

13/01/2005

A Malaysian to set benchmark in Pakistan

By FAUZIAH ISMAIL

PUTRAJAYA'S original masterplan hangs majestically in one of the meeting rooms at Teo Ah Khing's office in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur.

The master planner of the administrative capital took nine months to draw up the development masterplan and another three years to see to the completion of the project.

"I had a staff of 20 and we were working out of Singapore where our office was. We had to work day and night to get it completed," Teo, who is the managing director of TAK Management Consultants, said.

But that hard work paid off for Malaysia's first Harvard-trained architect.

The 45-year-old has not only brought TAK Management Consultants - relatively unknown in its own country - home to Kuala Lumpur from Singapore but he is also making inroads overseas.

Teo is currently designing a mini-Putrajaya in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, which will serve as the new general headquarters of the Pakistan Armed Forces. The Armed Forces headquarters is currently in Rawalpindi, which is half an hour's drive from the country's capital.

In Pakistan, he is also designing the Lahore Golf Course, hotel and housing developments and the proposed Rawalpindi race course for Bandar Raya Developments Bhd and the proposed Army Heritage Museum and Theme Park at the Ayub National Park in Rawalpindi.

TAK Management Consultants is also designing the Malaysian Trade Distribution Centre in Bahrain, the proposed pulp and paper mill complex in Indonesia, the April-Suzhou Concerting plant masterplan and Suzhou Waterfront Garden in China.

On the homefront, most of TAK Management Consultants' work is in Sarawak.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the other project he is handling besides Putrajaya is BioValley Malaysia for its client, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations.

It is easy to see why Teo is excited about the mini version of the project in Islamabad.

Everything about the project mirrors that of Malaysia's administrative capital, from the time taken to draw up the designs and the construction of the mini-Putrajaya and the natural elements that are maintained to the transfer of the Pakistan Armed Forces headquarters from Rawalpindi to Islamabad.

The buildings are of the same size as those in Putrajaya and are designed to take into consideration the climate of the country.

In his designs of the mini-Putrajaya, Teo - a firm believer of eco-symbiosis where nature and man-made structures co-exist - maintains the hills on the 1,040 hectares. He will also turn the dry ravine in the area into a cascading river with water flowing from one lake into another.

"I see Islamabad as Kuala Lumpur in the 1980s but by 2010, I believe it can rival our best cities. The mini-Putrajaya project will make it into an ultra-modern city," he said.

He has presented the mini-Putrajaya designs to Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf twice.

He expects approval on the designs next month before physical works can begin.

As a master planner, he puts together, among others, the civil and

mechanical engineers, architects and water specialists for the project. "We're not the boss to the engineers and architects and others involved in the project. We are the chief servants of all."

Teo does not see the Pakistani project as a self-promotion but that of other local architects and master planners. "When foreigners designed our airport and the Twin Towers, they left the benchmark for us to meet. I felt challenged to meet that benchmark.

"Now in Pakistan, a Malaysian is setting the benchmark, that our expertise is of world standard and can be equally recognised," he said.

The Kuala Lumpur International Airport was designed by renowned Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa while an American architect, Cesar Pelli, designed the Petronas Twin Towers.

In his first interview as Putrajaya's master planner, Teo revealed that TAK Management Consultants was not Putrajaya Corp's first choice as a master planner.

"We were one of seven invited by Putrajaya Corp to comment on the initial plan submitted by another company," he said.

His boldness in suggesting changes to the initial plan, especially the location of the Prime Minister's office, caught the attention of then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who had convinced the Cabinet members the need to make changes to the initial plan.

Dr Mahathir also put in a tall order for Teo to meet. "He wanted to move into his new office within three years. We managed to meet that target. There are no surprises. Putrajaya was built as per the drawings."

As a master planner, Teo said he is merely translating the vision of the leader and the country. "The biggest challenge then was to get people to understand what we are doing and why we are doing it.

"The hills and the water are Putrajaya's biggest assets. We need to preserve that. The weakness of the project is not understanding this," he said.

While Pakistan is the first country which will use Putrajaya as a model, Teo said countries like South Korea, Thailand and China hold keen interests in emulating the administrative capital's development.

Having helped build the new administrative capital, Teo - is who the youngest in a family of 10 siblings, whose late father and grandfather were fishermen - now wished that he could have a hand in the future development of Kuala Lumpur.

He feels the capital city has not reached its real potential. "Planners can play a role. Professional master planners should be involved. A city is a living organism. There are bound to be decays.

"Changes can be made and many skills can be engaged without antagonising the livelihood of people. There are ways of mobilising people and effort. Once you get the strategy correct, you cannot go wrong.

"I had wished you were the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur asking me that question," he quipped.

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