

There's a leak in our civic virtue

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WHY is it that things fall apart so quickly? From flooded buildings to roofs caving in, it is becoming increasingly clear that things around here don't stand the test of time. We've heard all the excuses — poor maintenance, shoddy construction, perhaps even straightforward cheating with contractors lining their pockets instead of spending money on quality materials and workmanship.

The last few weeks have become a joke. We're not talking here about old buildings. We're talking about parliament, ministerial buildings in Putrajaya and even one of the biggest judicial complexes in the world. All three branches of government have been hit by the malaise of poor construction and even worse maintenance.

When things go wrong, everyone blames everyone else. Nobody wants to be accountable. Government agencies tasked with monitoring the construction of these installations blame the contractors. Contractors blame the people in charge of maintenance. Around and around we go until people forget about it.

Soon enough, the contractors responsible for the shoddy workmanship will again be considered for new construction projects after ingratiating themselves with the right decision-makers.

And then we're back to square one. The vicious cycle of shoddiness con-

tinues, and taxpayers' money is again wasted on facilities that fall apart at any time.

This may be a harsh indictment of what is happening. The relevant government agencies will point out that the majority of buildings is in fine condition. But that's precisely the problem: One leaking roof is one leaking roof too many, and the irony cannot be more pronounced when the most famous leaking roof in the country is the one over our lawmakers' heads.

Maintenance is even worse. Why is it that when you go to most ministries in Putrajaya, you immediately get the feeling that the building is already dated, worn and, in places, dirty?

I have given up finding out why. I don't even mind the (lack of) taste issues surrounding fake, gaudy flowers, doilies and stenciled, styrofoam letters spelling out a technicolor welcome to a visitor. I have made peace with this default look in public buildings, conceding that it may well be a national consensus on interior design.

But the dirty walls, wet and broken

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toilets, exposed wires and cracked edifices make a real mockery out of something as grandiose as the notion of Putrajaya.

Things are so bad the prime minister coined a phrase for this problem; First-class infrastructure, third-class mentality. Only now it's becoming clear that the infrastructure, too, is

third class, courtesy of third-rate minds and attitudes.

Sometimes it's painful because when you look at these real-world examples, you know that they could have been avoided. Go to most ministerial “parcels” or complexes in Putrajaya and the first thing you will realise even before you come into contact with the notoriously ill-maintained buildings are the number of cars parked near the offices.

Just to make it more graphic, when you enter these “parcels”, you come to a complex of buildings with a road going all the way around. The “parcel” is not designed to have cars parked on the road since it's quite narrow but, I assume, because there are not enough parking lots down in the basement, government staff and visitors have to leave their cars by the kerb, turning the entire “parcel” into a car park.

Surely when they were building the offices, they would have anticipated the number of cars but it seems as though they either underestimated (which is poor planning) or simply didn't think about it (which is the exact opposite of clever).

The reason why this issue is such a drag is because it encapsulates the very real shortcoming that this nation suffers from. Bad planning and careless maintenance is a reflection of not caring for public assets and a shared public domain.

And before we conclude that the public sector has a monopoly on this attitude, we should be under no illusion that it is also very much alive among the general Malaysian public. This careless disregard for things that are not personally our own is a mark of a nation that lacks what the Roman republicans called civic virtue. It occurs when people do not take responsibility for what is in the public realm yet use and abuse it as though that is their right.

For a nation that has built political and legal foundations that lean on the side of the community and not the individual, this is a glaring paradox. We have legislation, regulation and even public mores that are often criticised for not giving enough protection to the individual in the interest of the greater good.

But when it comes to individual actions, it seems as though as citizens, we couldn't care less about the greater collective of Malaysians.

The leaking roofs, collapsed ceilings, even haphazard parking facilities that have haunted us reveal more than just monitoring oversight or greedy contractors.

It goes to the very essence of a disease that we have never been cured from. Until we start developing with civic consciousness guiding our actions, any finish line whether it's in 13 years or in another 50 years will be a pyrrhic victory.