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`Pacman' track is leader of the pack

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IT'S more than a circuit; more precisely, a landmark. The Sepang F1 Circuit was deliberately designed to be the best in the world.

And when it boasts state-of-the-art facilities and equipment available in motor-racing technology today, it is only right that the circuit be acknowledged internationally as the first purpose-built Formula One facility.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed last week officially opened the RM286 million circuit and renamed it from the Sepang International Circuit to Sepang F1 Circuit, a distinction accorded by Formula One boss Bernie Eccelstone.

The design and engineering of the 5.6km circuit, which features 15 slow and fast corners, was undertaken by German firm Tilke Engineering and Architecture. The company had designed the Estoril circuit in Portugal and Austria's Nurburgring track.

A team of between 40 and 50 personnel worked for two-and-a-half years before the final design was approved by the International Automobile Federation (FIA) and adopted by Malaysia Airports Bhd, who financed the construction of the circuit.

"The initial design of the track was inspired by the Pacman video games," said managing consultant Herman Tilke, a former touring car racer.

"The idea was to draw the spectators closer to the race action by watching from inside of the track instead of outside, which you see at all race tracks today.

"Visualising the circuit from an oil palm estate was not too difficult, because we had taken into account the gradient of the terrain, the precise height quotes for the ground and look at the surroundings.

"We then took out a piece of paper and made several rough sketches of what the track and the circuit proper would roughly look like."

The drawings and recommendations were submitted to FIA for endorsement. Right from the start, it was designed with Formula One racing in mind."

Even Scuderia-Ferrari's Michael Schumacher, who sits on the Formula One Drivers Safety Commission, had some influence in the design and planning of the circuit.

"He made a number of recommendations, outlining details which needed to be addressed. Schumacher was impressed with the final design and was optimistic of it being a world class facility."

Tilke said the planning for the circuit was a design process which constantly evolved with excellence in mind.

"It is a very modern circuit, very different from the existing circuits around the today.

"Every bit of designing the facility was very challenging in the sense that we had to consider carefully where to place the fast straights and position the slow and fast corners.

"Not only that, we had to justify building the mammoth grandstand to accommodate 30,000 spectators."

The natural hillslopes which look down on the Sepang F1 Circuit can accommodate another 100,000 fans with good vantage points for viewing the races. In addition, some 18,000 parking bays are available.

Facilities provided at the pit building were also designed to be state-of-the-art.

The ground level has 30 pit areas measuring 24x8m, 15 team rooms,

photography areas and two prayer rooms.

The mezzanine floor houses race control room, time-keeping room, winners' podium, 12 offices, two very large conference rooms, an interview room, the royal lounge, a posh hospitality area and a media centre for approximately 600 journalists and photographers.

A Welcome Centre was also designed as a pedestrian mall bridging the four-storey double-frontage grandstands, capable of accommodating restaurants, bars, exhibition areas and retail outlets.

The circuit also boasts some 50 garages measuring 4x8m and a comprehensive medical centre with features an X-ray room, facility for burnt patients, doping control centre, observation room, waiting room and laboratories.

Tilke was modest when asked how he would describe the circuit to others.

"You have to see it to believe it."

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