



room with a view
BY LH Ng

MERDEKA RECEPTACLES

NATIONAL THIS AND THAT
RECONSIDERED

ALMOST 50 YEARS ago, Malaysia became independent in a space that embodied a progressive new state. Stadium Merdeka was designed to be an iconic monument that would stand alone like the nation, with a commanding view above the rest of the city.

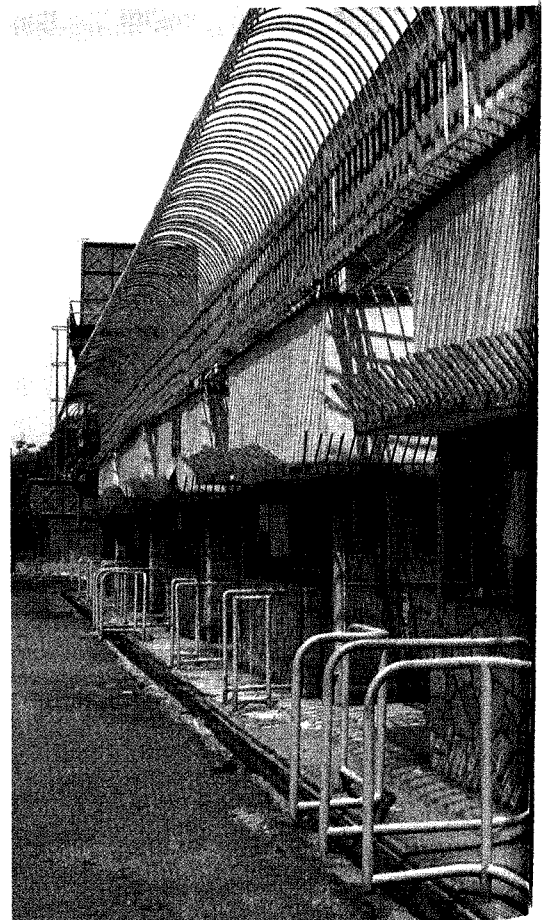
So the recent decision to preserve the stadium as part of the national heritage is almost overdue. From the seat of memory theatre, it has instead become an indifferent backdrop to pop concerts, sporting events and the remnants of Citrawarna Malaysia celebrations.

We often look to our national buildings to literally embody collective ideas, mistaking presence and weight for a sense of self. While the expression of the country's identity typically re-

lies on strong visual symbols, buildings that are deemed national also remind us that their relevance depends on our response to them.

Take a look at the iconic photo of the declaration of Merdeka. Behind the Tunku's upraised hand are tiers of seated crowds, spectators to an act of history. Perhaps, it is a post-modern conceit to conceptualise place as a practice and event, but successive purpose-built receptacles of patriotism often omit the larger systems of the city, cultural and natural.

Rather than idols to nationalism, places defined as Malaysian can also be observed in the practice of everyday life. These are spaces that are representative of a country, with their capacity to act as a secular hub by integrating complex styles, social groups and aspirations. In our gathering areas and temporary structures, in memory and in movement, are the crowded fragments of identity. ■



free quotes

RAKYAT MALAYSIA INGIN
PENJELASAN KENAPA PEMERINTAH
INDONESIA TIDAK BISA
MENGHENTIKAN MASALAH ASAP
INI MENJADI PERISTIWA TAHUNAN
YANG TRAGIS

Pemimpin oposisi Malaysia Lim Kit Siang,
quoted in Detik.com

IT'S AN ENDANGERED SPECIES AND
I HOPE MORE PEOPLE WILL SEE THE
VALUE OF THIS BEAUTIFUL WILD
ANIMAL INSTEAD OF GOBBLING IT UP

Malaysian trade commissioner to Papua
New Guinea, who reportedly paid more than
RM10,000 to a Malaysian Chinese restaurant,
in a twist to the man-eating tiger tale

