

Malaysia's architectural landmarks through the decades

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By Priya Devan



Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has undergone tremendous transformation in its built environment and infrastructure, evolving from a nation with basic essential amenities to one that boasts world-class architecture and shiny skyscrapers.

Through the decades, both local and international architects, developers and contractors have continued to shape the skyline of the nation. These buildings not only serve practical purposes but also embody the cultural, religious and historical narratives that have shaped the country.

Compiled by the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) and City & Country, this listicle features some of Malaysia's most iconic architectural landmarks since Merdeka.



Stadium Merdeka was the main venue for major and sporting events in the country until the completion of the Bukit Jalil National Stadium in the mid-1990s (Photo by Patrick Goh/The Edge)

1950s: MALAYAN MODERNISM

Stadium Merdeka

Officiated on Aug 30, 1957, a day before Merdeka, Stadium Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur (KL) has stood the test of time as a witness of how far Malaysia has come. It was the site where the nation's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, proclaimed the country's independence on Aug 31, 1957.

The stadium, designed by architect Stanley Edward Jewkes, originally seated 20,000 people and was later expanded to accommodate 45,000.

Stadium Merdeka in the early years (Photo by PNB Merdeka Ventures)



The stadium has since undergone renovations in the 1970s and 1980s as well as a comprehensive restoration process by PNB Merdeka Ventures Sdn Bhd, which acquired the site in 2006 and now manages it under the Merdeka Heritage Trust. Stadium Merdeka continued to be the main venue for major and sporting events in the country until the completion of the Bukit Jalil National Stadium in the mid-1990s.

According to PAM deputy president and design thrust lead Dexter Koh, 67 years later, the stadium's significance still runs deep in the minds of those who witnessed Merdeka. "We must ensure this memory is perpetuated in all post-Merdeka Malaysians present and future," he says.



1960s: NATION-BUILDING

Parliament Building

Located adjacent to the Perdana Botanical Gardens in KL, Parliament Building was birthed in 1959 on a 40-acre site selected by the government. According to the Official Portal of Parliament of Malaysia, Parliament Building was the brainchild of Tunku, who wanted to have a building specifically for parliament.

Construction commenced on Aug 31, 1962, and the first meeting of the Parliament of Malaysia was held there on Sept 16, 1963. Parliament Building consists of three blocks: the three-storey main block, a 17-storey tower block and a multipurpose hall equipped with recreational facilities.

Koh says parliament serves as the emblem of freedom and democracy of the nation, and true to its intents, it took a modernist form, which refrained from referencing colonialism, yet alluded to the vernacular. “It has reticulated façade screens adapting to the climate and the steep pitched angles of the gable roof on the podium evoke the

iconography of traditional roofs. Above all, its architecture speaks a universal language that is neutral about ethnicity in a diverse country.”



The National Museum of Malaysia’s traditional Malay architectural elements blend seamlessly with a classical composition layout and functionalist principles (Photo by Zahid Izzani/The Edge)

The National Museum of Malaysia

As with the Parliament Building, Tunku initiated the idea to build the country’s national museum. According to The National Museum of Malaysia’s official website, the site of the Selangor Museum building (1906-1945), which was almost destroyed by an Allied Air Force bombing attack in March 1945, was chosen as the location of the national museum.

Construction of the national museum began in 1959 and was completed in August 1963. The design of the building was done by the appointed architect, Ho Kwong Yew, and supervised by Mubbin Sheppard.

According to PAM heritage and conservation committee chair Datuk Zulhairi Md Zain, the museum marked a significant shift in regionalist architecture during the 1960s, at a time when modern architecture faced global criticism. “The design was thoughtfully adapted to the local climate, materials and cultural context for this

museum. The traditional Malay architectural elements — comprising the kolong [or stilts], main body and pitched roof — are distinctly recognisable, yet they seamlessly integrate with a classical composition layout and functionalist principles, particularly through the use of deeply shaded glass.

“The building symbolises the nation’s quest for unity and progress within its diverse multicultural and multi-ethnic society. It represents a departure from foreign influences, fostering a sense of pride, belonging and identity in the newly independent country,” Zulkhairi says.



Tun Mustapha Tower, which resembles a rocket ship ready to be launched, features a 72-sided polygon and a glass façade

1970s: SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Tun Mustapha Tower

A 30-storey aluminium and glass-clad building fronting Likas Bay in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, serves as the headquarters of Yayasan Sabah Group. Known as Tun Mustapha Tower, the cylindrical building was completed in 1977. Originally known as the Sabah Foundation Building, it was renamed in honour of the late Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun, the third chief minister of Sabah.

