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Malaysia's towers of strength

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THEY are the talk of the town. In the dramatically changing skyline of Malaysia's capital they stand out for more than just their height. In a city of highly original architecture, they set new standards of design.

If asked what is the most surprising thing about the Petronas Twin Towers, it is not their statistical importance nor even their engineering feat. If anyone had told me that one day Malaysia would build the tallest buildings in the world, I might have shuddered, imagining some ugly, elephantine, concrete pile. An inevitable eyesore - aesthetics sacrificed on the altar of the Guinness Book of Records. Instead, who can deny the shining elegance and the incomparable grace of Kuala Lumpur's latest landmark? Soaring towers pointing heavenwards. Echoes of what Mathew Arnold described as the "dreaming spires" of Oxford. I like them best at night. Illuminated, they have an almost ethereal quality.

Then of course, there is the added appeal of novelty in there being not one, but two of them. Down the ages, twins have held a special fascination - nature's double bonus, the Gemini factor. Romulus & Remus who founded Rome. Castor and Pollux the Heavenly Twins, part of the firmament. Our pair are more down to earth. But it spiced up the construction no end as an imagined race developed - pitting the Koreans and the Japanese against each other. No one won. By a strange collusion they arrived at their respective peaks together.

Now the Towers join the other individual buildings that grace this fair city. These include surely the most picturesque and romantic train station in the world (notwithstanding the obligatory depressing resemblance to Crewe Station on the inside); the simple pure lines of the National Mosque; the arresting facade of the Dayabumi building; the cool tranquillity and spiritual atmosphere of the IKIM headquarters; the graceful, pastel charm of the Menara Kuala Lumpur; and innumerable Wismas that seek to outdo each other in contemporary concrete and glass, many of them supremely stylistic buildings. My own favourites are the blue Mosque in its perfect setting - and that rather playful building resembling nothing so much as a Coca Cola bottle, that turns out, surprisingly, to be the Pilgrims Management and Fund Board Headquarters. By contrast metropolitan Singapore's architecture is utilitarian - a mere statistical achievement, and in its miniature aping of New York, Tokyo and the like, anonymous.

Mind you, not everyone feels enthusiastic about the Twin Towers. "Why do your buildings have to be so tall?", Prince Charles once asked Caesar Pelli, the architect of the Petronas Towers. Recent years have seen a positive frenzy of construction in this country. We shall soon be running out of superlatives - the tallest, the biggest, the longest, etc. And stand accused of a building neurosis; a country seduced by technology. And a Prime Minister charged with erecting monuments to self-esteem. His response - that all he asks is a simple tombstone. We can, I think, safely leave the history books to record the final appreciative verdict.

Of course, as usual, the outside world has failed to understand what the Twin Towers are all about. They are doing a job - and not just housing Petronas and the petroleum community - but an essential job of putting Malaysia on the map. Nothing irritates Malaysians more than when others don't even know where this country is. Well, they will now. We can rely on the ubiquitous modern predilection for quiz games. The question will

increasingly be asked, "Where are the tallest buildings in the world?" And word gets around.

Chicago had more substantive cause to question: they sent the Tall Buildings Committee with their measuring tapes, in defence of their Sears Building, up to then the reigning champion. They came, they saw, we conquered. The Petronas Towers stand 1,483ft tall (450 metres), officially classified as the world's highest.

Kuala Lumpur's first "tall" building was the old Shell House, all of four storeys, and in its day a proud landmark. Now we have ascended 88 storeys. Why 88? Could this have something to do with the Double Eight so auspicious in Chinese culture?

The preeminence, needless to say, won't last. There will be a frantic rush elsewhere in Asia to top it. Does one not hear that Thailand has already started on the successor? No matter. The Twin Towers have demonstrated something else. Here we have the concrete proof, literally as well as metaphorically, that Malaysia boleh. Despite the sceptics coming out in full force. The ones who whispered that the Towers were falling down - but like London Bridge they failed to oblige. Or that other insidious story that the connecting bridge fell short of connecting.

