



COVID-19: Analysis of the situation for the construction sector in Malaysia

Interview with Esa Mohamed, UIA Immediate Past President

1. How is COVID-19 affecting architecture firms in Malaysia? E.g. Decreased workload, decrease in new enquiries, project delays or cancellations etc.?

The government imposed the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020 for two weeks to end on 31 March 2020. It restricts movement and everyone is mandated to stay at home, except for essential services such as buying of food supplies, groceries, medicine, personal hygiene and hospitals in order to control the spread of the Covid 19. The MCO or lockdown was extended twice and is now supposed to end on 28 April 2020. All offices are closed until now. So, the architects and their employees do not go to their offices or project sites. They resort to working from home and conducting on-line meetings.

The MCO is enforced through the Government Gazette on 14 April 2020 under Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 which among others compels the population to stay at home during the MCO period.

The impact on Architectural Consultancy Practices (ACP) has been devastating. A survey by PAM showed that almost 90% of the ACP will not be able to pay their employees after more than three months. Some even not more than one month. The survey also showed that the value of unpaid invoices would generally be able to support the employees for another 5.5 months during the lockdown. This is the general structure of the profession where the architects' fees are paid a long time after the services have been rendered in both the private and public works. There will be a lot of unemployed architects and graduates after the MCO is lifted.

The client bodies, mainly developers, are suspending their projects withholding expansion due to a drastic drop in sales of property units which affects their cash flows and their needs for consultancy services. The government sector projects are also being held back due to the adverse economic impacts and uncertainties brought about by the Covid 19. We expect that the GDP will contract to -2% in 2020 with a recovery by the same in 2021 should the Covid 19 pandemic end in 3-6 months.

PAM has urged its members to upskill by participating in online training programs and webinar lectures that PAM conducts regularly, up to twice weekly.

2. What is the situation currently for construction sites? E.g. Open/closed? Builders/architects present onsite?

All construction sites have been closed except for essential projects such as infrastructure, utilities services, maintenance, health facilities, emergency bridges, slope failure repairs and retention work during the first phase of the MCO.

The government announced on 14 April 2020 the addition of more services which include ACP and building construction works that are allowed to operate subject to strict observation of the MCO protocols including social distancing and guidelines from the Ministry of Health, police and local authorities.

The procedure is for each establishment to register with the Ministry of International Trade and Industries (MITI) on their intention to start operations. The registration is compulsory for every entity of the supply chain which includes architects, consultants, building materials suppliers, etc.

The registration must include the scope of work and the list of employees with their personal details which will be stored in the database that is managed by MITI and accessible to police roadblocks at strategic locations. This is to limit the movement of people and to enable the tracking of individuals in case they get infected by Covid 19.

Construction activities shall follow strict protocols which include health screening (normally checking of body temperature) for each worker before entering the site, maintaining social distancing, hand sanitization, etc. Should any of the workers be found to be a positive Covid 19 carrier or break the protocol, the whole site will be shut down



and aggressive screening will be conducted and possible quarantine of personnel. This protocol is yet to be tested as the processing of approval for restarting is still ongoing. There is a realization that the economy has to restart, albeit slowly and cautiously to balance the risk of spikes in the Covid 19 cases.

We are expecting that the government will roll out more projects to stimulate the economy while continuing on with the ones that were committed to before the pandemic.

We also expect that there will be more restrictions on foreign architects to be involved in local projects when the government is trying to revive the local economy.

3. What are the government measures that impact architectural firms and independent architects? Is the State providing any financial support for businesses and entrepreneurs?

The profession of architects is not going to be the same after the pandemic. The government has provided a few economic stimulus packages with a total value of Malaysian Ringgit 260 billion (Euro 55 billion or 18% GDP) that include direct payments to households, employee retention by wage subsidies, 6 months moratorium on loans from financial institutions, banks, deferment of tax, employee social security contributions, special relief loans at low interest and other incentives. The drawback is that while this economic stimulus package is a welcome relief for the general population, the ACPs are somehow missed out due to the higher salary bracket that the architects are under that will entitle them to wage subsidies. PAM is appealing to the government to raise the minimum wage level from RM 4000 (Euro 844) per month to RM 6000 (Euro 1260) per month to expand the wage subsidies coverage.