The building, which looks like a rocket ship ready to be launched, also portrays Sabah's beautiful landscape as, at times, the view of Mount Kinabalu is reflected in the glass walls of the building.

According to PAM awards and competition committee chair Alvin Lim, the tower is renowned for its innovative design, featuring a 72-sided polygon with a glass façade that distinguishes it from conventional office buildings.

He says: "In addition to its innovative architectural concepts, the tower's 2,160 reflective glass panels change colour throughout the day according to the [movement of the] sun and clouds and the ever-changing hues of the sky, and can endure winds of up to 272kph."



Tabung Haji Tower is known for its distinctive Islamic architecture (Photo by Low Yen Yeing/The Edge)

1980s: ECONOMIC BOOM

Tabung Haji Tower

Tabung Haji Tower, located in KL, is a prominent 38-storey skyscraper completed in 1984. The tower serves as the headquarters for Lembaga Tabung Haji, or the Malaysian Haj Pilgrims Fund Board. Designed by Hijjas Kasturi Associates, the building is known for its distinctive Islamic architecture, featuring elements such as geometric patterns and a crescent-shaped structure.

Koh says, in pursuing his intention not to have columns interrupting the spaces, “Hijjas proposed five peripheral columns as structural elements, symbolising the five pillars of Islam. The most distinctive and iconic feature of the tower is the curved and tapered elevation, on a circular floor plate, which resulted in a highly unique and recognisable edifice, despite being dwarfed by newer and taller buildings around it”.



The central building of the Sabah State Museum is designed in the style of the traditional Rungus longhouse (Photo by Yayasan Sabah Group)

Sabah State Museum

Built on the site of the former British North Borneo Governor's Palace, the Sabah State Museum in Kota Kinabalu is a cultural and historical hub. The mission of the museum, which was opened in 1984, is to collect, preserve, conserve and document ethnographic, archaeological, historical, numismatic, art-historical, botanical, zoological and mineralogical collections from throughout the state, and to conduct research on important and interesting aspects of Sabah's history, culture and social and natural history.

According to Zulkhairi, in the 1980s, architects in Peninsular Malaysia leaned towards high-rise buildings with international and contemporary Islamic influences, while Sabah's architecture embraced vernacular traditions, reflecting post-modernist sensibilities.

“The central building of the museum is designed in the style of traditional Rungus longhouses. The Rungus people, residing in the northeast of Sabah, primarily engage in small-scale agricultural practices. Their longhouses, now becoming rare, serve dual purposes and are built using traditional materials such as small split timbers secured with rattan for the frame, palm fronds for the thatched roof, split bamboo for the floor, and tree bark for the walls. The architect incorporated abstracted elements of the Rungus longhouse roof, colours and patterns into the design to preserve Sabah's cultural identity.”



1990s: RISE OF MEGA PROJECTS

Mesiniaga Tower

Mesiniaga Tower, located in Subang Jaya, Selangor, is a distinctive 15-storey office building designed by architect Datuk Ken Yeang and completed in 1992. This tower is an early example of bioclimatic architecture, integrating sustainable design elements that respond to the local climate. The building features solar shading devices, a spiralling landscaped terrace, and energy-efficient systems that reduce its environmental impact.

The tower, which is the headquarters of Mesiniaga Bhd (KL:[MSNIAGA](#)), features a distinctive design with a focus on integrating natural ventilation, which reduces the need for air-conditioning, says PAM media and publication committee chair David Teoh. “Its façade incorporates a series of vertical green terraces and gardens, which not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also contribute to the building’s energy efficiency.”

Terengganu State Museum

Spread across a 66-acre tract, the Terengganu State Museum, in Kuala Terengganu, is a sight to behold, with its traditional Malay architecture. The structure features steeply pitched roofs and intricate wooden carvings that reflect the rich heritage of the state.

Opened in 1996, the museum houses extensive collections of Islamic art, natural history and the rich cultural heritage of Terengganu. It also includes several galleries with themes such as history, royalty, Islam, textile and craft. On the site, there is also a botanical garden featuring local plants and flowers.

Architecturally, Zulhairi says, the museum is inspired by traditional Terengganu palaces, as seen in “its roof design, building massing, carvings and decorations. The design emulates Rumah Tele or Rumah Bujang Berserambi, with a distinctive front known as pemelah and intricately carved wall panels”.

