

# SUNDAY VIBES

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## The maverick architect

Hajeedar — Journey in Architecture is an impressive tome, befitting one of the country's most formidable architects, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**



*Hajeedar, the architect of many talents.*

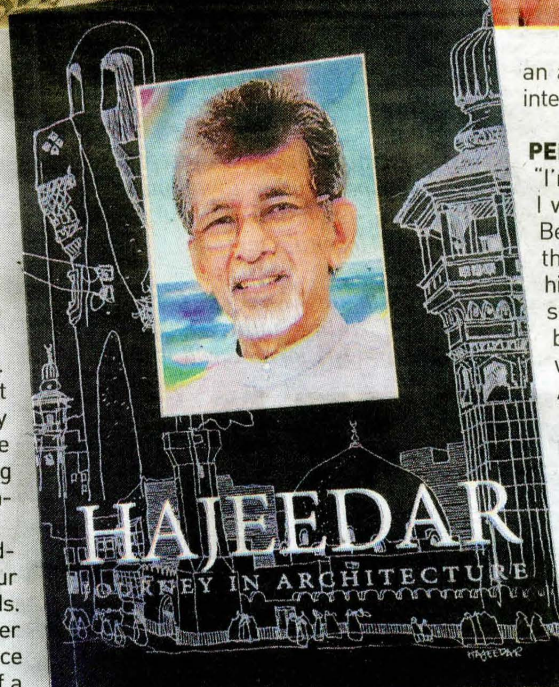
**D**ARKNESS has descended and the only thing visible from my bedroom window is a pale crescent moon shining like a silvery claw in the night sky. Somewhere in the distance, thin slivers of conversation waft in, an animated exchange between the guards as they make their rounds.

I resume my lonely typing. Tick, tick. The sound of the keyboard being hit begins to morph with the ticking of my bedside clock. Otherwise, there's silence except for the soothing voice emanating from my headphone as I continue to transcribe my interview.

My heart sinks as I note the word-count at the bottom of the screen. Four hours later and it stands at 9,000 words. "I can write a book at this rate," I mutter incredulously into the darkness. Suffice it to say, this is going to be one hell of a monumental exercise to write this story.

But then again, how can it be any other way? This is Datuk Ar Haji Hajeedar Haji Abdul Majid, one of the country's most formidable architects, whose firm, Hajeedar and Associates Sdn Bhd (HAS), recently celebrated its 42nd anniversary in practice with more than 100 buildings completed around Malaysia and abroad under its belt, including mosques, commercial towers and public buildings, some of which are award-winning landmarks today.

His latest milestone is the release of *Hajeedar — Journey in Architecture*, an autobiography detailing his colourful journey in both life and career. This impressive tome,



*The impressive tome detailing Hajeedar's journey.*

divided into three parts, covers his story, the story of his practice and a collection of papers and speeches on numerous subjects he'd delivered over the years.

Accolades aside, Hajeedar, as I duly discover whilst furiously ploughing through my notes and desperately attempting to bring some semblance of order to the chronology, is a consummate storyteller.

Proceeding to finally call it a night, I couldn't help but recall to mind the day I crossed paths with the man described as "an extremely principled person with

an acute sense of justice, honesty and integrity".

### PENNED FOR POSTERITY

"I'm going now. Please help yourself. I won't pour the tea yet, it'll get cold. Because he REALLY can talk," exclaims the elegant, bespectacled lady who'd hitherto been sitting across from me ever since my arrival in this beautiful house belonging to Datuk Hajeedar and his wife, Datin Sabi Datul Majni Toh Muda Abdullah or Manja, for short.

Her chuckle is soft as she rises from her seat and her gaze meets that of her bemused husband's. "Suka cakap. Allah dah bagi mulut (Love to talk. God has given me a mouth)!" he retorts gleefully to her departing back before turning to me and adding: "I'm a storyteller! Sometimes I refer to myself as a *tukang karut*; you know, like the guy in *wayang kulit* who rambles on because he knows the subject!"

