

# PROPERTY 360°

## KL's white beacon of pride

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BY Chris Prasad PHOTOGRAPHY: Fazari Madehi



**The Dayabumi Complex heralded the birth of a modern era that would change the face of the KL skyline**

When measuring the impact heritage buildings have made on our landscape, it is difficult to ignore the immense historic and nationalistic significance of the Dayabumi Complex in the spiritual heart of Kuala Lumpur.

Located close to the National Mosque and the old Kuala Lumpur railway station along Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin, the 35-storey building has become such an integral part of the city's landscape that we sometimes forget its importance ... but we really shouldn't.



Towering over a surrounding landscape of colonial era buildings, the relatively modern Dayabumi is no less historically significant because it was one of the first true icons of the modern era, representing our coming-of-age and announcing our ambition to be a modernised society.

Standing at 515ft, Dayabumi was hailed as the first steel frame skyscraper in the country, and for a short time, it was the tallest structure in Malaysia. More than this, it was also the first all-Malaysian effort, utilising local builders, local engineers and local architects. It was envisioned to be a statement, depicting our desire to be an autonomous global economic player, and the result was a timeless icon and a major source of national pride.

Ironically, when the plan for Dayabumi was first hatched in 1981, there was tremendous controversy surrounding it.

For one, it was by far the most ambitious and expensive building project ever attempted. The earmarked site would also displace the age-old Malayan Railway workshops and depots, which had been operating there since the early 1900s, and the development required the demolition of the adjacent historic Central Market area (which had been there since the foundation of Kuala Lumpur in the 1800s).

Many simply thought Dayabumi couldn't and shouldn't be built.

Amidst heated debates on the conservation of the area and expense involved in such an ambitious endeavour, the project did garner important support from some of Malaysia's most prominent modernists – not the least of whom was the newly-installed Prime Minister Datuk Sri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (now Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad).

Fortunately, the design was realigned to preserve the existence of Central Market, and work on the project began in early 1982.

Remarkably, the Dayabumi Complex was completed in just two years in February 1984, which was a record-breaking feat for a mega project at the time. Once its doors were open, criticisms dissipated as the building was clearly an engineering and architectural marvel. The fact that we achieved this on our own, with little foreign influence or assistance, instilled a crucial sense of belief in the nation – one that inspired us to climb greater heights.

Despite being overtaken as the tallest building in less than a year, by Menara Dato Onn, Dayabumi remained “the” KL landmark throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Among the chief reasons, say contemporary architects, is because it truly felt like “ours”.

Dayabumi pays tribute to the prevalent Moorish and Byzantine ambience from the colonial buildings surrounding it, but it is also clearly Malaysian in form. The design, which employs linear designs and arched surfaces that are inspired by Malaysia’s own cultural heritage, was a collaborative effort between architectural firms Arkitek MAA Sdn Bhd and BEP Akitek Sdn Bhd, and much of the conceptual work is attributed to architect Nik Mohammed.



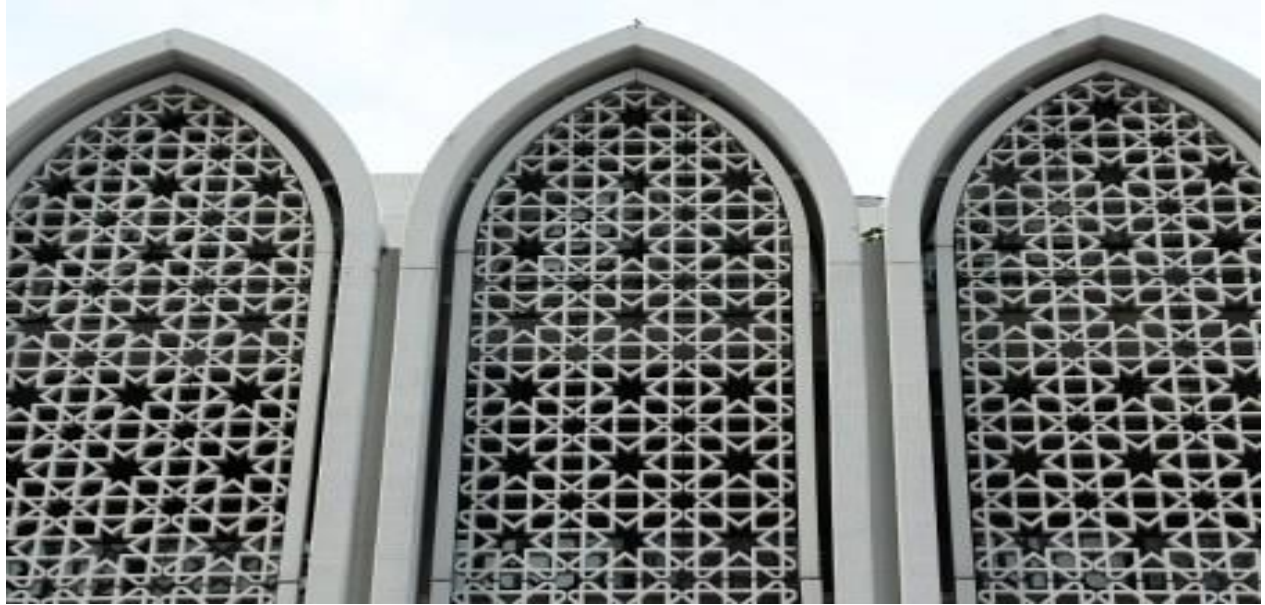
**A new lobby, introduced during a recent refurbishment exercise, showcases a transparent glass and steel structure.**

The synergy between middle-eastern and local styles is linked by a strong Islamic theme and art form. The façade of the tower is adorned with patterns of eight-pointed stars and high vaulted Islamic arches at the top and bottom of the tower. The gleaming white marble structure is endowed with complex patterns, shiny white fretwork and interlaced carved decorative designs.



Built by Kumagai Gumi Malaysia, the developer once said that the choice of pristine white for the entire building surface was a tribute to the purity of Islam; it is a colour commonly associated with mosques.

The entire complex spreads across 1,621,930sq ft and currently houses government and commercial offices as well as an annex that houses the General Post Office.



**Intricate motifs reach skyward, blending traditional Islamic art into a linear modern edifice.**

Originally, Dayabumi was owned by the Urban Development Authority of Malaysia (UDA) before being taken over by the national oil company Petronas. Ultimately, Petronas too moved out to occupy another iconic structure, the world-famous Petronas Twin Towers in KLCC. The building is still owned by KLCC Property Holdings, a unit under the Petronas Group.

KLCC Properties has recently refurbished the Dayabumi Complex and added a new lobby during Phase 1 and 2 of the refurbishment project. The new lobby was designed using a totally transparent glass and steel structure without any ceiling or HVAC ducting.



While KL may now be home to an armada of world-class skyscrapers, many believe that few have achieved the same level of Malaysian ingenuity and artistry that Dayabumi expresses, and it is still considered among the most beautiful buildings in the country.

Since Dayabumi, we have continuously pushed the boundaries of engineering and design, culminating even in the tallest twin towers on earth, but this building will continue to be the monument that gave birth to a self-believing nation.

Today, Dayabumi still serves as a white beacon of hope, constantly reminding us that Malaysians can achieve great things... if we believe we can.