ABSTRACT: The search and discourses on the Malaysian Architectural identity has led to the design of monuments such as the Parliament Building, the National Museum and the Putrajaya Prime Minister Office. The discourse of identity in architecture is a combination of architectural and political compromise. The early approaches in the late fifties and early sixties however, demonstrated universal and progressive interpretation of Malaysia as a democratic multi-ethnic country. It was a period with architectural freedom of experimentation free from fears of race and partisan politics. It is within this era that Malayan Architect Co-Partnership (MAC) was born. This paper, therefore, is a pioneering attempt to piece together the thoughts of this important era by documenting the existence of MAC by concentrating on significant project profiles that contains interpretation of modernist socialist-democratic idealism for Malaysia.

Keywords: Architecture, National identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The search for a national identity seems to be necessary for countries which has either newly become independent or with a leadership that stresses certain groups of race as ‘better’ than others. To most countries, this search is a high profile event as it has strong political implications. Of all the arts and technology produced by man, architecture is the most conspicuous of them all. The search for a national identity is a most difficult endeavor and for a multi-cultural nation, the effort is even more so. To search for one’s identity is also something of a peculiar nature since it implies that one has either lost the identity or does not have a clue as to who one is.

Islamic Architecture and Malay Architecture have one thing in common. They have had a long development period but their growth was stunted because of colonization and internal social decadence. Both cultures were on the wane when European Enlightenment came into being. When industrialization and religious reform came to Europe, the traditional architectural practice and philosophies were shaken by the early modernists who questioned the role of ornaments, the search for an optimum form for the new building materials, the strong socialist morals of architecture of equality and the question of mass production. The traditional architectural vocabularies were reexamined in the light of the social, economic and intellectual forces. These questioning of the traditional philosophies of revivalism and eclecticism in the light of new found technology and moral values had not developed fully in Malaysian Architecture. When independence came to Malaysia and most Islamic countries, modernist philosophies were imported indiscriminately. The chance for questioning traditional architectural aesthetics and approaches could not happen for two important reasons; firstly, because of lack of documentary works and analysis of traditional architecture and secondly, no serious attempts were made by local architects and academicians to understand the roots of the modernist philosophy which has much potential for cultural assimilation. Before any attempts were made concerning these two important researches, Post-Modernism arrived and opened the doors to ‘any architecture that does not look like the modernist block’. In non-Western countries, the modernist philosophies were hanged before any trial was performed.

We believe that is why the search for a Malaysian Architecture has resulted in many awkward design solutions bordering on eclecticism, revivalism and loose adaptation of the traditional heritage. There is therefore a serious gap in the development sequence of Malaysian Architecture from the past to the present. We believe that there are many good philosophies that came out of the early period of modernism inherent in the discussion on structural rationalism, relationship between form and function, the role of ornament, the ‘spirit of the times’, the Art and Craft Concerns and Wright's Organic Architecture. There are many moral questions raised and that of examining Nature's Wealth of forms and aesthetic. The secular and pluralistic nature of mid 20th century Westerners found difficulty in accepting the moral and ‘religious' overtones of these philosophies. We, the Easterners who still hold to a theo-centric idea of life can benefit from some of these theories.

There are four areas of work necessary in filling the gap in the intellectual discourse of architectural theory in the Malaysian context. The first is an analysis of the traditional architectural vocabularies from its various technological, cultural and aesthetic perspectives. Secondly, there is a crucial need in documenting the modern works of architecture in order to identify serious attempts at creating an appropriate architecture for Malaysia. Thirdly, there is an important need to explain the selected theories of modernism such as those mentioned above to the local students, architects, potential clients and policy makers. Finally, there is the important work of integrating the knowledge of traditional architecture with the proper modernist philosophies. This essay is part of an on going doctoral research in order to answer the second effort needed. It briefly highlights the main ideas of the first local firm in Malaysia known as the Malayan Architects Co-Partnership.
2. METHODOLOGY
The research relies mainly on interviews, literature sources and on-site observation of the building designed. The interviews will be held with the principles of MAC as well as those politicians and civil servants associated with the important projects. The literature sources are mainly from PETA, Majalah Arkitek, books, magazines and publications that focus on the issue of Malaysian National Identity since 1957 onwards. It will also covers literature sources on political ideas of Tunku Abdul Rahman and of the National front concerning the idea of “Malaysia”.

