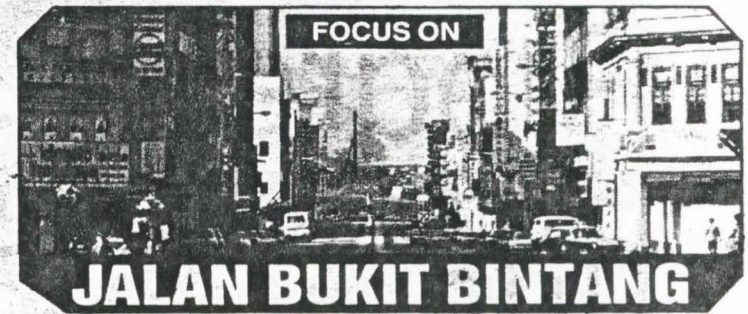


supplement

COME TO WHERE THE ACTION IS



Perpustakaan DEWAN BANDARAYA KUALA LUMPUR

By Chin Seow Ping

JALAN BUKIT BINTANG is the Federal capital's proverbial road paved with gold. Even in days gone by, it was the place people in search of fun and entertainment headed for.

Today, it is still THE place for fun and entertainment but over the years it has also developed into a prime shopping area.

Three of the major shopping complexes of Kuala Lumpur are situated in this area. More than that, the road is lined with shops and restaurants offering a gamut of goods and a variety of food to please every shopper or diner.

Has Jalan Bukit Bintang always been this busy? What was it like in the past when shopping complexes were non-existent.

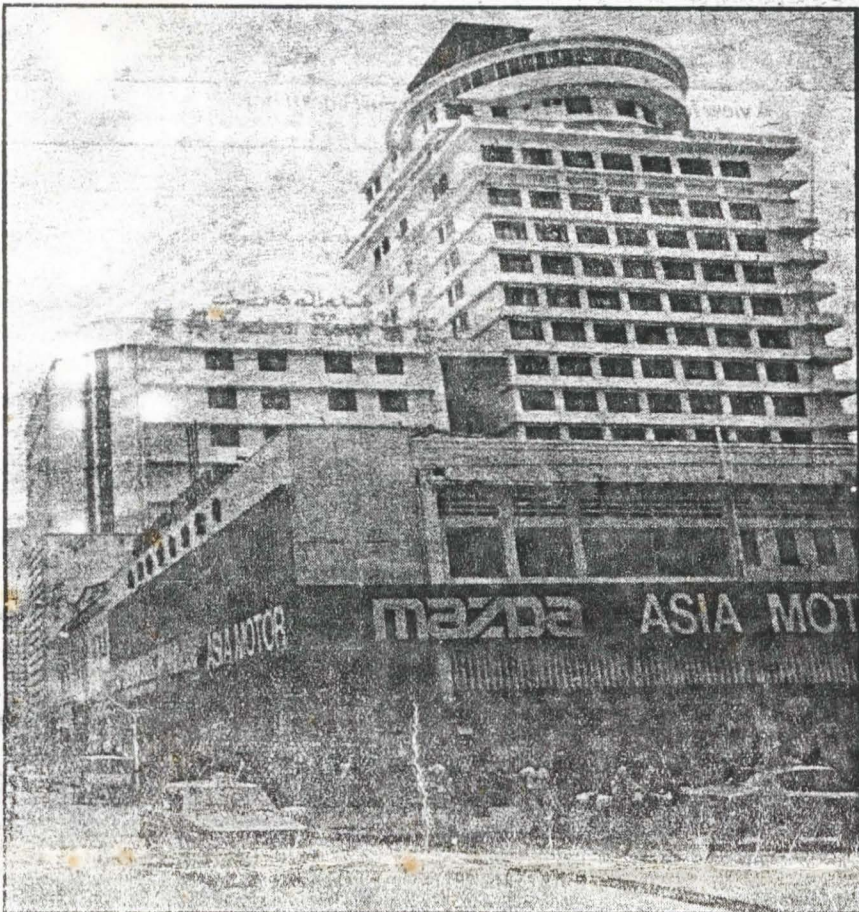
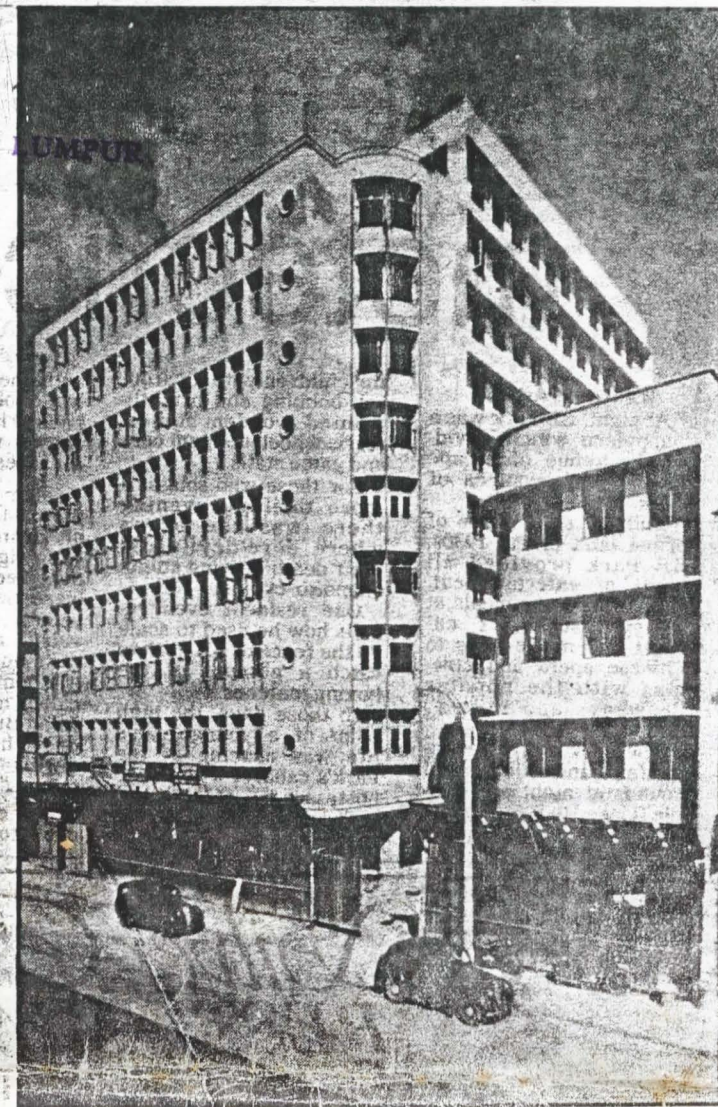
To many of the older generation, Jalan Bukit Bintang of the past was better known for fun and entertainment than for shopping.

