PETALING JAYA
MALAYA'S SECOND NEW TOWN

BY
FEDERAL TOWN PLANNER.

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THE STORY OF PETALING JAYA—MALAYA'S SECOND
NEW TOWN
BY
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Although our historians do not all agree, it is generally accepted that 1957 marks one hundred years since the days of the renowned Capitan China, Yap Ah Loy, when the modern settlement of Kuala Lumpur was first established.

In this comparatively short time the Capital has grown rapidly and today has a population of some 315,000 persons within the full Municipal limits of 23,500 acres, about double the figure for 1947 when the last Census was taken. A map of the town in the early 1890's shows that what is now the central area had already taken shape with the traditional eastern shop-house and commercial buildings, but the Selangor Government offices and St. Mary's Church were not at that time in existence and coffee estates covered the Weld Road-Bukit Bintang parts of the town.

In 1900 the population was some 30,000, which rose to 45,000 in 1910 with expansion of commercial and business premises and residential areas. Coffee had given place to the newly discovered rubber and the turn of the century saw completion of the buildings which exist today around the Padang, including St. Mary's Church and the Selangor Club (the 'Spotted Dog') and the impressive Saracenic architecture of the Post Office, Public Works office, and the Railway Station.

By 1920 the population had increased to 80,000, to nearly 120,000 by 1936 and to 175,000 in 1947. Estimated figures suggest this had grown to about 220,000 by the beginning of 1952. The recent Census of 1957 indicates that today the town population is 315,000 composed largely of Chinese, Indians and Malays with small numbers of Eurasians, Europeans, and other nationalities.

The Japanese Occupation of 1941-45 caused a virtual standstill in permanent building of all kinds, but very 'temporary' construction particularly of housing and industry took place on a large, unplanned, and widespread scale. It is also unfortunately true that, with the advent of the British Military Administration at the end of the war, military camps and so-called 'temporary' offices and housing were permitted on important sites at variance with the approved Town Plan, which had been legally gazetted in 1938.

With the gradual return to normal conditions after the war the local authority (the Town Board and later the Municipality) endeavoured to direct the proper siting of new 'temporary' buildings, but the demand for housing and industry with the growing population resulted in an increase of temporary and ill-sited structures. The local authority was not able to provide alternative accommodation or to offer suitable sites within the town at economic costs, and thus control of development was
difficult and limited. Large areas of town land were, and are today, in private ownership, for which the owners hope, and expect, to obtain maximum prices, and lack of legal powers made it impossible to compel owners to develop these valuable lands (the Housing Trust Ordinance of 1950 includes such powers, but this important legislation has not, to date, been put to practical use).

During this post-war period a vast amount of illegal ‘squatter’ housing mushroomed in many parts of Kuala Lumpur, both on private and State land, which in most cases quickly deteriorated into slums. Lack of supervisory staff, shortage of publicly owned land, and the demands of tin mining greatly hampered efforts by the authorities to arrest this continuing menace to proper planning and development.

In the period from 1947-51 applications for subdivision of land for some 2,000 permanent houses were approved by the local authority, but not more than 1,200 houses, representing accommodation for 10,000 persons, were actually built (this difference is no doubt due to land speculation, since approval of an application in the Federation for subdivision of land to an approved planning scheme does not bind the applicant to construct a building). It has been estimated that a comparable number of houses were erected from 1936-41, and thus permanent accommodation for 20,000 persons was built whereas the population by 1951 had increased by more than 100,000. A survey carried out by the local authority indicated that some 10,000 temporary houses had been erected within the town, providing for approximately 85,000 persons. About 6,000 of these had been built on State land, that is land required for Federal, State or Municipal purposes and these houses must, of course, eventually be removed; this presents a difficult social problem since, although the majority of these buildings are of flimsy and ramshackle construction, many have been built of permanent materials, with modern sanitary conveniences, costing as much as $10,000/-—$15,000/–.

The site on which Kuala Lumpur has arisen is very rich in tin, and thus land known or believed to contain quality ore has been scheduled for prospecting and working. Partly for this reason, and partly because of the form of the surrounding hills and mountain range, land for urban development on the western, northern, and eastern fringes is not suitable for permanent building.

