

# architecture institutions and change

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## **Institutionalising the Profession in Post-colonial Malaysia: The Role of Australian Trained Architects in the establishment of PAM (Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia)**

*Intersections between professional and political agendas in processes of transnational social and economic exchange are difficult to pin down because professionals aspire, by definition, to act autonomously. Yet, in the context of Cold War anxieties about the fragility of democracy in the Southeast Asian region, strategic investment in the training of Asian architectural professionals was one of the more instrumental and constructive ways in which Australia became engaged in the modern nation building of its Asian neighbourhood.*

*Under the Colombo Plan the British Commonwealth scheme (c. 1950-80) for bilateral aid to developing countries in South and Southeast Asia, Australia took the unusual step in funding a major scholarships program that aimed to train Asian professionals rather than export its own experts to the region. By the early 1980s as many as 40,000 future professionals from participating Asian countries had been sponsored to study in Australian universities. These graduates were to go on to build new networks of transnational exchange that, as the Plan had intended, would help to integrate a region in which the unravelling of the previous colonial empires and the on-going geopolitical struggle for competing capitalist and socialist models of modernity had placed Australia in an unprecedented position of insecurity, but potential new opportunity as well.*

*Focusing on the agency of Malaysian architects who trained in Australia in the Colombo Plan era, the proposed paper will examine their efforts to establish and consolidate the institutional framework and pedagogical foundations of a modern architectural profession in post-colonial Malaysia. In the context of the racial and cultural conflicts that were redefining the region in this period, the paper will also illuminate the importance that the autonomous institutional standing of the profession was perceived to provide for these young Australia-returned modernists in their substantive efforts to develop and build the modernising nation in their subsequent careers.*

Whilst Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s was among the most militarised theatres of operations in the on-going Cold War, the business of suturing together viable modern states and societies from the disparate geographical, ethnic and social fragments left behind by the former colonial empires was also pursued simultaneously by other more constructive means. These included the acquisition of new technology along with the professional know-how to command it. Equally significant for those who aspired to attain this was the privilege to exercise and uphold the new social status of autonomous professionals that such expertise accorded. The professionalisation of knowledge was a meritocratic mechanism for social change, at least in theory, and particularly so in newer technical disciplines like modern architecture and engineering that had not previously been aligned (as Law and Politics were) with established elites.

As we explore in this paper, the professionalisation of the architectural discipline in post-colonial Malaysia, under the auspices of Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) (the Malaysian Institute of Architects), allowed geographically and socio-culturally marginalised groups to use these institutional means to become an integral part of the modern nation state. With particular reference to the case of the East Malaysian state of Sabah, we will draw on original interviews and archival material to examine the professional stances and agency of some of the key players involved in that process. The paper also highlights a significant transnational dimension to the agency of these professional organisers and leaders that reflected a shared experience of architectural education overseas. But, countering previous accounts of post-colonial architectural developments in the region that have emphasised the agency of an elite avant-garde educated in distant metropolitan schools, we focus on the comparatively larger cohort trained in nearby Australia. Australia was the locus, we argue, of an alternative, less elite form of architectural education in this period that served as a more appropriate model for the nuts-and-bolts training needed to professionalise architectural practice in the self-consciously developing Malaysia of this period. Turning first to the geo-political conditions of the post-colonial era that fostered the development of this network of Australian-trained architectural professionals in the Southeast Asian region, we will briefly outline the relationship between Australian architectural education and its growing Asian student cohort in this period of seminal change. We will then consider the impact of those formative educational experiences in Australia on the development of institutions like PAM and its role in stewarding the establishment of the modern architectural profession across the Southeast Asian region.

