

21/03/1997

## Slow 'greening' of Malaysia

Faezah Ismail

IF the country's landscape is a legacy from history, can Malaysians secure the continued survival of its forested areas and enhance its built environment?

The recent plea by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Malaysians to take landscaping seriously demands yet another round of gloomy introspection.

Vegetated landscape that covered most of the country before the colonial masters began to build still surrounds and penetrates even the biggest urban centres. But have Malaysians been putting in enough effort to design gardens and to preserve and develop green belts in and around towns and cities to sustain contact with the rolling rural landscapes beyond?

Past attempts have been less than encouraging, say those who make it their business to follow developments in landscape gardening here which, admittedly, is still a young field.

"Landscape architecture in Malaysia has always been misinterpreted and misunderstood," writes landscape architect and planner Datuk Mohamed Ishak Mohamed Ariff in the quarterly publication *The Professionals* (July-Sept 1991).

"It is often taken to mean many things but never one which portrays its total environmental concern. Many often see it as a beautification effort which is merely cosmetic. As a profession, it is rarely allowed to express itself in a functional and scientific manner," states Mohamed Ishak, who was director-general of the Department of Town and Country Planning Malaysia until four years ago.

When he launched the nationwide tree planting campaign at the Medan Idaman Recreational Park, off Jalan Gombak, three weeks ago Dr Mahathir pressed States and local authorities to make landscaping mandatory in all development projects.

With survival issues mostly out of the way, Malaysians now crave for experiences that will uplift their spirits, expand their vision and invigorate their lives.

Among other possibilities, well-designed gardens and landscapes can offer these things.

The campaign is jointly organised by the Housing and Local Government Ministry and local authorities with a target of three million trees by the year 2000 and 20 million by the year 2020.

Its overarching theme is to fashion Malaysia into a garden nation by the year 2005. (See report on Page 10).

"Dr Mahathir's passionate entreaty to Malaysians to grow trees and to improve landscaping within the built environment is not new. He has been making such appeals ever since he became Prime Minister in 1981," reminds Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) president Datuk Dr Salleh Mohamed Nor.

"But I sense a frustration in him that his calls have not been seriously heeded particularly by developers and one need only look around for proof. Take housing projects - the environmental destruction could not have been more apparent than there. In many of the new housing estates all you see are miserable looking trees about three to four feet high and they call this landscaping," adds Salleh, a former director-general of the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (Frim).

Before the arrival of the British in the 18th century, little villages or kampungs were probably the main type of man-made landscape that

characterised the largely forested Malay peninsula.

The arrangement of these villages mirrored the love the Malays and other indigenous people had, and still have, for the forest, and how they took great pains to maintain a strong intimate relationship with the wilderness.

Never really dominating the land, the villages were well-integrated with nature. Mostly, they were subdued and engulfed by the lush green tropical jungle.

Yet it would be wrong to assume that these villages were extensions of the forest. Instead, they were distinct living units with a lively and well-landscaped environment.

Each household took great pride in its outdoor areas. The front lawns were filled with flowering plants while the backyards were a cook's paradise where all sorts of herbaceous plants and vegetables sprouted delightfully.

The habitable environment was only just separated from the wilderness by a buffer dominated by a variety of fruit trees.

By making a conscious effort to landscape their surroundings, the villagers had created tranquil enclaves fit for habitation yet allowing themselves a loose but personal bond with nature.

Such an idyll was not to remain long, however. The British colonialists brought not only alien social values but their actions resulted in considerable physical changes, modifying much of the original landscape into the current one many Malaysians are familiar with.

As you drive around the country this weekend, let your eyes wander all over the landscape.

Miles and miles of padi fields greet those who are journeying north. Some travellers have found comfort in focusing on the rows and rows of oil palms in a number of stretches, rubber trees in others, when traversing the central region. The scenery is sometimes broken by tracts of tin mining land.

A similar scene awaits the South-bound folks, but instead of tin mines are pineapple farms. As for Sabah and Sarawak, these States are said to be "unspoilt" and many localities are still dominated by forests.

Kampungs, many of which have been given a modern touch, still dot the trunk roads, a reminder that Malaysia is not too far gone yet in the urbanisation race.

As you enter the heavily populated places, however, you will be struck by the inadequate attention to landscaping there. Many new Malaysian towns were built on land that had been completely ripped of its vegetative cover. Extensive pavings, hard surfaces, dense structures and the emission of heat, noise and impurities from vehicles, on-going projects and factories have created hot, dry and dusty urban zones.

In and around new structures such as hotels, government offices and commercial complexes, the arrangement of plants and trees at strategic locations have lent these places a luxurious air. Some may even describe them as beautiful.

But in many public areas - children's playgrounds, fields (where sports such as football and hockey are played), parks and open spaces - the view may be quite offensive, anything from clogged drains to unsightly undergrowth. Often, play equipment such as swings and see-saws seem to be in danger of falling apart at any moment.

Concerned individuals say we must act now to keep the rural landscape and to create natural settings for buildings, towns and cities. "The longer we delay," says the director of Frim's Environmental Sciences Division Dr N Manokaran, "the more difficult it will be to set apart sites for recreation and green spaces as they are most vulnerable to

development."

The environmental movement of the late 20th Century led to the emergence of design values that seek to integrate mankind and nature rather than separating them. Development, it is said, needs to take cognisance of this.

Since the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), the country's blueprint for development, envisages tremendous growth in the coming years, the landscape will be significantly impacted by the pace and form of development. Hence, proper planning is central to success and allocation of sites for gardens, parks and other planned green outdoor spaces must be given the priority it deserves.

As Salleh puts it, "once plans are approved they should be cast in concrete and not be subject to the whims and fancies of individuals."

If landscape architecture did not figure highly in the national agenda in the past, it was certainly not for lack of interest. Apart from Dr Mahathir, personalities like Mohamed Ishak (now chairman of Metacorp Berhad/Metramac Corporation Sdn Bhd), MNS's Salleh, Frim's Manokaran and Town and Country Planning officers have long appreciated the social and environmental benefits of landscape gardening.

Creation of the National Landscape Department in January 1996 to undertake, oversee and co-ordinate all landscaping efforts underscores the seriousness of the mission to green Malaysia.

Before this, suggest some, the absence of an institutional framework to deal with concerns relating to landscape architecture could be one reason for the discipline not taking off in the desired manner.

An organisation under the Housing and Local Government Ministry, the new department is led by director-general Ismail Ngah, who is trained in town planning and landscape architecture.

Legislation, as outlined in the amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act 1976, already exists empowering local authorities to make development agencies include landscaping in their proposals; at the same time, restrictions are imposed on wholesale tree felling and tampering with natural topography.

"It is up to the local authorities to interpret and enforce the Act," says Department of Town and Country Planning deputy director-general (development) Datuk Wan Mohamad Mukhtar Mohamed Noor. "We can only advise them."

But are Malaysians willing to accept the challenge?

(END)