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## Rudinara – A Handmade House – Aga Khan Award for Architecture

BY ISMAILIMAIL | NOVEMBER 9, 2006

### The Aga Khan Award

One day, Datuk Rudin received an email from a professor at the University of Southern California asking if he could bring his architectural students to visit. Little did Datuk Rudin know that that visit would alter his life, discovering only later that the professor was a “scout” for the Aga Khan Foundation, a role Datuk Rudin himself has since played twice.

Subsequently, a letter from The Aga Khan Award for Architecture was received. Rudinara had been nominated for the award. The very next day, Datuk Rudin drove the 300 km to the house of the master craftsman, Ibrahim Adam to give him the good news. A few days later a second letter from the Foundation arrived. The house had been selected for the Aga Khan Award which would be presented in Grenada, Spain and set out the amounts involved. Ibrahim’s share was substantial so once again Datuk Rudin drove to his house to give him the good news.

The following week Ibrahim came to Kuala Lumpur. As he had never traveled abroad before, travel documents had to be prepared. Datuk Rudin also took Ibrahim to a first-class tailor to have him measured for a Baju Melayu, a traditional Malay costume, and a western suit and some shirts. For a master craftsman with no right hand, pre-tied ties had to be purchased for Ibrahim.

Datuk Rudin confessed that he had always dreamed of seeing the Alhambra in Grenada but being there to receive the Award from King Juan Carlos of Spain was beyond his wildest dream. The Award Ceremony itself was a fantastic experience. In the photo session following the Award, Ibrahim, who was the only craftsman there, was surrounded by the King and Queen of Spain, and with the Aga Khan and his wife right in the center of the picture



crystal, mounted on a solid granite base. Datuk Rudin personally hand carried it back to Malaysia. The Award has since become part of the display of items and artifacts at Rudinara, which Datuk Rudin never tires of explaining to many listeners who have had the privilege of visiting Rudinara.

This unique house is the only one of its kind in the world. None like it will ever be built again as the craftsmen with the skill to build such houses are slowly passing away. Additionally, Chengal timber is increasingly difficult to get in large sizes, and is prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, very few people are willing to wait six years for a house to be completed.

Since the receipt of the Aga Khan award, Rudinara has received a great amount of publicity from the print and electronic media. A great number of people have visited Rudinara to appreciate its beauty and one-ness with its natural surroundings. The Handmade House has become a Malaysian icon



These are just a few words that come to mind

when one visits the beautiful Rudinara, a handmade house belonging to the husband and wife owners, Datuk Dr. Rudin Salinger and Datin Munira. Datuk Rudin reminisced that when he was growing up, he lived in a house with wooden flooring. It is the pleasant memory of walking barefoot on such floors, the inherent comfort of being in direct contact with something natural, that prompted him to build a house almost entirely of wood.

Rudinara is a post-and-beam timber structure raised on stilts to reduce its impact on the land and the environment. It is, by far, one of the best local representations of vernacular architecture. It is built in the traditional way of the Malays, yet is modern in a form that creatively interprets rather than imitates Malay culture and reflects Dr. Rudin and Munira's Islamic faith.



shaped house, which was later modified to include an extended veranda. However, much of the original plan remained on paper, as the master craftsman, Ibrahim Adam, from the Peninsular Malaysia's State of Kelantan that Datuk Rudin had identified, made considerable modifications to the actual design of the house as it was constructed. It must have been the challenge of building a non-rectangular house using traditional methods that captured Ibrahim's interest. Together with four septuagenarian assistants, Ibrahim began masterminding and leading the six-and-a-half-year project to build Rudinara, and unique, one-of-a-kind abode for a nature-loving couple. What was remarkable is the fact that Ibrahim was blind in one eye and had no right hand.

Rudinara was designed with sustainable ecological principles in mind. Placed on a high elevation, it avoids water run-off during the monsoon rains, and was designed to capture the prevailing winds. The house was formed by two adjoining equilateral triangles, the larger for indoor living, the other a prow-like portico, or verandah for alfresco dining and relaxation in the outdoors. Except for the handmade roof tiles, it was constructed throughout with Chengal, a very dense timber which is highly resistant to water and termites.

