PAPER 6:
PUTRAJAYA AND THE FRENCH CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

Putrajaya, being one of the most significance and distinguished city of its kind in Malaysia is claimed to be of a 'true and progressive' Malaysian architectural expression. The architecture of Putrajaya has been drawn upon diverse influences resulting in a building that is uniquely 'Malaysian-Islamic' in character and universal in outlook. Above all it represents a fusion of the best of the past and present to create an enduring legacy for the future. Another administration centre of the sort, Versailles of France is an example of an architectural grandeur designed for an absolute monarch Louis XIV. It is resplendent as the prime example of the French baroque style. As with Putrajaya, Versailles is spreads with gardens and forests, added with immaculate parterres, great basins and orangery. This paper is therefore seeking an explanation on the influences and similarity (or imitation?) of both administration centre of Putrajaya and the Versailles. The intention is to gauge the development of Putrajaya architectural language in comparison to the French's Baroque particularly the city of Versailles. It is hope that the true characteristic is revealed.

KEYWORDS: Putrajaya,, Versailles, Administration Centre, Identity, Vernacular.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Architect, academician and historian have long thought the issue of architecture identity. Research and papers are mostly done on the discourse of the Malay vernacular architecture and on the other side on the environmental and weather adaptation. Very few did touch on the notion of Malaysia as a political entity and its relation with architectural design approaches.

In recent years, there has been a steady stream of architecture in Malaysia that refers back to our very own heritage and cultures. Architects, landscape architects and designers alike try to recover the vital underpinnings that once linked us to the past. Some manage to abstract and reinvigorate the vitality of vernacular elements while others merely indulge in a romantic peasantism. On the positive side, such approach enables architects to penetrate into the creative potential of traditional elements but the negative aspect is that many of them opt for a facile approach of imitating past forms, reducing these traditional symbols into mere signs.

As a new administration centre of Malaysia, Putrajaya embark on the Malaysian national identity of architecture. While Malay and Islamic design idioms dominate the architecture of Putrajaya, it also incorporates classical and contemporary elements to reflect the universal outlook of the Malaysian psyche.

Being the new administration centre of federal government of Malaysia, Putrajaya marks a new chapter in the history of modern city planning in Malaysia. It is set to be a model garden city with sophisticated information network base. Termed as Malaysia's first intelligent garden city, Putrajaya is designed to become a vital development catalyst – as the nerve centre of the nation and an ideal place to live and work. Lush greenery, botanical gardens and parks are spread across landscapes to provide a comfortable and quality lifestyle for its residents.

Putrajaya is one of the important architecture, which resembles the initial approaches of national identity architecture. At the moment, there is no comprehensive research done on the design approach principles, initial ideas and discourses on the Malaysian architecture. The

documentation of Putrajaya development is vital since it was built during the time when architecture profession has a strong and clear objective and political leadership did not restrict any critical ideas.

2.0 THE PUTRAJAYA MASTERPLAN

The original concept of creating the Putrajaya city was based on creating a 'city in the garden'. A high level of cut and fill works was initially envisaged in the creation of the new city. However, through careful planning and design by maximising the use of the existing topography, an intelligent garden city with minimum disruption to the natural environment has emerged. An unprecedented total of 37.5% of the entire site was designated as a green space. This has enhanced the overall creation of a 'garden city'.

Hill spurs as well as selected low-lying areas were designated for building works. The government precinct, positioned as the 'heart' of the development, sits on the highest plateau overlooking the entire township. The primary effect of the layout is to reflect and reinforce the position of Putrajaya as the new Federal Government Administrative Centre of Malaysia.

The City is divided into core and periphery areas. The central core area comprises the Government, Commercial, Civic and Cultural, Mixed Development and Sports & Recreational precincts. The design places the Prime Minister's Office complex at the highest point overlooking the City, visually portraying it as the symbolic head of the entire City. The precinct is defined by an oval drive, which unites the whole precinct. The Commercial Precinct located at the southern end of the site is on the lowest platform of the central core. It was planned such so that taller buildings can be built without overshadowing the Government Precinct.

