

## ENDURING LANDMARKS

# THE RISE OF KL'S GUARDIAN SENTINELS

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With Kuala Lumpur celebrating its 50th city status anniversary this year, **ALAN TEH LEAM SENG** turns back the clock to the time when our nation's capital was just on the cusp of greatness

**M**Y friend breaks into a wide grin and waves from his table in the distance after realising my presence at the revolving restaurant's entrance.

While negotiating the meandering self-determined route fraught with ravenous diners making a beeline for the buffet spread, I recall his rather cryptic WhatsApp message sent the night before, requesting a lunch meet-up at Menara Kuala Lumpur's Atmosphere 360.

Although subsequent appeals for additional information went unanswered, my curiosity was sufficiently roused to make the date with the fellow history buff.

Everything quickly falls into place after he hands over an envelope filled with early photographs featuring key Kuala Lumpur buildings and starts pointing out their respective locations on the landscape down below. At that moment, the wisdom of choosing this meet-up venue becomes apparent.

Apart from the golden opportunity to enjoy a sumptuous lunch, the vantage point from Southeast Asia's tallest tower gives us a synoptic view of grandiose century-old landmarks that make up the soul of

Malaysia's bustling capital.

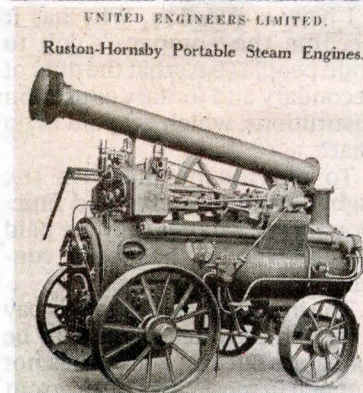
## CONSTRUCTION BOOM

While tucking into the first of many choice culinary servings, we take full advantage of the 282m elevation to peel back the years and travel back in time to the 19th century, when Kuala Lumpur was just at the cusp of greatness.

Ironically, it took a debilitating five-year slump in tin demand beginning from 1875 to spark off a phenomenal three decade-long boom in construction activities which gradually replaced the fledgling settlement's collection of rudimentary thatched roof buildings with majestic structures that still make their presence felt today.

Affected by weak tin prices, Yap Ah Loy began diverting labour from his mines to newly opened brick kilns at an area known today as Brickfields. Confident of producing superior quality bricks and tiles, the influential third Kuala Lumpur Kapitan Cina planned to export the products to Singapore to compete with similar Hong Kong-made materials.

Although the plan did not come to fruition due to high transportation costs, the kiln products became a precious commodity



The Sultan Abdul Samad Building was the first major structure to appear on the growing Kuala Lumpur landscape. (Inset) The 1923 United Engineers catalogue was filled with engines and equipment that fuelled the city's construction boom. PIX FROM ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

when Kuala Lumpur rode the wave of improving tin prices in late 1879.

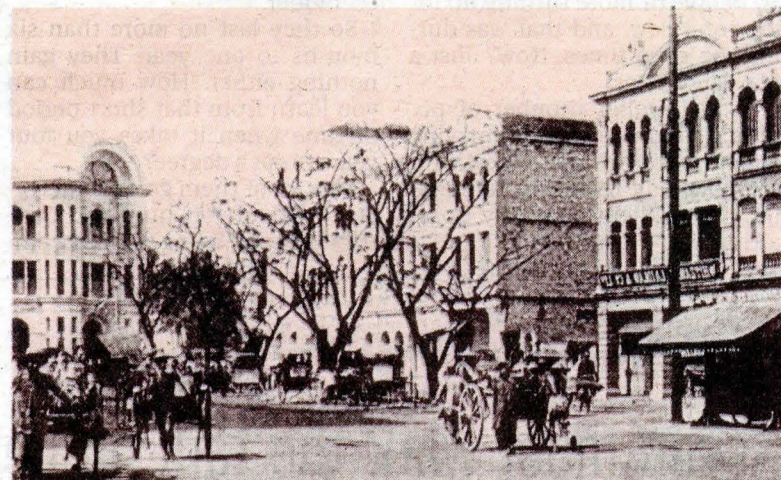
As the annual population size increased by more than a third in tandem with the escalation in tin price, the decision was made in June 1880 to move the state capital of Selangor upriver from Klang. Instead of heralding a new and more promising era, the honour bestowed upon Kuala Lumpur was, during those early days, met with inadequate hygiene which made its rubbish-strewn streets a ticking time bomb for disease outbreaks.

