TANJONG JARA BEACH HOTEL AND RANTAU ABANG VISITORS’ CENTER


Master Jury’s Citation: For the courage to search out and successfully adapt and develop an otherwise rapidly disappearing traditional architecture and craft, and at the same time meet the demands of contemporary architecture. The program, while attempting to provide a resort facility in an otherwise underdeveloped area, is part of a broader strategy for the development of local architecture and the economy. In this the project has succeeded. It has provided employment at the resort and at the industries that service the resort. Through the use of traditional architectural forms and materials, the project has revived a number of building-material industries, crafts, and traditional constructional skills.

Though architecturally the adaptation of traditional forms to new uses raises several technical and ideological problems, the consistency and seriousness with which this approach has been pursued at all levels of design and execution has generated an architecture that is in keeping with traditional values and aesthetics, and of an excellence that matches the best surviving traditional examples.

Objectives. The northeastern coastal state of Trengganu on the Malay Peninsula has, like other states on the east coast, lagged behind in Malaysia’s drive for modernization. Since the 1970s, however, the government has taken an active interest in developing Trengganu by utilizing its cultural heritage and picturesque settings with the aim of establishing a tourist industry. The first project undertaken as part of this scheme was the Tanjong Jara Beach Hotel (T.J.B.H.) and the Rantau Abang Visitors’ Center (R.A.V.C.) which the government’s Tourism Development Corporation (T.D.C.) decided to establish in 1976.

In designing both these sites a number of objectives were borne in mind, the primary one being to create a project in

Pages 138–141: The Tanjong Jara Beach Hotel has revived building-material industries, crafts, and constructional skills through the use of traditional architectural forms and materials. Its buildings were inspired by the two-story palaces of earlier sultans.
harmony with the surrounding environment. To this end local craftsmen and materials were employed and the essence of the region's architectural traditions honored. It was also intended that the projects provide the local community with an impetus for economic growth by creating jobs and making use of local crafts. In addition the T.D.C. sought to encourage efforts at conserving the natural sea life of the area, create a training center for hotel staff, and finally to set the pace for future developments in the region.

Although the project comprises two physically separate entities situated 10 kilometers apart from each other, they share the same owners and management and are regarded as a complementary whole.

Location. Sites for the project, located south of the state's capital of Kuala Trengganu, were well chosen. The buildings are surrounded by an area with remarkable physical features: the Kuala Abang River; steep hills contrasted with golden beaches along the South China Sea; lush foliage; palm trees, a natural stream, and a lagoon.

Access. It takes about eight hours to reach the site by car from the country's capital of Kuala Lumpur. Alternatively the journey can also be done by car with an hour's flight from Kuala Lumpur to Kuala Trengganu, from which the hotel can be reached within an hour by car.

Local Architectural Character. The varied forms apparent in Malaysia's architecture are a reflection of the foreign influences to which the country has been exposed. Interspersed with architecture of a distinct Chinese style are mosques with domes and minarets and buildings with a formal style prevalent during the British colonial period.

The traditional architectural idiom of the east coast takes the form of buildings raised on stilts for flood protection, constructed from wood with inexpensive red Trengganu tiles used for the roofing. Today, however, this architectural form is giving way increasingly to the influence of the modern International Style. Tiling for roofs is more often than not being replaced by tin or asbestos sheets, and new housing schemes are usually not raised on stilts.

The prime source of inspiration for the design of the project was the istanas, the two-story hardwood palaces of the earlier sultans of the region. Perfected over centuries, their style blends in with the local environment and is ideally suited to local weather conditions. Only a few examples of the building form remain today. The istana's raised position on stilts, some .9 to 2.44 meters above the ground, protects it from flooding and encourages air circulation. Ventilation is also provided by open-sided rooms, lattice soffits, steep pitched roofs with grilled gables and bisque roof tiles. The latter are left exposed on the inside, thereby allowing the interior to breathe and warm air to escape through the roof. The hot tropical rains saturate the
Tanjong Jara Beach Hotel. Situated 65 kilometers south of Kuala Trengganu the hotel is spread over 31.44 hectares around a crescent-shaped beach of golden-yellow sand. The northern end of the site begins at a steep hill and stretches to the south over a sand berm running parallel to the ocean. A weir, placed at one end of a natural stream running across the property, has allowed a lagoon to form. The hotel’s two-story cottages, reflecting traditional istana designs, are situated within it. Behind them and at a higher elevation near the base of the hill are a series of two-story buildings, each containing eight to twelve guest rooms. A similar arrangement and relationship is repeated for the guest units to the south of the site.

All the hotel structures are oriented toward the ocean view. Placed in clusters, they derive maximum advantage from the ocean breeze because of their high ceilings and their verandas and balconies, which face the ocean. A large public house bridging the lagoon contains dining, conference, social, and recreational facilities.

A number of large shady trees and palms, already growing on the site when construction was started, were preserved to form the basis of a lush planting scheme.

Rantau Abang Visitors’ Center. Spread over 6.07 hectares sandwiched between the coastal road and the ocean, the Rantau Abang site lies 10 kilometers north of the beach hotel, or about 55 kilometers south of Kuala Trengganu. Running parallel between the road and the ocean is the Kuala Abang River, separated from the ocean by a high sand-dune berm. The museum, restaurants, and shops are built over this river.

