

FIVE RESIDENCES BY ALMAZ ARCHITECT

# VARIATIONS OF THE TROPICAL THEME

— Review by Ahmad Nizam Radzi

Architecture, in the broadest sense of the word, is nothing but high fashion. It really is. The word "style" is taboo to many architects and many of them refrain from using that word to protect the "sanctity" of architecture. The study of architecture has always been more on the study of styles and less to do with the science of it. No example is much clearer than in the built environment that we see around us today, particularly on the development of residences, houses and condominiums around the country. Hijacked by overzealous developers and taking advantage of the truly Malaysian obsession on everything foreign, the houses we find around us are "designed" and marketed to echo that of the Spanish *casa*, the Tudor inn or the Mediterranean *hacienda*. The public gets what the public wants but the high fashion that the demand had created in turn resulted in even more horrendous "styles".

Some architects, including the PAM Gold Medal laureate Hijias Kasturi, then began to question this obsession with pseudo-foreign treatments in the state of our contemporary architecture. In the last decade or so however, a renaissance of architectural style that harks back to a more localised vernacular and tropical feel had begun to sprout everywhere, partly due to the appraisal of works by regional architects like Lek Bunnag and Made Wijaya. Their works, particularly in Thailand and Indonesia, were publicized intensively and turned the tables around as far as "tropical architecture" is concerned. Terms like *heliconias*, *palimanan* and *sandstone*, previously Greek to most architects, have now become stylish words within the cultured fraternity.

The Balinese concept, now ubiquitous to a point that it has been commercialized everywhere, was previously an idealized philosophy



(a) SITE PLAN



(b) SECTIONS



(c) FIRST FLOOR PLAN



(d) GROUND FLOOR PLAN



(e) GROUND FLOOR PLAN



championed by local Balipiles who took great passion in architecture such as the Aman resorts of Indonesia, in the way the tropical landscape fused visually and physically into the purist architecture, using local materials – expressed naturally and al fresco. The limits of the tropical climate are studied, natural ventilation is preferred and local timber and stone became in vogue again. The Malaysian response is a derivative of the Balinese concept, without the bale, *alang-alang* and the mythical statuettes, but the spirit is the same: the return to all things tropical, a born-again desire to be part of the Malaysian landscape and a sense of belonging and identity. Is this another phase in the high fashion trend in Malaysian architecture? Or is this a reflection of growing maturity in Malaysian architecture, where the search has now started within our realm, our own culture and our own environment?

Almaz Rahim, practising under the style of Almaz Architect in Kuala Lumpur, is an advocate of this genre and a series of similarly-themed residences had been completed recently, epitomizing her interpretations of architecture for a tropical lifestyle. Physically, the architecture of the tropical residences is the juxtaposition of natural materials, textures and colours: orange clay roof tiles, exposed roof rafters, stained timber-framed fenestration, earth-coloured walls and yes, the luxury of frameless glass to view the abundant green vegetation in all its natural splendour. Spiritually, these houses are sanctuaries for their owners, abodes of peace and serenity where one would feel absolute security and privacy. The five residences featured here, while located in various parts of Klang Valley, are all sited within a lush context that allows them to harmonize with their environment to the maximum.

The **Deck House (a)**, occupying the end of a cul-de-sac in a prestigious residential suburb, is bound by a gentle slope, overlooking a small lake a few metres below it. A processional route takes one from the entrance into the heart of the

house, a route filled with elements of green and water, of natural light and views, hardly a corridor it is but a celebrated journey. The extensive glass windows allow natural light in and views out, a constant reminder to the occupants of the natural environment outside and for surveillance too. Careful planning of the house orientation and the abundance of trees ensure that heat gain and sun glare do not disrupt the comfort levels within the house.

An internal, open courtyard is the hallmark of the **Courtyard House (b)**, located in an affluent hill suburb, on a sloping site bounded by dense secondary forest. The courtyard on the ground floor is a simple, rectangular space open to the sky, filled with stone pebbles on the floor to receive the gushing discharge of monsoon rain from the roof. In a tropical climate, such an internal courtyard is an effective architectural device to facilitate natural ventilation and afford natural light into the inner spaces, very creatively utilized in the old, deep shophouses of colonial Melaka and Penang. In this house, where views are extraordinary towards the western side, the corners of the house are relieved of columns – instead, frameless corner glass meet at right angles to allow for a privileged view out. First used by Frank Lloyd Wright in his celebrated-Fallingwater deep in the woods of Bear Run, Pennsylvania.

The philosophy of feng shui or geomancy, plays a pivotal role in the design and concept of the **Feng Shui House (c)**, located within the same suburb as the Deck House. The location of the various rooms within the house was determined in relation to the nine boxes of good feng shui. The piece de resistance, however, is a double-volume entry foyer which overlooks the courtyard ahead but the eye would be led up to a walkbridge across the voluminous space that links the family room on the upper level. Taking advantage of the semi-enclosed courtyard, a series of external decks with pergolas are arranged within clusters of green perennials and lush *paku gajah*. Similar details such as timber

windows, shuttered doors and timber balustrades complemented by earthy finishes like pebblewash and terracotta contrast very well with the green vegetation.

