

ROJAK

Kuala Lumpur *By Maggie*

Peng A salad consisting of mixed tropical fruits and root vegetables topped with prawn paste, Rojak characterizes the milieu of cultural identity in Malaysia. A country with at least three distinct ethnic groups, the landscape of Malaysia reveals the piecemeal aesthetic that is generated by overlapping histories, cultures, and territories. The laissez-faire urban landscape of Kuala Lumpur (KL) is collaged from picture perfect suburban developments, fiberglass-domed mosques, labyrinthine shopping malls with everything from roller-coasters to cell phone repair shops to stores selling the latest bootlegged DVD's of banned Western movies. Within this context, Rojak characterizes the current postmodern condition of Malaysia.

Ingredients

25 diced chilies - soaked and ground (less if you prefer mild)
2 1/2 cm square dried shrimp paste (belachan) - toasted and ground
4 tbsp. tamarind paste
1/2 cup water
1 tsp. dark soy sauce
6 tbsp. brown sugar
1 medium size cucumber
2 small green mango (choose ripe mango if you prefer sweet)
1/2 medium pineapple (or can)
1 starfruit (optional)
1 jackfruit (optional)
200 gm bangkwang or turnip
100 gm sweet potato
2 tbsp. black shrimp paste (heiko)
150 gm peanut candy or roasted peanuts, ground coarsely
1 tbsp. sesame seeds - roasted

Method:

1. Put ground ingredients and tamarind juice in a small saucepan and cook over low heat
2. Stir in sugar and dark soy sauce and cook until sugar dissolves and sauce is thick
3. Let it cool
4. Mix cut vegetables with cooled sauce and black shrimp paste in large mixing bowl
5. Add ground peanut candy or roasted peanuts and roasted sesame seeds
6. Serve immediately

Makes about 4 to 6 serving.

As this young nation (independence from the UK in 1957, nation of Malaysia in 1963) continues to build at an ever-rapid pace, the ambitious scale of current development describes the illusive process of the search for national identity and quality of lifestyle through architectural

means. The optimism of Malaysia is revealed through its design culture. While Malaysia builds the new administrative capital city of Putrajaya and the new technological capital of Cyberjaya, the sprawling capital of KL faces the on-going challenge of maintaining its status and identity as the cultural capital. Already a city of many centers, new projects continue to tug and pull the extents of KL. A walk through the city is an experience of polarization, contradiction, and disjunction, moving through patchworks of iconic triumphs, bizarre urban conditions, and unfinished projects, all revealing the complex history and cultural mix that is intrinsically Malaysian.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the different typologies, or ingredients, employed to represent power, security, status, and progress for this young nation. I will present case studies, both finished and unfinished or under construction, that exemplify the current search for national identity, however successful. At the same time, the article will discuss contradictions inherent within the process of attaining such ideals within the cultural complexity of Malaysia. The reference to Rojak is that of collage, in terms of meaning and metaphor. Analogous to the dish, the unlikely mix of ingredients creates surprising urban landscapes and cultural conditions, almost by accident. Symbolism, iconography, and forms are re-appropriated, given new purpose in the process of creating Malaysia's national identity.

Civic Putrajaya is the new administrative capital of Malaysia that began as a vision of the former prime-minister Mahathir Mohamad twenty years ago. Putrajaya is located 30 minutes from Kuala Lumpur and 25 minutes from Kuala Lumpur International Airport to create a triangle of centers within the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a zone about 9 by 30 miles dedicated to high tech government and commercial enterprises.

Putrajaya was created with the guidance of three simple ideologies:

*Man and his Creator
Man and man
Man and nature*

The concept is simple. Putrajaya is a city within a luscious garden, hinging on a balance of ideal qualities of living, working environment. Architecturally, Putrajaya will be an indigenous city with a modern look. Planned to the most minute detail, this intelligent garden city will enhance the goal of the nation in nurturing a caring and progressive society. (Excerpt from <http://www.i-putra.com.my/aboutputrajaya.htm>)

In 1995, the construction of the Masterplanned city of Putrajaya began. A grand vision with allusions to utopian ideals of society and western formal motifs of axial boulevards and gardens, the infrastructure of Putrajaya reflects the goal of Malaysia in becoming a first-world nation by the year 2020.