3. MALAYAN ARCHITECT CO-PARTNERSHIP

The Early Beginnings
Malayan Architect Co-Partnership (MAC) was formed in 1960. It was originally a collaboration of 3 young Malayan architects. They were Chen Voon Fee, Lim Chong Keat and William Lim Siew Wai. Later, they were joined by Lim Chin See. All of them received their professional training in architecture abroad and decided to set up their practice together upon returning to Malaya in late 1950’s. They had met before in London when they attended a seminar in United Kingdom by British architects who worked in Nigeria and Ghana. The architects talked about the idea of tropical architecture in African countries. Chen VoonFee, Lim Chong Keat and William Lim was intrigued by these ideas and felt that they need to come back to Malaya to create their own tropical architecture. They were among a few local architects at the time to start independent practices. Other local architects who practiced on their own were T.S. Leong, Y.T. Lee and Fong Yin Leong.

“With barely enough working experience, and hardly any commission to ensure minimum economic survival, we decided collectively to practice architecture with great dedication and seriousness. This was an exciting period of drastic social and political changes in Singapore. Nationalism was in the air everywhere and the need to evolve a national architecture was a frequent topic of discussion among the younger local architects” (William Lim, 1990)

Chen Voon Fee, Lim Chong Keat and William Lim opted to use a group name for their practice, instead of using partner’s name as commonly practiced at the time. It was indeed an unprecedented act and was seen as an attempt by them to form an “egalitarian organization” (Yeang, p.248). They had actually been influenced by similar practice in United States and United Kingdom, which they were exposed while studying there. In the United States, Walter Gropius went into a partnership with several architects to form The Architect Collaborative (TAC) in 1945. Gropius, an outstanding modern architect and teacher of the 20th century, emphasized his great belief in the value of teamwork, which was a requirement in modern building.

“For him, all building should be “the product of a teamwork in which each member of the team appreciated fully how his contribution related to the whole design” (Lampugnani, 2000). The teamwork is a “symbol of community living and the intelligent integration of society” (Lampugnani, 2000). It is not surprisingly that this idea was followed by them as Lim Chong Keat himself had the opportunity to be in direct contact with Walter Gropius while he was in United States. Even William Lim had his first-hand exposure to the group working philosophy of Walter Gropius when he was doing his post graduate study at the Harvard University. Furthermore, in 1939, eight former students of the Architectural Association in London founded Architect’s Co-Partnership, which was later reformed in 1945 by C.K. Capon, P.L. Cocke, M.H. Cooke-Yarborough, L.M. de Syllas, J.M. Grice and M.A.R. Powers. The Architect’s Co-partnership announced their pragmatic, modernist-intoned approach to design reflecting their preference for an anonymous team approach to architecture, which were the main characteristics of the European continental Modern Movement.

“We were probably the first firm to use a group name and also a logo, and we prefer the team image rather than personal names although we are fully aware that personalities within a firm will emerge and express themselves, but maintaining harmony with the others” (Lim Chong Keat, 1978).

“I believe in and practice genuine team-work” (William Lim, 1990)

The Malayan Architect Co-Partnership practiced during the period of post-independence in Malaya. The period saw a drastic progress in building and infrastructure development. Similar situation can be seen in Singapore, as it was a period of swift social and political changes. Public buildings, hounges, institutions and roads were rapidly built to meet the demand of a new country. Due to large scale urban migration, demand for commodities and public housing increased. At the same time, globalization of architectural ideas has been accepted in Malaya. It was further evident in many new buildings built by either expatriate architects or local architects who were educated in the Western world.