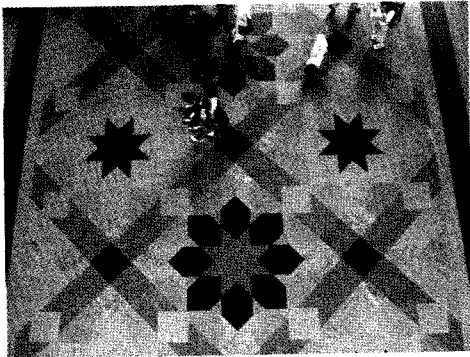
MID VALLEY

An enigmatic building, Mid Valley is obscured by office blocks and devoid of outer expression other than the commercial. Despite its visual prominence, entry into the complex is distorted through a series of flyovers and anonymous car park levels. From here, one emerges into an empire of shop signs. Regardless of any anxieties about globalisation, all major festivals are fetishised equally within, including Merdeka celebrations that feature an orgy of sales. As a public space that is market driven, it is an air-conditioned, litter-free and highly popular haven from the complexity of modern life. The search for individual difference is exchanged, cash or credit, for the celebration of a consuming new Malaysian unity.



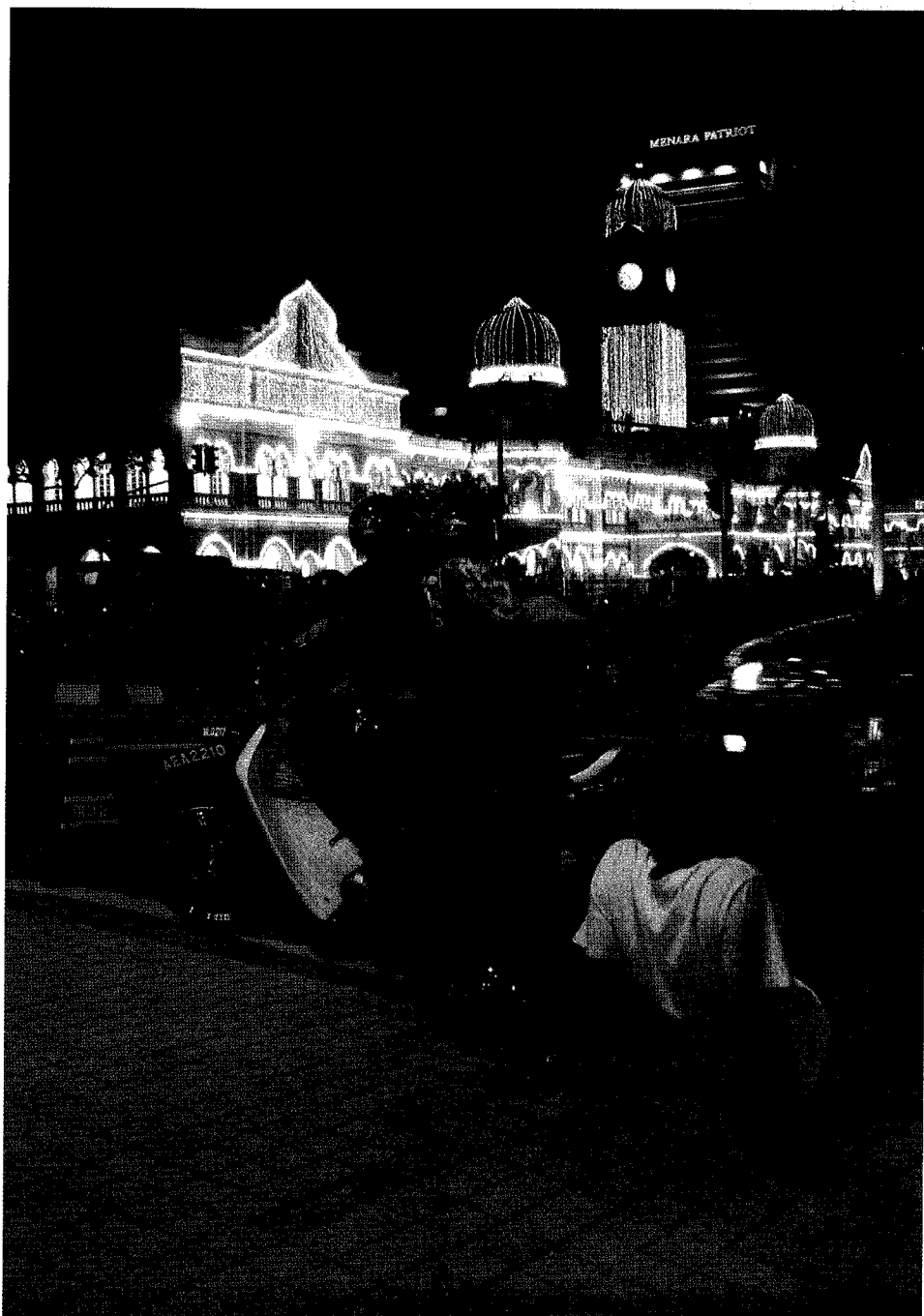
KL SENTRAL STATION

Like another more famous national icon, Sentral stands out on the landscape for its pair of towers as mirror opposites rather than twins. Yet it is the focal point of not just nationwide transportation but also the fabric of Malaysian society. Identity can best be expressed by mobility, moving on to new cities, new jobs and new lives. Dispersing for *cuti* or *balik kampung*, inevitably during one of our national holidays, requires a massive space invested with the mixed-use tag of a city within a city. Development has so far been uneven, leaving empty plots and surrounding areas curiously detached. But as nature abhors a vacuum, so is the vast station building instead filled with requisite bazaar stalls for the crowds in transit. Drifting through brightly coloured merchandise and temporary stands, people continue with their journey to other places.



DATARAN MERDEKA

Memory is one of the key ingredients in the creation of a national space, none more so than in an open square that shares history with collective space. Framed by converted residue from the past, Dataran Merdeka provides a unique contemporary ground for disruption and engagement of the tourist experience. Where the first marker over the Malaysian landscape was raised, the flag is now reproduced at every scale possible and endlessly photographed as a representative urban experience. Being the site for national celebrations and parades, it also condenses meaning into a spectacle of Malaysian history and culture. But on evenings when traffic is closed off, an alternate urban culture becomes possible in a place that can be publicly explored but seldom understood. Lit by a radiance of light bulbs tracing the fantastic architecture of the historic buildings, snacks are eaten; bikers linger and families stroll in the night air.



