



VIEWS FROM ABOVE AND BELOW: THE PETRONAS TWIN TOWERS AND/IN CONTESTING VISIONS OF DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

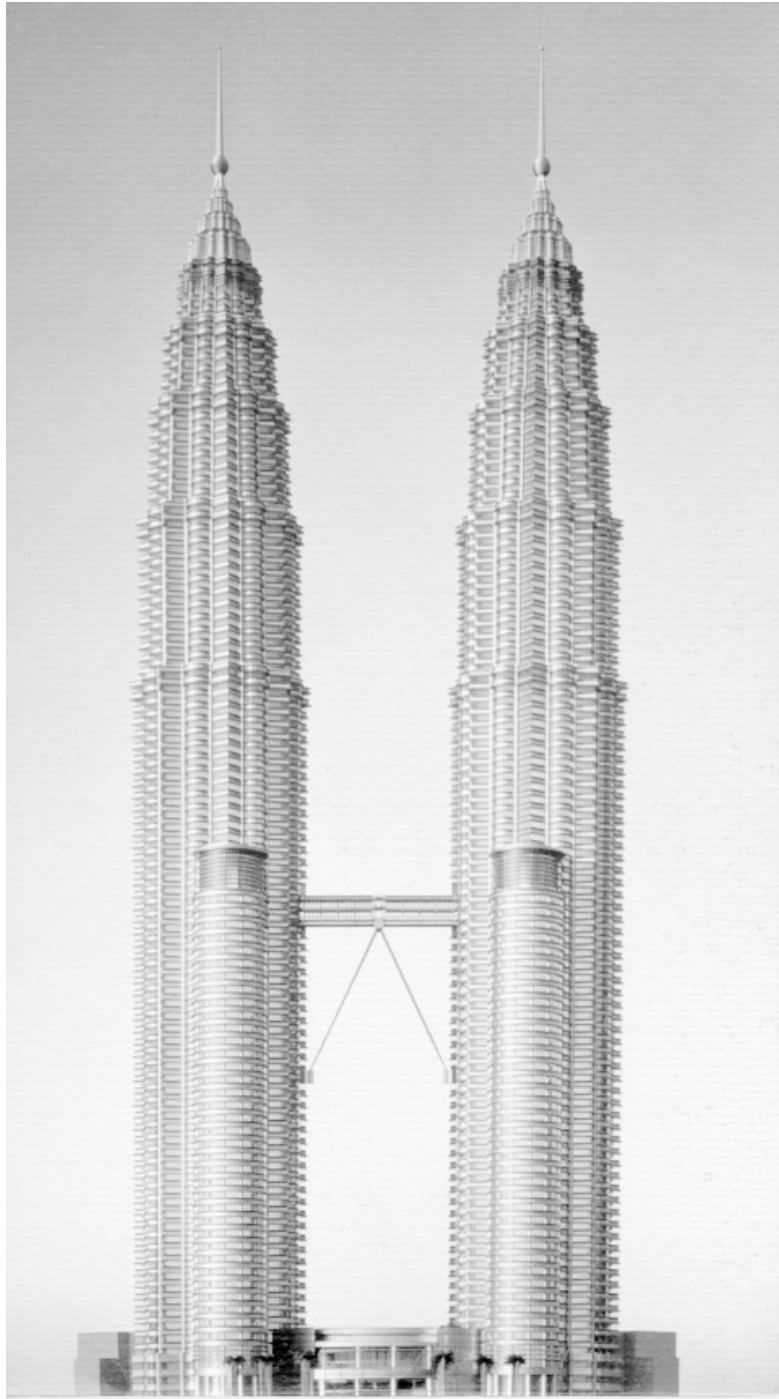
Large-scale urban transformation in Malaysia is the most visible sign of the rapid development which has accompanied the premiership of the current Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. The national capital, Kuala Lumpur, has seen the development of a new city centre (Kuala Lumpur City Centre, KLCC) which includes the world's tallest building, the Petronas Twin Towers. Using techniques from cultural geography, this paper provides a "reading" of the building. The paper first considers the symbolic role of the Petronas Towers in realising a state vision of national development, the so-called Vision 2020. The building is seen to both image Malaysia as a "world class" national player (and Kuala Lumpur as a "world city") as well as to promote new "ways of seeing" among national citizens. However, the paper also considers ways in which intended symbolic meanings are contested and the would-be hegemonic state vision reworked "from below" through everyday experiences of life in the city and the nation.

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the Petronas Twin Towers was "topped out" becoming, for a time, the tallest building in the world. The building consists of two identical towers 452m in height and joined by a skybridge at the 41st and 42nd stories (Figure 1). Named after the state oil company whose new headquarters occupy one half of the building, the Petronas Towers forms part of a larger development project – the so-called Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) – which, at its unveiling in 1992, was described as being "among the largest real estate developments in the world" (Mahathir, 1992:np). In addition to the Petronas Towers, phase 1 of KLCC included a Concert Hall for the newly-created Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra; a luxury hotel, the Mandarin Oriental; two further office

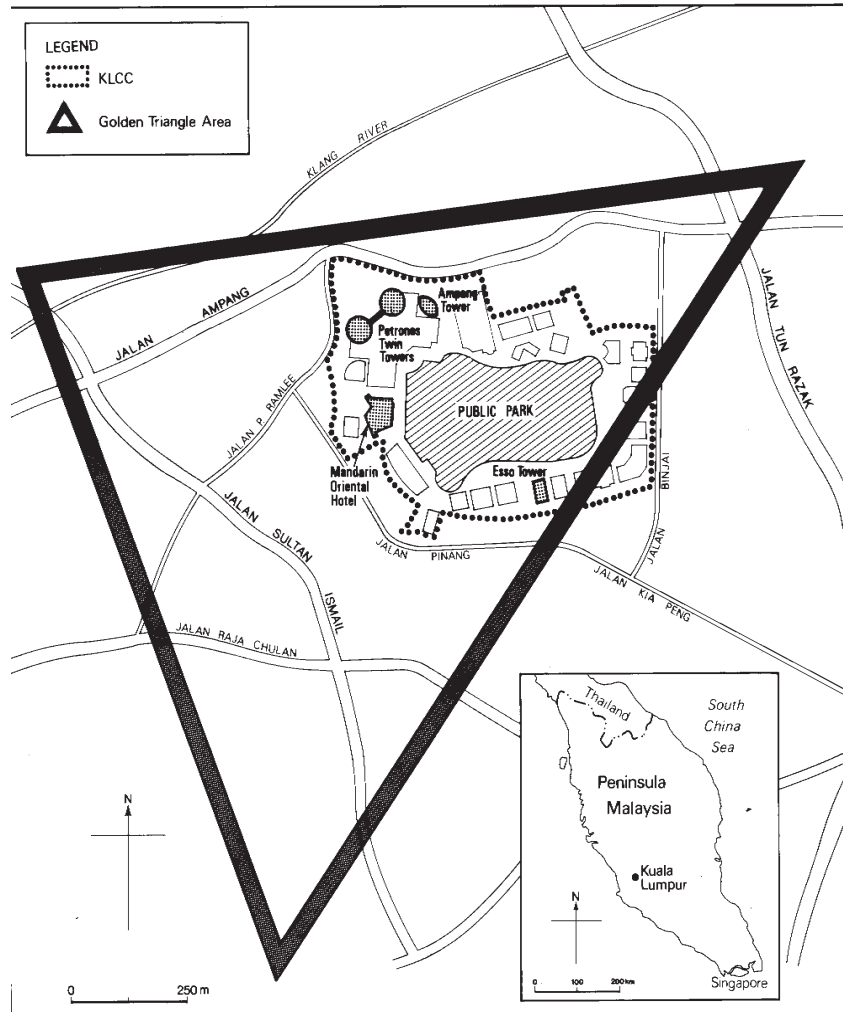
blocks, Ampang Tower and Esso Tower; and a 50-acre "public park". KLCC is being built on the site of the former colonial racecourse off Jalan Ampang and marks a north-eastward expansion of Kuala Lumpur's main commercial district, the so-called Golden Triangle Area (GTA) from Jalan Raja Chulan and Jalan Sultan Ismail (Figure 2).

