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## The prince & the palace

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RAISED in the royal circles of Terengganu and Perak, Raja Datuk Kamarul Bahrin Shah has seen his fair share of palaces. As a young architect, he even helped move the beautiful wooden Istana Tengku Long from Besut to Kuala Terengganu.

But when he was approached by Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin, Perbadanan Putrajaya's president three years ago to design Istana Melawati - a retreat palace for the Yang Dipertuan Agong in Putrajaya - Raja Bahrin still couldn't help being seized by a sense of trepidation.

"It was quite a scary task. There was no precedence, no palace has been built for the Agong before. The brief was to combine the elements of a retreat with that of a venue for formal functions. The challenge was how to reconcile the two," he says.

These days, the 48-year-old architect, whose salt and pepper beard gives him the air of an academic is a very busy man, quite hard to pin down in fact.

On any given week, if he's not overseas on business, the father of six spends most of his time shuttling between his family and architectural practice (Senibahri Arkitek) in Kuala Terengganu and his second office in Wangsa Maju, Kuala Lumpur. He drives about in a grey Audi sedan, where a clutch of dry cleaned suits, a construction site hard hat and rolled up plans make for a mobile office.

"Up in Terengganu I usually get around in a four-wheel-drive," he volunteers.

The work on the palace, which began in 2001, convinced Raja Bahrin to establish a more permanent presence in the Klang Valley.

Completed last month, the hilltop Istana Melawati overlooking the federal administrative centre's prestigious Precinct One - also home to the Prime Minister's Department, Masjid Putra and the new Shangri-La hotel - opened its doors last Tuesday, playing host to the Conference of Rulers which was for the first time held away from Istana Negara.

In a number of ways, the palace Raja Bahrin designed, with its airy verandahs and terraced gardens is a veritable icing on the cake for the Federal Government's new home.

Putrajaya was launched only eight years ago by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and many would still find it hard to imagine that a city of onion-domed office complexes, green parklands and lakes could emerge so rapidly from 4,500 hectares of jungle and palm oil plantations, in what was formerly sleepy Prang Besar.

With three-tiered roofs, imposing 40-metre towers and a commanding view - on a clear day you could even see the Petronas Twin Towers - visitors could be forgiven to think that the palace straddling a 6.9-hectare site is larger than it really is, thanks to Raja Bahrin's emphasis on vertical rather than horizontal lines.

"It took me about a year to do the drawings. There were more details in it than in any of my previous designs," explains the architect, unrolling the plans on the slopes leading up to the palace, as he shows the Nuance team around.

"Apart from the towers, we incorporated the Buah Buton, the sharp finials on the roof, and the Sisik Naga, the ornamental ridge caps, into the design."

Fleshed out with regal cengal wood and polished sandstone, the palace

was inspired by the architectural heritage of old palaces and mosques of the Malay world, while not leaning too heavily on any one particular regional style.

"I would like to dispel the impression that the palace reflects the architecture of the East Coast. People tend to assume this because I am from Terengganu. You will also find the palace towers' pyramid shaped roof in the mosques of Malacca, such as Masjid Tengker, and those in the Javanese cities of Gresik and Demak. The form is found throughout the Malay Archipelago, but you only have more of such buildings remaining in the East Coast," explains the soft spoken man whose bearing is one of refined understatement.

In fact, if there was one building that inspired him most in his design of Istana Melawati, it is Istana Kenangan in the royal town of Kuala Kangsar - a much photographed building with pencil-shaped turrets at the corners, and home to the Perak State Museum.

"It was the palace I had in mind when they asked me to design the new palace."

The Istana Melawati project is a culmination of two decades of insights gained by an architect who employs the traditional idiom in modern settings.

One of his earlier attempts at this was the Terengganu State Museum, located atop a hill in Losong, 6km outside Kuala Terengganu.

Started in 1991, when Raja Bahrin was still working with the state's Public Works Department, the design for the complex was inspired by the state's traditional Rumah Bujang homes - raised on stilts, with finely carved fascia boards and pitched tiled roof, facing the Terengganu River.

However, instead of mostly wood, the museum, completed in 1994 and officially opened two years later, was built from modern construction materials.

"We explored new ways because it was not practical to use wood carvings on some (exposed) parts of the building. So from original carvings we made moulds and cast the designs in concrete," he explains.

Then in 1996, Raja Bahrin unveiled the Aryani, a Malay-themed resort located in Setiu, north of Kuala Terengganu. A family enterprise, the resort is managed by his wife, To' Puan Norilah Salleh.

By then, he had also established his own private practice Senibahri Arkitek.

"Why Senibahri? Seni is art. Bahri is from the Arabic word for sea. In Terengganu, our culture is closely connected to the sea. And it's close to my name Bahrin too."

For the Aryani, Raja Bahrin restored century-old Malay houses into luxury suites, combining the rural way of life with uncompromising comforts of modern living.

But unlike the multitude of resorts lining the long sandy stretches from Cherating to Besut, the Aryani, which is Sanskrit for "the origin" was also built to make a statement.

"The problem with our people is that they are so rendah diri, so humble that they have no faith in their own indigenous culture. I floated with some people the idea of building a resort which showcases our local lifestyle, just the way the Balinese had been doing, and they were sceptical.

