

# Architectural iconicity: Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor

Despite architecture and the built environment confronting all of us in our daily lives they have received little attention in discussions of globalisation, capitalism or postcolonialism. Certain types of architecture can be hegemonic in a class sense, serving specific class interests alongside their recognised aesthetic qualities. Until the middle of the 20th century this idea was discussed mainly in terms of monumentality and political power. However, in recent decades with the spread of consumerism around the world, notably in the postcolonial, newly industrialised countries (NICs) of East Asia, Leslie Sklair argues that iconic architecture is becoming increasingly important to understanding capitalist globalisation.

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IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE<sup>1</sup> I attempted to explain the relationships between iconic architecture and capitalist globalisation, defining iconic in terms of fame and symbolic/aesthetic significance. Iconicity operates at the local/urban, the national and the global levels and many buildings can become iconic locally and/or nationally without achieving this status globally, though all global architectural icons are also well-known in their cities and countries of origin. My argument is that in the pre-global era—roughly before the 1950s and the onset of the electronic revolution in production, distribution and exchange, paving the way for what we now know as capitalist globalisation—architectural iconicity, usually in the form of monumental structures, was largely driven by state and/or religious authorities (often overlapping); while in the era of globalisation, iconicity is more often driven by the corporate sector, often in partnership with globalising politicians and bureaucrats (allies in an emerging transnational capitalist class). An examination of the iconic architecture that characterises most postcolonial and globalising cities suggests that the typical architectural form is not so much monumental as what can be characterised as consumerist—lightness of materials (glass and steel) replacing monumental massification (stone)—thus encouraging delight and the democratic propensity to spend rather than totalitarian awe.

## Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)

MSC comprises a series of high-tech, modernist (in some cases postmodern) buildings and projects designed to transform the image of Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia from an economically quite successful Asian country into a globalising powerhouse for the 21st century. The then Prime Minister Mahathir first expressed his global 'Vision 2020' in 1991, highlighting the fundamental importance of Information and Communication Technologies (now more commonly labelled the Digital Revolution) and the MSC is a direct consequence of this policy. Responding to extreme overcrowding in Kuala Lumpur, through a series of public-private partnerships, MSC comprises a 50 km long, 15 km wide corridor, from Kuala Lumpur, through Putrajaya, the new administrative and governmental complex, and Cyberjaya, its 'intelligent city' neighbour, culminating in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA)—linked to KL city centre by an express rail link—one of the largest and most spectacular airports in Asia. The master plans for most of these sites were developed with foreign consultants (Bill Gates was on the MSC International Advisory Panel). While some of the more ambitious goals, particularly the development of Cyberjaya, were and continue to be adversely affected by the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the current global financial crisis, an impressive amount of building has been completed.

In Malaysia, as in all postcolonial countries, the global needs to be balanced by the state-approved symbols of real and/or imagined national cultures. Marc Boey puts the issue very well: this 'carefully articulated "hybrid" MSC landscape... embraces not only the economic magnetism of modern global-city architecture but also the repackaged symbolisms of tradition and culture that reifies the national integrity of the country'<sup>2</sup>—complete with strategic placement of new mosques. Creating a building, let alone an urban mega-project, that combines the elements of an acceptable national icon with the elements of a recognisable architectural global icon is not an easy task but this is exactly what the planners of MSC tried to do, notably with their flagship project, the Petronas Twin Towers (PTT). The construction of PTT in Kuala Lumpur (in this 'moderate' Islamic state) is a good, if convoluted, example of how such issues are typically addressed under conditions of capitalist globalisation. The architect, Cesar Pelli was born in Argentina in 1926 and moved to the US in 1964. Pelli attracted international attention with his enormous towers in the World Financial Center in New York (1981) and in Canary Wharf in London (1986), so it was no great surprise that he won the international competition for PTT in 1991. The project was the centrepiece of Mahathir's *Wawasan* (Vision) 2020, based on two 88-storey towers, 451.9 metres high, with a skybridge between the 41st and 42nd floors. PTT is owned and largely tenanted by

the consortium led by Petronas, the state petroleum company, as part of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre plan. The architect reported: 'It was never specified that the towers should become the tallest buildings in the world, just that they be beautiful',<sup>3</sup> though the fact that the tallest building in the world would be located (for a short time, at least) in Kuala Lumpur was certainly appealing to the Malaysian client. Pelli & Associates won, apparently, not only because their 'proposal met the desire for a uniquely Malaysian design' (ibid.) but because meeting this desire also solved a problem in skyscraper design. In Pelli's own words: 'Linking the Petronas Towers to Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia required rethinking the character of the traditional skyscraper to unburden it of American or European connotations. ...[the] shape of the towers has its origin in Islamic tradition, in which geometric patterns assume greater symbolic importance than in Western culture' (ibid.: 68).