I couldn't agree more, I nod to the famed architect, who strangely reminds me a lot of my own father who's also quite the storyteller. At 75 and lanky in build, Hajeedar, the seventh recipient of the prestigious Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) Gold Medal Award in 2012, in recognition of his contributions to both architectural design and practice, has so much to "story"!

"Datuk, let's return to why you decided to do this book, can?" I tease, attempting to steer our interview back on course for the umpteenth time. His eyes under his glasses, dance mischievously as he acknowledges that yes, once again, he has successfully

strayed from my original question!

"Anyway, when I got to 60, I thought I should retire and do something else. One of the things I wanted to do was to compile my experience and all the papers I'd done," resumes the father of three, who also received the Board of Architects President's Medal in 2017 for his contributions to the development of laws and guidelines in practice.

After all, as he proudly adds, he'd been preparing and presenting papers at various forums and seminars from the 1970s. "A lot of people asked me what I'd done with the papers I'd given a lecture on in the past. These people are practising architects now but they were once my students. They encouraged me to compile everything so that present students can have a better understanding about the history of the profession etc."

In addition to his illustrious "work" journey, his own personal stories are also so colourful. Chuckling, Hajeedar says: "Every time I meet people, they say, 'Jeedar, write your stories because people don't know what life was like back then. And while you're at it, share all those academic papers too.' That's when I began to seriously consider."

The process, from inception to the tome's full realisation, shares the grandfather of eight, took five months. He started to focus on his gargantuan undertaking during the lull of the Movement Control Order, sometime in April 2020. "Fortunately, materials had already been compiled with the help of Hanafi, a graduate architect, who's been working in my office," reveals Hajeedar.



He'd initially contemplated writing an autobiography that would focus on telling his personal story — something like a story book. "But then friends said, 'Jeedar, what about your practice? People want to know how you started, what jobs you did etc, so other architects can emulate and maybe do better.' Again I pondered and well, I have to admit some of the jobs I've done have been quite significant. You know, for a man to have done 14 mosques."

Was it challenging to go down memory lane and recall things, I ask. Shaking his head, he replies: "I always say our brain is akin to a CPU. This is one brand of CPU created by Allah SWT that you don't have to upgrade. It has a fantastic capacity to absorb, store and retrieve information — if you look after it well. That's how I explain how I'm able to remember things from the past."

#### LOVE OF KL

Hajeedar's journey to where he is today is the stuff that movie scripts are made of, with plenty of twists and turns and intriguing plotlines, some of which are probably best left censored! In fact, I don't even have enough space here to detail everything that I've learnt on this beautiful balmy Bangsar evening.

Perhaps, a brief insight into his concern for heritage might be a good place to continue. "I was born in KL at a government quarters in Old Pudu Road, later known as Bukit Mahkamah, where the current Maybank headquarters stands. The buildings on the hill were then the police head office before being occupied as the High Courts," shares Hajeedar, the third of nine siblings (he has seven sisters and

one brother).

Later in 1947, his police officer father was posted to Bukit Aman and subsequently allotted quarters with three other families at the Venning Road Police Officers Mess. Three years later, in 1950, Hajeedar's father became the OCPD for a part of KL and had an office at Campbell Road Police Station. It was during this time that the family resided in a rented house in Kampung Baru.

"I practically know every corner of KL," he states, adding: "Masjid Jamek was 'my' masjid. I started going there when I studied at Victoria Institution. On Fridays, the school would allow the Malay boys to leave earlier so they could walk or cycle to the mosque for Friday prayers."

Fast forward to 1973 and a 28-year-old Hajeedar returned from England. He'd been away for seven years pursuing his architectural education, beginning in 1966 at the Plymouth College of Art and Design (where he got his RIBA — Royal Institute of British Architects — Part I exemption), before moving on to the Department of Architecture at Portsmouth Polytechnic for his Diploma in Architecture and his RIBA Part II three years later. After a practical stint in Brighton during his second year, Hajeedar gained his RIBA Part III and professional registration in the UK.