At one level, this new "city within a city" (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa.* 1996a:7), and the Petronas Towers in particular, may be understood in terms of regional economic change. In the mid-1990s, KLCC was one among myriad "Urban Megaprojects" (Olds, 1995) in what was commonly considered to be an economically "miraculous" Asia Pacific (see,



Source: KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd. (circa. 1996b) *Kuala Lumpur City Centre*. Marketing brochure, np.

Figure 1. The Petronas Twin Towers.



Source: KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd. (circa. 1996b) Kuala Lumpur City Centre. Marketing brochure, np.

Figure 2. KLCC and the Golden Triangle Area (GTA).

for example, World Bank, 1993). Malaysia was cartographically, discursively and economically very much part of this “new Asia” (Noordin, 1996). Economic recession in the mid-1980s in Malaysia had been followed by a period of unprecedented growth. The Sixth Malaysia Plan period (1991-95) was described as “a momentous period of rapid progress” with an average increase of 8.7 per cent (Malaysia, 1996:3-5). It was, of course, no coincidence that this period also bore witness to a dramatic

transformation of urban fabric in the national capital, Kuala Lumpur, and around the GTA in particular. The tall building remains the most profitable use of valuable city centre land.

The aim of this paper, however, is not to explain the general phenomenon of urban transformation or the rise of “spectacular space” (King, 1996:97) in Asia-Pacific cities. The paper focuses, rather, on a specific megaproject site, KLCC, and a particular



building within this, the Petronas Towers. While a capitalist reordering of space and society in Asian cities is undoubtedly an important explanatory context for urban (re)development, the Petronas Towers cannot be understood merely as a function of land values. For one, given the extra costs and diminishing returns from building very tall, it might be suggested that the construction of skyscrapers in general is actually “uneconomic” (cf. Huxtable, 1984). The 88-storey Petronas Towers has no lettable space above the 84th floor and is topped by functionless spires which enabled the building to eclipse the previous “world’s tallest” record held by Chicago’s Sears Tower. Like many other skyscrapers, the Petronas Towers was built for symbolic as well as functional reasons. In order to interrogate this symbolism and to answer the question of “why the Petronas Towers?”, it is necessary to consider the ideas and intentions of the proponents of the building as much as any macro-level economic forces.

One of the key proponents of the Petronas Twin Towers is the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). Mahathir had acquired a reputation for ambitious, “highly visible” national industrialisation projects long before the unveiling of KLCC (Bowie, 1991:131). In 1988, for example, work began on the 869 km North-South Highway which now spans the entire west coast of Peninsula Malaysia from the Thai border in the north to Johor Baru in the south (Naidu, 1995). However, there were more historically specific political and economic foundations for KLCC. Economic recovery from 1988 appeared to vindicate Mahathir’s privatising policy prescriptions. He, like the country as a whole, appeared finally to have emerged from a period of political insecurity and uncertainty. A series of “monumental” public works were founded on this new stable personal and national ground (Harper, 1996). Unveiled by Mahathir himself in September 1992, the KLCC set a trend for high-profile infrastructure projects with “mega characteristics” (Cartier, 1998:157). Such was

the scale and importance of real estate and construction that Malaysia came to be described as an “infrastructure-driven economy” (Lopez, 1998).

Large-scale infrastructure projects were geared towards and symbolic of a new national development strategy associated with the Prime Minister. *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020), promoted and popularised following a speech by Mahathir in 1991, has the purported aim of turning Malaysia into a “fully developed country” by that year (Mahathir, 1993:403). The Prime Minister has since been described as the “architect of developed Malaysia” (Asian Editor, 1997:29), the “master planner” who is “rebuilding Malaysia his own way” (Time, 1996:front cover). Such descriptions may be said to be both symptomatic of and contributing towards popular understandings of contemporary development in terms of an omnipotent leader transcending history, geography and politics, unrestrained in his attempts to fashion Malaysia in his own image. Yet, as Khoo Boo Tiek in his “intellectual biography” of the Malaysian Prime Minister reminds us, Mahathir remains influenced by, as well as an influence upon, events; like any other leader, he is both “representative” and “peremptory” (Khoo, 1995:xxi). Vision 2020 demands contextualisation in historical debates on post-colonial Malaysian development and national identity.

While recent work has problematised the term “post-colonial” for its assumption that “a certain weight and significance be attached to colonialism” (Watson, 1996:302), the “colonial period” is a useful starting point for contemporary debates on multiculturalism, development and national identity in Malaysia. Apart from the long-established role of the colonial economy in the construction of plural societies in Southeast Asia (Furnivall, 1939), the three generalised communities of post-colonial Malaysia – Malays, Chinese and Indians – were consolidated through colonial bureaucratic practices such as census-taking (Milner, 1994). More significantly, perhaps, the

British administration considered the Malays as the rightful inhabitants of Malaya and “the ‘special position’ of the Malay rulers and their Malay subjects was adverted to time and again” (Comber, 1983:11). By the time of independence in 1957, therefore, the “special position” of the Malays under the leadership of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was established as the “ground rule” of the national political system (Ong, 1990).

Failure to translate the privileging of Malay identity into an improvement of the economic lot of Malays, however, led to a resurgence of Malay nationalism and contributed to ethnic riots in May 1969 (Said, 1996). The following year, the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced state interventionist positive discrimination (or “affirmative action”) on behalf of *bumiputera*, the constitutional term given to Malays and other “indigenous” groups, particularly in East Malaysia. A National Cultural Policy extended “bumiputeraism” (Brown, 1994) to the cultural realm by promoting indigenous, and especially Muslim Malay culture, as the “core” of national identity (Kahn & Loh, 1992). It is in this historical context that Vision 2020, with its primary aim of “establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny... a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership” (Mahathir, 1993:404) would appear to suggest a departure from preceding national development priorities. The notion of a *Bangsa Malaysia* (“Malaysian race”) (Mahathir, 1993:404) is arguably the first time a Malay leader has mooted the possibility of a “level playing field” and functions as a sign of a Malaysia beyond constructive protection (Hiebert *et al.*, 1996:19). While the National Development Policy (NDP), announced later in 1991, is the official successor to the NEP, it is Vision 2020 which has come to define post-NEP national development (Khoo, 1995).