A central boulevard, which runs across the core area, is a distinctive landmark of the city. Measuring just over 4km it can be clearly viewed from the elevated Prime Ministers Office Complex as the central spine linking the entire core area. Separating the core area form the periphery, where the residential precincts are located, is a large water body, which creates a natural division between the two. The neighbourhood precincts are planned to be 'self contained' with full public facilities and other amenities including commercial districts. The core and periphery areas have distinctive features and characteristics, which create different 'worlds' for the residents. The usage of the greens, open spaces and water features form natural separators for the different precincts.

3.0 THE GREENS

State of the art technology was incorporated throughout the entire development with natural features utilized in unique ways that combine aesthetics and convenience. In addition to being used as major recreational facilities, water bodies are also used as water filtration 'plants'. The man-made wetlands which form the northern face of the main lake contributes to the overall well-being of the area as well as to improving the water quality of the water bodies. Taman Wilayah, the 500-acre metropolitan park, provides the backdrop for the gateway from the north, as well as to serve as a water catchment area that acts as an environmental sieve for the water before being discharged into the lake.

The road network within Putrajaya provides flexibility in tandem with the sequential development of the township. A web of ring roads and numerous nodes not only enables flexibility for usage of the 'park and ride' concept but also reduces congestion at key intersections with the provision of alternative routing. The 37.5% of green space allocation has been realized with an integrated system of parks, watercourses, wetlands, forests and open spaces within which the built environment is set. The green areas have been further enhanced by the creation of the Putrajaya Lake and the Wetland areas, which now form major features of the city.

Parks, which include regional, urban and city parks, feature both formal and informal designs, catering to the working population, the residents as well as those seeking recreation outlets. Taman Wilayah, Botanical Garden, Taman Putra Perdana and Perdana Walk are among the significant parks with distinct characteristics of their own while Central gardens have also been created within the main core precincts. Further enhancing the garden city environment is the integrated transport network system of roads, rails and water transportation in which a pedestrian network has been incorporated. The modern transportation networks will reduce usage of cars within the core precincts and promote the concepts of a '21st century congestion-free, city of public transport.' In Putrajaya every place is considered a special place and is designed accordingly.

4.0 THE IMAGE AND CHARACTERISTIC

Environmental images are the result of two way process between the user and his environment (Kevin Lynch, 1977). While the environment suggests distinctions and relations, the user on the other hand suggests adaptability – selecting, organizing and endows with meaning of what he sees. Image may be analysed into three components, which are identity, structure and meaning. Identity implies its distinction from other things, its recognition as a separable entity, not in the sense of equality with something else but with the meaning of individuality and oneness. Identity should also include the spatial or pattern relation of the object to the user and to other objects. The objects itself must have some meaning whether practical or emotional.

Putrajaya, while making an attempt to feature and define the best of Malaysian identity of architecture, not only implementing and reinvigorating the vernacular architecture but also incorporates 'western and 'contemporary' elements (Dato Mohd Hashim Hassan, 2002). Though that sounds rather pastiche and superficial, this has been implemented and reflected in the architecture of Putrajaya. To clearly understand the language and approaches of its architecture, a few buildings are selected to define and explained of its expression.

4.1 The mosque – Masjid Putra

Fig. 1. Masjid Putra

One of the monument of Putrajaya, the red mosque was clearly influenced by the Mughal originated from India. It is clearly defined by its huge dome and several smaller domes. There is also a single minaret with 5 tiers standing at 116 meter tall, claimed to be the tallest minaret in the region (well, another record for Malaysia Guinness Book). One will feel dwarfed upon entering the mosque due to its size. The mosque itself is located in front of a bare and hot dataran. Plants are only found in front of the extended walkway. The main entrance to the mosque is very grand in it's appearance probably to give a sense of welcoming though it is extremely hot in the midday since there is no shading whatsoever. Probably to give a clearer direction to its entrance. The spaces are divided into three main areas, which are the 'sahn' or

the courtyard, the prayer hall and the functional room (in the basement). The windows, doors and panels are made of chengal wood to enhance the 'Malayness' of the mosque.