Together with haphazardly planned buildings and narrow lanes, the situation was made worse by severe overcrowding.

These conditions led to frequent blazes which occurred with devastating effect.

A particular incident on Jan 4, 1881 rendered 500 people homeless and caused damages amounting to US\$100,000.

Although a volunteer fire brigade was formed soon after, it was the 1884 policy of replacing all wooden huts with brick houses and tiled roofs that provided a



The Old Market Square gained much from the early 20th century rubber boom.

more fundamental solution.

Reflecting the overwhelming support from most sectors, shop owners tore down their single-storey shacks and made better use of the land by utilising more robust materials to build double-storey shophouses which were already common in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka and Singapore then.

At the same time, three of Kuala Lumpur's largest Chinese groups — Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese — brought in skilled builders to remodel and improve their ancestral houses and tem-

ples. This rapid growth in construction saw a corresponding expansion in building material supply. The number of brick kilns more than doubled to 33, while lime producers hit a cumulative record volume by 1888.

## ADVERTISING SUCCESS

At the same time, the government's substantial public works programme also played a key role in sustaining growth.

Main offices were rebuilt and plans were afoot for a new market and, more importantly, much-needed additions to existing hospitals to counter the growing problem of malaria and beri-beri.

These diseases were so prevalent among labourers in heavily populated tin mines that the Pauper Hospital was built on a new site at the north end of Kuala Lumpur. It involved the construction of 10 wards, each consisting of a large and airy single-storey shed with a plank floor overlaying a cement base.

As construction in Kuala Lumpur chugged along smoothly like a well-oiled machine in the early 1890s, colonial officers, especially Selangor resident



St. Mary's Church is the first brick church built in the Malay states.



The Pauper Hospital treated sick labourers from heavily populated tin mines around Kuala Lumpur.

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The former Chartered Bank building is located along Jalan Raja, next to Dataran Merdeka.



The Railway Administration Building remains one of the most stunning landmarks in Kuala Lumpur.

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William Edward Maxwell, felt that time was right to advertise Kuala Lumpur's success through the construction of an impressive office building on a par or even better than the majestic structures in British India.

After finishing the last bit of lamb *kurma* on his plate, my friend gestures towards the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in the distance and remarks that it was the first major building to appear on the expanding Kuala Lumpur landscape as a result of that lofty ambition.

The building's original classical renaissance design by Arthur Charles Alfred Norman and Regent Alfred John Bidwell was rejected by state engineer Charles Edwin Spooner. With the assistance of senior draughtsman Arthur Benison Hubback, Bidwell and Spooner reworked the blueprint in the then novel Mahometan or neo-Saracenic style, complete with an imposing central clock tower that very much reflected London's Big Ben in Mughal design.

During the course of construction, which began in September 1894, Spooner was quick to conclude that Kuala Lumpur's existing resources could not cater to Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad's insatiable appetite for building material. In the midst of problems related to producing millions of bricks and an acute timber deficiency, the state engineer began relying heavily on newer

types of imported building materials like iron, steel and cement which were sturdier and more cost efficient in the long run.

At a cost of US\$152,000, Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad's completion three years later was celebrated with a grand dinner hosted by the Selangor Public Works Department (PWD).

On April 4, 1897 it was officially opened by Federated Malay States Resident-General Sir Frank Athelstane Swettenham.

That evening, a grand ball was held in the building and onlookers lining Jalan Raja watched in awe as its stunning facade was lit up by gas burners, the first time such illumination was used in Kuala Lumpur.

Two months later, the clock on the highest tower chimed for the first time to ring in Queen Victoria's Jubilee Parade, as well as herald Kuala Lumpur's ceremonial acknowledgement as one of the greatest capitals of the world.

#### PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVEMENT

While taking a breather before assaulting the irresistible dessert section, my friend proudly produces an extremely rare 1923 United Engineers construction requisite and general hardware catalogue which listed items and services available at their Singapore headquarters, as well as branches in major Malayan towns including Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melaka, Ipoh, Taiping and Seremban.

Excitedly pointing out interest-

ing pictures in the heavily illustrated 362-page hardcover tome, he declares that the company came into existence not long after metal replaced timber as the building material of choice upon the completion of Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad.

That key changeover gave architects the confidence to continue reaching for loftier goals.

Although the PWD factory in Kuala Lumpur could efficiently cater to most metal component requirements, designs of comparatively complex structures still had to be done by experts in London and the materials assembled in Singapore.

