

PRETTY WHEN WEATHERED

Bucking typical Malaysian office high-rise building trends for glass, gloss, metal and sheen is the PJ Trade Centre. Situated against a hillside backdrop and amidst a fast developing modern urban locale, the structure stands apart for its 'low-tech' appearance that is still undeniably modern, but is more significantly, refreshingly harmonious and sustainable within its local context.



The first glance of this office development, which primarily consists of 4 tower blocks, will likely elicit a double take. At first look, the clean, clear modern lines and proportions of the development leave no doubt of the aesthetic considerations that went into the design. The double take occurs when one realizes that the textures, colors, and patterns that emerge from these forms are not quite conventional in nature. The PJ Trade Centre, designed by Kevin Mark Low of small projects, is overtly 'different', and starts from its use of simple locally produced materials for its surfaces – overburnt bricks, a 20-storey 'gardenwall' that is a vented block screen that faces east and west to provide sun shading, and off-form concrete.

The designer's approach however, go beyond skin-deep appearances – and was more a conscious attempt to provide a unique Malaysian paradigm that is suited specifically to its temperate climates. Aside from the mentioned 'gardenwalls', three metre wide verandahs are another feature that is usually not found in other similar office high-rise developments, and was also the result of the response to the local climate. Sustainability considerations were not surprisingly, integral to the design. More than 1,400 trees were planted throughout the site, including at the 10,117 square metre plaza and the 12 sky terraces that are situated between the four towers.

Additional the intentional 'unfinished' look weathers well

and will age gracefully, with the building, over time, taking on and responding to nature, with moss growing on top of the concrete, brick and vent block screen. There is also notable presence of nature in many areas – many offices have balconies that are about 122 square metres, concealed behind the vent block screens, for private gardens. The stand-alone annexe building, a fitness centre, is designed with views to gardens and courtyards from every room, including the reception, changing rooms and showers.

The buildings are designed as thin masses (14 metres to 16 metres wide) that are singly loaded. This allows in plenty of natural light, reducing the need for artificial lighting during the day. Lift lobbies, as well as washrooms, are placed at the edge of buildings, with natural light and ventilation. Interestingly, there is also no escalator between the ground floor and lobby floor (where the tower lifts are situated), lowering the buildings energy requirements by encouraging occupants to walk up a flight of timber stairs.

Another notable departure from the norm is that cars are not allowed near the buildings at the plaza level – there is no drop off at the front of the four towers. Cars are limited to the main driveway at the edge of the plaza. When it rains, it is intended for cars to go down to the basement car park for drop-off.

The following is the statement from the designer (edited for brevity): "It has been observed that Malaysian office buildings commonly employ design concepts based primarily on western precedents; our offices are designed around imported ideas, materials and finishes which we have been led to believe exemplify the integrity expected of buildings of international standard.

However, most of these western concepts fail to perform optimally in monsoon environments, having been developed in and for the west, specifically for temperate climates: they fail take



into design account and production, the high degree of rainfall, humidity and airborne pollution in tropical Asia.

This usually results in commercial buildings in Malaysia that are better suited for climate and environmental conditions found in temperate countries, buildings which require a high degree of maintenance, a greater load on active cooling systems and constructed of imported materials less able to weather satisfactorily, aside from being expensive to import.

The concept for the PJ Trade

Centre is one based on a Malaysian paradigm, one less reliant on western concepts, both with respect to choice of construction materials and building design and, as a result, better adapted to monsoon Asia.

The building mass for this project are broken down to smaller blocks, a shift from the usual single massive tower which characterize the office tower: the blocks in this development are arranged in thin cross ventilated masses gathered around courtyards, a softer more efficient design for the ventilation and

cooling desired for a hot and humid climate which is our tropical monsoon context.

On the issue of building materials, the development looks entirely to local industry and is inspired by the connection which Malaysian ethnology shares with Malaysian natural history. Throughout the evolution of our culture, it can be seen how the patterns in the landscape of our archipelago have been expressed in Malaysian weaving, from batik to kain songket, pelek and tenun: weaving is, in fact the single most powerful form of our

creative expression as a culture.

The basic sarong cloth is one of the cornerstones of our Malaysian way of life. Its simplicity of form lends itself to a multiplicity of uses, from the generality of formal occasions to the singular act of cradling a baby to one's chest. Its graciousness shows off the curves of the human form without revealing the mystery of the human body.

It is the concept of the sarong from which the elevations of this development takes its inspiration: like the simple wrap of the flat and woven cloth, a building scaled screen wraps the public and the exposed sides of the blocks, hiding the softer inner facades of the offices from the view and noise, while allowing sunlight to filter through. This screen of patterned locally produced precast vents have been designed to allow the effects of weather and pollution to become expressed on its surface as a pattern itself, reducing the degree of maintenance that would otherwise go into cleaning and maintenance of its facades. The growth of fungus and collection of dirt in Malaysia will always be a part of our lives: the lesson learned is not to avoid these by constant cleaning but by allowing the weathering of our buildings to form in a pattern, one inspired by our culture of weaving.

This development seeks cultural roots which are truly Malaysian. It will demonstrate its internationality, not through the copy of a western or Middle Eastern typology, but through the development of its own originality as a Malaysian paradigm." **B**



- > **LOCATION**
Petaling Jaya, Malaysia
- > **CLIENT**
Tujan Gemilang Sdn Bhd
- > **SITE AREA**
21,853 square metres
- > **FLOOR AREA**
335,280 square metres (gross) floor area, 4 towers of 20-21 storeys.
- > **DESIGNER**
Kevin Mark Low / small projects