He adds: “The building gives the impression of being elevated on stilts, with access via a raised staircase reminiscent of traditional village houses. The use of authentic materials and wood carvings enhances its aesthetic and historical authenticity. This

building exemplifies the pursuit of a Malaysian architectural identity through vernacular revivalism in the 1990s.”



The Petronas Twin Towers exude modernity with a blend of Islamic art (Photo by Shahrin Yahya/The Edge)

Petronas Twin Towers

A big part of the Malaysian identity is none other than the renowned Petronas Twin Towers, located in KL. When it was completed in 1998, the iconic twin skyscrapers were the tallest buildings in the world until 2004, standing 452m tall. The 88-storey twin towers were inspired by then prime minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad’s vision for Malaysia to be a global player. Today, it is the world’s 21st tallest building.

Designed by Argentine architect César Pelli, the twin towers exude modernity with a blend of Islamic art. According to the official website, the design features two pinnacles topped with spires and a distinctive sky bridge on the 41st and 42nd floors, offering panoramic views of the city. The towers are home to offices, including the headquarters of Petronas, and the Suria KLCC shopping mall.

Koh says: “[The twin towers] gave Kuala Lumpur an instant identity, while the KLCC Park beside it spearheaded the development of a tropical, urban public space on the former racecourse land. The high quality of articulated stainless steel and glass cladding set new standards for skyscrapers here and abroad. The twin towers are a powerful symbol of Malaysia’s aspirations to take its place on the world stage.”



The UTP campus reflects the university’s focus on technology and innovation (Photo by Petronas/Facebook)

2000s: DAWN OF A NEW MILLENNIUM

Universiti Teknologi Petronas

Completed in 2004, the Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) campus is designed to reflect the university’s focus on technology and innovation, according to its portal. This masterpiece of a campus was designed by UK-based architectural firm Foster and Partners.

Founded by Petronas, UTP is a leading private university known for its focus on engineering, science and technology. The campus is thoughtfully planned to harmonise with its natural surroundings, incorporating elements such as open courtyards, water features and green spaces for a conducive learning environment. Buildings are strategically positioned to optimise natural light and ventilation.

According to Lim, the main academic buildings were strategically placed around the base of the hills to minimise disruption to the natural topography. “These buildings are connected by a series of canopies surrounding a central jungle park, creating a five-pointed star. The canopies also provide protection for pedestrians and building entrances against the region’s extreme tropical climate patterns. The intersections of the canopies also serve as communal areas and student support facilities.”



Telekom Tower’s unique shape is inspired by the Malay keris (Photo by Shesmax/Wikimedia Commons)

Telekom Tower

Telekom Tower, also known as Menara TM, is a prominent skyscraper in KL and serves as the headquarters for Telekom Malaysia Bhd (KL:[TM](#)). Completed in 2001,

the 55-storey building stands 310m tall, making it the sixth tallest building in the country.

Designed by architect Hijjas Kasturi, the tower's unique shape is inspired by the traditional Malay keris, or dagger. The building features advanced energy-efficient systems and a sky garden halfway up, offering greenery and panoramic views of the city.

According to Lim, the building is also shaped to resemble a sprouting bamboo shoot. "The interlocking curved shapes create a visually captivating silhouette. The tower's unique shape drew inspiration from sculptor Latiff Mohidin's series of artwork called Pago Pago, and represents a young bamboo shoot with strong roots at its base and delicate leaves sprouting.

"The tower's design isn't just about aesthetics; it carries symbolism, representing growth and progress, aligning with Malaysia's aspirations. Beyond symbolism, the tower was intelligently planned to harmonise with its environment. It is equipped with systems that encourage energy efficiency and promote communal interaction. The office floors are divided into north and south wings, served by a unique sustainability feature of 22 open sky gardens alternating every three floors."



The Putrajaya Energy Commission building is a benchmark for green design (Photo by Shahrill Basri/The Edge)

2010s: GREEN WAVE

Putrajaya Energy Commission

The Putrajaya Energy Commission, also known as the Diamond Building, is another example of sustainable architecture in Malaysia's administrative capital, Putrajaya. Completed in 2010, the building is the headquarters of the Energy Commission of Malaysia.

It features numerous green technologies, including energy-efficient lighting, solar panels and rainwater harvesting systems, which have earned it prestigious certifications such as the Green Building Index (GBI) Platinum rating.

According to PAM ESG committee chair Axxu Hoi, the building is the best example of integrating passive design with active systems to establish a benchmark for green design. "The diamond form not only creates shading for the lower floors but also enhances its architectural profile, making it both functional and visually striking," says Hoi.