### **Politics and professionalisation in Malaya in the 1960s and 1970s**

In 1975, a small group of overseas-trained architects practising in the Malaysian state of Sabah initiated the process of establishing a local chapter of Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM). Situated on the north-eastern tip of the island of Borneo, Sabah is the easternmost territory of the Malaysian federation, separated by the South China Sea from Peninsular Malaysia and the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Although it was already over a decade since their political union with the mainland, Sabah – the former British North Borneo – and neighbouring Sarawak were still coming to terms with their new post-colonial geography and provincial

status as distant annexes of the Malaysian state. Within the professional discipline and practice of architecture, the establishment of the PAM Sabah Chapter was, therefore, a significant step in an on-going process of cultural evolution and institutional integration. But, by embracing the national framework of the Kuala Lumpur based professional institution and thereby submitting to regulate their activities within its norms and strictures, these ostensibly 'provincial' architectural practitioners also stood simultaneously to enhance their local stature and recognition as autonomous professionals equipped to play a substantive expert role in the physical development and construction of the country as a whole.

Examined superficially, the larger story of the propagation and development of the modern architectural profession in post-colonial Malaya – as, indeed, across Southeast Asia in general – appears to have been dominated by a relatively small number of overseas-educated architect-planners whose academic pedigrees affirm the neo-colonial hegemony of the former European colonial powers and their successor (in the geo-political arena of the Cold War), the USA. Dato Ikmal Hisham Albakri, for instance, the designer of Malaysia's iconic National Mosque (1965) and the first president of The Malaysian Institute of Architects, completed his training at the Architectural Association (AA) in London. Singaporean architect, Liu Thai Ker, who forged his reputation as a director of Singapore's powerful Housing Development Board (HDB), took his graduate degree from Yale, whilst his colleague, architect Ong Teng Chong, who spearheaded the development of Singapore's MRT network and went on, quite exceptionally, to a successful later career in politics as the first democratically elected president of the maverick city state (which had briefly been a member of the Malaysian federation, from 1963-65), took his graduate degree in town and regional planning from the University of Liverpool.

Less conspicuous but equally significant, however, is the fact that a substantial proportion of these same leaders, among many more of the less celebrated foot soldiers of the profession across the region, gained the undergraduate foundations of their professional training, not in Europe or America, but in Australian university schools of architecture. Liu, for example, was a celebrated early graduate in architecture from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney in 1961, whilst Ong along with his future professional partner, wife and First Lady of Singapore, Ling-Ong Siu Mai, were among the first graduates, in the same year (1961), of the University of Adelaide's recently established Bachelor of Architecture degree. Another regional doyen of the profession, Hijias bin Kasturi – whose idiosyncratic skyscrapers of the 1980s were in the vanguard of the building boom that had transformed Kuala Lumpur's skyline by the end of the century – was a contemporary of the Ongs, initially enrolled in the Adelaide course, who ultimately completed his architectural and urban planning studies at the University of Melbourne in 1965. But far from just a successful commercial architect, Hijias was also an institution-builder responsible for establishing the first architectural program at a Malaysian university.

Back in Sabah, the process of setting architectural practice and training on a firm professional footing was spearheaded by yet another young University of Adelaide-trained architect, Francis Yit Shing Wong, who, when the PAM Sabah Chapter was subsequently

registered in October 1976, was appointed as its Founding Chairman. Supporting Wong in this process was a network of both local and national peers, again dominated by Australian-trained architects. These included his key collaborator in Sabah, Lawrence Chin, a graduate of both UNSW (1966) and Sydney University (1968), and most significantly the mentorship and political backing of Kington Loo, one of the earliest and most accomplished Asian architectural graduates of the University of Melbourne (1953) who had previously served as the first non-Caucasian president of PAM's predecessor organisation, the Federation of Malaya Society of Architects (FMSA), in 1962, and again as PAM president from 1970-72.

Collectively, this network of Australian-trained architects strove to establish a unified professional identity for architects across the territories of the newly formed nation, framing key policies of professional registration and governance to supersede the irregularities and inequities of the inherited colonial system and its long neglect of the need for local professional training and development. The existing registration practices in Sabah were a case in point.