Inevitably, MAC employed modern architectural ideas as brought by the International Style that was prevalent around the world at that time. However, MAC adapted the ideas to local climate and building materials.
'Many architecturally interesting houses were built by the young local architects during the early sixties. Some were even experimental – applying, adapting and testing what was learnt from abroad" (William Lim, 1990)

MAC also created an important precedent with its establishment. It demonstrated that local architects were able to compete with expatriate firms in Malaya. Many foreign architect firms were brought to Malaya and Singapore after the Second World War. They participated in the reconstruction and development of the region. Prominent among them were Palmer and Turner, Booty and Edwards, Iverseen and Van Sitteren, James Cubitt and Partners, Swan and MacLaren, Raglan Squire and Partners, C.G. Boucher, R. Geeraerts, Eric Taylors, and James Ferrie and Partners. There were also expatriate architects employed by the Public Work Department as architects and Deputy-Director. They were Eric G. Gardner, Ray Honey, Norman J. Lehey, W. Ivor Shipley and H.I. Ashley. Among significant buildings, which they built were the Parliament building (1963), the National Mosque (1965), the Federal House (1951), and the Bank Negara (1968). It was a very competitive period for all the architects. Nevertheless, MAC successfully won a number of major competitions and awarded many projects either by private clients or by the government. The effect was confounding as it “sent shiver of fear to all the British firms in Malaya” (Ken Yeang, 1998)

MAC had an office in Singapore and a branch in Kuala Lumpur. The partners were successful in delegating projects and works among themselves by assigning specific responsibilities to each of the partner. In working together, Chen Voon Fee remarked that “there were conflicts all along but we were able to control them and we didn’t let them take over” (Chen Voon Fee, 1978). Chen Voon Fee and Lim Chin See were in charge of the Kuala Lumpur office and projects in the vicinity. While, William Lim and Lim Chong Keat were based in Singapore. At the beginning, it was quite difficult for them to get any jobs. They even had to design furniture. Undeterred, they worked hard. They submitted entries to competitions and won many of them. Among the competitions were for a Shopping Centre for Ipoh Municipality in 1960 that they won second prize, Singapore Conference Hall and Office for Trade Union Congress in 1962 for first prize, University Malaya Great Hall (Dewan Tunku Chancellor) and Administration building in 1962 for second prize and Negeri Sembilan State Mosque in 1963 for first prize. Throughout their practice, MAC designed numerous residential houses and public buildings in Malaya and Singapore.

“The country had just gained independence, and the mood was of optimism. We were on the threshold of a new life, and we felt that anything was possible” (Chen Von Fee, 1997)

### 3.2 The Partners

**a. Chen Voon Fee**

Chen Voon Fee was born in Ipoh, Perak. He completed his degree from the School of Architecture, University of Manchester, United Kingdom in 1952. He continued his studies at the Architectural Association School in London, and graduated in 1957. He worked at several British architectural firms to gain practical and industrial experiences. One of the firms was Howell, Killick, Partridge and Amies (HKPA). He came back to Malaya in 1959 for family matters and decided to set up MAC together with William Lim and Lim Chong Keat. He also set up one of the earliest private art galleries in Kuala Lumpur known as the Gallery 11 at Jalan Pinang in 1966.

**b. Lim Chong Keat**

Lim Chong Keat was born in Penang. He graduated with professional degree from the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. He received the Heywood Medal of the Royal Manchester Institution in 1955. He was the RIBA Rome Scholarship Finalist in 1956 and received the Commonwealth Fund (Harkness) Fellowship for his post graduate studies. He completed his Master degree in Architecture in 1957, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, United States. After returning to Singapore in 1958, he lectured at the School of Building and Architecture in Singapore Polytechnic until 1959. With Chen Voon Fee and William Lim, they started the MAC in 1960. He achieved greater success in 1966 when he was elected as the President of Singapore Institute of Architects from 1966 to 1969. He was also a member of the Singapore Housing and Development Board from 1960 to 1969 and on the Board of Governors for Singapore Polytechnic from 1965 to 1967.

**c. William Lim Siew Wai.**

William is a Singaporean, was born in Hong Kong. He graduated from the Architectural Association School in London in 1955 and worked for a year for the London County Council. Then he continued for his graduate study at the Department of City and Regional Planning in the Harvard University, United States. He was a Fulbright Fellow. He returned from the United States in 1957. Prior to setting up the MAC, he did his apprenticeship with James Ferrie in Singapore.