However, he was contractually obliged to return to Malaysia and serve a government bond of service, reporting to a statutory body, UDA. "In 1973, I arrived home and was dismayed to see MY Kuala Lumpur changing," recalls Hajeedar.

Passionately, Hajeedar, who was involved in heritage conservation work whilst in the UK, continues: "We were losing our heritage buildings and areas



The architect and his beloved wife, fondly known as Manja.

were changing drastically. I was concerned that we'd lose our identity if nothing was done. My time in England showed me just how much the British value their heritage. People come and go but the heritage and identity remain."

So what did he do? "I started writing papers," replies Hajeedar. He wrote the article, A Case for Conservation, KL — a two-part paper, arguing why we needed to conserve our heritage. "Because we want to know the journey of how far we've gone. We didn't just get independence. Independence from whom and for what?"

Grimly, he continues: "And what about these buildings? These are what we inherited as our culture. They shall be a reminder of what we've achieved. Our history of architecture may be relatively young but whatever we inherit shall then become our heritage and due responsibility."

#### NEW AWARENESS

He points to an Antiquities Act back then but it didn't cover buildings. Elaborates Hajeedar: "People worked around the law to say, ok, it's historic, but it's MY building. Then they go and monetise it. We were fighting a losing battle."

And because of that awareness and concern, the then-young architect thought that by writing, he'd be contributing to the greater cause. The local

papers reproduced the articles he wrote in *Majalah Arkitek*.

But for three years, remembers Hajeedar, nothing happened, except for the occasional messages of support. Then he received a phone call from an assistant of the president of the Industrial Court.

"It was Tan Sri Harun Hashim, the then-president of the Industrial Court," shares Hajeedar, before elaborating: "He had a bad set of courts within some timber buildings in Jalan Duta. He wanted the new courts and had identified an old building behind the General Post Office (GPO). He asked whether I'd want to put my money where my mouth is. I said, ok, what do you want me to do? He challenged me to convert it."

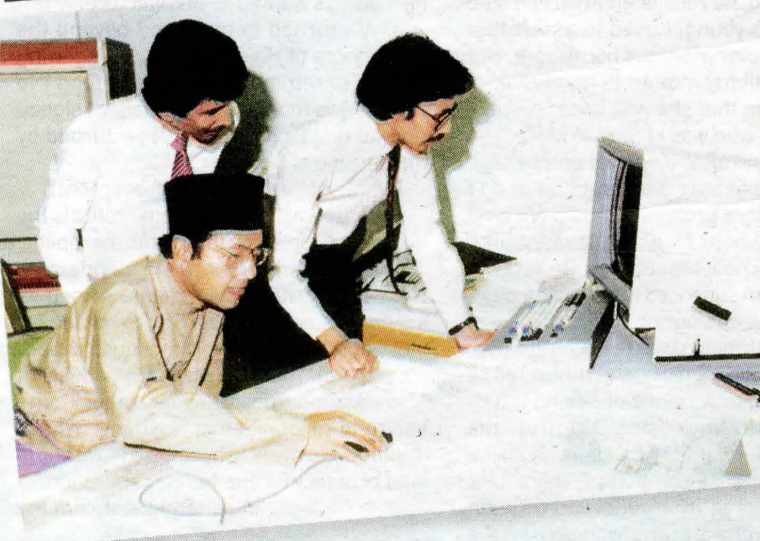
And that Hajeedar did. It took him 10 months to successfully restore and readapt the building (Chow Kit Department Store) into the Industrial Court for Harun. "That was around 1983. He ended up with six courts and was very happy."

Pictures of his before-and-after-work were spotted by the then-Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, during the latter's visit to Hajeedar's office. He couldn't believe that it was in KL. Wryly, Hajeedar shares: "You see, he'd been informed that it'd be too expensive to conserve old buildings. I told him it wasn't. And after that, other buildings slated for demolition had the opportunity to be sustained."