After considering theoretical and methodological approaches developed in

cultural geography which are appropriate for the “reading” of a landscape artifact, this paper examines, first, how the Petronas Towers articulates state versions of modern Malaysia for consumption by the “world” and by national citizens in particular. The former refers to the role of the towers in imaging modern Malaysia internationally; the latter to a sense of the KLCC as a site inscribed with “would-be hegemonic” meanings (cf. Pred, 1995:17) about the nation and development. Second, the paper considers how intended meanings have been, and continue to be, negotiated and reworked “from below”. The focus is not specific urban social movements nor the actions of a particular group or class (such as the “new” middle classes; cf. Kahn, 1996), but rather the KLCC project site. KLCC and the Petronas Towers are thus shown to be central to diverse individual and collective problematisations of development in the national capital and in Malaysia more broadly. The paper considers, in turn, contest over the site of the former Jalan Ampang racecourse which preceded the KLCC project and symbolic discontent to authoritative, “top-down” meanings of the Petronas Towers through everyday social experience.

THE WORK OF LANDSCAPE

Analysis of the Petronas Towers in this way involves engagement with issues of landscape and national identity. There is a well established interest in cultural geography in how landscapes in various media articulate national identity (Daniels, 1993; Matless, 1998). However, this paper considers, in particular, how conceptions of “Malaysianness” (what it means to be Malaysian) and “progress” (an appropriate national form of cultural and socio-economic development) are manifested in a single landscape artifact (for work which uses a similar approach see Domosh, 1989). The building is at once a *representation* of individual taste and the idiosyncracies of its proponents as well as of broader social and cultural processes, prevailing practices and dominant ideas. It is also *represented* – discursively, pictorially, electronically – as a

meaningful national site and series of signs. Official representations of the building, political and commercial, do powerful work in defining an appropriate version of the nation and an aspirational vision of national development.

This evokes questions of not only what landscape or a landscape artifact “is”, but rather how these may be said to “work” (cf. Mitchell, 1994). Cultural and political geographers have considered the politically motivated construction and reconstruction of national space in this way. Daniels (1988:43), for example, analysed woodland imagery in Georgian England showing how it not only symbolized but also “naturalised” ideas of social order. Macdonald (1995) has suggested that the symbolic landscape of Medan Merdeka in Jakarta supported and legitimised a particular version of independent Indonesia. Analysis of a landscape artifact, therefore, is an ideological as much as an ontological issue (Daniels, 1989). The Petronas Tower’s role in national development is not merely aesthetic, envisioning a state conception of Malaysian urbanity; the building also promotes new “ways of seeing” among citizens.

Geographers have incorporated ideas and methodologies from literary studies in order to understand the ways in which individuals ascribe meanings and act in relation to the built environment, often likening it to a text (Duncan, 1990; Donald, 1992). This work emphasises that “decoding” of intended meanings is a process of “translation” which inevitably involves slippage; meanings are neither stable nor interpreted in the same way by all (Duncan and Duncan, 1988; Duncan & Ley, 1993). This points, first, to a sense that official or intended meanings are not simply imposed and/or passively accepted through the symbolism of urban form; and, second, to the contingency of all “interpretations”. This paper considers the iconography of the Petronas Towers up to mid-1997. In the context of the subsequent economic crisis which continues to affect Malaysia and many neighbouring countries, new layers and levels of meaning have no doubt

been added. These are beyond the temporal scope of this research. The paper may thus be considered as an historical geographical reading of a contemporary landscape feature.

The limits of metaphors of reading to understandings of subjective urban experience and conduct more generally have been identified by Henri Lefebvre: “When codes worked up from literary texts are applied to spaces – to urban spaces, say – we remain, as may easily be shown, on the purely descriptive level. Any attempt to use such codes as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a reading” (Lefebvre, 1991:7). Urban space, in other words, is not only “read” but also shaped and defined through individual and collective social practice at the street level (Yeoh, 1996). As such, this paper considers how the Petronas Towers is “produced” as well as “lived” (cf. Jacobs, 1994). The urban landscape is therefore understood not only as a setting in which intended meanings may be contested and (mis)read (Cresswell, 1998), but also an active medium in and through which ever new meanings and social identities are created (cf. Ruddick, 1996).

While discussion in this section has focused on the socio-cultural and political aspects of national development, this is not to suggest that issues of economy are somehow irrelevant. The significance of land values and money markets has been alluded to already. However, the aim here is not so much one of seeking to address the residue of meanings left over from economic “explanations”, but rather of adopting an approach which considers how the economic is intertwined with other domains. Landscape is again an apposite concept for this endeavour since, Matless (1998:12) has put it, “the power of landscape resides in it being simultaneously a site of economic, social, political and aesthetic value, with each aspect being of equal importance”. The “symbolic capital” of a single urban landscape phenomenon, the skyscraper,



combines discourses of economics and aesthetics (Black, 1996).

NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION, WORLD COMPETITION

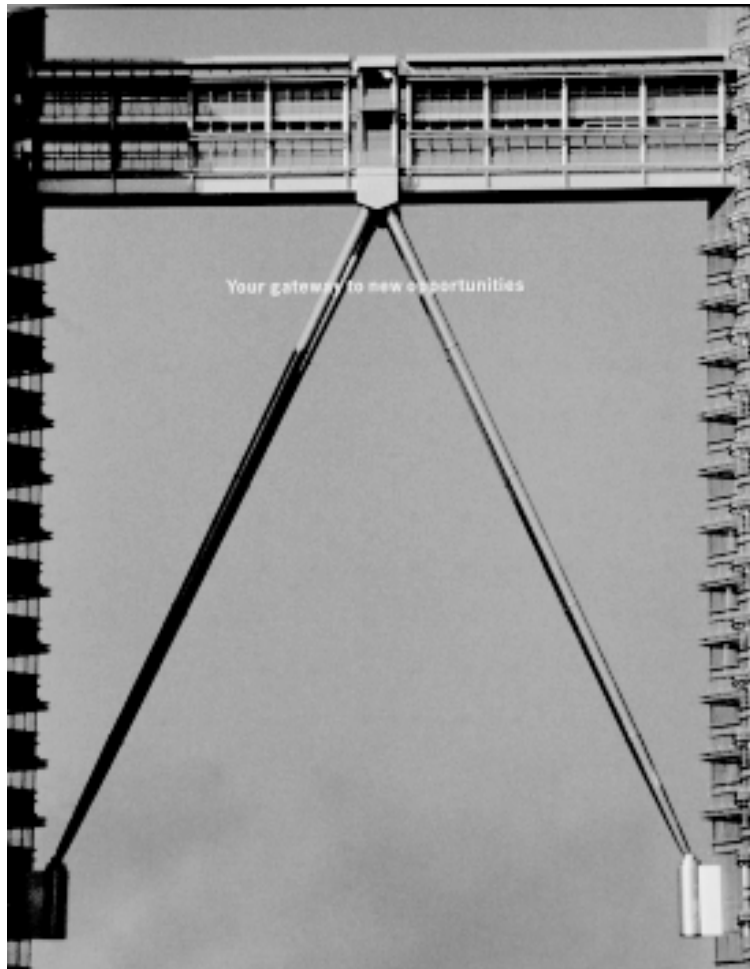
A phrase used three times in the short speech made by Prime Minister Mahathir at the unveiling of the first phase of KLCC was *peringkat antarabangsa*, “world class” (Mahathir, 1992). The suggestion, of course, was that KLCC would be a world-class infrastructural development. Like other urban megaprojects, KLCC constitutes “both a real and a symbolic node, a state of the art command and control centre to “hook up” to the global economy” (Olds, 1995:1719). Mahathir himself considered that the project “will definitely put Kuala Lumpur on the world map” (KLCC Holdings Bhd., *circa.* 1995:1) – what might be understood as part of a broader attempt to make the national capital into a “world city” (Friedmann, 1986; Douglass, 1998).