Originally only an information center was planned for this site, which is noted as one of the world’s few breeding grounds for leather-backed turtles and is a major tourist attraction. The center was to provide visitors with regional information especially about the giant green turtles and their annual egg-laying migration. The idea was eventually expanded to encompass other facilities: a museum concentrating on regional sea life as well as the traditional arts and crafts of the east coast of Malaysia; a snack and refreshments bar; a series of shops and bazaars featuring local crafts; a botanical garden; and eleven low-priced traditional Malaysian-style kampong bungalows situated on the banks of the river nearer the highway and particularly suited for local families on holiday.

Adapting the project to the site’s topography meant taking into consideration a number of factors: the rising and falling levels of the fresh-water lagoon throughout the year; the proximity of the major east-coast highway; and of particular importance, the effects of development on the life cycle of the turtles using the beach as their nesting ground. The species is very sensitive to light and movement. The Malaysian representative of the World Wildlife Fund has done much to protect and support them, and was adamant that nothing should be done to disrupt their breeding cycle.

The museum is raised on piers above the river and sand dunes to avoid disrupting the site’s natural features. This elevated position has the added advantages of raising the museum to the level of the prevailing breeze and of allowing a panoramic view of the turtle hatching grounds on the adjacent beach. A wooden bridge connects the museum and restaurant, (which serves exclusively Malaysian cuisine) with the information center and crafts bazaar located on the highway side of the river.

Local hardwoods have been used in the construction of all buildings, with Trengganu tiles for the roofing completing the traditional appearance from the exterior. Local arts and crafts, employed in the interior decor from lamp shades and wicker chairs to soap dishes consisting of half of a coconut shell, add an informal touch and complete the indigenous character of the buildings.

The layout of the visitors’ center is based on the casual rambling form of the Trengganu fishing village. Spaces between buildings convey a feeling of leisure and relaxation in contrast to the congestion and artificiality experienced in urban settings. As with the hotel none of the buildings is over two stories. Coconut palms extensively in evidence are therefore always higher than the built-up areas. Local plants and shrubs enhance the tropical setting and also act as windbreakers; in certain cases they provide privacy.

1: The site plan of the Tanjong Jara Beach Hotel shows the free arrangement of hotel building and guest pavilions around the lagoon. 2: The Rantau Abang Visitors’ Center is built more compactly, mainly on stilts over the Kuala Abang River, as the site plan shows.
Structural System. The structure consists of a post-and-beam construction in the traditional ethnic style. The roofs are carried by timber trusses covered with local traditional clay tiles on hardwood battens and rafters. Sarking is generally left out in order to enhance the visual expression and experience of the ethnic style from the inside as well.

Materials Used. Four kinds of wood, both hard and soft and abundantly available in the area, were utilized as the basic materials. Nyatoh, a kind of plywood, was used for interior paneling and kapor for the flooring except in the reception area, where Thai marble was preferred; balan, a softwood, was used for carving, and chengol, the strongest and hardest, for the main structural elements. A carpentry shop and sawmill were set up on site for the duration of the project. Timber columns, beams, and trusses were manufactured on the premises, while carved panels and moldings were centrally fabricated. The design of the buildings provided a welcome opportunity for the wood craftsmen of the area to exercise their craft. Tiles used for the roofing were kiln-fired in the nearby villages and supplied through local contractors.

Conclusion. It is common practice for architects to incorporate as many new construction techniques and innovative design features as available or affordable into major projects like hotels. With the hotel and visitors' center, however, a deliberate attempt was made to seek inspiration from the region’s Muslim heritage and to incorporate the best of both worlds into the design.

The buildings function well together both as an integrated whole and as individual units. They are well lit and comfortable, the design of each building providing guests with the option of either natural ventilation or air-conditioning. Maintenance according to the hotel's manager is a "year-long affair." This is understandable, given the never-ending scraping, polishing of wood, and spraying against insects and termites that are necessary.

A Western-style hotel of similar size, though more com-
pactly planned, would have required considerably less man­
power. The town's Development Corporation, however, takes
the view that for a labor-intensive economy the more jobs
created the better. The project has already started to yield a
profit, and the impact in terms of improved life-styles for the
local villagers is very apparent. The project also is expected
to provide long-term benefits in terms of training individuals
both regionally and nationally. A school has been established
by the T.D.C. to train personnel for the specific jobs required
by the hotel.

At the same time the project has revived a sense of pride
in the Malay heritage and arrested the decay of local skills in
the arts and crafts. The use of the traditional istana style, the
informal Malay village layout, handcrafted wooden construc­
tion techniques, and numerous indigenous decorative crafts
constitute a successful contemporary use of traditional Malay
building idioms.

More significantly and on an intellectual level, the project
has helped change the image of backwardness attached to
whatever was local and appropriate for the environment. It
has shown that Malay architectural forms from the past can
still be meaningful for Malaysia's contemporary needs.

The success of this project, the first resort hotel of inter­
national standards in the Trengganu area, has assisted the
T.D.C.'s efforts to transform the east coast of the Malaysian
peninsula into a major resort region.