Where, then, does this 'uniquely Malaysian design' come from? At one level, as noted above, it comes from the Islamic geometry of the floor plan; at another, deeper level it comes from the break with modernist tradition embodied in the symmetrical arrangement of the towers and what this means for the space between them. Pelli explains: 'Through Frank Lloyd Wright, many architects have been influenced by Lao Tzu's teaching that the reality of a hollow object is in the void and not the walls that define it. This quality of the building is not derived from Malaysian tradition. But because it appears for the first time in Kuala Lumpur, it will be forever identified with its place' (ibid.: 70). Just as the Eiffel Tower, whose structure and form were not French in origin, became synonymous with Paris, PTT would become synonymous with Kuala Lumpur. This is clearly a rationale that is open to many types and layers of interpretation. Suffice it to say here that, at one level and for some professionals and ideologues, it painlessly reconciles national and global architectural symbolism and aesthetics in a postcolonial direction conciliatory to the interests of capitalist globalisation. Not only are the twin towers a significant tourist attraction (thus feeding into a global culture-ideology of consumerism) but the ground floor of PTT has become one of the most iconic shopping spaces in Asia—the Suria mall. As Pelli predicted and his clients hoped, the Petronas Towers complex has become a first class marketing symbol for Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia as a whole, despite its purported 'break with modernism'.

KLIA, like PTT, was also designed by a world famous iconic architect, Kisho Kurokawa—a leading light in the Metabolist challenge to International Modernism, with notable buildings in Tokyo, Berlin and Paris in his portfolio. Again, the global-local symbolism and aesthetics are in evidence: with the roof structure purporting to reflect the Malaysian *kampong* houses, internal supports mimicking palm tree plantations, and full-frontal attempts to merge the airport with the jungle. Like all major airports around the world, KLIA is not only a transportation hub but a series of shopping and leisure spaces. While PTT and KLIA are the only undeniably global architectural icons in the MSC project, there are several aspiring local and national iconic buildings in Putrajaya.<sup>4</sup> The use of wood, Islamic symbols and 'tropical-ness'<sup>5</sup> all conspire to bundle the local into the global. The shape of the International Conference Centre has been likened to the '*pending perak*' (royal belt buckle); the modernist cable structure of the Seri Wawasan Bridge has the look of the Arabian dhow (we can also reference Calatrava here); the Palace of Justice, has been said to incorporate Islamic cultural forms (notably the Taj Mahal), Moorish culture and even a touch of the Palladian villa, and government buildings use the traditional Islamic keyhole motif that could pass for a postmodernist gesture.

These apparently culturally specific references fit easily into the architectural cosmos of the postcolonial and globalising city. According to the author of a study of urban mega-projects in Asia (including MSC), by the late 1990s 13 of the 30 largest architect-developer firms working in Asia were domiciled in the US, Australia or the UK. 'This leads inevitably to a collection of architectural projects that are remarkably the same

in cities such as Tokyo, Shanghai, Singapore and Jakarta'.<sup>6</sup> All these mega-projects will have partners on the ground; not just architects but engineers, real estate agents, bankers, lawyers, academics and support staff, out of which the elites and the new local affiliates of the transnational capitalist class will emerge as part of transnational urban growth coalitions. For example, the Multimedia University, whose origins lie in Malaysia's first private university created by the Malaysia Telecoms Company, is a key element in the aspiration to establish Cyberjaya as Malaysia's Silicon Valley—MMU is making a good start with its 'E-Scroll' a digitally signed graduation certificate, stored in a CR-ROM with a microchip-based Smart-Card ready to be downloaded into job application forms.

## Contradictions

While MSC has stalled somewhat in recent years, the rhetoric and some spectacular architecture remain. Nevertheless, frequently hidden from the tourist gaze the iconic buildings of the MSC obscure the lives and living conditions of the poor.<sup>7</sup> While it may be argued that the new high quality government buildings in Putrajaya are a legitimate public expense, local critics point out that Putrajaya Conference Centre is heavily under-utilised and that it could take hundreds of years to recoup its original cost. This appears to be true for many globalising cities and not just those in the developing world—it is a condition of existence of capitalist globalisation, what we can identify as the crisis of class polarisation. On the surface, this appears to turn the earlier critique of capitalism—private affluence and public squalor—on its head. Through the culture-ideology of consumerism, promising the fruits of capitalist globalisation to all (fortified by platitudes like 'the rising tide lifts all boats'), apparent public affluence is created through iconic architecture. This is achieved through an appropriation of modernist, often postmodernist, iconicity with regionalist characteristics which prevailing postcolonial modes of representation translate into a language that sits comfortably with the culture-ideology of consumerism of capitalist globalisation. Three main audiences are targeted by those who own and control such globalising cities. First and most directly, these spaces and buildings seek to attract the national and international tourist trade, an important component of which is business-tourism (trade shows, conferences, sports events, etc.); second, the local urban upper middle class, whose numbers have increased rapidly over the last few decades in most cities; and third, indirectly, the local working class who are encouraged to participate by looking at and taking occasional outings in their new, gleaming, city centres, public buildings and suburban shopping malls, promoted as sources of civic and national pride even in the poorest countries. In these ways under the conditions of capitalist globalisation former colonial cities are being transformed into postcolonial and globalising cities.

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## References

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