While competition for mobile capital undoubtedly takes place at a city or “nodal” level (Sassen, 1991), I contend that the “world” here is understood primarily as a world of competing nations. A brochure on business and investment opportunities at KLCC, for example, describes it as “a project of national significance and a symbol of Malaysia’s international status” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa.* 1996a:23). Yet the division between winners and losers in this competition is such that each is commonly understood as constituting separate “worlds”. In taking Malaysia “closer to its goal of becoming a fully developed nation by the year 2020” (*New Straits Times*, 16 September 1992:16), KLCC speeds the journey out of the developing world. Petronas Towers’ skybridge (Figure 3) defines a symbolic “gateway”, not only into the KLCC project, but also, perhaps, into the “new opportunities” of the developed world (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa.* 1996a:np). Mahathir (1992:np) took the opportunity at the KLCC launch to describe Malaysia’s development as a “role model” for other

developing nations which presumably also wish to bridge the gap between the First and Third Worlds.

Architecture and urban design are thus deployed as a symbol of national transformation. The use of high-rise architecture, in particular, is a well-trodden symbolic path to the modern world (Domosh, 1988). The skyscraper is a celebration of modern building technology, “a marker of modernity worldwide” (King, 1996:105). A supposedly positive public response to the KLCC project, therefore, is interpreted as a sign of national willingness to change, to accept the new, to embrace, perhaps, modernity itself. The Petronas Towers’ architect, Cesar Pelli, who also designed Canary Wharf in London, compares apparent receptiveness in Kuala Lumpur with negative reactions to “the first true skyscraper in England”: Canary Wharf sits uneasily at the edge of a city which is very ambivalent about skyscrapers, whereas “the Petronas Towers are for a city that is embracing them wholeheartedly” (cited in *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 1994:21). Malaysia, he adds, “sees itself as moving forward to the future whereas some think that Britain had its best days in the nineteenth century” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 1994:21).

Yet Kuala Lumpur has featured high-rise buildings at least since the 1970s (Yeang, 1992). Two characteristics may be said to distinguish the Petronas Towers from much of the previous high-rise architecture in Malaysia. The first concerns a purported attempt to create a recognisably Malaysian skyscraper by incorporating “local” design features. In addition to Canary Wharf, Pelli had previously designed towers in New York, Tokyo, Mexico City and Buenos Aires, and so had considerable experience of tailoring designs to suit cities and countries with wildly differing characteristics (*The Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 1994). The floor plan of the Petronas Towers is said to be “based on Islamic geometric traditions” and the building’s design features are intended to “convey a specific sense of



Source: KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd. (circa. 1996a) Kuala Lumpur City Centre: Business and Investment Opportunities. Marketing brochure, np.

Figure 3. *The skybridge defining “Your gateway to new opportunities”.*

their tropical locale” (Cesar Pelli and Associates, 1997:29). According to the project brief, the multiple facets created by the form of the towers “reflect the sunlight forming the combination of deep shadow and dazzling brightness that might be found in a tropical forest” (Cesar Pelli and Associates, 1994:np). One commentator’s suggestion that this symbolism has “all the profundity and insight of an in-flight magazine” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 1995:A5) is perhaps instructive. An article in Malaysian Airlines’ *Wings of Gold* noted how “Big Ben, Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids,

even the Little Mermaid conjure immediate images of a particular city” (Chee, 1993:54). Figure 4 picks out the Petronas Towers in the world of monuments traversed by Malaysia’s national airline.

The issue of profundity, therefore, is perhaps missing the point. What Mahathir considered was being constructed was a “cultural landmark” (Mahathir, 1992:np). The image of the Petronas Towers is used in “advertising the country’s arrival as a modern industrial nation” (Progressive Architecture,



Source: Malaysian Airlines advertisement, 1997.

Figure 4. The world of Malaysian Airlines.

1995:86). As King (1996:101-102) points out, “in what is now a totally institutionalized mimetic televisual convention, it is the White House, the Houses of Parliament, the Duma or Eiffel Tower which – subliminally elided into the capital city – is used to mediate the meaning of the Nation to the gazes of the World”. If it is not the individual building which fixes the gaze on the rectangular screen, it is a wider view of the city skyline. In Figure 4, the Petronas Towers flag Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia in what may be understood as the “global skyline” (King, 1996:101-102): “this unique pair with the distinctive outlines, is a national landmark in a global setting” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., circa. 1996a:7). There is, of course, something of a paradox in a situation in which the work of constructing the supposed “uniqueness” of place is not only expressed in a universally understood language of postmodern architecture, but is also carried out by a global network of property development “experts” (Olds, 1995).

There have been a number of earlier attempts to create supposedly recognisably Malaysian skyscrapers. These include Menara Maybank, the sloping roof of which is supposedly shaped like a Malay *keris*, or “dagger”, and the “LUTH” Tower, the Muslim pilgrimage fund building in which five columns are said to represent the five pillars of Islam (Tan, 1996). What distinguishes the Petronas Towers from

these other “Malaysian” high-rises is simply how high. While only claiming the world record from Chicago’s Sears Tower by means of contentious functionless spires (*Business Times*, 18 April 1996: 20), the Petronas Towers is “head and shoulders” taller than the mostly “placeless” high-rise buildings of Kuala Lumpur’s GTA (cf. Yeang, 1989). Simply being the tallest, however, does not ensure international recognition. The “fact” has to be disseminated across the world. I, for one, grew up believing that the Empire State Building was the world’s tallest while it would seem that this was “in fact” eclipsed as early as 1972 (*Guardian*, 1 March 1996).

That a *New York Times* article on the battle for the tallest building is reported to have begun with, “Well, KL has won” (*New Sunday Times*, 2 February 1997:10) suggests that the size of the Petronas Towers has gained “world” recognition. This is undoubtedly in part because, unlike the Empire State Building’s other successors, the Petronas Towers has meant that the tallest building record has left the “Western world” for the first time since for at least a century (*Progressive Architecture*, 1996). It is perhaps somewhat surprising, therefore, that Mahathir actually plays down the record-breaking height of the Petronas Towers. I suggest two possible explanations: first, a perception that “the public display of sheer size serves less to demonstrate its

superiority than to confirm the consciousness of its inferiority” (King, 1996:104); and, second, an awareness of plans in other cities, especially in Asia, to build even higher (*Business Week*, 4 April 1994). The ephemerality of “symbolic capital” applies as much to the “global skyline” as to that of any individual city (cf. Dovey, 1992). There is nothing especially thrilling about being the fourth, third or even the second tallest building in any world.

Most reports on the Petronas Towers in the western media discuss the building in terms of other past and projected record-breaking attempts. There is, no doubt, good journalistic reasoning behind this – putting the building “into context”, historically and/or spatially. Yet it is perhaps significant that this contextualisation is frequently concerned less with city- or national-level transformation and competition than with the emergence of an Asian region. Writing about the boom in high-rise architecture in Asia in the mid-1990s, one commentator made the point that “the world’s tallest towers are planned for cities few in the West could place, let alone pronounce” (*Guardian*, 1 March, 1996:2). To this may be added, “spell”: another article located the world’s tallest structure in “Kuala Lumpa” (*The Independent*, 10 September 1996:5). This may lead one to question the extent to which the Petronas Towers is serving to put Kuala Lumpur or Malaysia on world maps. Neo-orientalist reporting in the west subsumes Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (and other unspellable, unpronounceable places of uncertain location below the regional level) within a rising east. And this is an east whose “defeat” of America at its own architectural game is read as a sign of a broader “threat” to the western world.