**d. Lim Chin See**

Lim Chin See was born in Kuantan, Pahang. He graduated from the University of Manchester in United Kingdom.
2.3 Projects, Design Ideas and Influences

MAC was involved with many projects in Malaya and Singapore. The projects range from institution and public buildings to houings. MAC also entered many design competitions which mostly it managed to gain top three finalists. Among projects that MAC did was:

4. Great Hall (Dewan Tunku Chancellor) and Administration building, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1962 (2nd prize).
11. Dr AFH Aeria’s Courtyard house, Penang, 1966 (PAM House Award winner).
12. Department of Geology Building, University Malaya, 1968.

Some of the partner’s comments and quotes present much of their clear views and directions:

“We were full of energy and entered several competitions in Singapore and Malaya. Our greatest success was the winning of the NTUC-Conference Hall competition in 1962. The design concept was a mixture of Rudolph’s service towers and Corbusier’s Chandigarh umbrella roof modified for local conditions” (William Lim, 1990)

The modern architecture movement influenced the architecture of MAC. The movement was developed in the late 18th century in Europe and United States. It emphasized the idea of progress in design. The movement had started due to reaction towards the loss of confidence in the Renaissance tradition, the industrial revolution and changes in the economic, social and political structures at that time. In 1920’s, Henry- Russell Hitchcock in his book titled “Modern Architecture, Romanticism and Reintegration (1929), introduced a phrase ‘International Style’ to denote modern architecture. In 1932, at an exhibition of modern architecture in Museum of Modern Art in New York, modern architecture was referred as International style following the creation of the Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart in 1927. Consequently, the phrase ‘International Style’ became generally accepted and applied to a broad range of contemporary buildings in later decade. Among the pioneers of the modern architecture movement were Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Phillip Johnson, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe.
Modern architecture movement went through many evolutions of its definition. Originally, in 1929 Henry-Russell Hitchcock proposed the definition of International style as a movement that deleted all reference to past architecture and emphasized volume and plane rather than mass. The style had needed to avoid any ornament and employ the machine as an art tool. After the Second World War, it was associated with buildings that were composed of “right angle and parallel lines in machine-like, unornamented precision, using technical materials and glass walls and favouring open interiors” (Lampugnani, p.163). Phillip Johnson in 1947 exhibition to Mies van der Rohe at the Museum of Modern Art modified the definition to structural honesty, repetitive modular rhythms, clear glass opening, flat roof, pure geometrical form and no ornament architectural design. However, previously in 1930’s, a broad range of issues which emerged within the American architectural profession added to the complexion of modern design. Many architects started to look at vernacular architecture and the use of materials as well as the sensitive adaptation of climate and site. They believed climatic differences had a significant impact on design. This led to many explorations and experiments of ideas, which opened up the possibilities for new forms in modern architecture. The free curve, the diagonal, the hexagon, sculptural roofline and free wall arrangement were among the new vocabularies added to the list. “Issues of city and neighbourhood planning grew in importance, and the question of monumentality was raised, the ability to achieve an architecture that would symbolize social ideals and aspirations” (Lampugnani, p.163).

The partners of MAC had a firm knowledge of the modern architecture movement. They were products of modern architecture education and training in Europe and United States.

“My professional training at AA in the early fifties provided me with a sound understanding of the best in the Modern Movement. Critics and tutors at the time included the Smithsons, Stirling, Howell and Killick. This training was further reinforced by my post-graduate experience at Harvard University under Gropius, Sert and Trywhitt” (William Lim, 1990)

“The Post War period saw a significant number of young Singaporean architects returning after their education in Britain, Australia and the United States…Their heroes and influences included Le Corbusier, Gropius, Neutra, Mies Van der Rohe, Oscar Niemeyer, Louis Kahn, Maekawa, Kurukawa and others such as Ray Grounds in Australia and Peter and Allisan Smithson in UK” (Robert Powell, 2004)

However, MAC decided to define the style to incorporate the adjustment to climate, context, technology and culture factors in Malaya. William Lim stressed further that he attempted to develop a national and regional architecture “within the context and ideological envelope of modernism” (William Lim, 1990).