For where the present Sungei Wang-Bukit Bintang complex is, was the Bukit Bintang Park — the centre of entertainment to the people of KL.

As an old resident of the area since 1936 recalled: "There was no Sungei Wang or Bukit Bintang Plaza then.

Opposite the then BB Park were four rows of government quarters laid out in the shape of a horse-shoe which the residents in the area called 'horse-shoe lane'. The surrounding areas were rubber estates.

"As kids, we used to play there — catching spiders, shooting marbles and the like. There was very little traffic especially during the day but the night scene was a different story.



The Federal Hotel as it stands today

The Federal Hotel 28 years ago

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Progress has been meteoric

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At night, BB Park was a 'happyland' which provided the venue of escape from the pressures of work.

Built on eight acres of prime land in the 1930s, BB Park provided all kinds of entertainment, from sumptuous meals at classy restaurants, cabaret and music halls to Chinese opera and cinemas with the popular "cowboys and injuns" westerns.

The park was a veritable fairyland of lights and sounds at night and people flocked to it.

There was a playground

for children with a carousel, bobbing and brightly painted wooden horses, ferris wheel, dodgem cars and game stalls.

For those who sought a more thrilling evening there was the arena where dare-devils did their death-defying stunts on motor-cycles.

One resident even recalls how he used to scale up the fence of BB Park to catch a glimpse of the boxing matches.

In those days, the high point of a young man's life was dancing at the Park's cabaret with dance hostesses.

Thus the road to the fairyland was choked

with the cars of the rich while outside the dance halls, rickshaws and trishaws waited patiently for fares.

Jalan Bukit Bintang of the past was also a scene of drunken brawls and gang fights. But the resident recalls: "The police were never called in as usually, it was a trivial rivalry, all forgotten the next morning."

When asked what he recalled most vividly about Jalan Bukit Bintang of the past, he replied: "Life during the Japanese occupation."

"As early as 6a.m. people staying in the area

would be able to 'tune-in' to BB Park as it always played the Rediffusion over the loud speakers," he said.

"That was about the only sound one heard in the area during the day as life at BB Park began only at dusk.

"When the Japanese Occupation started, many people moved away from the area but came back later and life went on as though it was never interrupted."

Mrs Leong Chew Wake who ran a tailoring business in Jalan Bukit Bintang in 1951 remembers that their three-storey shop was the tallest and most modern in the area.

"Federal Hotel didn't exist then. Instead, just in front of my shop was a piece of vacant land filled with hawker stalls."

She adds: "What I remember most is the price of hawker food then. For 30 cents you could get a big bowl of noodles with lots of ingredients. Most of the old residents moved but I recently found out that a number of flats at Jalan Alor now are owned by the hawkers of our time. So, they didn't move very far...and they must have made a lot of money from the old days," she chuckled.

To Mrs Leong the market at Jalan Bukit Bintang (next to KL Plaza) has seen little change.

"It still sits on the same site and it is still as dirty



A view from the Revolving Lounge of the Federal Hotel

KL Plaza with Printemps in foreground

and smelly, perhaps dirtier now."

But what is missing now is the number of hawker stalls which used to overflow the area in the old days. The market is presently a hawkers' site by night. Mrs Leong also recalls the day Federal Hotel was opened sometime in 1957 to accommodate visiting VIPs who were in Kuala Lumpur to celebrate Merdeka.

"I also remember the

time William Holden and Susannah York were at the hotel to film *Year of the Dragon*. She (Susannah York) was so taken up by our batik, she bought 20 pairs of batik bikinis from me," she laughed.

One employee of Federal Hotel recalled the period between the 50s and the 70s when the hotel building reigned supreme as the highest with the revolving restaurant as a novelty.

"Then, the view from the revolving restaurant was one big scene of lush, green forest.

"We had a telescope and it was very popular with the crowd."

One resident reflected philosophically: "The kind of enjoyment sought in those days was different. For 30 cents, you got to dance with the ronggeng girls but of course people nowadays prefer the numerous discos."