In order to assist in solving the problems of over-crowding, squatter housing (which had assumed more than ordinary social importance with the ‘Emergency’ as a suspected hide-out and source of food supply for communist terrorists) non-conforming industry and the legitimate demands for industrial sites that had arisen in Kuala Lumpur from the time of the Japanese Occupation and been intensified with the rapid expansion of the town since the war, a scheme was conceived by the Federal Town Planning Department in 1951 for development of the valuable and important land occupied by the airport, Royal Air Force Station, and the adjoining burial grounds. This scheme included extension of the legal industrial area in the approved Town Plan (in the vicinity of the Chan Sow Lin-Sungei Besi Road) together with housing, shopping, open spaces, schools, and other community areas. The plan made provision for an alternative site for the airport at Petaling-Sungei Way having good flight approaches and road access, and this project was
approved by the High Commissioner (at that time Sir Henry Gurney), the State Government and the local authority. Due, however, to a subsequent major national policy decision to retain and expand the Royal Air Force station the scheme was abandoned, and it thus was necessary to seek an alternative site for this much needed scheme for relief of existing town conditions.

As a result of a land-utilization survey which had originally been made with the advice of experts from the technical departments concerned (such as Mines, Forestry, and Agriculture) land proposed for the airdrome at Petaling was selected for a self-contained New Town, mainly because adequate areas of reasonably level though undulating terrain were available, containing no economic tin deposits or of great agricultural or forestry value, and much of which was State land, with good road and rail connexions to Port Swettenham and to the parent town. The original scheme at Petaling was designed for an estimated population of 70,000 persons on a site of 3,000 acres, with areas for industry, commerce, Government buildings, public recreation, schools, housing and other private and community uses.

Much has been said and written by misinformed opinion variously describing Petaling Jaya (the word 'Jaya' was personally chosen by General Sir Gerald Templer as being appropriate for this progressive new enterprise) as "A Glorified New Village" or "An idea that grew from a New Village into a New Town." From the foregoing it will be seen however that the scheme was designed by the planners as a complete New Town some two years before actual work commenced on the site—the 3,000 acres which the town will eventually cover is in fact the area proposed in 1951. This original plan included more than 300 acres for local industry giving employment to 10,000 persons in the New Town, and was based on the sound principle of 'place, folk, work' in proper relation, so that all could live in pleasant and safe surroundings close to their work, shops, schools and open spaces, making the best use of the land in the interests of the community.

Funds for purchase of privately owned land to be acquired, largely rubber estates and small holdings, were made available by the Federal Government and construction was commenced by the State Government in February, 1953, when the main road lines and southern housing areas were cleared of rubber trees and undergrowth. A qualified senior officer who was also an engineer was loaned by the Federal Town Planning Department, who collaborated with the District Officer and the Development Officer as an estate office before the Petaling Jaya Board and, later, the present Authority were established. It was necessary to recruit technical and clerical staff, some of whom were trained by the estate office, and to purchase equipment for road and building works. Initial difficulties were experienced, since although the Municipality had given valuable assistance in providing earth-moving equipment and in forming the main approach roads neither they, nor the Public Works Department, were later in a position to offer much practical help; credit is due to the District Officer, the Development Officer, and the Assistant Town Planner for their fine efforts at that time against considerable odds—and some prejudice. Much encouragement was received from the High Commissioner (Sir Gerald Templer) and the Deputy High Commissioner (Mr. (now Sir) Donald MacGillivray) and their enthusiasm in the early
days has undoubtedly contributed to the success so far achieved in this modern experiment of building a new town in Malaya.

In 1954 the Petaling Jaya Authority was established by law as the competent local authority, with powers to discharge its duties in carrying on activities properly connected with the Town development. Financial provisions permit the Authority to borrow funds by approval to meet these obligations or in discharging any of its duties. The Chairman of the Authority is the Mentri Besar of Selangor, and control of day-to-day work is under the direction of an Administrator and a Development Officer assisted by a Town Engineer, with administrative and technical staff. There is also an Executive Committee and a Town Committee of elected and nominated members. The Federal Town Planner has continued to advise and assist the Authority in planning and layout, in association with the Administrator, the Development Officer, and the Town Engineer.

When it is remembered that only four years ago the site was under rubber, progress made has been astonishing: 2,620 houses have been built, 517 are under construction, 58 shops completed and 31 nearing completion. These shops have been built on a 25' × 75' lot as an improvement upon the standard 20' × 100' lot common throughout the Federation, in order to limit the possibility of the upper floors being subdivided into narrow unhealthy cubicles with insufficient light and fresh air.

The Federal Housing Trust has built 299 houses of various types including detached, semi-detached, and terraced at inclusive prices from $6,700/- to $17,000/- . The Malaya Borneo Building Society has erected 427 terraced houses and will shortly commence construction of additional numbers of terraced and semi-detached. The selling price of $5,000/- to $8,000/- for houses already built by the Society includes cost of land, roads, and services, on a lease for 60 years or 99 years. Loans can be arranged with the Society on a down payment of a percentage of the purchase price, the balance repayable over a period of 15 years.