Prior to union in 1963 with the Federation of Malaya, alongside Singapore and Sarawak, the practice of architecture in the independent Crown Colony of British North Borneo was ostensibly regulated directly by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).<sup>1</sup> In practice, however, it was the local Public Works Department under the direction of its expatriate chief engineers and architects that controlled the building industry. This included a register that distinguished between those 'Authorized To Submit Building Plans' without restrictions versus 'Building Draughtsman' who were deemed to be insufficiently qualified to provide full architectural services. Whilst the relative dearth of qualified architectural expertise had tended to favour expatriate firms with the lion's share of public commissions and professional fees, equivalent shortages of qualified engineers and quantity surveyors had also obliged the few architects who were authorised to submit plans to take full and comprehensive control of all aspects of a building project.<sup>2</sup>

On the mainland, architectural practice was ostensibly regulated more autonomously under the FMSA, which was an affiliate of the RIBA, but this organisation was also effectively dominated until the early 1960s by a small group of expatriates working for the Public Works Department (PWD).<sup>3</sup> While the territories of Peninsular Malaysia had gained independence under the British Commonwealth of Nations in 1957 the regulation of architectural practice remained in the hands of the FMSA. The annexation of the new territories of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore six years later brought new challenges to the process of registering and regulating professional practice across this now much expanded but divided national geography, and the professional education that was needed to underpin the new standards and regulatory guidelines that the FMSA would seek to enforce. This was a period of acute political strife in the wider Southeast Asian region, however, and other geo-political concerns were initially to take precedence over these regulatory matters.

The Malaysian federation itself had come about in the wake of the Malayan Emergency, a 13 year long struggle (1948-60) against the guerrilla war efforts of the Malayan Communist

Party (MCP). Over the decade-long campaign to restrict the communist aggression in the region the retiring British colonial regime had been backed up by Australia as its regional deputy. Australian troops had been deployed to Malaya beginning in 1955 as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve,<sup>4</sup> and were to remain engaged actively in the country until the larger Malaysian Federation was formed in 1963. Throughout this period, however, and well after, Australia was simultaneously advancing a more peaceful strategy to counter the communist incursion into Southeast Asia. This form of 'cultural' Cold War was prosecuted through educational programs and scholarships that would shift public opinion in favour of modern Western values.

### **Australian architectural education**

In 1950, at a seminal meeting in Colombo, Ceylon, of the foreign ministers of the newly formed British Commonwealth, a scheme that would subsequently be called the 'Colombo Plan' was established under which bilateral aid, including a major scholarships program, could flow to developing countries in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> As the only front-line state among the developed donor countries in the scheme, Australia was to play a major role in pioneering this regional knowledge exchange and, over the next three decades, hosted several tens of thousands of Colombo Plan scholars in an undisguised bid to win the hearts and minds of the next generation of Asian intellectuals and professionals and wean them away from the allure of revolutionary communism. According to the Plan, these graduates were to build new networks of transnational understanding and exchange to integrate a region in which the unravelling of the previous colonial empires and the on-going geopolitical struggle for competing capitalist and socialist models of modernity placed Australia in an unprecedented position of insecurity, but potential opportunity as well.

During the Cold War decades, other historical and contextual factors were also underwriting the popularity of Australia among Malaysians. As the kindred offspring of the same colonial empire with further regional affinities related to climate, Australia was a preferred conduit for the transfer of metropolitan values to its modernising Asian neighbours, inimical as they had become to their former colonial overlords. Although diplomatic relations were often delicate, the new Asian nations were keen to forge apolitical technological relationships.