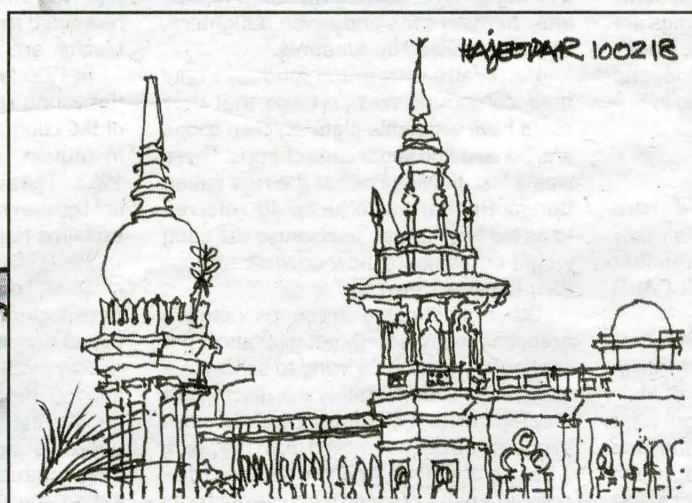
Soon after, Mahathir instructed UDA to restore JKR 92, a century-old building used as the KTM headquarters, Selangor JKR and the initial Bank Negara to be the centre for Infokraf.

This "new awareness", wrote Hajeedar in his book, attracted much attention because now past dilapidated buildings had a better chance for renewal and sustainability with new uses. Subsequently, more restoration works were done within the historic core of KL such as the KL Memorial Library in the former Government Printing Press Building and the Islamic Affairs Department in what was previously the Chartered Bank Building.

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Then prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad familiarising himself with CADD. RIGHT: Sketch of KL 2018.