The new region, however, suggests opportunity as well as threat. The KLCC project was said to be a “visible and viable commercial enclave for a great city in the fastest-growing region in the world” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa.* 1995:4); it is “the business location in South-east Asia” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd.,

circa. 1995:1). Advertising thus draws upon and contributes to the discursive construction of a dynamic economic region. It also imagines the project’s – and, by extension, the city and the nation’s – symbolic centrality within that region. The notion of a gateway (Figure 3), then, is understood not in terms of a regional border or boundary, but rather as an invitation to its centre – a project and a nation “strategically located in the heart of South-east Asia” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa.* 1995:6). In his work on Malaysian foreign policy, David Camroux has pointed to a conceptual link between discourses of Asia(n regionalism) and the construction of a pan-ethnic Malaysian national identity. A multi-ethnic body such as ASEAN, for example, “symbolises for the Malaysian leadership a model to tacitly proffer to Malaysian society as a whole” (Camroux, 1994:19). External and domestic imperatives are thus seen to be intertwined. However, it is specifically to the internal or domestic iconography of the Petronas Towers which I turn in the next section.

NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR NEW MALAYS(ANS)

Reports on the construction of the Petronas Towers within Malaysia make much of a “race to the top” between Japanese- and South Korean-led consortia undertaking the construction of towers 1 and 2 respectively (*New Straits Times*, 28 April 1997:8). Such representations articulate a sense of the scientific and technical self-sufficiency of a new “Asian” region, while also imagining specifically national-level competition as the dynamic for the region as a whole. As suggested above, national and regional level imaginings are thus, somewhat paradoxically, mutually supporting. At the same time, the Islamic symbolism of the building may be said to indicate the role that followers of this religion have to play in an Asian or non-western modernity. While one western architecture critic suggests that Islamic symbolism “will



mean little to the large number of non-Islamic Chinese” (Rowan Moore cited in *Independent on Sunday*, 23 February 1997:36), Islam is in part reconciled with multicultural national identity through being understood as an Asian or eastern value system. Islam is associated with regional or pan-national identity, not a national one. This section is concerned with the way in which the Petronas Towers, as a symbolic landscape artifact, promotes ideals about the nation and the world for consumption by Malays(ians).

The Petronas Towers does powerful representational work in the production of definitions of Islam and Malayness which are appropriate for a modern multicultural nation. One commentator suggests that the Petronas Towers’ Islamic motifs are intended as an architectural sign of the *Melayu Baru* (“new Malay”), the modern Muslim, who has entered the world of commerce (Abidin Kusno cited in King, 1996:113). The building thus offers a new international vantage point for a modern pan-national Islam which is to be practised nationally by *Melayu Baru*. In so doing, Malays will ultimately no longer require affirmative action which is perceived as ethnically divisive, an impediment to multicultural national unity. It was, in part, the extraction of newly-discovered petroleum reserves and rising oil prices from 1973 which had financed public sector growth for NEP affirmative action on behalf of the Malay community (Jomo, 1995). Now, the national oil company, Petronas, is concerned less with financing aggregate ethnic gains than with private sector profit and a viable Malay business class. The Petronas Towers may thus be read as representative of twin strands of Vision 2020 nationalism: Malays taking their rightful place in the national economy without threatening to displace national “others”; and a united Malaysia “standing tall” in the world of nations (Khuo, 1995).

KLCC is also a site at which more Malays can become new Malays. During construction,

the project featured a “technology-transfer scheme” in which every expatriate “expert” had a Malaysian (and preferably Malay) understudy.¹ The Minister of Education publicly reminded KLCC of its “social responsibility” to transfer skills and technology to *bumiputera*, (Najib cited in *New Straits Times*, 5 May 1995:2) and expatriates speak of a pressure to demonstrate “local participation”.² The expansion of Malay capabilities and experience which, since NEP, has formed a prominent part of nation building is thus facilitated by participation in the physical task of (re)building the nation. Having equipped themselves with knowledge and experience from international “experts”, Malays will be able to bring about future “world class” national development of their own.

The Petronas Towers is used to advertise a range of world class commercial and industrial products in Malaysia, from trucks and telephones to refrigerators. One advertisement shows Malaysia Electric Corporation (MEC) Bhd.’s “3-door frost-free refrigerator” in an imagined skyline comprising Malaysia’s other “greatest achievements”. In addition to the Petronas Towers, these include the tallest flagpole in the world, which is in Merdeka Square, and Menara Kuala Lumpur, the world’s fourth tallest telecommunications tower. The advertisement also includes a semi-diagrammatic representation of MEC’s refrigerator range which increases in height (and volume) from left to right, thus evoking charts of building height records and of evolution more broadly. Unlike the Petronas Towers, the three-storey 500 litre model may not be the largest in the world, but it is “the largest ever to be made in Malaysia” (*New Sunday Times*, 21 March 1997). What is more, designed to “international quality”, MEC’s fridges – like *Melayu Baru* – are equipped to “stand up” to

¹Interview with Project Manager, Zublin J.V., KLCC car and truck rental, 16 April 1997.

²Interview with General Manager, Real Estate Management Division, KLCC Holdings Bhd., 7 April 1997.

the competition of the “world market” (*New Sunday Times*, 21 March 1997).

Notions of corporate and industrial competitiveness form part of a broader sense that *Malaysia Boleh* (literally meaning “Malaysia can”). One newspaper article suggests that “the Towers reflect the current mood of expansion where high rise seems to equate with high ambition. They tune in to the spirit of the age” (*New Straits Times*, 28 April 1997:8). But perhaps the point is that they do not simply “reflect” a mood of optimism; rather, the Petronas Towers are intended as Malaysians’ “towers of strength” (*New Straits Times*, 28 April 1997:8), proving to the population that the sky is the limit for what they “can do”. The multicultural Malaysian Everest Team’s high-profile conquest of the world’s highest peak in May 1997 was described as “an achievement that shows the world Malaysia Boleh!” (*New Straits Times*, 27 May 1997:7). The Petronas Towers contributes to this fostering of a sense of “world” recognition of national achievement. Indeed it is perhaps more likely to attract the gaze of the world since, unlike the Everest ascent, the Petronas Towers represents a peak that no other nation has yet before reached. The way others see – or are said to see – Malaysia is thought to be bound up with new ways in which Malaysians come to see themselves. The Petronas Towers and the summit of Mount Everest are vantage points of Malaysians’ “world class” status.

Envisioning Malaysian modernity, therefore, is to be understood as part of a state imperative of transforming the imagination of citizens to inspire national modernisation (or at least to gain their acquiescence in the context of dislocation and transformation). However, the process is considered reciprocal since the attitudes and conduct of citizens, in turn, contribute to the imaging of Kuala Lumpur and the nation. While the Petronas Towers may be said to promote optimism about what Malaysia(ns) “can do”, there is sporadic official lamentation that certain traits of Malaysian social life – what Malaysians

actually do – adversely affect the nation’s international image. Problematic conduct such as littering and vandalism is said to affect a disproportionately large number of (presumably “old”) Malays who, despite the visionary developmental efforts of the state, are unable or unwilling to see beyond the *kampung* (village) (for example, *Malay Mail*, 31 May 1997). The visibility of the Petronas Towers (internationally and in the city) alone is not enough to ensure that Malaysia is seen to be modern. Malay(sian) conduct is problematised in relation to idealised national representations of Malaysian urbanity and civility for global consumption. “*Kampung-style*” behaviour is bad, in part, because it is bad for business (cf. Morris, 1993).