Australian sponsorship under the Colombo Plan was based on academic merit and was awarded largely to students of modest middle-class background who seized this opportunity to gain a Western-style education within a neighbouring regional context. Australia thereby offered new opportunities for professionalisation disassociated from neo-colonial pedagogical networks favoured by the elite, and the kinds of professional work and service that these graduates undertook upon their return to their homelands subtly but discernibly reflected the egalitarian ethos and straightforwardness of the particular modernist idioms and values in which they were immersed during their studies.<sup>6</sup> For sponsored students, like Francis Wong, the Modern Architecture propagated in the new curricula of the Australian schools of architecture offered rational, universally applicable arguments against the idiosyncrasies of the traditional building cultures from which they were emerging, and the parochialism that these could represent.<sup>7</sup> It would be the substantive means through

which they imagined they would engage directly in the actual building and shaping of the modernising new societies to which they anticipated returning from their Australian studies.<sup>8</sup>

Francis Wong was an exemplary candidate of this sponsorship program and the related cultural cold war. Having grown up in poverty as the son of a widowed servant in the household of an English colonial family, Wong's opportunity to study architecture at the University of Adelaide on a Colombo Plan scholarship was life-changing.<sup>9</sup> Commencing the five year course in 1961, Wong proved himself to be a conscientious and highly accomplished student, earning a number of academic awards including the James Hardie Prize in Architecture (1965), one of the most coveted accolades for Australian architectural students of the day. Typical of students hosted by the Colombo Plan, he also developed significant social relationships with a variety of others during his studies in Adelaide, including fellow classmates, professors, employers and the Australian woman that he was subsequently to marry. Completing his studies in 1966 and preparing to return home triumphantly to the new Malaysia the following year with a clutch of prizes and both his Australian degree and an Australian wife in hand, Wong was arguably the epitome of the manner of cosmopolitan professional, free-thinker, and agent of modernisation that the Australian training program had sought to produce.

The egalitarian ethos and straightforwardness imparted by the Adelaide curriculum was earnestly embodied by Wong in his final design thesis project: a comprehensive proposal for "A Technical College for Sabah". As Wong explained in his thesis report, in Sabah "there [are] no facilities as yet for higher education. Students requiring university or technological courses go overseas either on scholarship or at their own expense."<sup>10</sup> Reflecting self-consciously on his own good fortune in this regard, he observed that "the gap between the man with a degree from overseas on the design board and the unskilled personnel is getting wider and wider. It is this gap that establishes the need for an institution as proposed in this thesis."<sup>11</sup> Wong's idealism about the transformative power of knowledge and the higher educational experience was, nevertheless, tempered by the relative pragmatism of his actual design for the proposed college. This consisted of a small campus of separate low-rise buildings hugging the contours of a low hill situated across from the proposed 'acropolis' of the new state capitol for Sabah with its house of assembly for the state legislature, national library, museum and art gallery. The programming and technical specifications of the project were based on information Wong had gathered from various Australian precedents for contemporary technical colleges as well as the public works departments of New South Wales and South Australia.

The assumption that modern Australian norms and models for contemporary institutional buildings and facilities could and should be applicable to modern Sabah was evidently in little doubt. On the other hand, the muted contextualism of the detailing was an understated nod to the climatic identity of the equatorial region. Notably, however, it avoided any of the more literal references to traditional types of the architectural vernacular that might have been compared with the overt formalist tendencies and historicism of committed Malay nationalist architects such as Dato Hisham. Rather, with their straight-forward, almost

dogmatic attention to the 'functional' brief, Wong's designs reflected the ethos of the post-war everyman's Australia of the mid-twentieth century in which it was the level playing field to which one aspired, not the narcissistic individualism of the 'tall-poppy'.

## Organising professional training and practice back home

Wong's return home in 1967 confronted him with significant shifts in political and cultural sensibility that had come about during his six years away in Australia. His hometown, Jesselton, was now known as Kota Kinabalu, the new state capital of Sabah, and it was here in the same year that the first state elections were held, highlighting serious tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim groups. When the election was finally won by an alliance of the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) and Sabah Chinese Association (SCA), a stance of close cooperation with the federal government was established, which was to be diligently sustained in the political culture of the state for some time thereafter.

