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Frenetic pace to build a new city

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THE frantic activity in MEC City - the site of an electrical appliance industrial park-cum-township in Kuantan - is exhausting, even just to watch.

As we stepped out of the air-conditioned car into the heat and dazzling sunlight of last Thursday morning, we were surrounded by a confusion of 600 workers rushing about.

There was plenty to do and just three days to do it all.

Sector One of Phase One (sited on 120ha, 10 per cent of the 1,215-hectare project) was due for its official launch by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad shortly.

The Prime Minister visits the project today.

The first products - air-conditioners and refrigerators - are scheduled to hit the market by next month, all bearing the Malaysian brandname MEC.

MEC stands for Malaysian Electric Corporation Bhd. But the project is not just an industrial park, hence a rather ambitious "City" tagged on to its name.

MEC City includes residential areas, a town centre, parks, shops, cinemas, recreation areas and of course, the corporate headquarters of MEC.

Costing RM4 billion, spanning 12 years and five phases, this project is large enough to give a powerful boost to the Eastern Corridor which the Government is set on developing.

The pace of construction thus far, has been mind-boggling.

Have you ever seen walls being prepared for wallpapering, amidst deafening hammering of built-in wooden furniture and panelling, and floor-tiling, and ceiling works, and painting, and touching up of the marble floor, all at the same time?

Outside the building, more workers scurried to turf the bare earth, plaster the walls, cement floors, tar the roads and put finishing touches on the "waterfall", all at the same time.

Everything that needs to be done was being done; at top speed and simultaneously.

"See the street lighting," Janardhanan Gopala Krishnan, general manager of MEC Industrial Park Sdn Bhd which is building MEC City, pointed to the two-kilometre stretch, "they were put up in 10 days".

An imposing RM1.4 million arch spanning the entrance sprouted up in four weeks.

The hollow 200,000 square feet air-conditioner factory was outfitted in three weeks with 60 container-loads of machinery and 30 more to come.

And most impressive of all, what's existing on site right now - 600,000 square feet of two factories, one warehouse, one administration block, one canteen, roads and landscaping - came up in just four months.

Top speed does seem to be the creed of this ambitious project.

A year ago, it wasn't even on the drawing board and since then, plans had undergone 19 major overhauls.

"It's all tight planning and teamwork. Everyone has worked very hard and co-operated wonderfully," Janardhanan said.

"Everyone" here includes the executives in Kuala Lumpur who spend an awful lot of time on ground in Kuantan.

Janardhanan can recite the timetable of Malaysia Airlines flights to Kuantan as well as any ticketing clerk, though these days, he flies on the

company's aircraft.

The Kuantan Municipal Council, he said, had also been marvellous.

The council had set up technical and policy committees specially to handle the project and cut through bureaucracy.

"It was hard work, management and planning," declared Kee Book Hee, the managing director of the turnkey contractors Frontier Bond (M) Sdn Bhd.

These enabled them, he said, to conquer the terrifying combination of the monsoon season and double festivals.

Work stopped for two whole weeks for Chinese New Year and Hari Raya, and sporadically when the rain poured down.

We met Kee outside the administration block after Janardhanan had led us through the cavernous factories and warehouse, and the canteen.

Kee was supervising the work there, scooting around on a mud-splattered Modenas motorcycle.

"I think you better move out of the way," he waved me to a long distance away, "I'm not good with this machine."

Guiding the motorbike in a wavering path to the porch, he parked and took over the tour to show off the results of the "hard work, management and planning".

"Money counts too," he added, somewhat uncertainly, obviously wondering if it would be too vulgar to talk about money after extolling the values of hard work and planning.

Tip-toeing into the lobby, through the debris littering the floor and ducking blobs of flying cement, we came to the theatrette and the appliances showroom.

We couldn't make much sense of the terrible mess but did manage to discern a show kitchen taking shape rapidly.

We certainly couldn't believe our ears when Kee casually said the carpet would be laid the next day.

But at the pace the work was rushing ahead, round the clock, it was more than likely that this would be the case.

A proud Kee even showed us the boardroom's bathroom. "Do you like the colour?" he asked.

Janardhanan said the lightning pace of work would continue for the other phases, pointing to the piling works for the fan and motor factories, staff quarters, warehouse and packaging centres.

"Right now, the adrenalin is flowing and we have to maintain the momentum," he said.

For the next 12 years.

At present, only 10 per cent or 120 hectares have been completed. Another 200ha have been cleared.

The entire project is twice the size of Subang Jaya.

"We keep having to emphasise the size of the project in the planning process," said Janardhanan in an interview in his Kuala Lumpur office, two days before we flew to Kuantan for the site tour.

"Look at this," his index finger traces a road marked out on the plans spread all over his desk, "doesn't it look just a skip away?"

"But it's actually two kilometres.

"And this point to this point," he traces another road leading from a residential area to some shops, "they're really quite far apart, so we had to put in another set of shops."

The Pahang State Government is said to be delighted with the MEC City located about 27km from Kuantan.

The benefits are already evident, at least indirectly. Property prices around the area have apparently tripled.

MEC City is 14km from the airport and just off the crossroads leading respectively into Kuantan town, Kuala Lumpur and Segamat.

While the rest of the project will take another decade or so, fingers crossed, the progress today is impressive.

As we entered, we had watched workers clambering about a unipole billboard with several jumbled red pieces of metal. Driving out a short time later, we saw the M of MEC City already fixed in place.

We didn't stay to see anymore as workers spraying sticky tar on the road was zooming at an alarming pace towards our car, appearing seemingly out of the blue. They certainly weren't anywhere nearby when we parked.

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