Putrajaya is poised to be a fully integrated and self-contained city. Adapting the latest in telecommunication, transportation and infrastructure technologies, Putrajaya is to provide for a level of efficiency in Government machinery that would be geared towards excellence in the new millennium and towards 'Vision 2020'. (Excerpt from <http://www.i-putra.com.my/aboutputrajaya.htm>)



Prime Minister's Office (Pic.1)



Putra Mosque (Pic.2)



View of Putrajaya Boulevard from Convention Center, Looking towards Prime Minister's Office (Pic.3)

The core of Putrajaya is divided into five precincts, connected by boulevards, bridges, lakes, gardens, and wetland parks. The first phase of projects were concerned with the initial move of primary government offices. The first buildings to be completed anchor one end of the axially aligned mall, the Perdana Putra Building (Mahathir's office), the Prime Minister's Department (Pic.1), the Putra Mosque (Pic.2) and the Dataran Putra, an open plaza and food court connecting these three buildings and overlooking a man-made lake. The Perdana Putra incorporates "a mixture of European influences overlaid with Malay and Islamic elements". The Putra Mosque reflects Islamic architectural influences from Turkestan, Kazakhstan, Iraq and Morocco. The Dataran Putra is the centerpiece for the staging of major events along the promenade, a plaza that connects the buildings anchoring the governmental end of the boulevard. The pattern on the ground is symbolic of the national conception of Malaysia.

The Dataran is divided into 11 segments, in the pattern of an 11-pointed star. The outer 11-pointed star represents the 11 states of Malaya when the country gained independence in August 1957, the inner 13-pointed star the 13 states that formed Malaysia in 1963 and the 14-pointed star includes the new addition of the Federal Territory. The progressive arrangements of the different pointed stars finally culminate in a circle in the center of the Dataran. The circle symbolizes the ultimate goal of unity. (Excerpt from <http://www.i-putra.com.my/about-putrajaya.htm>)

The next phase of buildings was important in the procession and function for hosting the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) conference in October of 2003. To anchor the other end of the boulevard, a grand convention center and sports complex was built on a large island. (Pic.3) While the first cluster of governmental buildings looked towards traditional Islamic and/or Malay stylistic references, the architecture of the Convention Center, designed by Hijas Kasturi Architects, is monumental in scale and abstract in form. Traditional Malay references are made with interior textile patterns and finish rather than gestured in form.

The most exciting addition to the procession of buildings along Putrajaya Boulevard is the new Putrajaya Civic Center, designed by a young Malaysian architectural firm headed by Zaini Zainul. It is an impressive building sited across the Boulevard from the Hall of Justice, a multi-domed Islamic style building. The Civic Center mirrors the symmetry and scale of the Hall of Justice with two separate buildings bridged by a monumental arch clad in a delicate latticework of stainless steel that

serves as a pair of elevators to a bridge on the top floor. (Pic.4) It is the most ambitious deviation from the archetype of buildings along the Boulevard. When we visited the construction site in 2004, the building was about 60% complete. It was apparent that the building was not just ambitious aesthetically but was also experimental with technologically sophisticated architectural details. The modern aesthetic and high tech functions of the building facade serves to protect the interior from the harsh climate of Malaysia.

The Putrajaya Civic Center and the Convention Center exemplify the new direction in civic architectural expression that describes the contemporary ascend of a generation of new talent, many of whom were educated and trained abroad at prestigious institutions. The architectural representation is a mixture of western ideals and comforts while abstracting traditional cultural symbolism as surfaces or textures.

Security Desa Park City is an ambitious multi-phased suburban community being developed right outside of Kuala Lumpur. The project began in 1990 as a master-planned community on 473 acres of freehold land. Complete with residential, commercial, community and recreational spaces, Desa Park City strives to provide all amenities of



Putrajaya Civic Center (Pic.4)



Desa Park City, February 2004. Looking towards Nadia Parkfront Condos, under construction (Pic.5)



Abandoned construction site of residential towers in Kuala Lumpur (Pic.6)

urban living while accommodating the desires of country living. "Urban living redefined." There are eight different residential developments within the master-planned suburb: apartments, condos, park-homes, courtyard terraces, semi-detached homes, and lots for custom bungalows. The developments make up 23 "neighborhoods" that consists of a mixture of housing types. Only 2 out of the 23 neighborhoods are not gated communities.

Safa, the first development of 175 double-storied semi-detached units, opened in the fall of 2004. The second development, Nadia, with 165 similar type of units will open this month. Throughout the promotional literature, ideas of serenity, security, and exclusivity are repeated and emphasized. All of the developments are guarded if not gated. Many of the developments currently under construction have already sold out. The boundaries of Kuala Lumpur continue to expand at a rapid rate as developments continue to sprawl outside of the city limits. To provide a "town center" internally, the newest project at Desa Park City, the Quaritz, offer a main street providing community, commercial, and entertainment spaces.

