

Planning Issues - Malaysia

Introduction

During the 1997/8 period Malaysia was hit by an economic crisis which saw a serious devaluation of the Malaysia ringgit, a stock market crash, construction industry in crisis with over supply of housing and stalled projects. There were recriminations and scapegoats found after an extended boom/bull period of greed and prosperity in the housing market.

The aftermath of this difficult period has been a reflective, yet positive period, where a number of housing issues are being rethought, reviewed and reflected upon by government, developers, architects, planners and users.

This paper details some of these current issues such as: quality and values, precedent, ecology, sustainability, legislation, poor construction, profitability, condominium development, urban design/townships and most important components and issues that could pertain to future housing and urban design in this developing nation to secure the best positive future living for its citizens.

The aim must be to build a better living environment in which people can live, prosper and develop in Malaysia. As United Nations Habitat II Conference Secretary-general Dr. Wally N'Dow said: 'Adequate shelter means much more than just having a roof over one's head. It also means privacy, adequate space and security, a place with which to thrive, the structural stability and durability of a dwelling with proper lighting and ventilation, and with adequate infrastructure for sanitation and waste management. It is also important for the shelter to be located close to work and basic facilities – all this at an affordable cost'.

Recent Housing and Urban Design proposals

Macro level

Vision 2020 for the development of Malaysia is vast in both its scope and content. At Cambridge University, the Prime Minister, Yab Dato Ser Dr. Mahasir Bin Mohamad outlined the new challenges and development, including K-Economy, Multimedia Super Corridor (Putrajaya Cyberjaya KLIA, Multi Media University).

Putrajaya is a garden city with a projected population of 250,000, the new seat of Malaysian Government and designed as a paperless electronic government.

Cyberjaya has been described as "The Model Intelligent City in the Making" and it "presents a bold vision for a progressive yet ecologically sound 'cyber-city' of the future". This garden city will have a projected population of 170,000 by 2011.

The key features include:

Flagship Zone (50% open space)

City Command Centre – brain of the city for seamless integration of systems and Services.

Advanced traffic management.

Global Positioning System – to track public transport.

Integrated utilities management – to co-ordinate billing, fault reporting, maintenance.

Intelligent buildings.

Interactive community services – via broadband Intranet networks.

Municipal and public amenities – range of municipal services online.

Telecommunication – high capacity fibre optic lines locally and internationally.

Utilities – high quality.

District Cooling System – centrally chilled water for air conditioning.

Multimedia University – for knowledge capture and technology transfer.

Trauma Centre – integrated intelligent system, allowing patients and doctors to interact.

Source: Cyberjaya.

What will the take up rate be for this new venture? Who is committed to it internationally? What will the real benefit be? What are the implications of such a proposal? What benefit is it to everyday life for the vast number of ordinary citizens? Is such a “place” required at all? Would a dispersal of facilities be better than a concentration? Will it create an elitism or will there be a cascade effect across the country? The list is endless. Only time will tell as to Cyberjaya’s true worth.

A recent study evaluating public awareness of science and technology (S & T) indicates that 87% believe that S & T has a positive effect on life and 58.6% believe that the Malaysian government had not done enough to reduce pollution.

Source: Public Awareness of Science and Technology, Malaysia 1998.

There have been many substantial new directives from the Town and Country Planning Department and Ministry of Housing and Local Government to develop a safe and sustainable human settlement.

The “Total Planning Doctrine”:

Holistic approach

Man as the focus of development

Multi-dimensional activities

Qualitative and quantitative changes; and

Equal distribution and utilisation of resources.

Principle	Physical planning implication
Fairness and Equity	Respect for man and the environment
Beneficence (Ehsan)	Man should be kind to confer or sacrifice for his community and environment
Trust and Authority	Decisions based on sound knowledge and consultation
Unity	Promote sense of togetherness in purpose
Full respect for Knowledge and Creator	Education becomes a central focus in planning an urban area
Respecting Privacy and Division of Space	Spaces to be delineated into functional areas of private, semi-private and public use
Encouraging congregation and identity	Neighbourhood concept
Peace and Safety	Site evaluation to minimise risks and danger to people and property
Respecting the Rights of Others	Planning should avoid harm and inconvenience to disadvantaged group
Co-operation, Respect and Perseverance	Integration of society between different levels of income and ethnic group
Consultation	Consensus and public participation in planning
Clean and Beautiful	Environmental improvement and protection in planning
Conservation of the Natural Environment	Protection of the environment from pollution and destruction, and sustainable use of natural resources
Zero wastage	Reduce waste and efficient use of resources

Source: TCPD/MHLG

Micro level

The traditional kampong (village) set in the virgin forest is a uniquely balanced ecological life style – often is inexpensive, sociable and sustainable. Architects like Jimmy Lim have tried to incorporate ecological principles of cooling and ventilation in their domestic architecture.

There have been calls to incorporate kampong principles into contemporary urban living in the concept of “Kampongminium” (combination of village and condominium/apartments). It has been described as “ ... manifestation of new environments and space not seen anywhere else before. It is homespun”.