Malaysia Boleh, however, is to be understood not only as part of purported state attempts to liberate Malays from the debilitating *kampung* (Mahathir, 1970) but also in terms of a mental decolonisation of a nation thought to be afflicted by a complex of subservience and inferiority *vis-à-vis* the west and other parts of the “developed world” (Khuo, 1995). Mahathir noted the importance of “creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society with faith and confidence in itself, justifiably proud of what it is, of what it has accomplished” to the attainment of Vision 2020 (Mahathir, 1993:404); and, from the outset, KLCC was understood as a “visionary development that will take Malaysia closer to its goal of becoming a fully developed nation by the year 2020” (*New Straits Times*, 16 September 1992:1). In this context, it is perhaps surprising that little was made of the fact that post-colonial Malaysia was undertaking one of the largest real estate development projects in the world on the site of the former British colonial racecourse.

SPACE OF CONTEST

The fact that little official attention was given to the (post-)colonial connotations of the KLCC site was, no doubt, in part due to earlier opposition to the decision to allow the



racecourse to be used for commercial development. Plans to relocate the Jalan Ampang racecourse had, in fact, been announced as far back as August 1982, but this was said to be in order to turn the site into a “park for the public” (*New Straits Times*, 21 August 1989:8). Following the imposition of Section 8 of the Land Acquisition Act in October 1983, the Selangor Turf Club (STC) was given three years to find an alternative location before its 39 ha site was converted into the park. City Hall eventually issued an eviction notice in May 1988, but STC was granted another three years to develop a new race track at Sungei Besi, Selangor. STC, meanwhile, proposed that it would cede its 27 ha of leasehold land to the government without compensation in return for permission to develop the remaining 12 ha (which was freehold land) for commercial purposes (*New Straits Times*, 21 August 1989:8). However, following an extraordinary general meeting on 18 August 1989, STC announced the sale of all 39 ha to Seri Kuda Sdn. Bhd. raising fears that rather than being “opened” to the public, the former colonial racecourse would be developed into real estate as part of the GTA (*Sunday Star*, 20 August 1989) (Figure 2).

Seri Kuda’s application to rezone the site was publicly opposed by the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM) and an architect, Ruslan Khalid, who wrote an open letter to the *New Straits Times* (NST) proposing a public donation fund, “so that we can create a park for the people from money raised by the people” (*New Straits Times*, 28 August 1989:np). Some months later, an article in the NST proposed a possible plan for a “people’s park” under the heading “this land is your land” (*New Straits Times*, 9 February 1990:9). The accompanying text stresses that it has only been because the club is “exclusive” that the people had failed to recognise its potential to become “an oasis in an asphalt desert” (*ibid.*). The idea of an oasis suggests not only shelter from the “madding crowd” (for which a “Dome of Serenity” is provided), but also the “experience of nature”

in a Federal Territory described as “growing into a concrete jungle” (*New Straits Times*, 9 February 1990:9). In response to the alienating “harsh effects of towering concrete”, a windmill is said to symbolise “the harmony of life and the generation of pollution-free energy” (*New Straits Times*, 9 February 1990:9). A so-called Artist’s Corner and Graffiti Wall are said to allow creative self-expression in contrast, perhaps, to a tendency for “top-down” learning and development. The following year, residents of Kuala Lumpur learned that “their” land would be developed as a RM 7 billion city centre (*New Straits Times*, 12 July 1991).

The former racecourse, then, had been the site of contest over definitions of appropriate post-colonial urban development long before work on KLCC even began. In part, resistance to the “development” of the site relates to broader critiques of global capitalism and, in particular, the potentially deleterious environmental and social effects of the determination of land use by market value alone (Bird, 1993) and the privatisation of urban space (Fyfe, 1998). Plans to develop the racecourse site signify the spatial reorganisation of the city, and the GTA in particular, by market principles and the broader privatisation of urban space in Malaysia (Sobri, 1985). The issue of resistance also links in with ideas on the cultural dimension of capitalism in general and urban development in particular (Jacobs, 1994; Zukin, 1995). Thus, while claiming to speak for “the public”, urban conservationists’ views are legitimated by their professional status and cultural capital. Given the prominence of “heritage” in work on culture industries, it is perhaps significant that Ruslan Khalid is a prominent member of the heritage group, *Badan Warisan*. Predominantly middle class and expatriate *Badan*’s cultural opposition to urban redevelopment is artefactual rather than political.

Similarly, EPSM critique of urban development may, at one level, be understood in terms of a broader middle class

environmentalism. However, any notion of cosmopolitan middle classes simply mobilising universal environmental discourses in opposition to global capital serves to deflect attention from both the way in which environmental critique is deployed in the Malaysian context, and the complexity of the operation of state capitalism. As the President of EPSM pointed out, the decision to develop the KLCC has prompted critique of specifically Malaysian developmental practices and attitudes. He gives examples of what he sees as a “lack of accountability”: not only overriding the allocated land use for the racecourse in the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan against public wishes; but also the fact that no EIA was carried out; and that the results of a Department of Environment traffic survey were never made public.³ *Malaysia Boleh*, he says, is paradoxical given that the only Malaysians who “can do” anything meaningful in the development process are those personally close to the Prime Minister.

Seventy per cent of Seri Kuda, which purchased the real estate “plot of gold” (Ho, 1991:15), was owned by Pacific States Investments Ltd., reportedly controlled by T. Ananda Krishnan or “AK”, who is a former director of both Bank Negara and Petronas and said to be a long-time close friend of Mahathir (Gomez & Jomo, 1997). The KLCC project thus confirmed a sense that all major decision-making in a hierarchical process emanated from Mahathir himself and that even private sector success was dependent on close relationships with the upper echelons of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) of which Mahathir is also president. Criticism of KLCC within UMNO was most likely because Krishnan is a Sri Lankan Tamil, not a Malay (Gomez & Jomo, 1997), but the involvement of Petronas, in particular, also evoked earlier suggestions of high-level misuse of public

³Interview with President, Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM), 22 May 1997.

funds. In another “Mahathir project” in the 1980s, the Dayabumi Complex, Petronas was used to rescue the owners, the Urban Development Administration, by paying almost twice the market value for the building (Bowie, 1991). Critique of the untransparent, possibly corrupt, decision to redesignate the racecourse, against the wishes of “the people” can be understood in terms of (while also contributing to) a national discourse of “accountability” (Harper, 1996).

SYMBOLIC DISCONTENT AND CULTURAL REWORKING

If the “exclusive” space of the racecourse had been largely unheeded by most residents of Kuala Lumpur, except on race days, no “KL-ite” glance could fail to encounter the Petronas Towers. As an almost omnipresent visual focus for life in the city, the building has become imbued with meanings relating urban subjectivities. And, as an equally ubiquitous national monument, it has assumed a symbolic centrality in the developmental evaluations and aspirations of national citizens beyond the capital city. It may be said that intended meanings of the Petronas Towers are subject to “cultural reworking” through individual and collective experiences, memories and histories (cf. Pred, 1995:20). Given the limited space for formal public participation in, and critique of, the development process in Malaysia, it is possible that popular stories, gossip and rumour assume an even more significant role in articulating “symbolic discontent” (cf. Pred, 1995:20) than they would in political environments which accord greater space to civil society. This raises the issue of how to “use” everyday knowledges which are not only for the most part non-textualised, but are also obtained outside of formal interview situations and which have all too often been dismissed as “unrepresentative” or “subjective” (Shamsul, 1996:479). In addition to interview material, much of what follows in this section has been compiled from my research diary



which during fieldwork became the container for all those conversations, observations and experiences which did not fit into any other category of data collection.

