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Local flavour for a modern undertaking

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EVEN in the midst of intense construction, some semblance of structural cohesiveness is already apparent in Putrajaya, Malaysia's new administrative capital.

So, upon completion of the project 15 years from now, Malaysians can expect an aesthetically pleasing city where the siting of its various components and urban design would "hang together", as Putrajaya Corporation president Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin succinctly puts it.

Sensitive landscaping would lend greenery and fluidity to a city whose fulfilment represents a landmark in Malaysia's history of urban planning.

Phase One is coming along as conceived and "I think we are going to get our well-planned city", enthuses Azizan, effectively the "Mayor" of Putrajaya.

"We will be ready to open and receive the first batch of civil servants at the end of May," he says.

The Prime Minister's Office and the Prime Minister's Department will spearhead the move to Putrajaya although the dates have not been ascertained.

Phase One comprises the Government precinct and some of its periphery, supporting infrastructure such as public utilities and amenities, parks as well as 2,267 units of residential homes.

Construction began in mid-1996 and 30 blocks of government offices totalling 16 million square feet of gross floor area will be completed before the end of the year.

Realisation of Phase One in eight months' time means a step closer to accomplishing a national project which seeks to relocate the administrative offices of Malaysia's Federal Government to an area outside Kuala Lumpur.

The relocation proposal traces its roots back to the late 1970s. At the time, Janda Baik in Pahang was considered as a suitable site for that purpose, but, for various reasons, the idea did not materialise.

Later, a spot in Prang Besar, Selangor, was identified and submitted as the best location for the new Federal Government administrative centre.

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad launched the project in 1995, he renamed Prang Besar Putrajaya, after Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

The same year, Putrajaya Holdings Sdn Bhd was set up to develop Putrajaya. The company is owned by Petronas (40 per cent), Khazanah Nasional Bhd (40 per cent), the investment arm of the Government, and Kumpulan Wang Amanah Negara (20 per cent).

A year later, Putrajaya Corporation was consolidated as a body corporate responsible for the planning, management and administration of Putrajaya.

It also exercises the function of a local authority to provide, among other things, urban services.

Two main factors have driven the relocation impulse: to relieve the pressure on Kuala Lumpur's overstretched infrastructure and to allow the Federal Government to have a proper "home" for its administrative centre.

There has been constant upgrading of Kuala Lumpur's roads, sewage, drainage and water supply systems and all at great costs.

In some cases, improvement work cannot be done because it would have meant digging under buildings and roads.

To ensure Kuala Lumpur's unhindered growth as Malaysia's principal

business and financial centre, it was decided that the best solution would be to transfer a major component of the city to another site.

Currently, most of the ministries and departments are housed in sub-standard buildings. Many are also badly dispersed, a condition hardly conducive for operational and management efficiency.

A well-planned administrative centre with state-of-the-art facilities and technology would enhance efficiency and productivity besides boosting the morale of civil servants.

Against that rationale, the shift to Putrajaya seems inevitable and as Azizan notes, "we should have moved away from Kuala Lumpur a long time ago".

A lot of thought has gone into designing Putrajaya, a point which Azizan loves emphasising.

These days talking about Putrajaya is a source of joy to Azizan whose many passions include urban design.

"What we are doing here is developing a planned city, so this is a rare opportunity for Malaysia to build a city from scratch.

"We have put in a lot of effort to plan for its development, incorporating the latest ideas for a successful city," says Azizan.

"We hope we will not encounter problems of misfits between the facilities and their demand."

In sticking closely to its planning objectives and urban design guidelines, Putrajaya's developer is trying to meet the ideal of a planned city which would give dwellers maximum amenities.

That means arranging sections of the city - administrative, commercial, residential and recreational - in an orderly way, providing an efficient transportation system within the city and to the outside world, offering safe, sanitary and comfortable housing in a variety of dwelling types, satisfying the need for green spaces and relaxation outlets and ensuring adequate and economical water supply, sewerage and public services.

Much has been said about Putrajaya being an intelligent city where telemedicine, smart schools and computer-based interaction between the public and the Government will be a way of life.

Despite its futuristic element, however, the designers of Putrajaya are adamant that the new urban centre should reflect Malaysia's identity and cultural roots.

"Putrajaya is a project for posterity, we are building it for the next generation," says Azizan.

"As such, the main buildings will have to be well designed to be timeless like the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Kuala Lumpur."

Striving to dispel the picture of government blocks as being dull and without remarkable or interesting features, each group of structures in Putrajaya will stand out because of its own distinctive visual image.

While the buildings will be styled in the vernacular fashion, the structural details will mirror Malaysia's rich architectural heritage, a legacy of Islamic, British, Chinese, and Indian influences.

For example, the construction at Parcel D comprising offices of the Home, Human Resources, Transport and Rural Development ministries, the Anti-Corruption Agency and Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Jakim) hints of Moorish magnetism.

The near completed blocks in Parcel B which house the Prime Minister's Department, on the other hand, bear traces of traditional kampung house simplicity.

But subtlety is the operative word here. The old and new, juxtaposed with one another in a tasteful manner.

It is a philosophy which Azizan espouses wholeheartedly and which was applied successfully - if approval from many Malaysians is any indication

- in the interior design of Petronas Twin Towers.

  "We are trying to make that work in Putrajaya," says Azizan, who is also Petronas chairman.

  But have there been problems in assembling the city?

  "Whatever difficulties we have encountered are basically normal ones such as getting everybody to work in tandem to meet the deadlines, for example.

  "But because we are starting from scratch we have got fewer constraints than if we were involved in urban renewal," says Azizan.

  Putrajaya's planners are not just erecting a city of impressive blocks.

  More importantly, they are putting together a new community of the next millennium.

  For that reason, Putrajaya Corporation is working out programmes to help people to adapt to living in the new administrative capital.

  In short, what they have to do to be a part of the Putrajaya community.

  Houses in the new city are fenceless, for example, so dwellers must get used to the safe city concept. Fortunately, people will be relocating to the city in stages, making it manageable for Putrajaya Corporation officials to help inhabitants adjust themselves to the new city.

  Even so, it remains to be seen how the new community will take to Putrajaya. But it is an opportunity for city residents to shape their environment and to make the city work for them.

  Since the success of any city hinges on the dynamism of its population, it is crucial that would-be residents of Putrajaya psychologically prepare themselves to embrace what has been hailed as a new era in Malaysia's city planning.

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