## 4.2 THE RESIDENCE OF THE PRIME MINISTER - SERI PERDANA
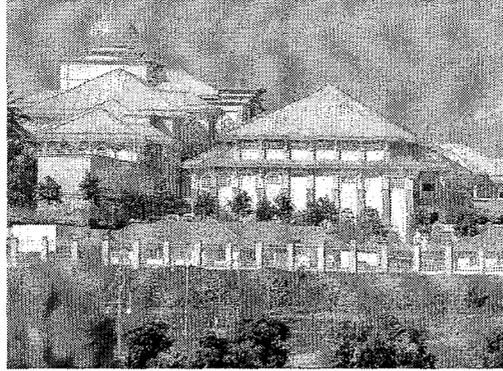
Fig. 2. Seri Perdana

Seri Perdana is the official residence of the prime minister. The architectural expression is inspired from the Malay vernacular tradition with its linear arrangement of spaces surrounded by arches, windows, doors, verandas and passages (Dato' Mohd Hashim Hassan, 2002). The buildings also make an extensive use of windows, fanlights, doors, grilles and lattices for cross ventilation and roof overhangs as shading devices. Looking at a glance, the buildings look more like a Palladian villa than a Malay vernacular architecture. The vast scale of the buildings contributes more to a Palladian style than a vernacular Malay architecture. The addition of the green dome defying the 'Malaynes' of the building. Even arches are hardly found in Malay architecture, due to the fact that the material used (timber) are impossible to be bended. Generally, the architectural expression is grandeur, supreme and monumental. This is to reflect the power of the leader and its authority and this speaks volumes of the political supremacy of the building.

4.3 THE ISTANA MELAWATI
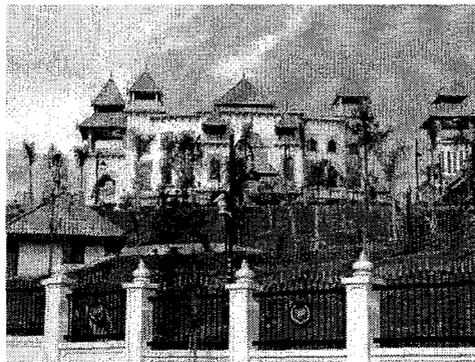
Fig. 3. Istana Melawati

Istana Melawati is located in Precinct 1, on the north-western slope of the hill within Persiaran Persekutuan. The palace is the retreat for His Majesty The Yang Di Pertuan Agong and his family as well as a venue for official and private functions. The roof form is inspired by the pyramidal form of the traditional mosque. It is rather strange though to see such a roof form being implemented in a palace (the form does not follow the functions). Anyway it does look distinctive and prominent especially when it is located on top of the hill. The tower structures or security watch towers with its pyramidal roof (that seems to be appropriate) enhances its strong architectural   silhouette   and   character.

4.4 The Prime Minister's Office – Perdana Putra

Fig. 4 Perdana Putra

Perdana Putra, the prime minister's office is located on top of a hill overlooking the Putrajaya Lake. Monumental and grandeur, the building with its green, onion shaped dome was inspired by the Mughal architecture. In the Islamic architecture, the dome represents the vault of heaven (James Dickie, 1995), and normally featured at the mosque, mausoleum or palaces. It is in fact very rare to find any dome used in administration building in the Islamic architecture. The notion is believed to enhance the grandeur, which is otherwise appearing to be humble and humane. The vertical line of the tall column further enhanced its height, suggesting power, authority and supremacy. The wall of the building is clad with brownish natural stone, complementing the green onion dome, creating a distinctive landmark to Putrajaya.