Closer to Wong's immediate professional concerns, 1967 was also the year that an Architect's Act was passed by the Malaysian Parliament, establishing a Board of Architects and a process of registration that would bring architectural practice across the various territories under a single national framework for the first time. These changes also led to the reconstitution of the former Federation of Malaya Society of Architects (FMSA) as the new Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) – Malaysian Institute of Architects.

Wong's return therefore coincided with a significant moment of uncertainty and transition in both the political and professional fields – in the latter of which he was to play a leading role, as we have already noted, increasingly conscious as he and his colleagues were becoming of the need to defend and exercise their freedom of expression and agency as accredited professionals from this doubly marginalised position of being non-Muslim practitioners in a geographical location far removed from the centre in Peninsular Malaysia. Accordingly, Francis Wong along with Lawrence Chin and their network of other fellow Australian-trained Malaysian architects worked to organise the local profession and keep it abreast of developments in Peninsular Malaysia. The express aim, according to Chin, was to instil "a sense of brotherhood among architects and to prevent any erosion of our status in society and the building industries."<sup>12</sup>

Architectural education and training was high on the agenda in the on-going professionalisation process, and the establishment of the Council of Architectural Education Malaysia (CAEM) as part of the Architects Act of 1967 expressly supported the development of new home-grown institutions. Following on from the ideals of his original design thesis project, Wong's immediate contribution to the actual propagation of technical education and training was his advocacy for the establishment of a new Drafting School under the auspices of PAM. Rebooting in effect an equivalent course to that which the colonial PWD had organised through the government technical college, the PAM School was set up to supply a pool of architectural draftsmen and technicians to the profession.

In Peninsular Malaysia the express need for local educational institutions was addressed

through the establishment, in that same year (1967), of the Institut Teknologi MARA (MARA Institute of Technology) or ITM which, among other disciplines, was to provide the first architectural training in the country at a tertiary level. This was a significant advance in recognition and educational support for the profession by government, which had previously only organised courses in architectural drafting through the government technical college for the needs of the former colonial PWD.<sup>13</sup> The new architectural program was set-up and developed by another Colombo Plan alumnus and Wong's near contemporary from the Adelaide University School of Architecture, Hijjas bin Kasturi. Under Hijjas' guidelines and initial direction ITM went on to establish a School of Arts and Architecture and he was subsequently involved in developing the master-plan for the ITM Complex at Shah Alam. While Wong would be later involved in a professional capacity with the expanding ITM system, as the consulting designer of the ITM campus at Kuala Menggatal in Kota Kinabalu, his initial contributions with the PAM School were particularly significant, as unlike the ITM School, which was restricted exclusively to ethnically Malay students, it would offer unrestricted admission to the profession – albeit only, as yet, to its subordinate ranks.

## Conclusion

Important as they may be in the development of regional ententes, intersections between transnational political agendas and the agency of architectural professionals in processes of environmental and social change are difficult to pin down because professionals aspire, by definition, to act autonomously. Yet, as this very brief sampling of developments in the case of regional Malaysia in the 1960s and 1970s has indicated, the nation-building objectives of the younger developing countries in Australia's Asian neighbourhood, with their limited budgets and urgent need to individuate and professionalise skilled labour, well-aligned with the pragmatic technocratic approach to the building of technical and professional capacity that underwrote post-war educational approaches of Australian university schools of architecture.

Empowered by this straightforward (i.e. ideologically unencumbered) 'functionalist' belief in the instrumentality of their discipline, and further motivated by the ideals of the Colombo Plan to which many were indebted, Australian-trained graduates such as Francis Wong played pivotal roles in the mobilisation and institutionalisation of the profession in Asia following their return. In so doing, we suggest, a peculiarly Australian preoccupation with fair-play and the levelling of the field through rules of order and due process was also instilled in the governance and mechanics of the newly organised profession. Not only would this help consolidate the profession's propriety, autonomy and rights of admission and inclusion on a legal basis, overcoming anomalous past practices and privileges still latent in the system from the colonial era, it would also provide a hedge against possible political pressures and restrictions in a context of growing nationalist and racial chauvinism.

