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SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2015



## Masjid Negara at 50

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# UMBRELLA OF FAITH

The avant-garde architecture of Masjid Negara is actually based on the humble umbrella, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

A GROUP of children on a field trip to the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia gather around a glass display unit and look at a model of Masjid Negara. Their teacher asks them to identify what is special about this building. Not long after, a little boy replies that the roof is not a dome. They're all unaware that a man is quietly observing them. Dressed in dark jacket and songkok, he wears a benign smile and has an aura of humility about him. He seems reluctant to let them know that he is Datuk Dr Baharuddin Abu Kassim, the architect who was part of the team that designed and supervised the construction of this iconic mosque.

It is 50 years since Masjid Negara was officially opened on Aug 27, 1965. As part of the celebrations, there's an exhibition called National Mosque's Golden Jubilee Pictorial Exhibition at the museum. A 200-odd-page monograph (a detailed written study of a single specialised subject or an aspect of it) called *50 Years National Mosque 1965-2015* has been published to accompany this exhibition. Together, they form a priceless

compilation of treasured photographs and sketches of this place of worship.

The author of the monograph, Azim A. Aziz, makes

the point that many times, when we try to understand the rationale behind a particular design element of similar buildings of that era, we have to rely on conjecture and hearsay as the people involved in their construction are probably no longer alive.

"He (Baharuddin) is one of the last in that generation who can convey the story of what happened accurately," says Azim, who's the chief executive officer of Atsa Architects.

Indeed, as Baharuddin narrates his story, the true nature of the design he created begins to unfold.

## STRAIGHT LINES

"I never thought that this mosque would become a very, very important building," says this robust man with the eyes of a dreamer. In spite of being caught by surprise in 1959, he knew that since his instructions came from none other than Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, he'd have no choice but to oblige and, "pull up

his socks."

From the word go, Baharuddin was certain that there was one element he'd never incorporate in his design: A dome.

"Eeee," he shudders. "*I benci* (hate) domes." Determined to avoid the use of onion-shaped domes and the Mughal designs made famous during the Colonial era, Baharuddin chose, instead, to be inspired by what he saw around him and his own history.

The 86-year-old architect was born in 1929 in a coastal village called Jeram, Selangor. The inhabitants of this village were mainly Malays. There were no Indians and probably only two Chinese families. As the eldest of nine children, he speaks of an idyllic childhood growing up in a kampung house. His playground was a neighbouring estate of rubber trees and a coconut plantation.

"You know, all those trees were planted in a straight line," he shares.

When he was 10, he became a boarder at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar. He was only able to complete his secondary schooling in 1951 as his education was interrupted for four years during the Second World War. Having always wanted to be a dentist or doctor, he was surprised to win a scholarship to study architecture from the University of Manchester. Upon completion of his Diploma in Town Planning in 1958, he returned to Malaya and started practice.