The perfectly octagonal supporting columns of the house were made using only a hatchet and plane (Ibrahim measured each cut with precision despite his calculations being made on the back of a matchbox!) There are no nails in the framework. All the internal flooring, doors and window frames are secured together using special wooden joints. The roofs were built on the ground, then disassembled, and sent up by pulley and reassembled. The highest part on the roof is 16 meters from the ground, and this was assembled when there were no walls or floors below the workers. The traditional joinery was entirely the work of Ibrahim and not in the original plans. There are nails on the verandah, benches, and for the battens, called Kayu Jerial which support the imbricated clay roof files. Each tile was hand made, and many have the names of Dr. Rudin and Munira embossed on them in Arabic script.





from Kota Baru, Kelantan was enlisted to build the staircase. First, he built a wall around the staircase that would also provide points to which the rising structure could be connected. It took four months to complete using large pieces of granite which the mason carefully selected to fit one against the others. The base consists of solid granite three feet thick, tapering to one-and-a-half feet thick at the uppermost part which corresponds with what is now the height of the first level of the house. The work was not completed to that level right away. Instead, as the level where the surrounding structure was being constructed gaps were left in locations directed by Ibrahim. At this time crossbeams from the surrounding structure were placed in the designated gaps which were then cemented into place by stone. The mason then went on to complete the wall.

With no internal walls on the first and second floor, technically the house has only two rooms. The lower floor, which itself is raised a few metres above the ground, contains a contiguous area that covers the living room, dining area, kitchen and guest room with an en suite bathroom – all embracing a hexagonal stone and granite core that houses a spiral staircase from the ground level to the lower and upper floors of the house. Only day curtains are used to separate the guest room from, on one side, the kitchen and on the other, the living room. The roof of the first level is from Chengal planks but underneath these roofs there are spaced slats which allow air to circulate. The upper floor consists of a sitting room, a prayer room, an office and bedroom with an en suite bathroom, all ‘boundaries’ demarcated and defined by the mere use of specific furniture.

Woodcarvings adorn every doorway of the house except one. The carvings were all crafted by Hj. Wan Su Othman and his son Wan Mustafa, Malaysia’s foremost wood carvers.

The “sisir angin”, literally translated as “wind scissors”, are another interesting feature of Rudinara. They are actually a set of handmade windows. There are a total of five, four of which are in the master bathroom and one in the master bedroom. These are actually louvered windows whose slats can be opened or closed. As for all the other windows, in an attempt to ensure every patterned translucent piece of glass would fit perfectly, Ibrahim drew a map of every window in the house with its dimensions and had the glass delivered pre-cut and labeled. Every piece was a perfect fit. The master bedroom has stained glass windows installed on the east- and west-facing sides to catch the morning and evening sunlight respectively.

### A Cool Space to Live In

Nowadays, with rapid urbanisation and the quest for each dweller’s square foot of living space surrounding the city, very few can call his abode a haven. Not so for Datuk Dr. Rudin



and yet it provides a heavenly retreat for the frazzled body, mind and soul day after day for the owners. It has provided them with the opportunity to re-connect with nature on a daily basis, and to enjoy the changing colours of the leaves of rubber trees and the popping sounds of the rubber seeds in their garden. It has become a place they look forward to returning to day after day, and is always a cool retreat no matter how relentlessly hot the tropical sun can be.

They have familiarised themselves with the daily rhythms of their natural surroundings, courtesy of, amongst others, the cocks crowing in the morning, the winds brushing against the leaves, the rain drumming on the roof, the sounds of the night jar and numerous multi-coloured birds that have also made Rudinara their home. They have witnessed the evidence of wild pigs, porcupine, bands of wild monkeys, large lizards and even the cast-off skins of pythons.

They have also acquainted themselves with the joys of having friends dine under the stars on the raised verandah. Nowadays, Datuk Rudin even hosts large groups of people for traditional cooking classes, where age-old implements and paraphernalia are still used to produce delectable dishes and scrumptious desserts. Many organisations have also utilised Rudinara for leadership and team-building training. Datuk Rudin believes that this is the best way to preserve the unique beauty of Rudinara for posterity.

Rudinara proves that high technology and energy-depleting techniques can be renounced if sufficient craft and creativity are deployed to make the best use of nature's offerings, like the natural coolness provided by mature trees and winds flowing underneath raised floors. Rudinara is a testimony that vernacular architectural designs can be successfully combined with man's modern-day needs.

## Source

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