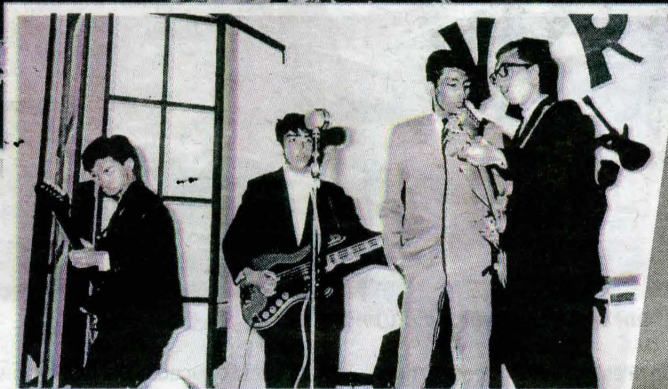




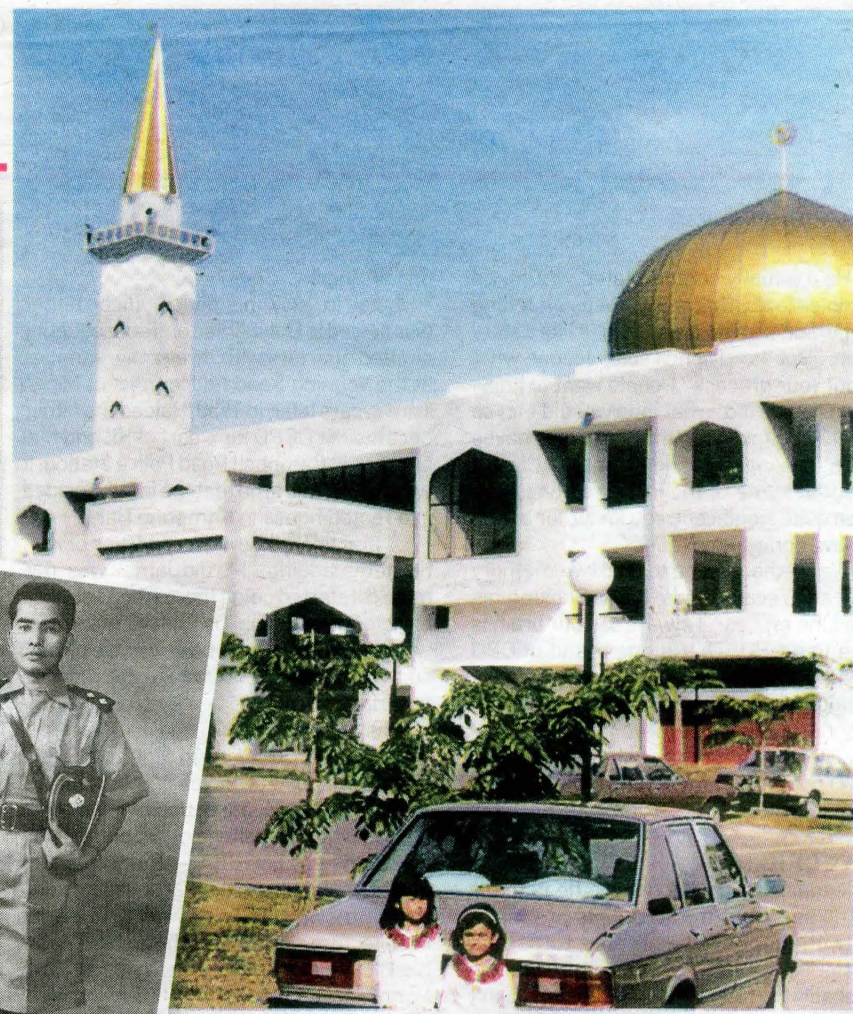
Hajeedar's mother, Siti Har with her large brood.



Man of many talents. Here, Hajeedar sings for the Sultan Abu Bakar school band. (1964).



Hajeedar's first concrete mosque, Masjid Bangsar. LEFT: Hajeedar's father, Abdul Majid.



## Of heritage and responsibility

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These initial conservation efforts peaked when the historic colonial Carcosa and King's House were readapted as a boutique hotel called Carcosa Seri Negara in 1989 to coincide with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which saw England's Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip gracing the event.

"It took a while before the National Heritage Act came into being in 2005," continues Hajeedar, adding that the Act incorporated all aspects — not only archaeological, above ground and below ground, in the seas, but also buildings of historic architectural significance. "Then with that law, buildings were identified as our national heritage."

A long sigh ensues as the 75-year-old looks intently at me. "But I'm still fighting the system," he confides, adding: "Despite the Act's existence, these gazetted buildings have been left to dilapidate again. Have you seen the KL Railway Station and the hotel there lately? There's a national heritage plaque there and yet the buildings are overgrown with fungus and parasitic plants. I'm saddened. There's no consistency and this is why I find it very challenging in our country."

### MEMORIES AND MILESTONES

Trawl through his tome as I did, and it's hard not to be impressed by Hajeedar's many achievements. His practice was the first local architectural office with full CADD capabilities in Malaysia.

In addition, he also designed and completed a total of 14 mosques and *surau* in Malaysia and one in the Republic of Maldives. Residents of Bangsar, KL might want to know that this is the man responsible for their impressive mosque, Masjid Saidina Abu Bakar As-Siddiq, the architect's first

concrete mosque initiated in 1979.

Hajeedar was also the youngest artist to have his art works displayed and bought by the National Art Gallery (NAG). He was only 15. "My work was in their permanent collection and in the company of renowned artists like Syed Ahmad Jamal, Cheong Lai Tong and Hossein Enas," shares Hajeedar before confiding that he was also presented to Tunku Abdul Rahman when NAG was officiated.

Tell me more about your childhood, I probe, finally taking a sip of the now-luke-warm tea that his wife had kindly poured earlier. His grin is wide as he allows slivers of memory to rise.

"Twelve of my formative years were spent at 155 Circular Road (Jalan Tun Razak), in a cluster of three identical government quarters set within two acres of land," remembers Hajeedar, continuing: "The Director of Post and the Director of Malayan Film Unit were our 'neighbours'. My father was sent to the UK for police training in 1952, leaving my mum to look after her two sons and seven daughters. She was assisted by our aunts."