This is difficult to evaluate. The two typologies are so inherently different; the kampong implies nature, openness, social interaction and trust; the condominium implies a peripheral fence, security, little space for interaction (except maybe a pool), park and limited trust. Maybe it is not that simple and an evolutionary process, over time will with high integrity produce new quality housing/living configurations.

Whilst some are seeking new innovatives, others are seeking to increase profitability still further through the manipulation of housing design factors, such as housing density, design standards and administrative on costs etc. (Bertaud and Malpezzi, 1998).

A scenario was evolved, to increase the amount of saleable land (44%), public use land (56%) in low cost housing development. By reducing road widths (distribution 12 to 10m., local 8 to 7m.) elimination of the traditional drainage back alley, reduction of setbacks, the over site floor area was considerably increased and hence more profitable. But, one must ask at what total cost; surely road volumes, parking provisions, utility vehicle access, private garden and social/ecological cost must be applied to such financially driven models.

Conclusion

- Precedent

There have been many Utopian ideologies, theorists and realisations of varying quality on how people should live. From the disasters of Pruitt Igoe (USA), Park Hill (UK), Arcosanti (USA) to excellence in College Heights (Malaysia), Saltair (UK), Columbus (USA) and such eclectic proposals as a new artificial island for “the kinetic elite” (ref. Peter Sloterdijk, the German philosopher, referring to people whose lives are entirely subordinated to business demands) off Holland, by architect Rem Koolhaas. The Dubai International Award for Best Practices in Improving the Living Environment has produced much interesting material.

This is not the place to evaluate all these and other worthy examples, but it is important to thoroughly review and incorporate best and reflective practices in future proposals.

- Sustainability

The United Nations’ definition of sustainability is:

“A sustainable society meets the needs of the present without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

The United Nations Sustainable Development Programme outlines the following objectives:

Providing adequate shelter for all;
 Improving human settlement management;
 Promoting sustainable land-use planning and management;
 Promoting the integrated provision of environmental infrastructure: water, sanitation, drainage and solid-waste management;
 Promoting sustainable energy and transport systems in human settlements;
 Promoting human settlement planning and management in disaster-prone areas;
 Promoting sustainable construction industry activities;
 Promoting human resource development and capacity-building for human settlement development.

Source: Agenda 21, Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development.

At the macro level the dichotomy exists between the rich/developing nations and the poor ones who blame the rich for their vast consumption. The rich look at the poor ones who often have the natural/ecological materials and point to their destruction, but all have the right to development and realisation of potential.

For life as we know it to survive at the city level, the following declaration is useful:

- “1. The physical resources and systems that support life must be maintained:
 They can’t be used up so that there is nothing left; and
 They can’t be made unusable through degradation.
2. The health of plant and animal populations, whether they are considered as the human food chain or as a highly complex system that interacts with physical life-support systems (such as the atmosphere) in ways that aren’t well understood, must be insured.”

Source: Office of the Mayor, San Francisco, October 1996.

Planning must include economic development, community revitalization and our relationship with the environment. A number of these issues have been highlighted in Vision 2020, Seventh Malaysia Plan, National Urban Policy to strengthen attitudes, values and actions which are compatible with sustainable development.

- Seeking Added Value

To evolve serious added value and better living standards, from the same or similar resources demands serious thinking, which comes from creativity, innovation, 'benchmarking', communication and technology, but most important of all is the moral drive to improve standards.

Creativity and innovation in the built environment requires the ability to generate often new and useful ideas and solutions to everyday problems and challenges, through divergent (original, diverse and elaborate ideas) or convergent thinking (logical evaluation, critique and making choices).

Technology must play an increasingly important role in house design – the use of energy, renewable energy, insulation and ecological design principles will have to be taken on board by all – it will be too expensive not to do so.

Benchmarking and best practice requires gaining access to really valuable data, visiting top-notch organisations, precedent built examples, reflective practice, international experts, knowledgeable professionals, listening to the users, and opening the debate for discussion.

A recent study undertaken by the author indicated a poor miss-match of built environment livability factors (BELF, Malaysia 1997). Value between architects, developers, users and architectural students and a serious lack of communication between them – no wonder some overall results appear to be less than optimised.

Collectively with all participating and with vision, foresight and planning, we can make a better living environment for future generations.

- A new Malaysian Research Institute of Contemporary Living (MICL)?

This paper has attempted to outline a number of housing issues (post 1997) which hopefully will promote a better understanding of these concerns, and could provoke more debate amongst those involved.

Already established are the Construction Industry Development Board, Housing Developers Association, the Building Academy of Malaysia, and other professional groups, but perhaps what is called for is a new Research Institute, possibly named the Malaysian Institute of Contemporary Living (MICL), which could undertake this important explorative research for proactive action and implementation. Such an organisation could establish Malaysia as a world authority in living and settlements to not only secure the best possible living standards for its citizens, but in time, to advise other countries on their development.

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