A rumour which was circulating during my undergraduate fieldwork in 1994 was that Petronas had been coerced into participation in KLCC. The oil company's rescue of the Dayabumi Complex mentioned above had occurred as recently as 1989 and yet this building was to be vacated so that Petronas could become the "anchor tenant" for the twin towers. It was initially calculated that Petronas and all of its subsidiaries, housed together in one building for the first time, would occupy one-and-a-half towers, or three-quarters of the total floor space.⁴ This was later seen to be an over-estimate, leaving the whole of Tower 2 as lettable space. For all the undoubted attractions of the building in terms of both facilities and prestige, popular belief had it that few companies were willing to "pay the price" for building so high. One leasing agent conceded that there had been a "slow uptake" for the half-million square feet of space.

One floor, at least, was presumed to have been secured, however. It was widely rumoured in Kuala Lumpur that Mahathir himself would occupy the top floor of one of the towers – if he was not already doing so. Perhaps that was why there was no lettable space above the 84th floor? I could see no sign of the Prime Minister when I visited the towers myself, but this, of course, did little to diminish a sense of Mahathir keeping his "authoritarian eye" on the city population. Even in the rare moments when the Petronas Towers disappears from view in the capital, there is a sense that the building – and, by extension, the state – can see you. Official literature on KLCC which describes its "intelligent buildings" (KLCC Holdings Sdn.

Bhd., *circa.* 1995:4) perhaps only serves to confirm suspicions of surveillance. Greater uncertainty lay in the issue of "which tower"?

This dilemma was, in turn, resolved by another popular rumour circulating during my doctoral fieldwork in 1997. It could only be Japanese tower 1, since South Korean-built tower 2 was said to be "leaning". The rumour has numerous possible connotations. First, that the South Korean contractors were simply not "up to the job". Although the choice of Asian companies may be said to reflect a sense of regional technological and technical capability, there is a concomitant sense of an internal (i.e. national) hierarchy which places South Korea on a level below Japan. It may only have been a "matter of degrees" but the distinction was reaffirmed nonetheless. Despite their apparently inferior workmanship, the South Koreans still "lost the race", though this, of course, could be because the Japanese went "straight" to the top. This connects with a second connotation, of KLCC having been "crooked" from its inception with the (at best) "secretive" involvement of enigmatic "AK" (*Malaysian Business*, 1991:15). If not actually corrupt then, third, KLCC is at least misconceived. The race to the top was symptomatic of a project which, like its main proponent, was "in a hurry" (Khoo, 1995). The Petronas Towers was a "rush job", not only ignoring the wishes of the public, but undertaken without the requisite geological research (*Aliran Monthly*, 1996). Indeed, for those convinced of Mahathir's super-humanity, it was perhaps only the force of the Prime Minister's personality – as opposed to any technical consideration – which was keeping the building upright. Popular organic comparisons of the building – to an upturned *jagung* ("corn cob"), for example – may be said to capture the sense of its ephemerality, its perishability.

Others joked that all would not be lost if the Petronas Towers was to collapse. After all,

⁴Interview with leasing agent, Jones Lang Wootton, 29 May 1997. The remainder of this paragraph is based on information obtained from this interview.

Malaysia would still be home to the longest building in the world(!).⁵ The building was thus diagnosed as symptomatic of a nation obsessed with superlatives: in addition to being the world's tallest building, the Petronas Towers had the dubious distinction of having necessitated "the single biggest Concrete Pour for a building foundation in the world to date" (*Building Property Review*, 1995:87); there was also the tallest flagpole in the world; and Kuala Lumpur Linear City (KLLC) which, stretching 12 km along the Klang River, would be the longest building in the world – far longer than a fallen Petronas Tower (or two) (Kuala Lumpur Linear City Sdn. Bhd., 1997). Much of this popular discursive contest was directed at Mahathir personally. Explanatory critique ranged from a perception of his monumental ego to suggestions of a diminutive manhood. Whichever, there was a sense that expensive public works should, by definition, work for residents of the city and not merely serve to satisfy "sky-pricking" (cf. Jencks, 1980:6) fantasies (Lim, 1997).

This connects with a broader popular perception of the supposedly erroneous priorities of urban development in Malaysia. While KLCC may serve a symbolic function in advertising Malaysia internationally and provide "world-class" infrastructure to promote further economic expansion, in the construction stages at least, the project did little to ameliorate urban citizens' everyday lives. On the contrary, in addition to reducing Kuala Lumpur's already sparse "green space", KLCC only served to augment air pollution and traffic congestion in the capital (*New Straits Times*, 5 July 1996). It is no coincidence that Jalan Ampang became the renowned

traffic-jam black spot in an already-congested city. While these problems may have been concerned with the construction phase, the sheer size of the project raised fears that completion would only mean yet more cars and more traffic problems. Each tower will house up to 5,000 workers and KLCC has underground parking for 5,000 cars.⁶ As one informant pointed out, this is ironic given that the original justification for moving the racecourse was said to be the congestion caused by race meets which occurred once a week at most.⁷

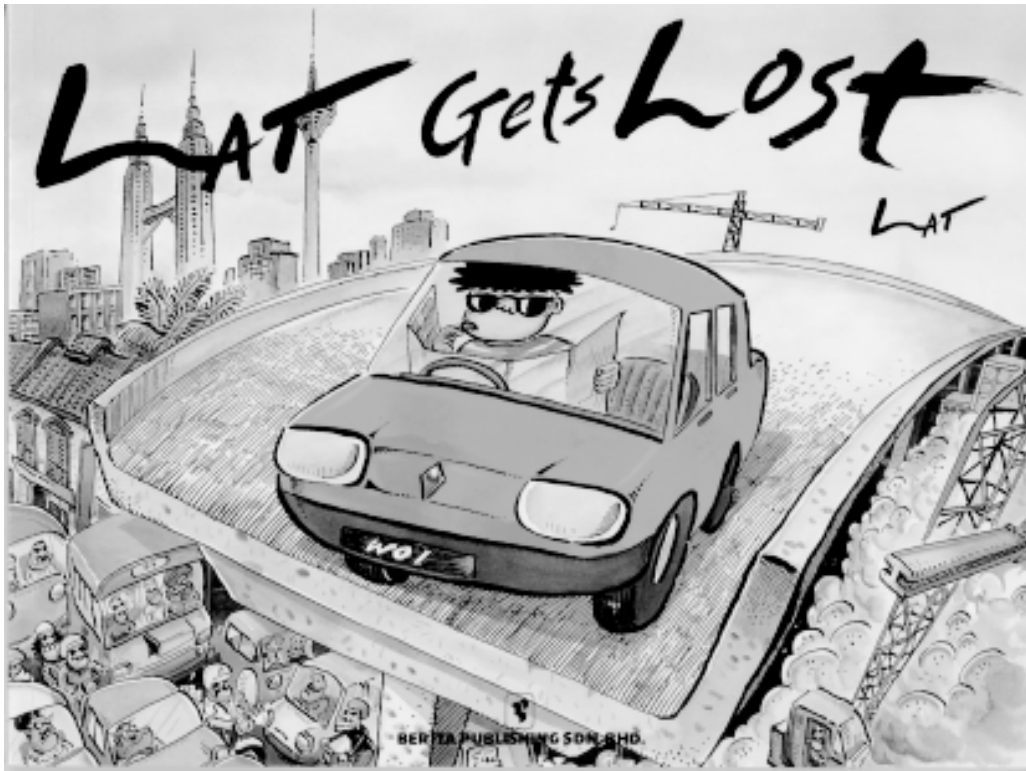
The front cover of a book by Malaysia's celebrated cartoonist, Lat, is bound up with such popular problematisations of the development of Kuala Lumpur (Figure 5). A new arrival to the city sits in his Proton – Malaysia's national car – at the end of an uncompleted road. Smoke billows from the on-going construction work (which is also suggested by the crane on the skyline) reducing the traffic below to a standstill. However, there is perhaps a sense here of problems relating not only to incompleteness, but to the state vision of development more generally. The driver is faced with the choice of turning around – leaving the "development" of the city behind – or else plunging over the edge. His map provides few clues as to alternative routes; the cartographer's view is as out of touch with the street level(s) as are the Petronas Towers and Menara Kuala Lumpur shown on the skyline. The Master Planner's panoramic "totalisations" (cf. de Certeau, 1985:124) cannot discern the fine detail of everyday lives which consist of "getting lost" (the Proton driver) or else going nowhere (the stationary traffic below).