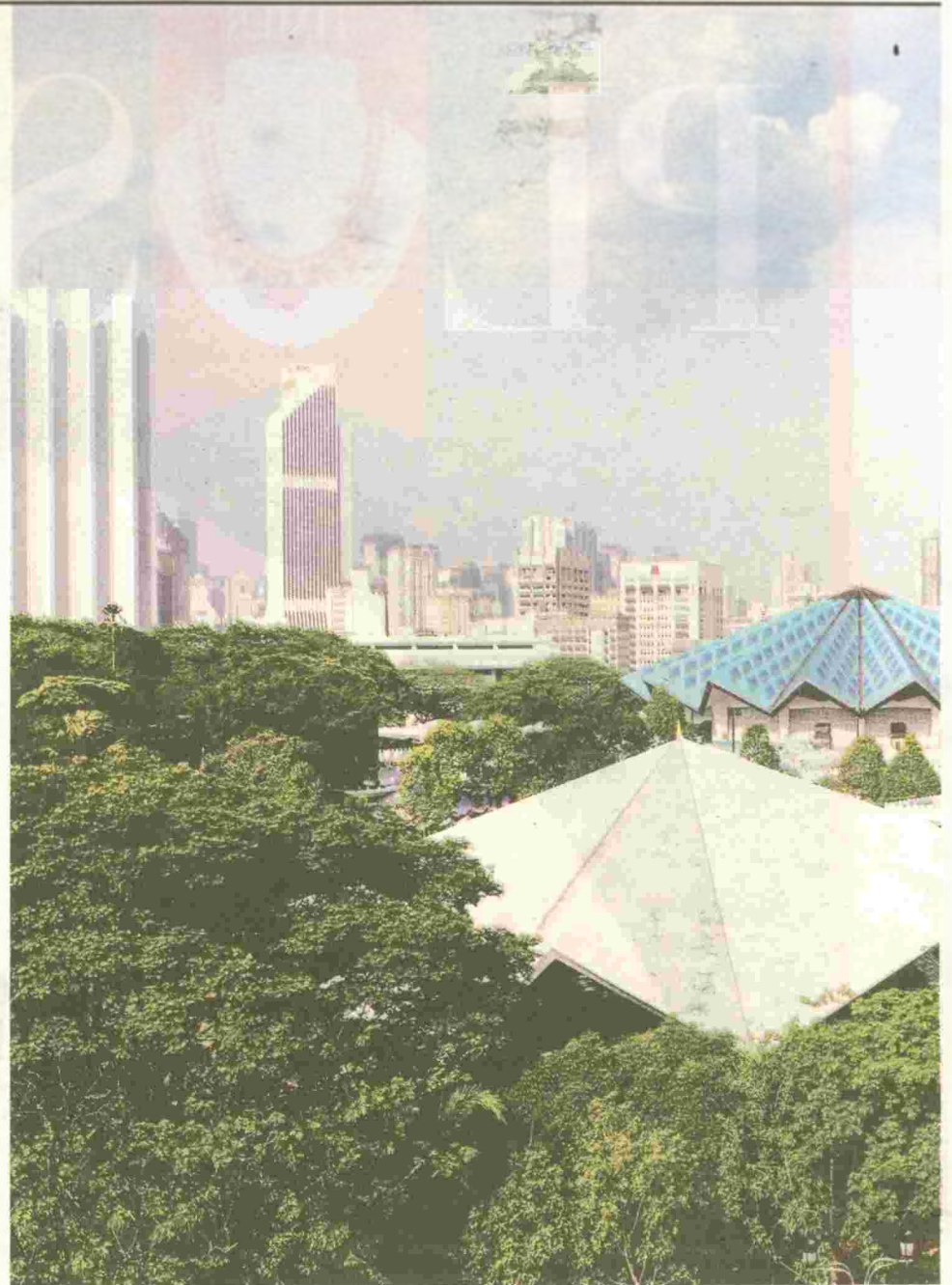
"I really don't like a dome," Baharuddin repeats. "It has no character. It's like you gulung (roll up) something and sit it down on the table. And it goes 'plop'. Then, on top of it, you put a spire. Then a star!"

## THE PRACTICAL UMBRELLA

The design he eventually emerged with was one based on something that had straight lines: An umbrella or, in particular, the *payung kertas*.

