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Designing the Malaysian garden

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IF the Japanese garden is inspired by the notion of mankind as a part of nature and the Renaissance garden by the idea that humans are nature's masters, the Malaysian garden seeks to evolve its own identity.

As National Landscape Department director-general Ismail Ngah puts it: "We are not looking at any particular model. We want to create our own based on our tropical rainforest. We want to be the exemplary tropical garden nation."

The plan calls for the preservation of natural landscape and the creation of scenic settings for buildings, towns and cities to enhance it.

Since garden and landscape design operates exactly at the frontier between man and nature, the idea is to develop transitional connecting zones between the outside limits of buildings and engineering structures and the natural forms and processes surrounding them.

The Malaysian garden will be designed to mirror the philosophy of working with nature, not against it. And it will use indigenous trees and plants and reveal the spiritual and cultural values which many Malaysians hold dear.

Each house, school, village, town and city will be planned to include lots of trees, plants and green spaces.

If the proposed Malaysian garden sounds too good to be true and many are sceptical of its viability, it is because Malaysians have too often been disillusioned.

But Ismail insists the dream is not mere sloganeering but a concrete framework for action to turn Malaysia into a garden nation by the year 2005, as envisaged by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Shortly after assuming office in 1981, Dr Mahathir proceeded to translate his vision into reality by instructing the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to set up a landscape unit within its purview.

The move culminated in the founding of the National Landscape Department 15 years later. The agency is charged with monitoring and co-ordinating all landscaping activities in the country.

With the launching of the national tree planting campaign by Dr Mahathir at the Medan Idaman Recreational Park, off Jalan Gombak, in Kuala Lumpur, three weeks ago, Malaysia took a major step towards pushing the garden nation ambition forward.

The target is to plant three million trees by the year 2000 and 20 million by the year 2020. The greening drive is jointly organised by the Housing and Local Government Ministry and local authorities.

Ismail says there are many spaces available within existing developments where trees can be planted - road sides, river banks, individual and private compounds or any incidental open spaces.

"Tree planting can be done in such places and need not require any large specific sites which may not be easily found given increasing development pressures and competition for land," Ismail adds.

Some RM200 million has been allocated to the National Landscape Department for implementing urban greening and beautification measures. New parks will be created, and existing ones upgraded. Six areas have been identified as nurseries to provide trees for public and commercial requirements.

Each State will have its own landscape master plan which would be used as the basis for landscape planning in their areas of jurisdiction. When

this happens, landscaping carried in an ad hoc or piecemeal fashion would stop.

More professionals in landscape architecture would also be trained. Since art, science and nature are intertwined in garden and landscape design, the discipline is to be pursued by professionals who love nature and who have an artistic and scientific bent. Not only must they be concerned with beauty but they have to be conversant in technique and function as well.

Malaysia sorely craves a pool of such professionals, who are sensitive to the needs of the expanding population.

Metacorp Berhad chairman Datuk Mohamed Ishak Mohamed Ariff agrees the task is not going to be easy.

"As the country progresses, environmental problems would become more complex, and we need inputs of various experts to solve them," says Mohamed Ishak, who is also a planner and landscape architect.

Given the diverse interests involved in development planning, can there be cooperation among landscape architects, town planners, engineers, architects, ecologists, economists, sociologists and administrators?

At the same time, says Malaysian Nature Society president Datuk Dr Salleh Mohamed Nor, research in tree and plant suitability cannot be avoided. These living things are not static but change with time. Their species, colour, form and texture necessitate sensitive selection and grouping.

Whether or not Malaysia achieves garden nation status in eight years' time hinges on the population's willingness to see the commitment through. Sceptics, however, point to our poor record in this.

One such person is a resident of Taman Seri Serdang who is afraid history will repeat itself. Recalling that this is not the first call by the Prime Minister to plant trees, he says that following a similar appeal in 1981, residents in his housing estate responded favourably by planting trees in available spaces in front of their houses.

But two years ago they were shocked to find the trees being chopped down by labourers said to be acting on instructions from a local authority.

Baffled, the resident informed the Malay-language tabloid Harian Metro which then despatched a photographer and a reporter to the locality. In the time the newspaper took to finish its enquiries almost three-quarters of all grown trees in the estate had been felled.

The Petaling District Council admitted that "it was a mistake", and that the labourers "were directed to cut only small trees". Even though the tree cutting stopped eventually "the damage had already been done," says the resident.

"The call to plant trees is good, but will the indiscriminate tree cutting continue? The funny thing is, one side is asking you to plant trees, but at the same time another is telling you to cut them. What is going on?"

This is just one example of tree cutting in one locality. Others in Kelana Jaya in Selangor, and elsewhere, have reported similar incidents in their housing estates.

Even if amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 are now in place, that is no guarantee that people will stop destroying trees at random.

Town and Country Planning Department deputy director-general (development) Datuk Wan Mohamad Mukhtar Mohamed Noor concedes that strict enforcement is critical to save existing greenery.

"We have the organisation, we have the legislation but without enforcement it will not work," he says.

As if this is not enough, there is the worry that forest areas may be

snatched away by development agencies. Such sites that have fallen to development include an area in Sungei Buloh, the hillsides of Penang Hill and Bukit Sungei Puteh in Cheras.

Ecologist Dr N. Manokaran says greening the nation is not just a matter of planting trees, displaying potted plants here and there and considering the project over.

Besides ensuring that landscaping is done in a scientific and artistic manner, an adequate budget for maintenance is also essential.

"Tree planting, landscaping and environment maintenance are lifelong commitments.

"In five years' time, we may need to review what the project has achieved and perhaps make some changes," says Manokaran, who is director of Environmental Sciences Division at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia.

Otherwise, the much vaunted Wawasan Lanskap Negara (National Landscape Vision) will remain just that.

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