The two most experienced fabricators at that time were Riley Hargreaves and Howarth Erskine who eventually joined forces in 1912 to form United Engineers.

The London, Singapore and local expertise combination proved to be extremely efficient and helped realise many complex projects like the lattice-girder Connaught Bridge which conveyed the railway line safely cross river into Klang town in 1890 and the 1896 Ulu Klang waterworks that catered to the needs of a rapidly growing Kuala Lumpur.

Fully extended by work at Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, as well as other subsequent major building projects, the PWD began inviting private sector involvement by way of tender participation. Among the firms that were most successful in that form of collaboration was Nicholas & Walsh.

Operating out of their Jalan Raja office until the site was cleared to make way for Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, the company was most noted for its involvement in the first Victoria Institution building in High Street (now Jalan Tun H.S. Lee).

Holding the record as the oldest secondary in Kuala Lumpur, it was built with financial support from, among others, the Selangor sultan and prominent community leaders to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

Nicholas & Walsh also helped in the relocation of St Mary's Church from its original Bluff Road (Jalan Bukit Aman today)



Arthur Benison Hubback designed the stunning Kuala Lumpur Railway Station building.

location to the current site near the Royal Selangor Club in 1895.

The amount raised by the congregation for the first brick church in the Malay states was supplemented by a US\$5,000 gift from the Selangor government on suggestion of the Straits Settlements governor, Cecil Clementi Smith. Notable local contributors included people of other faiths like Yap Kwan Seng and K. Thamboosamy Pillay.

#### PREMIER BUSINESS HUB

The early 20th century rubber boom led to a marked demand for commercial buildings. Keen to gain from the rapid expansion, the Chartered Bank (now Standard Chartered) led the way for foreign agency houses and other financial institutions to set up offices in Kuala Lumpur. As a result, the Old Market Square quickly became a premier business hub for companies like the Mercantile Bank and the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank.

Even Zacharias & Co, the first motor car importers in Selangor, had its showroom in this bustling commercial area, known today as Medan Pasar. Realising that good reputation was a prerequisite for success, the enterprising proprietor brought a newly arrived car complete with a driver to Loke Yew's office, located between the General Post Office and Straits Trading Company building, and invited the celebrated business magnate for a ride.

Feeling sceptical, Loke Yew asked Choo Kia Peng, his assistant who later became a federal councillor, to go in his stead.

Although the trip did not com-

pletely go as planned, it was enough to convince the wealthy far-sighted entrepreneur that the future was in motor vehicles and not horse-drawn carriages.

Loke Yew's stamp of approval was reason enough for the upper echelon of Kuala Lumpur to start clamouring for one of their own to travel in style.

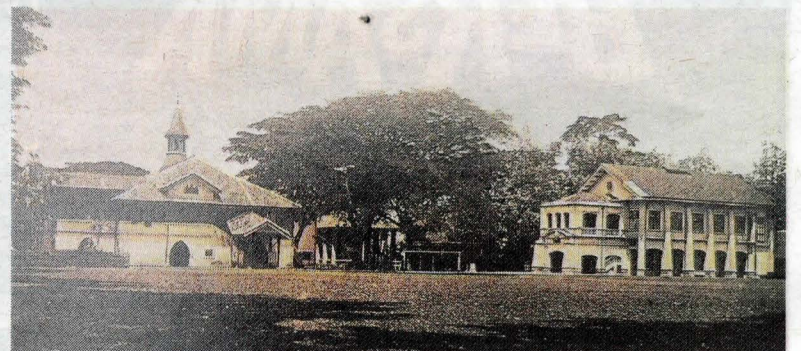
As our amazing lunch comes to a close, my friend aptly notes that all good things must eventually come to an end. More than a century earlier, the wisdom of this saying came to pass when Kuala Lumpur's phenomenal expansion came to an abrupt halt after World War I broke out in 1914. Apart from government finance disruption and building material scarcity, growth was hampered when prominent figures like Hubback had to head off to fulfil national service in Europe.

Even when peace returned in 1918, it did not bring back the much-anticipated resumption of rampant economic growth, as priorities had changed.

At a time of fluctuating and uncertain public revenues, the desire to build huge government offices had all but evaporated.

Post-World War I Kuala Lumpur began emphasising increasing healthcare facilities and improving water supply for the betterment of the public.

Although the golden age of constructing impressive buildings had ended, these sprawling wonders of architecture continue to watch over Malaysia's dynamic capital through the ages like guardian sentinels as the city marches towards an even more promising future.



Victoria Institution is the oldest secondary school in Kuala Lumpur.