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The town planner's task is to anticipate and spearhead the response to human impact on the environment

The concept of town planning was developed out of the English public's concern for the environment which had its roots in the middle-class reforming spirit of the mid-Victorian period.

The professional town planner came into being in 1914 with the formal constitution of the Town Planning Institute, which received its royal charter in 1959. It subsequently became known as the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

Despite its long history, there continues to be widespread misunderstanding amongst the public at large of the nature of town planning, with the nature of the town planner's skill, work and vocabulary being obscure to many people.

According to RTPI, planning is very broad so the work is varied and may include the designing of new towns and villages, improving of communities and the environment, writing and explaining of regulation rules, protecting of buildings that are of historical and architectural importance as well as ensuring suitable lands become available for development and support businesses and jobs.

The Public Services Commission of Malaysia explains that town planners employed by the government and local authorities are responsible to plan, prepare, supervise and coordinate development plan reviews and other types of plans as well as prepare technical report and give advice on planning matters including layout plans.

Defining town planning

According to RTPI, town planning makes better and more sustainable places for everyone to live, work and enjoy.

Balancing between social, economic and environmental factors is one of the town planner's roles, and this balance is important in shaping the way that towns and cities grow and create great communities.

Urban planning and housing activist Coleman Woodbury defined town planning as the process of preparing in advance and in a reasonably systematic

More to town planning than meets the eye

- The role of a town planner remains little known to the public at large
- The planning of a town or city not only takes into account current factors but also possible future scenarios



by Ihsan Zainal Mokhtar

fashion recommendations for policies and courses of action (with careful attention to the probable by-products, side effects or spillover effects) to achieve accepted objectives in the common life of urban and regional localities or communities.

Thus, the town planner's entire focus is to assist in the evaluation, planning and development of a better environment, which involves the skilful selection and employment of elements significantly related to the community growth and development. Also involved in this process is a sensitivity for the broad spectrum of human activities. They relate to the environment, thus the town planner has to comprehend all the factors - social, economic and physical - which make up the total backcloth of life.

Town planners must not only know the requirements of their own profession but also be aware of the contribution to the planning of other professions. They must also recognise the interdependency of many specialised fields in guiding comprehensive

development and must be capable of creating a synthesis of relating concepts and data.

Robert I. Williams, a former governor of Oklahoma in the US, says town planning is not architecture on a large scale nor geography on a small scale.

Although many of the goals of a community are rightly social and economic in content, it is the translation of those goals into a physical plan as a guide to public and private investment that is the epicentre of the town planner's contribution.

The town planner's task is to anticipate and spearhead men's response to human impact on the environment. A well-conceived and well-supported public planning policy is then proof enough of the town planner's contribution.

Multiple acts

In Malaysia, Penang took the lead by becoming the first place where town planning was practised in 1801 when a Committee of Assessors was entrusted with the powers to layout the town in a manner most suitable to the requirements of the inhabitants.

The Town Planning Act 1923 was the first law of town planning to be framed and granted residents the power to appoint the town planning committee.

It also authorised the government town planner to prepare a General Town Plan which allocates zones for residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural and other specified uses.

The need to restructure the local authorities in Peninsular Malaysia led to the enactment of the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 for the purpose of introducing a standard system of law and policy for town and country planning in Peninsular Malaysia.

Prior to 1976, each state had a

Local Government Act for the administration of the local authorities, and legislation enabled every local authority to prepare general town plans for the areas showing zones for residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural or other users.

The local authority can also show the plan density in terms of houses of persons per acre, plot ratios, road reserve, parks and other specified uses. It is believed that this legislation was modelled on the 1927 and 1932 British Town and Country Planning Acts.

At present, Malaysia has four sets of planning laws including the aforementioned Town and Country Planning Act 1976 which is adopted by all states in the peninsula.

The other three are the Federal Territory (Planning) Act 1982 (Act 267) for the three federal territories, the Town and Country Planning Ordinance 1950 (Cap. 141) for Sabah and the Sarawak Land Code (Cap. 81 [1958 Ed]).

Promoting town planning locally

Town planners are involved in the pre-development state of every project development, where they are tasked with the responsibility of getting all the required planning approvals before any physical work can commence.

This role was stated in the Town Planners Act 1995 (Act 538) where town planners are responsible for preparing and submitting applications for planning permission, sub-divisional layouts, drawings and planning reports to any person or public authority for the purposes of developing any land.

The act also states that all registered town planners are entitled to prepare development plans, be they national physical plans, regional plans, state structure plans, local plans or special area

plans for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning Act 1976.

They can also carry out urban, rural and regional development planning studies and feasibility and environmental impact assessment studies relating to land use. The register of town planners in the country is maintained by the Malaysian Institute of Planners (MIP), which was established under the Societies Act 1966.

The idea to set up a national planning institute for an independent country was mooted during the 1971 annual general meeting of the Malaysian branch of the RTPI - the only body representing the planning profession in the country at that time.

MIP's chartered objective is to promote the science and art of town planning for the benefit of the public, primarily by ensuring the existence of a body of professional planners with the appropriate knowledge, training and skills to promote the advance of town planning in Malaysia.

To-date, the body has 1,917 members, most of whom are qualified professional town planners working as planning officers with various federal, state and local authorities.

The actual body governing the town planning profession, however, is the Board of Town Planners Malaysia which is also responsible for legislating the registry and practice of town planners.

Another agency that plays a major role in the industry is the Federal Department of Town and Country Planning (PLANMalaysia) that ensures the ideal use and development of land and employs the most public sector planners.

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