The haze which afflicted Kuala Lumpur and much of the rest of Southeast Asia during 1997

⁵This idea was based on a cartoon about the construction the Prangin Shopping Mall in Penang which was said to be undermining the foundations of 'Komtar', the tallest building on the island. The cartoon contrasted "now: Komtar - the tallest building in Penang" with "in future: Komtar - the longest building in Penang" (*New Straits Times*, 21 March 1997:12).

⁶Interview with Site Manager, Lehrher McGovern logistics, 10 May 1997.

⁷Interview with President EPSM, 22 May 1997.



Source: Lat (1996) *Lat Gets Lost*, Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, front cover.

Figure 5. *Lat Gets Lost*.

raised new possibilities for popular problematisations of development centred upon the Petronas Towers. Fears for the health of citizens in the smog which worsened from August prompted the state Meteorological Services Department to publish daily recordings of an Air Pollution Index (API) in different parts of the country. However, the API was widely thought to be at best inaccurate and, more likely, plainly falsified by untrustworthy, image-conscious authorities (Pillai, 1997). It was the Petronas Towers which came to be seen (or not) as a huge “dipstick” for air pollution levels in the city (*The Star*, 28 July 1997). A contributor to an Internet forum described his friend’s “personal index” as follows: “if the Petronas Twin Towers can be seen in outline in a haze, it [the API] is over 200. If it cannot be seen it must be over

250. If the neighbouring buildings are also encased in smoke, more than 300”. More than this, he claimed that this method “is more effective than the figures the government gives out” (Pillai, 1997:np).

Severe air pollution, whether attributed to industrialisation in Peninsula Malaysia itself or else understood in terms of forest fires in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), fermented critical views of Malaysian development more broadly. Forty-three Malaysian companies were involved in the logging in Kalimantan, some of which were state-owned (*Guardian*, 8 November 1997). This suggests a broader sense of an elite group of corporate stars and their political allies benefiting from development, while much of the rest of the population is left to suffer the consequences

(Gomez & Jomo, 1997). The Petronas Towers may allude architecturally to the Malaysian context and claim to represent the lofty ambitions of all Malaysians, but from “below” it may also appear to be from “another world”. At one level, this is perhaps the intention. The Petronas Towers’ steel cladding may be likened to the “strategic armouring” of Los Angeles which Davis (1992) describes, protecting worlds of commerce from undesirable groups and individuals. The Malaysian poet, Cecil Rajendra alludes to notions of the militarisation of the city in his “War Zone”: “The world’s tallest buildings/ look like giant shell casings/ embedded in the heart of our city”.⁸ In the battlefield of representation which is contemporary Kuala Lumpur, state-constructed urban space is reworked as a symbol of a repressive, self-interested political and economic elite through the discursive “weapons of the weak” (cf. Scott, 1985).

CONCLUSION

The final plan for KLCC included a 20 ha (50 acre) park (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa*. 1996a&b). Designed by the “award-winning” Brazilian landscape artist, the (late) Roberto Burle Marx, the park, at one level, is understood as contributing to KLCC’s international real estate appeal. Marketing literature envisages the park as “‘balm’ for the stresses of work” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa*. 1996a:9). However, there is also a sense of the park as a response to public opposition to commercial development of the racecourse site. Ananda Krishnan himself described it as “a gift to the public” (cited in Ho, 1991:15). Official marketing literature may be said to appropriate much of the vocabulary of previous contest: KLCC park will be a “green lung freely accessible to the public” and “a park for the people” (KLCC Holdings Sdn. Bhd., *circa*.

⁸Thanks to Anwar Fazal for bringing this to my attention.

1996b:np). When rumours of redevelopment first reached the press, the minister in charge of the Federal Territory and its development reportedly warned, “city folk have been waiting for this park since the idea was mooted in the early 80s. I think any plan contrary to this will disappoint the public” (Sulaiman Mohamed, cited in *Sunday Star*, 20 August 1989:6). If the public was, as we have seen, subsequently disappointed, KLCC’s park for the people signifies a regime which is “responsive” as well as “repressive” (cf. Crouch, 1996).

However, I suggest that “response” here is to be understood as more than merely placatory or concessionary. Rather, it may be suggested that there is also a sense of popular problematisation of existing development effecting transformation of would-be hegemonic developmental aims and objectives. This is, perhaps, a rather different conception of everyday resistance to the “foot dragging” popularised by Scott (1985). The latter suggests to me merely the application of friction, resistance to a pre-existing force, rather than any positive intervention in or alteration to that force. A notion of would-be hegemonic and everyday counter-vision existing in a kind of creative tension, on the other hand, allows for an expanded conception of the agency of those “below”. Everyday contest contributes to an on-going reworking of the would-be hegemonic vision in what might be understood as a circulatory process.

As has been shown, everyday contest extended beyond initial opposition to plans to “develop” this urban space. The KLCC site manifests emergent as well as residual meanings; it connects the specific or local with regional, global and particularly national-scale issues and concerns. The economic “crisis” which followed the fieldwork period on which much of this paper is based – and which brought to an end almost a decade of spectacular economic success in Malaysia – has added new layers of meaning about national and regional development to the

symbolic site. The contribution that over-investment in real estate has played in the economic problems of the region has been widely analysed (for example, Henderson, 1999). Mahathir's megadevelopment is thus seen anew: not only as symbolic of flawed development strategies, but as itself a causal factor in social and economic deterioration (Sardar, 1998). In this context, is it possible that the Petronas Towers is itself "re-visioned" as a specific moment in an obsolescent national developmental past. Emergent ways of seeing the building, including those "from below", articulate rationalities of national development which are perhaps post-Mahathirist.

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The Petronas Twin Towers in Malaysia

23

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