Application of modern architecture ideas are evidenced in MAC works. The A & W Drive-in building in Petaling Jaya is a good example of an attempt to interpret vernacular timber architecture in a modern language. The building was built in 1963, using bold reinforced concrete frame A-structures to allow for a clear span for kitchen area. Its structural clarity was recognized for its honest expression and was “in line with its modernist approach” (Lillian Tay, 2000).
Another example is the National Bank building in Penang which was built in 1969. The building comprised of two main blocks of rectangle mass which were connected with an internal circulation corridor. The MAC utilized staggered floor plans to give the building a distinctive form. It was also to break the scale of the building mass in complying to the surrounding buildings. The façade was accentuated by vertical concrete shading fins which responded to the site climatic condition.

“I was very pleased with the Penang Branch. In fact it was our first branch building built before this headquarters (Kuala Lumpur) building itself... I think it is very well designed and certainly meets our functional needs and I think it does blend with the surrounding area...Bank Negara buildings should not only look solid and strong but also should lend dignity to the surrounding area” (Tan Sri Ismail Ali, 1979)

Perhaps the best example of MAC architecture can be seen in the State Mosque for Seremban in Negeri Sembilan. The Mosque, which was built in 1963 and completed in 1967, won the first prize in the FMSA design competition. It was a uniquely designed mosque. It was designed with an umbrella shaped polygonal roof of nine curved section reflecting the nine districts in Negeri Sembilan.

“A structural expressionist building which is conscious of nuances associated with international style architecture. A fresh and unique design for a mosque which avoided the symbolic clichés normally expected of mosque design in this country” (Lillian Tay, 2000).

3.4 The Demise of MAC

The firm struggled to stay together as long as they can. Chen Voon Fee remarked that 1960’s was the golden decade for Malaysia and there were plenty of opportunities for them to practice. However due to personal problems among them as well as political and social development of the period, MAC was dissolved in 1967. They recognized that they were unable to hold the group together due to “divergences in design approach and quality control as well as incompatibility of personalities” (William Lim, 1990).
The trouble was we grew much too fast and didn’t really have time to sort out the structure, the organization and responsibilities but basically the personalities were incompatible” (Chen Voon Fee, 1978)

After the dissolution of MAC in 1967, the partners decided to continue with their own practices. Chen Voon Fee continued practice under Arkitek Berakan with an English man, Peter Reed and Wong Chee Chong. William Lim started his own practice, Design Partnership (DP Architects Pte Ltd) in Singapore together with two other architects. They were Tay Kheng Soon and Koh Seow Chuan. While Lim Chong Keat set up Architects Team Three (Jurubena Bertiga) in Singapore with Lim Chin See and Baharuddin Abu Kassim.

During the short period of its establishment, MAC had achieved great success. They were able to maintain a “design emphasis and experimental approach” (Ken Yeang, 1992) in their endeavors. It was indeed a rare effort by Malayan pioneering architect at that time.

4. CONCLUSION

MAC has shown a tenacious and unadulterated effort to search for the idea of a Malaysian architecture. In a kinder political climate that did not see much interference from the political hands, they were more or less free to experiment with their concerns. The clear ‘rejection’ of the revivalist or metaphorical attempts at referring to the traditional Malay house form was a clear expression of a political stand that did not want to see any ethnic centered ideas of the new Malaysia. One might be bold to relate the ideas of Masjid Negara or the National Mosque as an almost similar enterprise that saw the original architects subscribing to a more universalist and progressive ideal that was the trade mark of the newly formed political entity. It is important at this juneture to contemplate seriously what MAC has achieved then and pose some equally serious questions to local architects at the present time who seem far less visionaries and more ‘service minded’ than their ‘gurus’ of the past.

REFERENCE

MASSA Interview with Mr. Lim Chin See, 7th February 2005.