sound bites

BY Adeline Wong

BJORK

VESPERTINE
(ELEKTRA)

Stunned initially by the intensity and great variety in Bjork's voice, I'm now taken with the delicate balance in

her lyrics and music, between eccentricity and universality, between quirkiness of personal experience and the expression of themes to which we all relate. Well-orchestrated, with beautiful washes of harp, chiming music boxes, dream-like effects and an utterly distinctive melodic style.

PETER EOTVOS

CHINESE OPERA, SHADOWS, STEINE (KAIROS)

A Hungarian composer whose compositional gestures are direct and strong. Eotvos shows a unique sound-image as suggested by the title, placing the sounds like objects in a space where they move away from one another, cast shadows and become shadows themselves. A masterpiece.

LUTOSLAWSKI

THE ESSENTIAL LUTOSLAWSKI (PHILIPS)

A composer close to my heart. This double CD is an insightful overview of the Pole's unique world of beauty – tonal colour, pitch structures, wonderful orchestration and distinctive handling large formal structures. Two of my favourite works are *Cello Concerto*, one of the best contemporary writings for this genre; and *Symphony No 3*, a monumental exhibition of modernist techniques that remains emotionally accessible and intensely dramatic.

STEVE REICH

MUSIC FOR 18 MUSICIANS (ECM NEW SERIES)

Hypnotic and trance-like, this Minimalist work is based on a series of static harmonies coloured by Reich's admirable sonic hues. A continuous pulsing beat swirls over arrays of pianos, marimbas, clarinets and voices as well as looping melodies that are fascinating to listen to. Hear this for the first time in one go and you'll ask yourself: 'What was that?' Truly mesmerising.

GIDON KREMER

HOMMAGE A PIAZZOLLA (NONESUCH)

The tone of this album is melancholic, passionate and sensuous – like the tango, like Piazzolla. Kremer's vibrant and expressive playing wonderfully captures the essence of Piazzolla's music. The man was a master of emotions and Kremer and crew capture the bittersweet beautifully. (Adeline Wong is interviewed on Page 66)