4.5 The Office Block
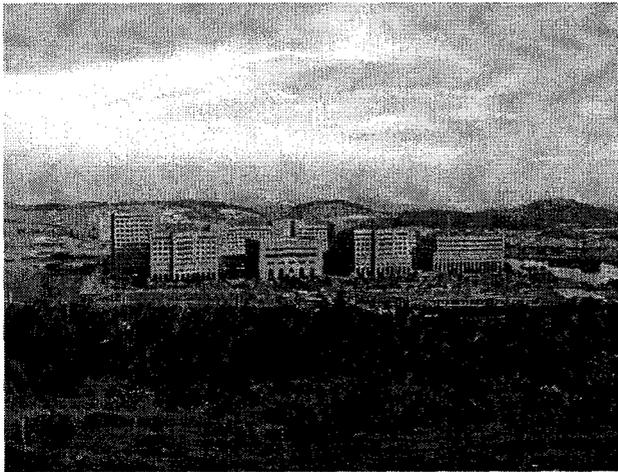
Fig. 5 The Office block.

The office building blocks which consist of federal government ministries, departments and agencies are located at the northern end of the core area. The building façade is rather flat and two dimensional as compared to the other buildings in Putrajaya. A series of block is punctured with windows and some arches for an 'Islamic' look. It is then finished with fair face brick, which break up the monotonous of the façade. The bulky and solid buildings have a very strong symmetrical composition. It is set in and around green open spaces and waterways and will

become a macrocosm and a reflection of the 'City-in-a-Garden' concept that defines Putrajaya as a whole.

5.0 THE VERSAILLES OF FRANCE

In the 17th century, France emerged as the most powerful state, centralised under an absolute monarch with a self-proclaimed Divine Right to rule. The king was the state. Business, arts and sciences were regulated by the king through newly-formed academies. A new breed of architects was spawned – the official court adviser who designed palaces, public buildings and churches for the state. For these monuments of vast scale and cost the appropriate style flourished...Baroque.

The concept of comprehensive landscape-planning, was fully realised in the gardens, palace and town of Versailles, which came to symbolise the power of the aristocrats.

The Baroque of the Versailles developed from Mannerism into a dynamic and unified architecture. Classical elements were integrated with sculpture, distorted and manipulated for dramatic effect.

The oval is a typical Baroque form. In church plans it integrated the rectangle and the circle to achieve simultaneous directional and centralised space, fulfilling the aims of architects and clergy alike.
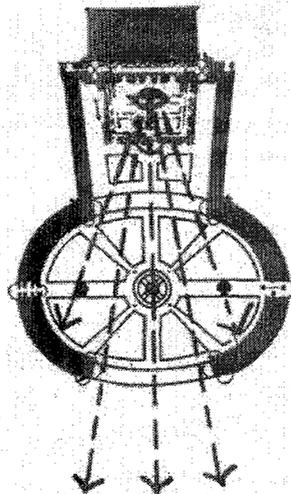

Fig. 6 The Baroque planning

Baroque planning exploits time and space. Usually planned on a vast scale, its long vistas give an illusion of infinity and endlessly change as you move through them.

Andre Le Notre who revolutionised French garden design created totally organised space (Jellicoe, 1995). The principles of composition are as follows
- Garden became part of a great land composition.
- Relate to an undulating land form
- Hedges must be clipped or carved (it gives refinement)
- The design must reflect the infinite spaces of the world (water reflection)
- Expanding views
- Sculpture and fountains, to provide rhythm and punctuate space
- It must be very directional (visually and physically).
- The garden can be seen all at one glace.

Versailles is a quarter mile long landscape with endless formal gardens at the rear where long intersecting paths extend outwards to infinity. It symbolised the king's total power over nation and nature. Versailles housed the seat of government, the court and high society.

## 6.0 THE IMAGE AND CHARACTERISTIC

6.1 the Châteaux of Versailles
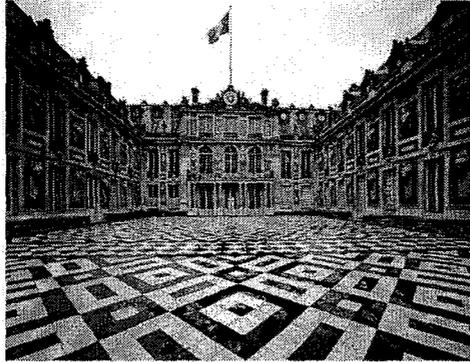
Fig. 7 The Chateaux of Versailles

The most dominant building in Versailles is the Château or the palaces. Meticulously design and built, the building reveals the architectural revolution, which Louis XIV created. The window and the column, the vertical and horizontal line, the massing and its composition, designed proportionately revealing the baroque architectural style to its height.