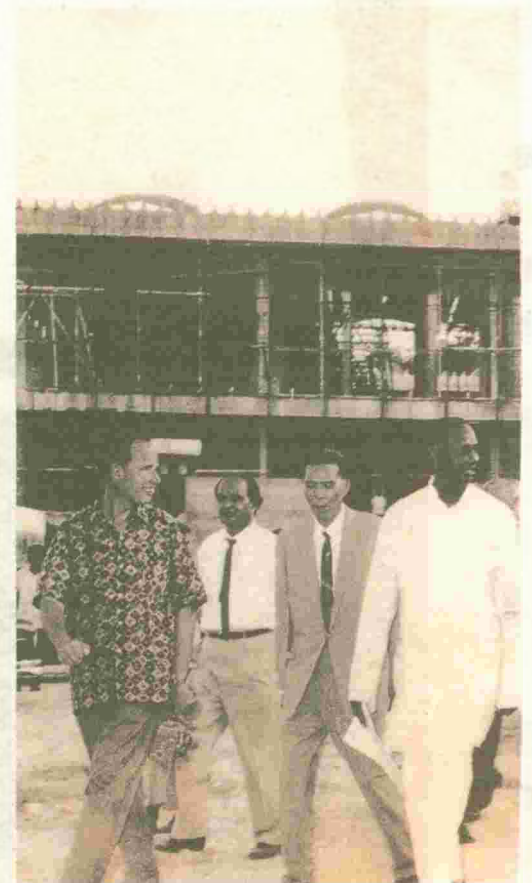
Granted that the umbrella is a symbol of royalty, but Baharuddin had a more practical reason for choosing to be inspired by it. A dome is utterly unsuitable for a tropical country like Malaysia. His rationale? When it rains here, the water flows fast. What is implied is that with a dome, the rainwater is likely to collect at its base where the dome curves. What happens if there's a leak in the dome? The water may just flow into the mosque proper. By using the straight lines as in an umbrella, this problem is avoided altogether as the water will flow away from the centre of the mosque.

In addition, he also looked at the traditional tudung saji (a food cover).