He recalls with much fondness how their compound was so large that they could have vegetable plots, chicken coops and banana and sugar cane clumps. There was a fast-flowing river at the rear called Sungai Bunus, which he fondly referred to as his Mississippi "... because the gang would occasionally flow downstream on their banana-stem raft."

Other childhood distractions included grappling with a smelly pet goat and a pet centipede, which he'd bring to school in a matchbox. Unfortunately, he discovered only too late that although the centipede's stingers had been removed from the head, it hadn't, at the tail. And this he would discover in a painful lesson when he got badly

stung and ended up with a swollen face.

His other interests, reveals Hajeedar with a youthful grin, was collecting the multi-coloured fighting fish, which he'd bring to school to fight with a friend's collection. The winner would go home with a fish of his choice from the loser's stash.

His introduction to art meanwhile, is also quite interesting. According to the affable architect, the government quarters where they resided was constructed of timber on elevated brick stoops, initially with thatched roof before being replaced by clay tiles.

"I'd draw on the regular timber panels of the building," he remembers, adding that after being told off by his mother, he started experimenting with other media such as powder and oil paints.

As a kid, Hajeedar happily shares that he was both mischievous and curious. "I needed to know everything and the word 'why' was most prominent in my vocab," he admits, adding: "I'd ask dad questions all the time and he'd just retort I didn't need to know. Only much later I discovered that in police training, you don't have absolute trust even of your own colleagues."

Chuckling, he recalls another episode: "When I was young, I used to assert that my school never assigned homework. But that was until my mother (a homemaker) reminded me that she was once a school teacher and who was I trying to kid!"

In 1959 and after a special entry exam, the young Hajeedar was enrolled in one of the country's premier schools, Victoria Institution, where he was a student until 1963. "The school's motto was 'Be Yet Wiser'. I guess I'm supposed to be wiser today!" exclaims Hajeedar, grinning broadly.

His first ambition was to become a psychiatrist, I duly learn. He was motivated by the shocking experience of seeing a fully naked woman who'd "escaped" from the nearby mental ward of KL General Hospital and into his house compound. Thankfully, he was deterred from following through upon discovering that psychiatry was a post-graduate medical studies specialisation, and therefore, would take far too

long to qualify!

Second on his list was accountancy because of his proficiency in Maths. But that option was binned after a "brief sting" as an article clerk trainee at Hanafiah Raslan Ong in Bangkok Bank Building, KL in 1966.

Hajeedar also had two scholarship offers to study at Universiti Malaya (UM) for Foreign Affairs and Civil Service. He rejected both! He wanted to pursue architecture, which unfortunately was not available there. Furious by his decision, his parents ordered him to "fend for himself". So he did, finding employment as an Assistant Traffic Officer (ATO) at Jabatan Telekom.

As fate would have it, MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat) advertised for a scholarship offer in Naval Architecture. And Hajeedar applied. "But I cancelled the word 'naval' and submitted my application form," he recalls, chuckling mischievously.

He was soon invited for an interview but found himself chastised by the panel of interviewers, which included Datuk Mansor Othman, Arshad Ayub and Amnah, for being disrespectful of the offer. However, against all odds, the young maverick found himself with a scholarship to pursue what he'd always wanted — architecture.

Day's turned to night and beyond the glass doors of Hajeedar's charming living room, I'm reminded of just how long I've stayed. One more question, *Datuk*, I signal. And he nods, completely unperturbed by the passing of time.

What's your proudest achievement?

A pause ensues as Hajeedar reflects the question. Expression thoughtful, he replies: "To have served my community. For example, with my mosques. I regard myself as a sinner — *banyak dosa*! So I'm hoping for blessings. You know, build mosques so people can pray. That would be my proudest but also equally humbling achievement. I don't aspire to recognition or anything. What's important to me is to be able to leave some kind of legacy for the future generation."

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To order Hajeedar — *Journey in Architecture*, contact 03-2283 3288 (Siti) or 016-203 3143 (Hanaffi) for details.