6.2 The Garden of Versailles
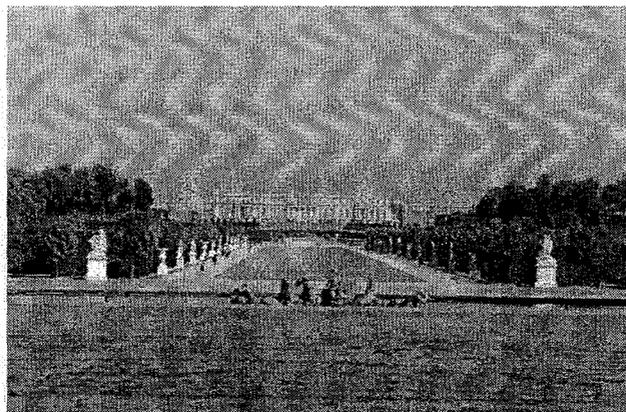
Fig. 8 The garden of Versailles

The garden of Versailles represents a celebration of perfectly balanced integration of art and nature. The parterres and promenades enhance the whole composition of the garden. French classicism dominates the gardens, imposing a strict geometrical order, shaping the flowerbeds and boxwood, and brightening the bosky depths with fountains and statuary. The great facades, the stone goddesses, the flowers and pools, the masks, columns, and towering trees are all created transforming by the ever-shifting forces of nature.

## 6.3 The Office Blocks (Administration Buildings)
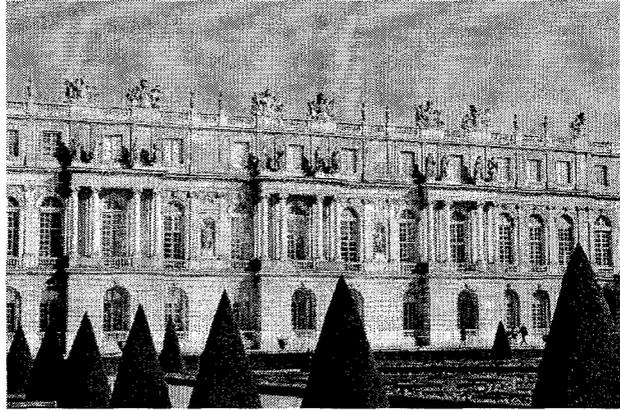
Fig. 9 The Administration Building of Versailles.

The administration building of Versailles seems to be humane and scale-down though the expression is monumental. The horizontal line and the vertical column proportionate to the whole scale of composition. As compared to office building blocks of Putrajaya, this façade treatment is rather dynamic and three dimensional caused by the extended balcony. The detail of the Baroque style ornament enhanced its grandeur and at the same time, humanize the scale.