PAM Centre has an open, flexible layout and incorporates green features (Photo by PAM)

PAM Centre

Located in Bangsar, KL, PAM Centre is the headquarters of the Malaysian Institute of Architects. Completed in 2016, the building was designed by renowned local architectural firm Hijjas Kasturi Associates. The seven-storey structure has an open, flexible layout and incorporates green features such as rainwater harvesting and energy-efficient systems. The building serves as a hub for architectural education, exhibitions and events.

PAM's Hoi says the architecture showcases the fundamentals of green design by allowing sunlight penetration and natural ventilation throughout every part of the building. "It has established a new standard for GBI Platinum certification, with passive design strategies specifically tailored for high-rise buildings."



Paramit Factory in the Forest in Penang is a pioneer in sustainable industrial architecture (Photo by Paramit Malaysia)

2020s: TO THE FUTURE AND BEYOND

Paramit Factory in the Forest

A one-of-a-kind five-acre factory designed with plenty of greenery and outdoor spaces, the Paramit Factory in the Forest in Penang is a pioneering example of sustainable industrial architecture. Designed by Design Unit Architects Sdn Bhd and completed in 2017, this 150,000 sq ft electronics manufacturing factory integrates with its natural surroundings, embodying the concept of bioclimatic design.

According to Teoh, the factory, which is nestled amid lush greenery, integrates sustainable practices with advanced technology, producing high-precision electronic components. “Its eco-friendly architecture includes extensive use of natural light, energy-efficient systems and a green roof.”



The Exchange 106 is a modern luxury tower offering premium office spaces (Photo by Sam Fong/The Edge)

The Exchange 106

Situated in the Tun Razak Exchange (TRX) district of KL, The Exchange 106 is currently the 19th-tallest building in the world. The tower is part of the larger TRX mixed-use development comprising retail spaces, residential towers, commercial office spaces, a hotel and public rooftop park. Positioned as a hub for finance and business, TRX is poised to become the country's international financial centre.

The Exchange 106 stands at 452m with 106 floors, making it a dominant feature of the KL skyline. Completed in 2019 and designed by Mulia Group Architects, the tower combines modern luxury, offering premium office spaces. The tower's exterior is clad in glass, giving it a sleek, reflective appearance, while the interiors feature high-end finishes and expansive views of the city.

Zulkhairi says this project highlights Malaysia's remarkable economic progress amid global challenges and reflects the nation's dynamic political leadership and aspirations for a brighter future.



The Borneo Cultures Museum has a combination of steel, glass and innovative architectural elements (Photo by Patrick Goh/The Edge)

Borneo Cultures Museum

The Borneo Cultures Museum, located in Kuching, Sarawak, is the largest museum in Malaysia. Opened in 2022, the five-storey building showcases the rich cultural heritage and biodiversity of Borneo.

According to the Sarawak Museum Department's website, the museum's exhibitions feature interactive displays, artefacts and multimedia presentations on the indigenous cultures, history and natural environment of Borneo.

Teoh says the museum's structure features a sleek combination of steel, glass and innovative architectural elements, resulting a dynamic and modern silhouette. "The design reflects the rich heritage of Sarawak and Borneo, blending traditional cultural motifs with cutting-edge design techniques. The building serves not only as a repository of cultural artefacts but also as a vibrant space for engaging exhibits and educational experiences, showcasing the deep cultural roots and diverse heritage of the region."



The Merdeka 118 tower has a tapered silhouette with a distinctive spire and reflective glass façade (Photo by Low Yen Yeing/The Edge)

Merdeka 118

Currently the world's second-tallest building, Merdeka 118 stands as a testament to the country's continuous growth and advanced talent. As the name suggests, it comprises 118 storeys and soars a whopping 678.9m above the KL skyline, offering a majestic view of a glimmering diamond-shaped crystalline concept.

Designed by Melbourne-based Fender Katsalidis Architects, the skyscraper is named for Malaysia's independence and situated in the larger 40-acre Merdeka 118 precinct. The tower was built and is owned by PNB Merdeka Ventures Sdn Bhd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Permodalan Nasional Bhd.

The Merdeka 118 tower comprises offices, a Park Hyatt hotel, sky restaurant, two-level observation deck and an associated basement car park. Teoh says the tower features a sleek, tapered silhouette with a distinctive spire and reflective glass façade. "The building also combines modern design with traditional Malaysian motifs, making it a prominent city landmark. Merdeka 118 stands as a symbol of architectural innovation and national pride."

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