Dr Mahathir, resourceful man that he is, is rumoured to have marched members of his Cabinet across the offending and potentially hazardous structure, with himself a latter-day Grand Old Duke of York, at the head of the column. Probably apocryphal, but it makes a good story, and unlike most of our rumours, is plausible, for it would be entirely characteristic of the man.

To me the Towers are an optimistic structure - part of the feel good mood. A daring and bold concept, brought to birth by the extraordinary entrepreneurial flair and inventiveness of their parents - Petronas and Ananda Krishna. Symbolically as the huge cranes were dismantled, and the Towers reached their identical peaks, this coincided with the economy also peaking. Their prime movers were in the vanguard of Malaysia's forward-looking companies, anticipating the new millennium and starting now on the physical environment for the world of 2020.

Thus the Towers reflect the current mood of expansion where high rise seems to equate with high ambition. They tune in to the spirit of the age.

Down the ages, the legacy of each century has been its great buildings. The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World were all architectural wonders. A country is distinguished by its monuments to posterity. We think of the Coliseum in Rome, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal of India, the San Sofia Mosque, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the pyramids of Egypt. The Medieval period built the great cathedrals that traverse France and Italy on the Pilgrim Route. Oxbridge built its great colleges as temples of learning.

And Kuala Lumpur has its Twin Towers, a tribute to the world of contemporary commerce. No longer "dreaming spires" - we have no time to dream. The Twin Towers are intended to spawn new business activity. They sit at the heart of the KLCC, a city within a city, providing the intended hub of the country's financial centre and the gateway to the Multi Media Super Corridor. All our mega projects reflect mega aspirations.

The 20th century is the era of the skyscraper. If we look at the earlier precursors of the Towers, we find a fascinating history. It starts with the little known fact that a sky scraper first came to the world's notice by winning the Derby (horse race) in 1789. I have not taken leave of my senses. The term was first used of a high handed horse - or, if that sounds like an equine attitude problem, a horse many hands high. (Appropriately enough the KLCC stands on the former race course).

In 1800 a sky scraper had come to signify a man's high hat or a woman's

bonnet; in 1859 a very tall man; and only in 1880 became associated with a very tall building.

The early skyscrapers tended to be tyrannical commercial buildings that defied all the old aesthetic rules. Henry James, returning to New York after 21 years' absence, was appalled at what he saw, and described it as "extravagant pins stuck in an overcrowded pin cushion".

If he thought it overcrowded then, what would he think of the present day metropolises created by the invading high rise? One architectural eccentricity in turn-of-the-century New York was derisively named the Flat Iron Building - it looked like some monstrous domestic appliance for a race of giant amahs.

America being still a raw country went to town on skyscrapers. Europe, which treasured its architectural heritage, was not so adventurous. London was considered daring when it built an elephantine block of flats, 10 to 12 storeys high, ancestor to today's ubiquitous condos. Queen Victoria was distinctly not amused and forbade any future buildings in her reign over 80ft. Meanwhile, Chicago and New York embarked on a skyscraper contest which Chicago eventually won - until, that is, Kuala Lumpur overtook them.

It would be wrong, however, to mistake Kuala Lumpur for the West with palm trees. The resemblance is only physical - the cultural heart of Kuala Lumpur is something else again. Modernisation does not equate with Westernisation - a common mistake. Malaysia's phenomenal success of which the Twin Towers are only one manifestation is born of a political impetus and a business dynamic that at the same time asserts its own cultural ethos.

And so we have a new landmark - and an intriguing one. It depends how you come at it. Sometimes perfectly aligned. Sometimes the angle of vision distorts the view and one or other appears to dwarf its twin. The Gemini factor.

Petronas will be taking up residence in the Twin Towers by year-end. There is perhaps a degree of irony that an enterprise dedicated to harvesting the seas and drilling the depths of the earth for oil and gas resources, should be the one reaching for the heavens when it comes to their headquarters.

It does look as if for Malaysia, in the present buoyant mood, the sky's the limit.

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