This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia (ILAM). For the past 30 years, landscape architects have often been the unsung heroes of Malaysia’s development projects. These passionate individuals work tirelessly to balance the needs of the environment alongside the construction of physical features such as buildings and public spaces. However, few know about the role of these professionals or how they contribute to our nation’s identity. The following is an exclusive interview with the President of the Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia (ILAM), LAr. Mohd Fadrillah Mohd Taib.

Could you define ‘landscape’ for our readers?
The landscape we speak of comprises the visible features of a piece of land, such as the physical elements or landforms. It includes both their physical origins and the cultural overlay of human presence. Landscapes reflect the living synthesis of people and place, which is vital for local and national identity. Landscapes help define the image of a region and its sense of place, which differentiates it from other regions.

How does the public perceive landscape work?
In Malaysia, people may perceive landscape work as merely planting trees or gardening, without understanding that what we see, where we live, what we touch in the environment around us, is more often than not the result of careful planning by a landscape architect.

What is the history of the profession?
In the 19th century, the man known as the founder of landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmsted, gave a different slant to the term ‘landscape architecture’. He used it to describe the professional task of designing a composition of plants and trees, landforms, water features, paving and other structures. The winning entry for the design of Central Park in New York City, which still stands today, is the earliest example of his amazing work. In 1863, Olmsted adopted ‘landscape architect’ as a professional title for himself and used it to describe those who planned urban park systems. Today, the role is seen more as a guardian of the environment, with the responsibility to plan, design and build user-friendly exterior spaces which enhance the requirements of our modern lifestyle.

What is the general practice of landscape architects?
The general practice of landscape architects is diverse. Tasks range from creating small gardens to constructing large public areas such as parks, streets, plazas and open spaces. Town planning, natural and cultural conservation and even regional landscape master planning and landscape guidelines for cities and states are also...
Within our purview.

When and how did the profession begin in Malaysia?

The landscape architecture profession in Malaysia was initially formed under the name Angkatan Landskap Arkitek Malaysia (ALAM), on Sept 24, 1981. This group comprised various professionals, semi-professionals, students and private individuals who shared a passion for forming and developing green spaces.

In 1982, we were accepted as a member of the Malaysian Professional Centre or Balai Ikhtisas Malaysia (BIM). Subsequently, international recognition came by becoming a member of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) and the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1984.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Malaysia began a new era of development. With Kuala Lumpur hosting the 1998 Commonwealth Games, several mega-projects were undertaken, such as the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and KLCC, in 1992. Both projects witnessed greater involvement from various professionals in our field. This was a milestone for our group, as we were seen by the government as vital partners for any new construction project. We were also deeply involved in the planning and design of Putrajaya, which has become the nation’s first urban area planned as a garden and intelligent city.

Has ILAM garnered international recognition?

Our first international recognition came in 1995 when two local university students won first prize in an international landscape design competition, organised by the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) in Christchurch, New Zealand. First prize was achieved again in 1998 (Bali) and for a third time in 1999 (Kangwon-do, Korea).

In the new millennium, ILAM was known as one of the most active members of IFLA. In 2002, Malaysia hosted the IFLA Eastern Regional Congress in Kuala Lumpur.

2007, we hosted the 44th IFLA World Congress in Putrajaya, attracting more than 450 delegates from 30 countries. That same year, ILAM was invited by the Chinese Society of Landscape Architects (CHSLA) to visit the progress of the Beijing Olympic Park development and presented papers during a symposium.

Last year, we held the inaugural IFLA Asia-Pacific Symposium on Landscape Architecture Education (SoLear) in Putrajaya and we are proud to announce that we will be hosting the IFLA Asia-Pacific Regional Cultural Landscape Symposium 2012 in December. We have also been selected to host the IFLA Asia-Pacific Congress in April 2014 in Kuching, Sarawak.

In the past 30 years, local landscape architects have also been providing professional services beyond Malaysia, in India, the Middle East, China, Vietnam, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

What is the role of the Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia (ILAM)?

The institute serves several roles here. We are the only professional landscape architect association, comprising certified practitioners, which ensures our members stay up to date with developments in the profession by completing a course and examination process (KAIAL). As of 2009, all landscape architecture consultancy firms must register with ILAM prior to their registration with the Ministry of Finance. This demonstrates the government’s recognition of our profession.

How does education in Malaysia support the demands of the profession?

At ILAM, we provide accreditation services to local universities which offer landscape architecture degrees and master’s programmes. This ensures the standard of education is on a par with current demands, nationwide requirements and international trends.

What are the job prospects for a fresh graduate?

There is a range of career options available. Besides working as a landscape consultant, one can choose to work in the public service sector, as most city councils and state governments have landscape departments, or teach at the tertiary level. Many graduates also find places in the property development sector or in the construction field.

What are the annual activities organised by ILAM?

We organise events such as the Malaysia Landscape Architecture Awards (MLAA) which honour the best in landscape design and practice. We also provide courses and conferences, site visits, community outreach programmes such as exhibitions, talks, and tree-planting campaigns, all of which ensure knowledge and understanding is made accessible to the public.

The 44th IFLA World Congress in Kuala Lumpur.
The ILAM Belum-Temengor Rainforest Expedition and tree-planting ceremony with Orang Asli community.

The Malaysia Landscape Architecture Awards.