Sites for housing are now leased by the Authority for a term of 99 years (originally 60 years) with a premium of 25 to 34½ cents a sq. ft. (or slightly more for corner lots and main road frontages) with a quit rent of 2½% of premium per annum (this represents, for example, on a standard lot of 50' × 90' a premium of $1,125/- — $1,552/- and a quit rent of $28/- to $39/- per year).

In the industrial area more than half of the 330 acres has already been sold, and applications are under negotiation for most of the remainder. Industrial sites are also now leased for 99 years with a premium of 25 cents a sq. ft. and an annual quit rent of $500/- per acre. To date industries established include a soft drinks factory, oil mill, furniture manufactories (both timber and steel), sawmill, sauce factory, distillery, match factories, soap and oil factory, heavy machinery plant, motor repair shop, rice miller, sewing machine assembly, and tyre repair factory; there is also a large store for the Department of Telecommunications and a small Station for the Department of Agriculture. The Authority has under construction a building with factory space for rental which it is hoped will prove attractive to small type industries, and has also recently acquired an additional 600 acres for a second
industrial area with related housing and commercial centre. Although the emphasis in development so far has been towards public housing, the needs of housing for local industry as a basic objective of the plan have not been forgotten, and it is intended that all workers in industry in Petaling Jaya will be housed in the town so as to reduce the ‘journey to work’ to a minimum.

Three schools have been built, a church and chapel, temples, a surau, Colleges for the Rural and Industrial Development Authority and Co-operative Department, and Headquarters for the National Union of Plantation Workers. Other buildings include a cinema, bank, post office, market and stalls, bus station, petrol-filling station, and an imposing multi-floored block of Government offices on a site in the centre of the town commanding magnificent views in all directions. Lastly there is one—pawnshop! which we trust is not doing too roaring a trade!!

Plans for the Town Centre are in hand and will include a shopping precinct and market, clock tower and ornamental fountain, restaurant, showrooms and arcade, bus station, public car park and sites for commercial buildings.

Running through the centre of the town is a wide strip of mining land which it is planned to develop so far as practicable as public open space, utilising mining pools for boating and other past-times in a park-like setting. It was originally intended that the existing Klang Road should be improved as the major access to Petaling Jaya, with main connections from the south and only minor roads to the north-east through the Pantai Valley to Bungsar and the parent town. However, this view was not accepted by higher authority and, in 1954, it was decided that a new main high-way in the form of a dual carriageway should be built from Bungsar to Sungei Way. Although there can be no doubt that this road will prove an important traffic artery, it is equally true that it must inevitably result in cutting Petaling Jaya into half, an undesirable feature from the planning viewpoint and contrary to accepted town planning principles. The new high-way, which is still under construction, lies in the centre of this open park belt, and will reduce the distance to Kuala Lumpur from Klang by about one and a half miles.

Because of the comparatively short distance between Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur it will not be feasible to provide a complete ‘green belt’ or rural strip as open space for public use to separate the new town from the larger city. To some extent, however, this important characteristic of a modern town will result from juxtaposition of the hill range and by siting of the University of Malaya and the Federal Hospital to the north-east on land flowing out from the Pantai Valley. Between the sites for the University (320 acres approximately) and the Hospital (120 acres approximately) it is planned to create a public park of some 260 acres in which bridle paths and other forms of pedestrian ways will meander through the natural undergrowth and trees, providing a pleasant sylvan setting for walks and picnics on holiday and festive occasions. When it is realised how deplorably deficient is Kuala Lumpur in public gardens and open spaces the people will welcome this plan to provide a fine park in a natural setting, as an attraction within easy reach of town dwellers by road and even on foot.
This short article describes Petaling Jaya as Malaya’s “Second New Town” because, in recent history at least, Kuala Kubu Bharu built in 1928 may justly claim the honour of being the first—as indeed it is so described in the Malay Mail of that time. Petaling Jaya is however on a much larger scale than Kuala Kubu, and is the first example of its kind in the Federation of a complete town planned as a whole by Government on publicly owned land.

It has its faults; some of the houses may seem to some of us to be set too close together; to others there is not sufficient variety in their design; some people feel there are too many bungalows and not enough tall buildings, too few open spaces and not enough shops. But it must be remembered that the work is so far only half completed, and present indications are that the majority of the 16,500 odd residents who have already made their homes in the town over the past four years since work commenced are very contented with their new surroundings and living conditions, and it is the hope of the planners and of Government that, when completed, Petaling Jaya will be as near an ideal place as possible in which to live and to work and a practical realization of the concept ‘place, folk, work’ on which the plan was founded.