We got a tour of the site with the construction supervisor last February. It's hard to imagine the places represented by the billboard renderings of the various developments when most of the site consists of graded dirt and foundations. The harsh intensity of the sun reveals the fertile red clay soil, which served the palm oil plantation that existed before. (Pic.5) Crews of men from Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Indonesia, and Nepal live in shack communities on site. There are distinct communities amongst the labor force at Desa Park City. Much of the construction labor force in Malaysia comes from other Southeast Asian countries. They are migrant workers who stay on job sites for various periods of time. These nomadic communities are seen at every major development in Malaysia.

The image of "city" in these developments hark back to western utopian ideals of the garden city, with an abundance of open space, meandering streets, low density of housing. The image of "home" in Malaysia is marketed as a modern place, with large bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, showcase kitchens, and lush landscaping. The marketing strategies present an image of western creature comforts paired with Malaysian amenities, like the wet kitchen, generally outside or partially enclosed. Images of lush, park like settings inhabited by a cross section of Malaysian population young and old reveal a desire to create communities. The idealism and optimism for social progress is seen everywhere, on billboards advertising the latest housing development promising a better city, a better home. However, behind every billboard for such developments, there's a chance that the project will never complete. Incidents of disappearing developers, who take large deposits from new homeowners and vanish, are common. (Pic.6)

Vestige Plaza Rakyat would have been crowned the 7th tallest building in the world at the time of its conception. Located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, next to the Pudu Raya Bus Station, Plaza Rakyat was designed as a 6.6 million square feet mixed-use development that would expand and improve the transport terminal, provide retail mall at the base with an office tower on top. The project began in the mid-1990's, at the height of the building boom and stalled during the Asian economic crisis. Designed by SOM, the project would have anchored the older business neighborhood around the transport terminal while on the other side of the city, a shiny new business district develops around the Petronas Towers, completed in 1998. (Pic.7)



SOM model of Plaza Rakyat (Pic.7)



Plaza Rakyat, February 2004 (Pic.8)



Plaza Rakyat, February 2004 (Pic.9)

When we visited Plaza Rakyat in February of 2004, the project was still on hold, the concrete base structure stood right behind the existing transport terminal, overgrown with weed, moss, and debris. (Pic.8/ 9) When we asked local residents about the site, many speak with disdain about the eyesore that's there but also optimism that the project will be completed. Berjaya Times Square was recently completed after years of abandonment due to financial troubles. Visitors not knowing its history would not have guessed the project was on hold for almost 4 years. The 12 stories of retail, amusement park, dining, with two towers of hotel and convention center was packed with people when we visited. The luminous atrium, flanked with escalators was adorned with festive lights while a fashion show was in progress on the ground level. The mall, however, had many empty stalls suggesting the imbalance between supply and demand of commercial retail space.

Major mixed-use developments, providing some public amenity, entertainment, commercial, and in some cases, residential spaces is currently the standard model of urban development. These projects are megastructures even by global standards, providing enough program space to be considered a city within a city. Just a few weeks ago, Plaza Rakyat re-started the construction, after almost 5 years of abandonment. Questions are being raised about the traffic patterns and congestion issues once the shopping mall is complete. The city of Kuala Lumpur is far behind in dealing with the impacts of such large developments in the city. Traffic is a major problem as more cars are added to the system every year. The city has been resolving problems of street names and map making since the streets were renamed from colonial names to Malay names, which caused more confusion to the exquisite corpse that describes the way streets in KL are laid out.

Future After 22 years in power, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stepped down from office in October 2003. The new leader, hand-picked by Mahathir and served as Deputy Prime Minister for 4 years, is Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. The new leader has been described as a political "Mr. Nice Guy". However, that image has shifted to "Mr. Clean". Less outspoken and less extravagant, Badawi is cleaning up political corruption and halting major infrastructure projects in favor of a more careful and slower-paced course of development. In this shifting political climate, development projects are being scrutinized in terms of long term goals, not speculative and spectacular gains. Malaysia is in a reflective period, tying up loose ends, scaling back, editing its political image, and redirecting its resources. At the end of an era, Malaysia has accomplished much towards becoming a "first-world" nation. It will be interesting to return in 2020 and see how that vision shifts to accommodate the citizens and the cultural, economic, and political climates.

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