

By SHIREEN ZAINUDIN

IN 1909 the *Malay Mail* described the sporting club on Jalan Raja overlooking Kuala Lumpur's Padang as a locale that "provided (for) ... healthy exercise... and well worthy of the conspicuous position it occupies in our town".

Construction was completed in January 1910 upon which the club was affectionately monickered "The Spotted Dog" after erstwhile president Harry Syers's pair of dalmatians, often tethered by the entrance as he was "quenching the thirst such exercise engendered".

This writer's favourite Selangor Club tale of bygone days is recounted by a friend with a Scottish grandmother (only white members in those days after all) who recalls a warning gong being struck when a tiger was spotted lurking by the Padang and members hastily retreating indoors.

The club (built in mock Tudor-style) was granted a royal charter by the Sultan of Selangor in 1884 and was thereafter known as the Royal Selangor Club. Even though Kuala Lumpur was granted city status in 1972 and seceded from Selangor to become a Federal Territory in 1974, the Royal Selangor Club still maintains its name.

It's been 66 years since that midnight lowering of the Union Jack on the Padang, the British officers' favoured cricket playing field.

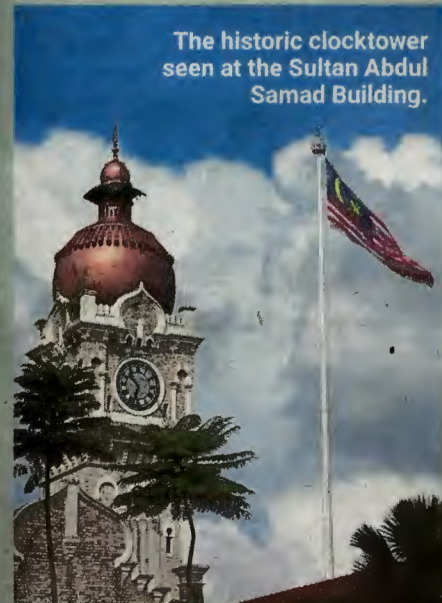
Dataran Merdeka today is dominated by the Jalur Gemilang, fluttering atop what was for a time the tallest free-standing flagpole in the world.

### The West Bank

Cricket is no longer played on the Dataran. Malaysian Tigers wear striped football jerseys and shout slogans. Transformation and evolution. The anatomy of KL reshapes itself around this verdant heartbeat.

Where once administrative officers walked over the Padang to lunch and drinks at the club, today (barring pandemics), celebrations mostly take place against the backdrop of the Sultan Abdul Samad building every Aug 31 in an annual showcase of Malaysian pomp and pride.

KL's first government office building opened in 1897 and was built in Moorish design.



The historic clocktower seen at the Sultan Abdul Samad Building.



Masjid Jamek, one of the oldest mosques in Kuala Lumpur. — Photos: SHIREEN ZAINUDIN

# Breathing life back into KL

### The history, transformation and evolution of Dataran Merdeka's heritage area.

Although the building is formally credited to A.C. Norman (only his name appears on the foundation stone as the architect) and his ground plan was kept, the actual design is to a large extent the work of R.A.J. Bidwell, with some contributions from A.B. Hubback who also designed the fixtures of the building.

It is part of the colonial cluster of achingly lovely buildings, to be found in varying states of disrepair, that encircle Dataran Merdeka.

With the administrative shift to Putrajaya and the rise of new imagination in the 1980s and 1990s, the colonial buildings around Dataran Merdeka appeared to lose their significance.

In its time the Sultan Abdul Samad building (renamed in 1974 after the reigning Sultan

of Selangor in 1897) was a state of the art showpiece made with bricks and lime from our soil, timber from our forests and tin dredged by the people. The 40m clock tower still keeps time and is a diminutive of London's Big Ben. The building is partly occupied today by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and is still the most photographed building in the country.

Skirt around the old Padang to find the former Federated Malay States Railway Central Office. The exterior walls are cheerfully fabricated with alternate bands of red brick and white plaster, topped by cupolas and chhatris.

In the swinging 1960s it served as the first headquarters of Bank Negara Malaysia.

Today you get to tour the astonishing breadth of Malaysian textiles in the dimmed spaces of the National Textile Museum located here.

Just beyond the National Textile Museum looms the Merdeka 118 tower. At a jaw-dropping 679m tall, it is the second tallest building in the world and truly does scrape the sky; a progressive reinterpretation of Tunku Abdul Rahman's

*The Straits Times* newspaper



A contemporary bamboo installation exhibited at the REKKL building's main arts space.



outstretched "Merdeka" salute built into the architecture.

The Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China was once housed in the most charming building south of the Dataran.

The site was said to be chosen for security considerations as it was close to the police headquarters on Bluff Road (now Bukit Aman).

*The Straits Times* newspaper

in 1909 reported that the completed premises of the Chartered Bank in KL were "in every way an ornament to the town".

Today the ornament lies unworn and unpolished.

Next door, the old British printing and press office buzzes anew as the KL City Gallery, an obligatory "I Heart KL" installation outside it ensuring a consistent upload to Instagram.

Tucked away across the busy road from The Royal Selangor Club lies Rumah Tangsi with its ornate yellow façade.

The former mansion of Loke Chow Kit, a tin magnate, KL municipal councillor and entrepreneurial giant in the early 20th century, the mansion was later repurposed as the Empire Hotel followed by the Peninsula hotel. Today her graceful aged spaces are still a sought-after event venue.

The chiming church bells from St Mary's add a nostalgically calming layer over the city's cacophonous soundtrack. The original wooden building was consecrated in 1887 on nearby Bukit Aman, but moved



Raising the red lantern in Chinatown.

Design-architecture outfit Studio Karya's *Right To The Padang - Planting Hopes 02* (2017) artwork, which reimagines the Padang area at Dataran Merdeka. — Studio Karya

courtyard and a double arcade of columns and arches.

The elegant towers were dining chambers with private tiffin rooms. Could there be a more fitting setting for a meal dressed in robes!

The *Malay Mail* in 1915 described the physical beauty and care bestowed in this creation as a worthy public edifice to our city.

A fitting structure for the noble business of administering public justice. Currently the space is vacant. An loudly echoing void. Though the Colonial Walk running alongside the River of Life boardwalk is a delightful spot for quiet contemplation and a teh tarik when not overrun by protracted influencer photo shoots.

### Kuala Lumpur

Unpoetically, our city is named after the confluence of the Gombak and Klang Rivers. This Muddy Estuary - Kuala Lumpur - is formed where the two rivers meet. It's where 60km of the Gombak River and 120km of the Klang River converge and divide KL into East and West banks.

Once the soggy dock for traders in sampans, today Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad sits on this neck of the prettiest spit of land.

A confection of onion-shaped domes, chhatris, minarets and spires, it is a magical place of worship.

The call to prayer soars over the 100 year old raintrees lining the river five times a day, luring with the promise of sanctuary.

Benevolent palm trees generously shading cool marble.

Much needed respite from the unforgiving frenzy of city life.

An time-sealed oasis from the rise and (pit)falls of progress around it.

### The East Bank

In the mornings the narrow roads leading from the east of the river are lined with parked



A general view of Dataran Merdeka, which features so much Malaysian history.

cars and food stalls poised for the early breakfast crowd. The nasi lemak and tau foo far vendors watch the passers-by - migrant workers, tourists, small business owners, students, those working in hospitality industries.

Leboh Ampang bears no trace of its mining past save its name from the Malay word "empangan" in reference to the tin-mining dams. The Malays of Kampung Rawa now occupy Kampung Baru farther north. There are neither bullock carts nor trishaws to be found.

There is a little Indian enclave called Masjid India and Petaling Street, more commonly known as Chinatown.

There is the whole dizzying gamut of East bank life, manifestly "local", and quite distinct to the ceremonious colonial culture of the West bank.

There is the recently created Historical Triangle and the continuing River of Life project. There are kaki lima ("five foot way" pavement) spaces co-opted by both informal trade and the homeless.

There are trading agency houses, temples, shipping companies, textile companies, department stores. The First Mercedes Benz showroom. Central Market.

Stories peel off the walls like flaking stucco as you wander the streets:

Metal signboards prohibiting entry to electricity panels peculiarly boast five languages - English, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and Punjabi. Punjabi?

Ahhh ... security was almost exclusively Punjabi then.

Location names are prosaically descriptive or historical: Bukit Nanas, Bukit Ceylon, Yap Ah Loy, Hang Lekiu.

The site of the first market, Medan Pasar (established by the most famous Chinese

Kapitan, Yap Ah Loy and situated right across from the site of his former home), is closed for a beautification upgrade. It will soon reopen as a leafy square. The neo-classical shophouses (circa 1907) that face the square have decorative plaster garlands and are currently inhabited by travel agents and exchange bureaus. I really want one.

