture such as in the quarter houses and the administrative structures. Then we have the Masjid Negara and the Parliament which are

such avant-garde buildings. A totally new approach to thinking about the mosque and administrative structures! Although they look avant-garde they still represent Malaysia. There is nothing that resembled this. Why can't we do it? What's wrong with people who have been educated in Cambridge and Oxford in that they cannot see all this? Why can't they think contemporary?”

The Rimbun Dahan residence, which is the private home of Hijjas and his family, is located on a 14-acre site, in the village of Kuang, Selangor. It consists of the main house which was completed in 1991, an underground gallery which was completed in 1995, a classic car gallery, studios and apartment which were completed in 1998.



Figure 3. The main house of Rimbun Dahan. On the right side is Hijjas' residence and on the left side is the guest house

The main house is divided into two: residential house for Hijjas and his wife, and a guest house. Both of the houses are located about 20 metres from each other by a long and covered loggia, which at the same time functioning as an entrance or 'serambi' or verandah to the main house. The covered loggia was designed by using a pitch roof and supported by steel trusses which sit on a series of circular columns. The steel trusses

are clearly visible and exposed. The height of the roof of the loggia is low that one can touch the roof trusses on the side with an extended arm. It clearly has the scale of the traditional serambi but expressed in a different function of a corridor as well as a place to sit and converse. From another point of view, it's respecting the human scale and proportion.



Figure 4. The covered loggia at the same time created the visual parameter for the internal area of the main house which is located at the back of the covered loggia

The loggia's roof has a different overhang length between the outer face and the inner face. The overhang for the outer face is slightly longer than the inner face. As a result, it creates the visual parameter from the outside to internal area of the main house. At the same time, it also gives the quality of visual sequence, travelling from one area to the new area when entering the covered loggia through the drop off point. The first thing that will be seen at this point is the water garden, located parallel along the loggia.

The quality of symmetry and balance are visible in the planning of the main house. It has a central axis walkway which continues from the drop off point in the covered loggia. The central axis walkway floats on the water garden surface and it separates the right and left side of the water garden. From the central axis walkway, the full facade of both guest house and residential house can be seen clearly. The end of the central axis route will direct the circulation to the garden.



Figure 5. The roof design dominates the physical appearance of the house. It has the same roof language with the covered loggia. The roof of the main house is based on the Malay traditional home

The main visible element is the design of the roof. The application of the pitch roof dominates the physical appearance of the house. It appears that Hijjas is trying to revive one of the notable Malay traditional roof, which is called as '*Gajah Menyusu*'. The roof is designed in different levels from one another. At a different level, it

gives the advantage of the lighting quality inside the house, since there is the usable attic space located beneath the roof. The roof design overhang harks back at the principal of Malay traditional house, to protect the interior space from heavy rain and direct sunlight. The steel roof beams penetrate through the end of roof as part

of the expression of using steel which is a modern expression of the traditional Malay timber construction method.

Most part of the house designed elevated to the first floor, which leave the ground floor mainly open. From the main facade, the elevated spaces are supported by a series of linear circular columns. At this point, Hijjas attempted to replicate the main principal of the Malay Traditional House, which is design elevated on stilts. This approach aids in natural ventilation and natural light on the ground floor. At the same time, it creates a direct view to the water garden and the greenery opposite the house.

CONCLUSION

Many scholars consider Hijjas an expressionist, but his design and statement point to him as a hard-core modernist. The three buildings that were used as examples in this study show that he use materials such as concrete, steel and glass within a masterly composition of tropical architecture but with a care for proportion

and mass as an allusion to traditional form and language of architecture. The idea of the *serambi* or *verandah* was transformed into a covered escalator ride seen at the entrance of Maybank entrance while the Maybank training centre had a large forecourt covered over the whole mass. The Rimbun Dahan interpreted the *serambi* into a long generous corridor that can still be used for sitting. The forms of all three buildings, although serving as a functional product, has the robustness of alluding to traditional forms of buildings or artefact. They are therefore, more dynamic and meaningful rather than the alternatives of revivalism or regionalism approaches.

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