"So I built Aryani as a protest. Later, when the resort did well, they wanted to buy it off me but I wouldn't, because now I have so much emotional attachment to it," says Raja Bahrin.

Then the palace project came along, providing further opportunity for Raja Bahrin to pursue his tradition-based inspirations.

"The reception area was partly inspired by the open-sided structure of

the Keraton or royal residence in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The same form can be seen at Istana Balai Besar in Kedah. Most of the palaces in the olden days were open-sided but no examples have survived because they were made of wood, which deteriorated with time."

"Nowadays our people tend to be manja sangat, spoilt. They fear the sun, the rain... we're so scared of nature that it restricts our designs. Ironically, people find the resorts of Indonesia fascinating because they are more open to nature. We need to be true to ourselves and to our traditions."

But underlying it all is Raja Bahrin's personal vision that an architect must create joy and experiences, allowing people not only to use the building but also enjoy it.

In Raja Bahrin's books, an architect must be a dreamer. "If the architect is too sober and practical, the building becomes overly utilitarian and functional... sterile."

This philosophy stemmed from his childhood love for Lego bricks, which allowed him to experiment with building all kinds of objects.

"Basically I'm constantly intrigued by the process of creation. I was fortunate that the Lego sets then were not as mechanised as they are today with the gears, motors and batteries. They were very basic sets, so you had to stretch your imagination to create."

His love for all things traditional came naturally, having grown up in a state where buildings weren't just structures, but sculptures.

This was brought home when he was introduced to the concrete jungle of Kuala Lumpur where he spent five years studying at St John's Institution.

"When I returned, I realised that Terengganu buildings were much truer to the Malay culture. It was a relief, it was so good to be home again."

But the years in Kuala Lumpur did leave a deep impression on the architect. It was here, as a child arriving in the big city by rail, that he encountered what he still considers his favourite building - the ornate Moorish-style railway station.

"I found the building very inspirational. It had a major impact on me as it was one of the first visual images of Kuala Lumpur I had when I was young... a lasting first impression of the city. Until today, the building retains its majesty, reflecting a certain level of imagination and fantasy."

Another great influence in his early life was his maternal grandfather, Almarhum Sultan Ismail Nasiruddin Shah of Terengganu, the country's fourth Agong.

"He was an avid photographer and had won several international prizes for his black and white studies.

Most of his subjects were people in rural settings. He would go to waterfront villages, makes trips to explore them on his speedboat. The river then was a main highway. The photographs fascinated me.

"Those days, things were simpler, it was all very informal, no entourage. So he was able to capture different moods of the people and scenes," says Raja Bahrin, a voracious reader of books on culture and architecture and an avid football fan.

The Sultan was also a patron of the ancient arts. He used to invite Menora, Makyong and Wayang Kulit troupes for private performances.

But being partial to vernacular forms and nuances does not mean that Raja Bahrin rejects modernity.

While he looks to the past for inspiration, the architect admits that his ideas are also influenced by several leading lights of modern architecture.

"In my early years, I was very much influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, particularly his 'Falling Water' house, and also the way he brings nature

into the design. In Falling Water there was not just the texture, the rocks, the sound of waterfall, it was the way he integrated the landscape into the building.

"Later, I was influenced by Charles Moore and his style of post-modernist architecture. He strived to capture the spirit of traditional architecture and bring it into the modern world by giving it new meanings and contemporary forms."

For Istana Melawati, beyond the facades, Raja Bahrin also carefully thought out the interior to give play to vestiges of Malay high culture, fitting out the rooms with elaborately carved panels and furniture, made from heavy cengal wood.

He recruited a group of master wood-carvers from Kelantan and Terengganu - among them respected names like Wan Su Othman and his son Wan Mustapha, Noorhaiza Nordin and Abdul Latif Long - in the process giving fresh impetus to the almost forgotten Malay art.

"The carvers were divided into three groups, covering different parts of the palace. They were given the chance to showcase their designs and talent."

Technology has brought vast changes to the way architects work, enabling them to see three dimensional forms of their buildings on computer screens, even before the first brick is laid.

But Raja Bahrin still prefers to do it the old fashioned way. Before he commits his idea on paper with soft pencils and rulers, he would visualise a building in his mind and walk through every room, niche and staircase.

"I would like to think that the way I approach designs is like a choreographer conceiving a dance routine.

"There is an introduction, then you get deeper into the heart of it, what experiences you will encounter, the high points, the low points, the dark and the light, joy and sadness."

Every part of the building must have its own character and mood - a grand staircase to invoke a sense of awe and an open verandah that of private contemplation, for example.

"You design spaces open to the public differently from those that are more private. In the palace, we try to do this by assigning wings for the public, formal and private areas, and separating them with gardens, just like the palaces in the old days with their taman larangan.

And Raja Bahrin is already thinking of his next project, a dream pursuit in fact. He wants to build a cultural centre that offers live performances and resident craftsmen to provide an all-round experience to visitors.

"I went to Japan recently to do some research on this," he adds.

But before this project takes off, visitors to Putrajaya, local and foreign (and that includes delegates for the 10th Islamic Summit Conference starting tomorrow), will have a new monument to marvel at and capture on film.

After all, a palace is not built everyday, especially one designed by a prince.