Perhaps we should see it as a sign of growth. This evolution of our city. How spaces fall out of fashion and fall into disrepair, and the possibilities of rejuvenation that attract more community engagement.

I see wit and beauty and spirit - a sense of adventure - in neighbourhood communities like Kampung Attap, Zhongshan, REKKL. The reawakening of the former cinema house has had a great knock-on effect along Jalan Sultan with traditional eateries

and hotels starting to reimagine too. I meet with Shin Chang, one of the seven partners who co-founded REXKL (other luminaries include architects Shin Tseng, Ng Sek San and investor Kamil Merican) who tells me they will soon relaunch the Rex Hall as an event space for immersive digital art. A cutting-edge beacon pulling the community in to enjoy more than just top-class coffee.

"There isn't a space like this in the area."

What downtown KL does offer is a dizzying number of cafes and restaurants. Food and beverage has always been the great cultural leveler in KL.

There is also the activation of interesting public spaces, like the enchanting back lanes of Kwai Chai Hong. The gaily painted murals and greening of "Ghost Children Lane" have scared off no one and proven a huge draw for visitors to the area. Yet the undertaking was carried out with an affectionate nod to Kung Fu movies for the community, by the community.

and hotels starting to reimagine too.

I meet with Shin Chang, one of the seven partners who co-founded REXKL (other luminaries include architects Shin Tseng, Ng Sek San and investor Kamil Merican) who tells me they will soon relaunch the Rex Hall as an event space for immersive digital art. A cutting-edge beacon pulling the community in to enjoy more than just top-class coffee.

"There isn't a space like this in the area."

What downtown KL does offer is a dizzying number of cafes and restaurants. Food and beverage has always been the great cultural leveler in KL.

There is also the activation of interesting public spaces, like the enchanting back lanes of Kwai Chai Hong. The gaily painted murals and greening of "Ghost Children Lane" have scared off no one and proven a huge draw for visitors to the area. Yet the undertaking was carried out with an affectionate nod to Kung Fu movies for the community, by the community.

There is also the activation of interesting public spaces, like the enchanting back lanes of Kwai Chai Hong. The gaily painted murals and greening of "Ghost Children Lane" have scared off no one and proven a huge draw for visitors to the area. Yet the undertaking was carried out with an affectionate nod to Kung Fu movies for the community, by the community.

### The spaces in between

Ashran Bahari and Naadiya Hani Mokhtar, the architects and architectural publishers behind Studio Karya and the thought provoking Suburbia, believe successful growth in the city should start with "non-buildings - the spaces in between buildings".

With activation and programmes for non-buildings in place, it would only be a matter of time for the buildings to follow suit. "It would make commercial sense."

In 2017, they published a speculative piece on democratising Dataran Merdeka. How best to give Dataran Merdeka back to the public. Their bold answer was to grow an orchard in this hallowed city green.

"It would be a gift to all - animals, insects and humans."

Mother Nature would approve. And while they don't necessarily think an orchard is THE answer, they do believe thinking out of the box and having these conversations is something needed.

Connecting KL's green spaces would indeed be a gift to the city. Our city centre is blessed with Bukit Nanas, Taman Tugu, Lake Gardens, the surrounds of

Carcosa Seri Negara and our public commons, Dataran Merdeka.

There are the delightful community gardens Kebun-kebum, started by Ng Sek San. Green connecting paths and blue bicycle lanes would connect more than physical spaces. If there's one thing the pandemic showed us is the dangers of dis-connect and alienation and the remedial effectiveness of community.

In many ways the competing voices are a testament to the health and vibrancy of KL. To our cultural curiosity. To stakeholders imbued with the pride of ownership, impassioned about directing any reboot.

The dialogue around gentrification and urban renewal, of repurposing buildings and breathing life back into these spaces should reflect the KL of today.

Standing not only at the confluence of two rivers but more importantly at the convergence of the many peoples, the many cultures that have found their way to our city in search of opportunity.

We have, historically, grown this way.

Paddling up in sampans, standing at the neck of the prettiest spit of land. Blessed with this rare richness of layered and interlaced stories.

Our business is unfinished. Our nation after all is only 66 years young and still growing. Our city crossroads are busy with creativity, commerce, technology, the environment and caring for all who live here. Let's avoid gridlock, direct the flow, build those connections.

This feature was commissioned under Think City's for the Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District Strategic Masterplan - developed in collaboration with Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and National Heritage Department (JWN), and supported by Khazanah Nasional Berhad, Yayasan Hasanah and Budger 2023 under the auspices of the Ministry of Finance.