6.4 The Cathedral Of Versailles
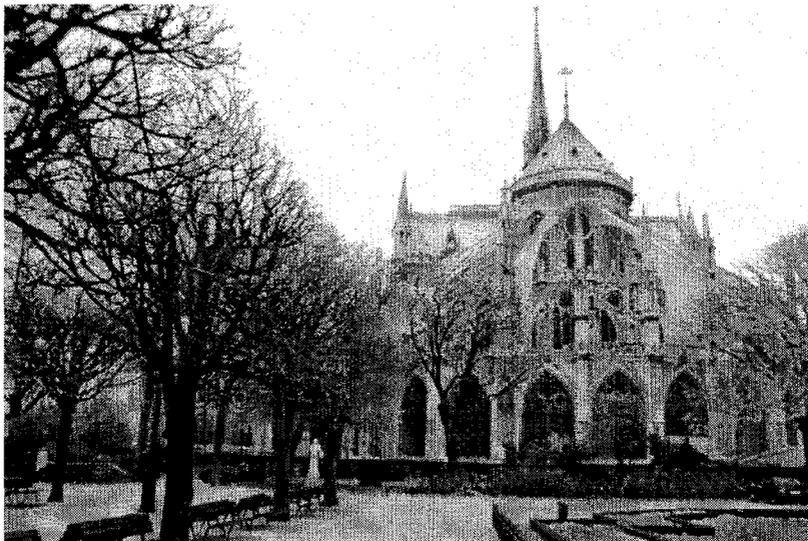
Fig. 10 The Cathedral of Versailles

The cathedral is a clear expression of baroque architecture. The spire, pointed arch with geometrical tracery and the buttresses contribute to the architectural expression. The conical roof structure enhances the height, which would otherwise stumpy in elevation thus creating a monumental yet humane structure.

7.0 PUTRAJAYA VERSUS VERSAILLES

The Seri Perdana, the official residence of the prime minister is sited on the crest of a mound, distinguished itself from the rest of the public structures, though in Malay village planning, the mosque is the most dominant structure in its placement and character.

The chateau de Versailles (the palace of Versailles) is in the highest plateau (and the highest building). Born out of the will of a king, the city has a rational and symmetrical grids of streets. For the standard of the 18th century, Versailles was a very modern European city.

The Baroque of the Versailles developed from Mannerism into a dynamic and unified architecture. Classical elements were integrated with sculpture, distorted and manipulated for dramatic effect.

The oval is a typical Baroque form. Rectangle and the circle are integrated to achieve simultaneous directional and centralised space. Planned on a vast scale, its long vistas give an illusion of infinity and endlessly change as you move through them. The same approach is implemented in Laman Depan, Laman Tengah and Laman Sari of Seri Perdana where the central court is oriented towards the city focal points of Perdana Putra, Putra mosque and Dataran Putra.

The scale and proportion on which the buildings in Putrajaya is based was very much Palladian than vernacular. The tall column, the vast roof structure, and the bulkiness are the reminiscent of the Palladian vocabulary. The elements that distinguish Putrajaya is the domes, which are obviously 'borrowed' from the middle-east Islamic architecture.

7.1 THE PICTORIAL COMPARISON
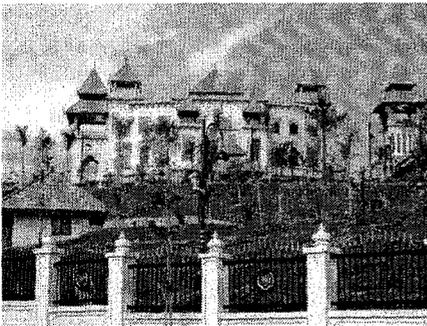
Fig. 11 The Istana Melawati of Putrajaya
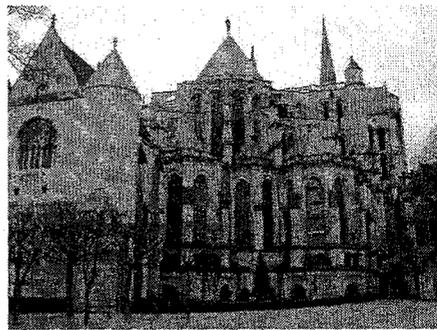
Fig. 12 The Chateau of Versailles
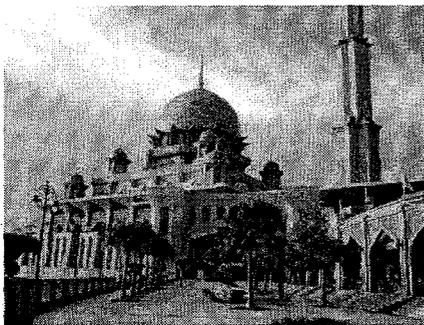

