

Building that shaped an industry

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COMMENT

By Elizabeth Cardoso

A COUPLE of weeks ago, a friend of mine went to see an exhibition at the Rubber Smokehouse Museum in Lunas, Kedah, that highlighted its history and its community. I wrote about the genesis of the project in July 2006 so I won't go into that.

I had asked Pek Leng to give me feedback about the exhibition and was delighted when she said the smoking racks and smoked rubber sheets were a nice touch and that she had no idea there were still people producing sheet rubber.

She thought they were left over from the old smokehouse which had been restored and turned into this museum:

"I thought they had such a great sense of history. I remember the smell from the rubber dealers' shops in Ipoh.

"Deodorise? But that would lose its authenticity."

You will by now be wondering where this is all leading to. Let me go back to the middle of last year.

We had decided to use smoked rubber sheets as part of the exhibit. So we made enquiries of the rubber dealers in Lunas to see if they could point us to an estate or a smallholding which was still producing sheet rubber in the area.

To our chagrin, they all laughed at us and told us we would need to import this from Vietnam or Cambodia as Malaysia had not produced sheet rubber in decades.

Coincidentally, shortly after that, we had a meeting with the Rubber Research Institute (RRI) in Kuala Lumpur and I told them the story of our search for smoked rubber sheets. They laughed at us too, but in a really nice way.

But it was entirely through their resources that we were able to get a consignment of 100kg of beautiful golden smoked rubber sheets from the Kuala Hidong Estate, Kuala Krai, Kelantan.

By the way, I was asked if we wanted the "smells" or if we wanted them almost odourless (a mixture of smoked and unsmoked sheets) — and the team I was working with unanimously, without a moment's hesitation, voted for the latter.

If Pek Leng thinks the smell of rubber is strong now, she should have been there when I first opened the packages!

Imagine if we had not voted for the odourless version.

The Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia traces its roots back to the turn of the 20th century when the Department of Agriculture of the Federated Malay States began researching rubber planting.

In 1909, the Rubber Growers' Association appointed Sidney Morgan, a research chemist, to conduct experiments on the curing of rubber.



The art deco style of the Rubber Research Institute building represented the cutting-edge technology of that time.

But with the demand for rubber rapidly growing, the RRI was established by The Rubber Research Institute of Malaya Act on June 29, 1925, to research, investigate problems and provide information relating to rubber, operating from their headquarters in Jalan Damansara.

In 1927, the Experimental Station in Sungai Buloh was set up and the institute itself relocated to its new headquarters at 3rd mile, Jalan Ampang, in Kuala Lumpur in 1937.

Designed by A.O. Coltman of Booty & Edwards Architects, with reinforced concrete design by engineer Steen Sehested, it was built for Straits \$265,000 by contractor Bong Sin.

Coltman was also responsible for designing several other art deco buildings in Kuala Lumpur, among which are the Anglo Oriental Building, now known as Wisma Ekran, on Jalan Tangsi, the Odeon Cinema which I wrote about in my last article, the swimming pavilion at the Royal Selangor Club and the Oriental Building on the corner of Jalan Tun Perak and Jalan Melaka.

The art deco style in Malaysia reflected a departure from the colonial style architecture that dominated the first three decades of the past century.

It was the cutting-edge technology of that time.

But unlike most other art deco buildings which were multi-storeyed and built in a city block without any compound, the RRI is a single-storey building set in a large landscaped compound.

The *Malay Weekly Mail* of Dec 19, 1935 reported, when work on the building began: "The new institute will consist of a number of buildings

ranged round an internal court with subsidiary stores and appurtenant buildings in the background.

"The main or administration block will be the most prominent of the structures, and this will accommodate the managing and secretarial staff, together with library, museum, and boardroom.

"The main courtyard is behind this and on one side there will be located the main chemical laboratory, adjoining that of the chemical testing laboratory and on the other side the botanical and pathological departments will be situated.

"All the buildings are of a single storey but are connected one with the other by covered corridors, so that all parts of the institute are accessible under cover. The approximate area which the buildings will cover is 420 ft by 300 ft, inclusive of a central courtyard."

If you were to visit it now, you would see that there is essentially no change to this original form and use.

Notable features include the plaster cartouche (scroll-like ornament) of layered latex sheets hanging out to dry, fluted test tubes and the distinctive patterning of the tapping cut on trees.

These motifs not only appear on the front façade, but also through the interior on carved timber doors, grilles and plaster cornices.

And once you go through the main block and stroll along the Shanghai plaster walkways to the labs, you will see, on either side of the library block, a set of five distinctive bas-relief panels depicting the origins of rubber and planting, tapping and smoking, as well as the application of rubber in everyday life.

This decoration work was done by Italian sculptor, R. Nolli.

Present and former RRI staff speak of the building with great passion. There are now around 200 staff based there, where in its heyday, I understand, there were more than 800.

And despite the fact that technically RRI no longer exists, because in 1998 it became part of the Malaysian Rubber Board, everyone still knows it as RRI.

The RRI Building on Jalan Ampang is among the top five of my favourite buildings in Kuala Lumpur.

Sadly, you will probably not even see this building as you drive along Jalan Ampang because you are too busy focusing on the traffic lights at Jalan Jelatek.

And road-widening activities, higher street levels, traffic congestion, tree-lined roads and heavily built-up surroundings add to the clutter of our landscape and impede our view of the beautiful red fair-face (bare) brick finish of this landmark building.

RRI can boast that it is the largest institute in the world devoted to a single crop and that it is internationally acknowledged as having played a pivotal role in transforming the rubber industry into a world-leading agricultural and scientific feature.

It is not only a historical icon of the importance of rubber to our economic development, but it also exemplifies our innovative scientific development and is a living testament to our pioneering social and cultural history and the history of immigrants.

And, of course, it is representative of the high-water mark of art deco buildings in Malaysia, and possibly is

one of the few buildings, apart from the Institute of Medical Research, which has retained its function and its "owner" since its construction.

In 1966, the Rubber Research Institute Enactment was revised to integrate it more closely with the Malayan Rubber Fund Board whose income was derived from a research cess of one cent per pound of rubber exported.

RRI received more than half of what was collected. This clearly demonstrates that the rubber growers have a vested interest in RRI and its perpetuity.

It would be a good thing if their points of view, and also of those who work or worked there, were sought about the future of this institution and its buildings.

It would perhaps prevent the furore over the proposed redevelopment of the Tun Abdul Razak Research Centre in Brickendonbury, London.

On Sept 25, 2006, Badan Warisan Malaysia sent a letter to the minister of culture, arts and heritage outlining the importance of this building together with its setting as an icon, representing the importance of the rubber industry which was vital to our nation's early economic success.

In this letter, we nominated the Rubber Research Institute, Jalan Ampang, as a National Heritage. I suppose we will know if the minister is of the same view when the National Heritage Register is eventually unveiled.

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