

# Merdeka! And Tunku's vision will live on

WHEN I first started doing research into the history of Merdeka Stadium in 2003, I went to the site on Petaling Hill to see what I could learn from the building and its setting.

Unfortunately it was not much, because the heritage values of its history and development were not apparent in the clutter that surrounded it.

Many of my friends, most of whom were born post-Merdeka, especially those who had not grown up in Kuala Lumpur or who were totally disinterested in sports, found it odd that I was interested in the building.

After all, what we knew of Merdeka Stadium was based on the iconic photograph of Tunku Abdul Rahman with his right hand raised, declaring "Merdeka".

Surely, it was argued, it was the event that was significant, not the building. After all, every year on Aug 31, we continue to celebrate the momentous event, and in my memory, the celebrations have never been held at Merdeka Stadium.

At that time, a decade had passed after the first media reports that Merdeka Stadium and Stadium Negara would be demolished and a national sports complex would be developed in Bukit Jalil. All that was left were some memories of school history lessons and even fainter memories of the derision and horror that had met this announcement on April 29, 1993.

Merdeka Stadium remained largely vacant, and the only activity of significance was at the car park in front and the restaurant famed for its fish-head curry on the first-floor of the grandstand.

What I found out in the process of research has profoundly changed my view — of the stadium, of Tunku's vision, of why it must be conserved and restored for all Malaysians to enjoy.

I learnt that in the late 19th century, Petaling Hill, located east of the Chinese quarter of Kuala Lumpur, had been used as a cemetery. It was subsequently laid out as a golf course with eight greens.

With much pomp and splendour, the Selangor Golf Club was opened on Aug 21, 1893 and remained at this site until it moved to its present location on Jalan Tun Razak (then Circular Road) in 1921.

By the turn of the century, a clubhouse pavilion had been built (1895) at the foot of the hill overlooking the first hole, and so had a refuse destructor (1896).



There are early photographs of Kuala Lumpur taken from the vantage point of Bluff Hill (Bukit Aman), showing the *padang* and the Sultan Abdul Samad building with the chimney of the refuse destructor dominating the skyline.

By the late 1920s, there were several developments on Petaling Hill. Educational, religious and community buildings were added to the landscape. Four schools — the Chinese Free School (now SRK Cina Jalan Davidson), the Confucian Chinese School, the Methodist Boys' School and the Victoria Institution had been built.

Today, we still have the Ni Tin Keng (established in 1894) on the edge of the hill above Birch Road (Jalan Maharajalela), the Chinese Gospel Hall, Wesley Methodist Church and the YWCA, which were also established in the 1920s.

The golf links were turned into a popular place for public recreation, People's Park, and in 1937, it was named Coronation Park in honour of King George VI.

When he heard that I was interested in the history of Merdeka Stadium, the late Datuk Ikmal Hisham Albakri lent me his precious souvenir programme for the inauguration of Merdeka Stadium.

It contained a mine of information on the project and the people who were involved — from those who inspired and led the project to its designers and contractors responsible for making it happen.

The construction of the stadium used the natural topography of the site. It entailed the movement of 200,000 tonnes of earth for the huge earth amphitheatre on which the reinforced concrete terraced seating was laid.

Altogether, 10,000 tonnes of concrete and 700 tonnes of steel reinforcement were used in the construction. The four flood towers reaching to a height of 42.6 metres above the arena were an innovation feat — pre-stressed concrete tubes constructed in a horizontal position on the ground, with a tower shaft 35.6



Tunku Abdul Rahman, flanked by Tun Abdul Razak and S.E. Jewkes, who was responsible for the planning, design and construction of Merdeka Stadium, visiting the worksite in June 1957. — File picture

metres long and weighing 25 tonnes raised into a vertical position and placed in a socket.

The stadium sits on a north-south axis, accommodating 21,364 persons including 3,000 under the cover of the grandstand.

Designed on a radial principle to prevent crowd congestion, 50 turnstiles and 14 tunnels provided access so that the stadium could be filled in 30 minutes and expediently cleared in 10 minutes. When it was built in 1957, the stadium was the largest single building in the country.

The stadium was built by the Public Works Department, which was under the charge of K. Nankivell.

S.E. Jewkes, who now lives in Florida, was responsible for the planning, design and construction of the stadium. He led the team of architects, engineers, quantity surveyors and technical assistants which included E.A. Green, Chan Sai Soo, J.L. McDermont, I.J. Marshall, Lee Kok Thye, Peter Loh Teh Kong and Low Chin Hon.

The work was carried out by two main contractors — K.C. Boon and Cheah Co Ltd, and Lim Quee and Sons.

The souvenir programme also acknowledges the illustrious members of the Board of Control led by the late Tun Abdul Razak.

A couple of years back, during a site visit to Merdeka Stadium, Datin Sushila McCoy recounted her story of

being one of the 30,000-strong crowd on 31 Aug, 1957.

The televised images of the event cannot match her poignant account and how, contrary to my expectations, the crowd was hushed, almost reverent, until the resounding call "Merdeka!" when they broke into an uproarious response.

Later, her husband Datuk Dr Ronnie McCoy, who was also present at the declaration, said at that time, as a young doctor, he felt that the \$2.3 million spent on building the stadium could have been better used for hospitals, schools and other needed facilities. But in retrospect, Ronnie has changed his mind.

Having had the privilege of looking through the 160 engineering drawings of the original building, discovering Tunku's vision for building a sports ground located in what was then the centre of Kuala Lumpur "out of consideration for the poorer people who will be able to reach it after just a short walk", I can now see that the 1957 form embodies all the heritage values related to the events, history, architecture, planning, society and politics.

Thankfully, much of the original fabric has remained intact, and amazingly, the 50-year-old structure and fittings have weathered far better than newer creations which were built in the 1970s and 1980s.

It's a testimony to its builders, and I applaud them all. The restoration

process will ensure that Merdeka Stadium is rehabilitated reflecting this spirit of resilience, as the nation's "first" building.

As Tunku wrote in the souvenir programme: "I am glad indeed, that the most important of the ceremonies to mark the birth of a nation on 31st August this year will be performed in this Stadium. The name which it has been given to it is therefore a most fitting one — Stadium Merdeka."

In late 2000, Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB) "rescued" Merdeka Stadium. On Feb 8, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced that PNB had initiated the restoration of Merdeka Stadium.

PNB must be congratulated for its excellent initiative in safeguarding this icon of our independence, to preserve and conserve it as a national heritage in perpetuity.

I have, however, noticed that apart from some modest reporting in the media, there has not been the kind of public fervour we saw more than 10 years ago when the building was slated for demolition. And I wonder why? In the spirit of the 50th anniversary of Merdeka, I hope that every Malaysian will pull together to support this investment for our future generations.

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