Fig. 13 The Masjid Putra of Putrajaya
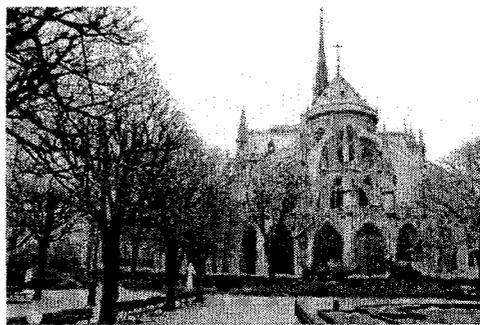

Fig. 14 The Church of Versailles
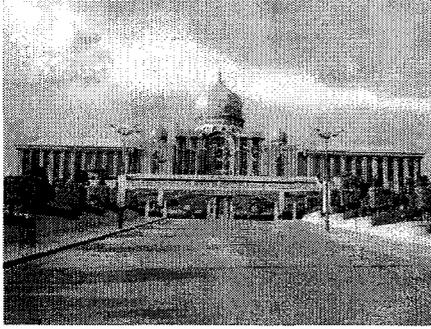
Fig. 15 The Vista of Putra Perdana
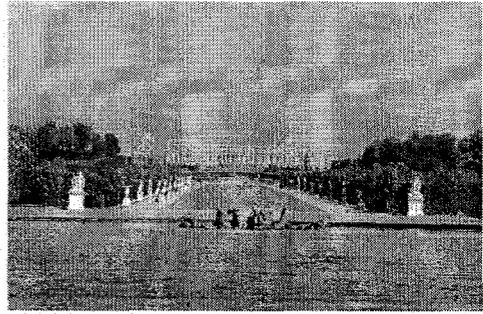
Fig. 16 The Vista of Versailles
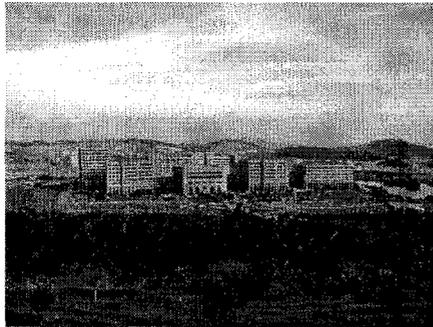
Fig. 17 The Building Blocks of Putrajaya
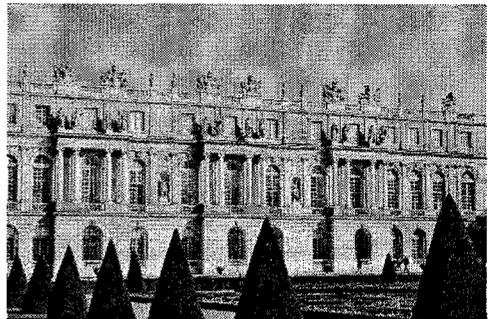
Fig. 18 The Administration Block of Versailles

Fig. 19 The Dataran Putra Of Putrajaya

Fig. 20 The Parterre Of Versailles

8.0 Conclusion

Though the language of Putrajaya was claimed to be of a Malaysian Islamic architecture (reminiscent of Malay vernacular architecture), the proportion and the grandeur portrayed is very much of the Palladian style. Let alone the domes and arches, which are barely found in Malay architecture. A comparison with the Baroque architecture of Versailles somehow reveals influences and adaptation. Though it is not clearly mention on the French classical language, attempts should be made to further research the adaptation or imitation. This is to clarify the 'truth' of the architectural language. This is vital as Putrajaya is an example of a modern development of architecture in Malaysia, which strives to create an identity of its own.

It is a good intention and attempt to rediscover the architectural language of the vernacular architecture – a vital underpinnings that once linked us to the past. Ironically, many end up in a facile approach of slavishly imitating past forms, reducing these traditional symbols into mere signs.

The past should not be simply romanticized. The true Malaysian architecture identity will only evolve when are prepared to take a long hard look at ourselves, to discover the true essence of oneself. The task is to search the ideas and strength within, but we are still obliged to be influenced by the modern world because we wish to be part of it. But to follow blindly without understanding and appreciation will resulted a pastiche, pseudo and ersatz architecture.

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