PAM is also seeking for assistance to enable ACPs to purchase laptop computers and software to enable employees to work from home. A lot of the design work can be done remotely, while meetings can be conducted online.

4. Do you know of any initiatives by architects for emergency healthcare facilities or equipment?

At the beginning of the MCO period, PAM deployed volunteer architects to 409 buildings that were gazetted to be quarantine stations all over the country. These include community halls, public institutions, colleges, convention facilities, indoor stadiums and student hostels. However, very few of these facilities were deployed. Instead, several hotels around the country have been added as designated quarantine stations which will accommodate returning travellers and students from overseas who will be quarantined for 14 days and observed. The cost of accommodation including in 5-star hotels will be paid by the government.

One exposition centre, the Malaysia Agro Exposition Park (MAEP) was transformed in 3 days into a temporary hospital to cater for 604 low risk patients. The project was coordinated by the Ministry of Health with architects from the Ministry of Works. There were other agencies such as the police and the army involved to ensure that there was no interruption to logistics, delivery of materials and control of movement during the 24 hours and 3 days operation. The MAEP is located on 149-hectare agriculture park on the fringe of the capital city Kuala Lumpur. Its two halls, with a combined area of 12,200 sq m were converted into a quarantine center to accommodate patients. Patients who are tested positive are quarantined in hospitals or quarantine stations for observation and not allowed to be quarantined at their homes to avoid spreading the Covid 19 to family members.

Currently the hospital facilities in Malaysia are sufficient to cater to the Covid 19 cases. The challenge is the number of health front liners who are over stretched and personal protective equipment (PPE) that runs out quickly. A large number of volunteers including professional bodies have extended their donations and help to supply the PPE required. This includes making the PPE suits and face protection visors.

5. How do you think the architectural profession can contribute to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the short-term and the long-term?

The profession has to look beyond buildings. A pandemic calls for emergency actions nation-wide. Urban planning for pandemic and disaster management is critical. There is a need to locate hospitals which can accommodate



immediate expansion. The hospital can be part of a cluster that accommodates schools, gymnasium, supermarket, community halls, sporting facilities with large open spaces where emergency tents or modular patient care units can be set up.

The transportation network must be planned to enable movement controls for civilians while easing of movements for essential services including the security personnel and to connect the community rapidly to the hospitals or other health facilities. The community has to be conversant with emergency procedures and protocols during a pandemic to turn it into an Epidemic Prevention Area. This is advocated from the experience in China.

In neighbourhood planning, each neighbourhood can be isolated by controlling its entry and exit. From our experience, Covid19 cases were identified in a settlement which started from someone who returned from traveling overseas or attended a mass gathering. The whole settlement had to be cordoned off and designated as a Red Zone where movement in and out of the area is controlled by police and health personnel. Essential supplies must be able to enter the neighbourhood. Otherwise the residents are only allowed to exit the area to get their food and other essentials such as medicine and personal hygiene within a distance of not exceeding 10 km.

In an apartment building that houses thousands of residents, there must be spaces for security and health officers to screen residents moving in and out of the apartment complex when it is designated as Red Zone. It is recommended that an apartment is naturally ventilated to rid of the aerosol effect of the Covid19 spread. Otherwise the mechanical ventilator must be fully operational at all times. The residents are not allowed to leave their apartments or use the common facilities.

I think the behaviour of people will change dramatically. People will be paranoid to be in confined spaces such as elevators and meeting rooms. We will pause to think about pushing the call and floor buttons in the lifts. If office entrances are not equipped with automatic opening doors, we will use our elbow to push the lever and shoulder to push the door open. This psychological fear will be with us for a long while as we want to exercise social distancing. No more shaking hands, hugging or kissing for greeting friends. The design parameters will be changed according to the human behaviour in the new normal.

From a local survey, the number of online shoppers is equal to those going to shopping malls (40% of respondents). They will go to the shopping malls if necessary, like shopping for groceries and essentials. There will be a preference to work from home. It is going to be a challenge to design public buildings without compromising social distancing. How do we design and give viable solutions for shopping malls, bazaars, restaurants, theatres, schools, cinemas, etc?

We pray that this pandemic will be temporary and will end soon. Insha Allah.