Another attribute of contemporary Australian architectural practice in the post-war era that had evidently (though perhaps inadvertently) been brought home by these Australian-trained architects was, frankly, a certain artlessness in their architectural designs, and the

spirit with which these were produced. Writing about recent developments in Australia for a British survey of new architecture in the Commonwealth published in 1960, Robin Boyd characterised this quality somewhat uncharitably as follows:

Any Australian flavour in everyday building appears to be involuntary, in some obvious ways related to the qualities [often observed] in the Australian human character. ... 'Near enough' is the national philosophy: a deliberate cult of anti-finesse.<sup>14</sup>

This helped to produce a background of contemporary buildings that, as Boyd observed, were “technically advanced” yet “casual in detail”, and “practical” rather than stylish. Similarly, the Australian-trained architects of the new Malaysia were to become the designers and builders of a competent but middling modernist architecture of the background which could neither be accused of elitist avant-gardism nor confused with any backward-looking provincial or essentialist yearning for cultural autonomy. Disproportionately representative of Malaysia’s ethnic-Chinese minority as this first wave of Australian-trained architectural graduates was, they were largely content to focus quietly instead on practical steps towards the building of the institutional structures and safe-guards of a more outward-looking and inclusive profession that would at least ‘measure-up’ to international standards and contribute substantively to the building of a new country that would be demonstrably constructed in the image of the wider modern world.

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- 1 For a useful background discussion and analysis, see Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2003), chapter 7.
  - 2 In the 1960s, there were several expatriate firms operating in Sabah as joint architecture/engineering practices. These were charging 7½ per cent fees while local firms that were not academically qualified were only able to charge 3 to 4 per cent. Nevertheless, architects were very much in charge of a project. As there were few qualified engineers in local practice, architects were obliged to prepare and submit their own engineering drawings. Through to the early 1970s, there was also a lack of quantity surveyors, so architects had to do estimates and simple bills of quantities as well. Lawrence Chin, e-mail message to authors, January 2013.
  - 3 Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, 158-160. Crinson mentions that a lot of expatriates in Malaya were possibly from Australia although this was not necessarily so for Sabah.
  - 4 The Far East Strategic Reserve was established in April 1955 to monitor the development of any communist aggression towards non-communist countries in Southeast Asia. Australia’s commitment to the Reserve would see it involved in the Indonesian Confrontation just a year after withdrawing from Malaya in 1964. Australian troops stayed there till the end of the Confrontation in August 1966. Lasting 13 years, the Malayan Emergency was the longest continuous military commitment in Australia’s history. See Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950-1966*, Official History of Australia’s Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1975, vol. 5 (Sydney: Allen and Unwin and the Australian War Memorial, 1996).
  - 5 Daniel Ockman, *Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004).
  - 6 Anoma Pieris, *Imagining Modernity: The Architecture of Valentine Gunasekara* (Pannipitiya: Stamford Lake, 2007).
  - 7 Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2000).

- 8 Pieris, *Imagining Modernity*.
- 9 All biographical details regarding Francis Wong related in this section are taken from the following account: Howard Salkow, "Australian Experience Builds Global Perspective," *Lumen* (Summer 2005).
- 10 Salkow, "Australian Experience Builds Global Perspective," 2.
- 11 Salkow, "Australian Experience Builds Global Perspective," 3.
- 12 Lawrence Chin, e-mail message to authors, January 2013.
- 13 Julius Posener, "Malaya," in *New Buildings in the Commonwealth*, ed. J. M. Richards (London: The Architectural Press, 1960), 193-196.
- 14 Robin Boyd, "Australia," in *New Buildings in the Commonwealth*, ed. J. M. Richards (London: The Architectural Press, 1960), 17-19.