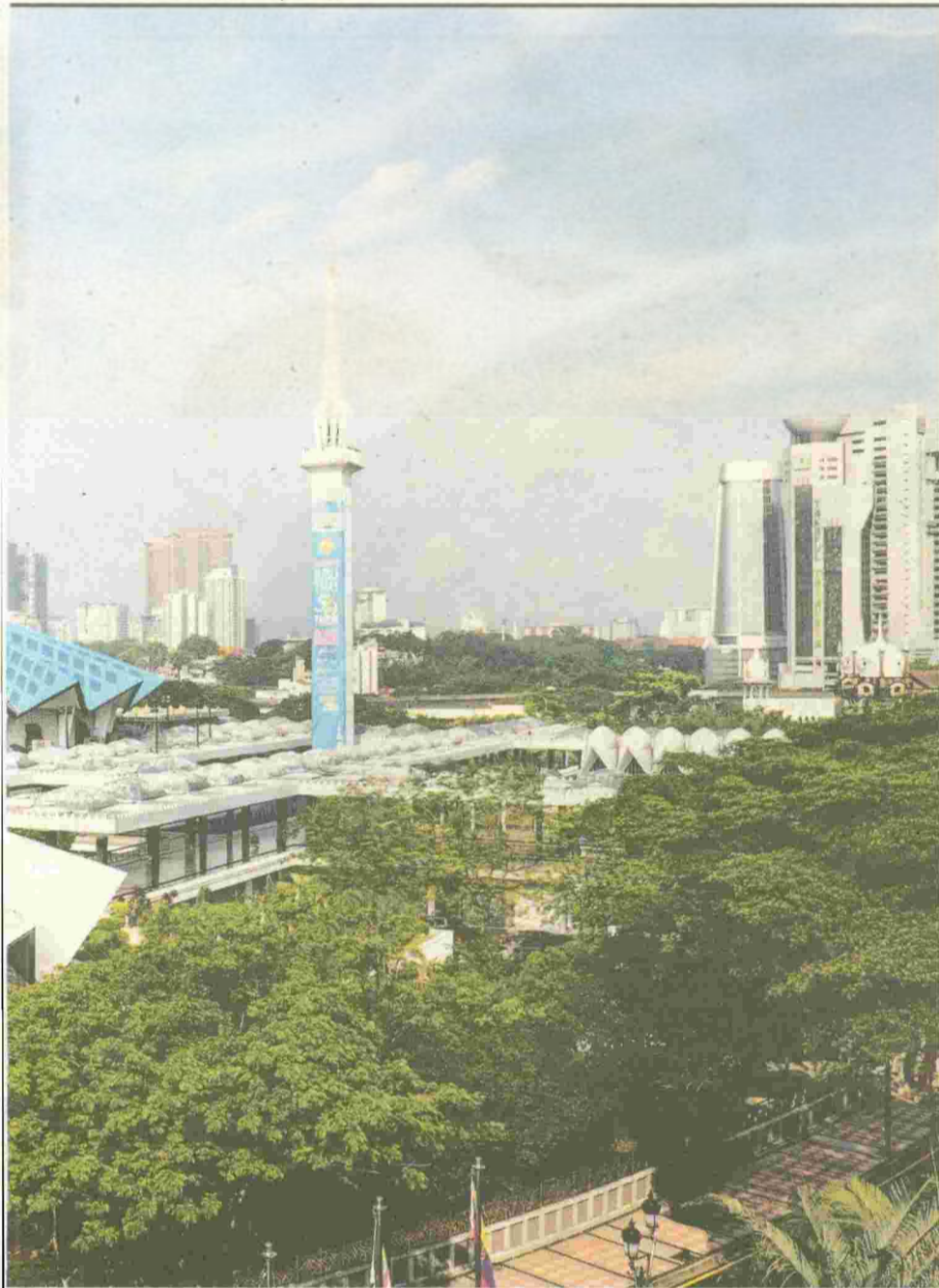
Datuk Dr Baharuddin Abu Kassim

Again, with emphasis on its straight lines, he says that this food cover protects everything underneath it. Baharuddin then alludes to the tudung saji-like headgear a paddy planter uses when out in the fields. Because of the wide brim, such a headgear completely protects the wearer from the harsh sunlight and rain. He wanted to incorporate this very practical element in his design. So, each panel of the roof of Masjid Negara is both wide and long enough to completely protect the faithful gathered inside the mosque.

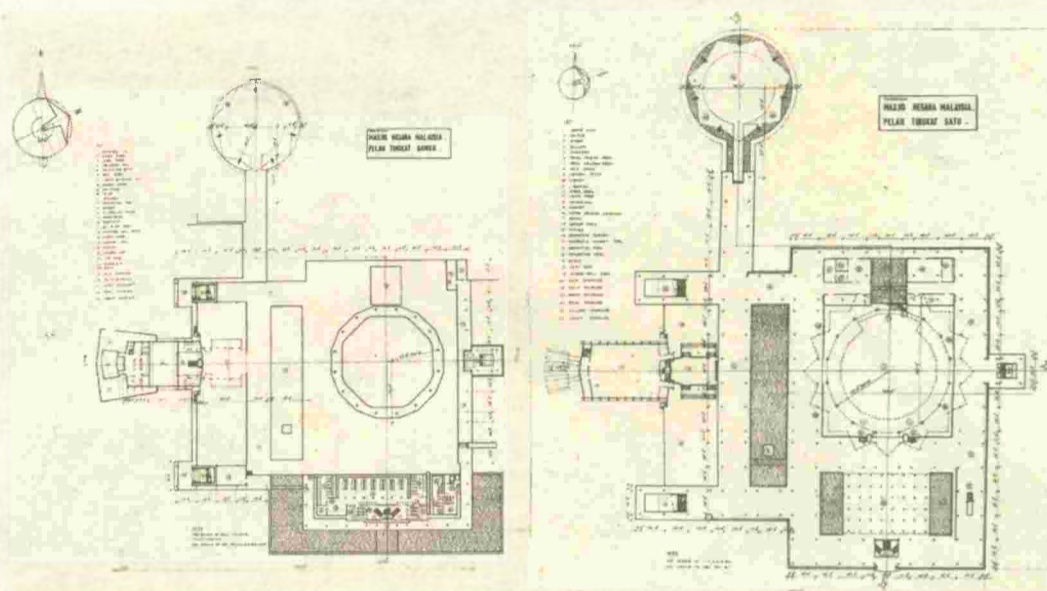


There was a snag, though. When he created a model of mosque to present to Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, Baharuddin didn't anticipate the following response: "*Apa ini? Masjid begini rupa?*" Where's the dome? *Tak seronok*

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COURTESY OF ATSAARCHITECTS



Sketch of the ground floor and first floor of Masjid Negara.