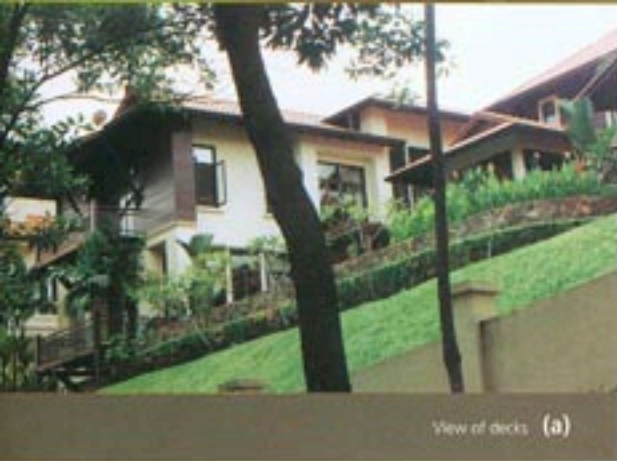
The **Peranakan House (d)** meanwhile, is a homage to the art of the Melaka Baba and Nyonya, particularly in the design of the timber-framed glass panels in various colours. The abundance of large and tall windows ensures adequate cross-ventilation within the inner halls and rooms. Heavy rubble stone clad the ground level walls in a fortress-like manner, giving a rustic feel and a hierarchical pattern on the external walls as well as the whole aesthetics.

Finally, the **Paya Jaras Retreat (e)** in Sungai Buloh is a weekend house for the owner, surrounded by a fruit orchard and two small fishing lakes. Indeed, by virtue of it being a recreational house, the decks and terraces are choice areas for that Sunday siesta when a long morning tending the orchard takes its toll. In a tropical climate, such architectural components are simplistic, yet effective.

The five residences by Almaz Architect are an indication that the contemporary trend in residential and domestic architecture has come full circle since the days of the pre-Merdeka government quarters. Then, houses were elevated on stumps and plinths, kitchens were separated from the main house by a courtyard, windows were tall and ceilings were high, all designed to achieve a balanced and comfortable living environment in the tropical climate. While the aesthetics of home design has evolved with new, natural materials being harnessed for more creative usage, human comfort levels have remained the same.

Thus, these architectural features are making a comeback, albeit in new forms and shapes. Maybe it is time to discard any plans for that Spanish villa or that Oxford country house and instead, reflect on what really is morally right in this unpredictable, tropical environment we live in. Now is that rain I hear falling? Get the laundry from the courtyard, fast!





View of decks (a)



Terrace and waterways (a)



Entrance porch, garage and driveway (b)



(a) View of terrace

**DECK HOUSE (a)**

**Civil & Structural Engineer**  
PAKATAN CERGAS SDN BHD

**Mechanical & Structural Engineer**  
WAWASAN BERSATU SDN BHD

**Quantity Surveyor**  
QS ASSOCIATES

**Landscape Architect**  
PUNT GARDEN

**Contractor**  
HIAP LECK CONSTRUCTION & TRADING

**COURTYARD HOUSE (b)**

**Civil & Structural Engineer**  
PAKATAN CERGAS SDN BHD

**Mechanical & Structural Engineer**  
WAWASAN BERSATU SDN BHD

**Quantity Surveyor**  
QS ASSOCIATES

**Landscape Architect**  
ARKITEK URBANISMA SDN BHD

**Contractor**  
ARUS MAJU SDN BHD

(b) The courtyard







(c) The private courtyard, a tropical sanctuary is the focus of the house. It is featured with timber decks and pergolas in a lush landscape.

**FENG SHUI HOUSE (c)**

**Civil & Structural Engineer**  
JURUTERA JTA

**Mechanical & Electrical Engineer**  
WAWASAN BERSATU SON BHD

**Quantity Surveyor**  
QS ASSOCIATES

**Landscape Architect**  
PUNT GARDEN

**Contractor**  
SYARIKAT PEMBINAAN INDAH



(c) A double-height pitched ceiling with bridge across the entrance hall creates a dramatic effect to the foyer.

(b) The gallery on the first floor.



(c) High ceiling above the living area makes it appear spacious and airy.







Living room balcony and kitchen overlooking the fishpond. (e)



(e)

**PERANAKAN HOUSE (d)**

Civil & Structural Engineer  
KEMASEPAKAT SDN BHD

Mechanical & Electrical  
Engineer  
KEMASEPAKAT SDN BHD

Quantity Surveyor  
QS ASSOCIATES

Landscape Architect  
PUNT GARDEN

Contractor  
ARUS MAJU SDN BHD

**PWYA JARAS RETREAT (e)**

Civil & Structural Engineer  
LIVE CONSULTANT

Landscape Architect  
KERIS SEROUA SDN BHD

Contractor  
KERIS SEROUA SDN BHD

All Projects' Photography  
STEVEN SHEA

Main staircase (d)



(d) View from across the lake



(e)