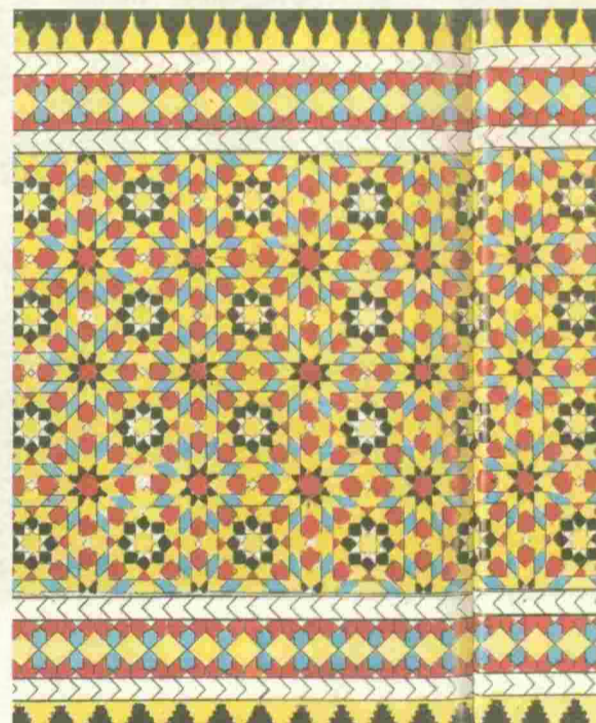
COURTESY OF ATSAARCHITECTS



The site inspection of Masjid Negara by Tun V. T. Sambanthan (fourth from left) and Tunku Abdul Rahman.



Azim Abdul Aziz PICTURE BY OWEEAHCHUN



Hand-drawn sketch by Datuk Baharuddin of the mosaics that decorate Masjid Negara.

lah.” (What’s this? A mosque with this design? Where’s the dome? Doesn’t feel nice-lah.)

“The thing is,” adds Baharuddin, “when Tunku said it, I didn’t know if he was joking or serious. I knew I had

to be very careful.”

**STANDING HIS GROUND**

At this juncture, Azim reveals a side of his mentor that explains how Baharuddin was able to stand his ground and obtain

the Prime Minister’s approval for his design. Baharuddin is deeply respected and held out as a man of integrity. Azim is quick to add that because of the older man’s influence, he’s been able to achieve some of his own success. As the architect behind the design for the Cyberjaya Mosque, Azim is very proud that it’s the first mosque in Malaysia, and possibly the world, to be accorded a Platinum rating on the Green Building Index.

“Datuk is very patient,” explains Azim, “and can eloquently describe his designs. It’s not easy to do this when you have various stakeholders. It takes some degree of diplomacy. At the same time, he doesn’t give up on an idea. And when you finally look at it, you realise that his idea works. This is what happened with Masjid Negara.”

In the final design of the mosque, the main dome resembles a semi-opened umbrella with 18 folded plates. Also, the 73m high minaret resembles a folded umbrella. To ensure maximum ventilation, the mosque has as many windows as possible. As in a kampung house where the structure is elevated, the prayer hall in Masjid Negara is located on

the first floor.

**MAKING MOSAICS**

Once the mosque was completed, it remained a plain structure for a quarter of a century before Baharuddin was once again asked, by another Prime Minister of the country, to spruce it up.

“Mahathir (Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) asked me to decorate it,” says Baharuddin. In this instance, the architect was inclined to use mosaic. He ventured to places as far-flung as the Alhambra in Spain and Turkey to observe the craft of creating mosaic. At the end of the contract, however, he realised that there was no one in Malaysia who’d be able to supply such mosaics for his use in Masjid Negara. So, he decided to start a factory to manufacture them. The moulds were made out of timber and, from there, thousands of little mosaics were created to fulfil his need.

Glancing at the group of innocent children who’ve now reached the end of their field trip, Baharuddin sighs. Smiling broadly, he says: “This task (to design Masjid Negara) was challenging. I’ve never been very ambitious. But, you know, I believe that Allah gave it to me and I’m very thankful.”