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The Hidden Profession

Why Malaysia's Quantity Surveyors Matter to You — and Why You've Never Heard of Them

By

Goh MY

(written in personal capacity)

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A Note Before You Begin

This essay is written in the author's personal capacity. It is offered to the general reader, not to the construction industry. No prior knowledge of the building trades is assumed.

It is the second public essay in the Etika Hijau Publication Series. The first concerned construction preliminaries; this one is broader. It tries to explain, in plain terms, why the building of a country is a public matter, why a quiet profession sits at the centre of how that building is paid for, and why most Malaysians have never been told that the profession exists.

The essay is roughly an hour's read. It is divided into eight parts. You may begin anywhere; you may stop anywhere. The questions it tries to answer are these: when a hospital is built with your taxes, who is supposed to make sure your taxes were not wasted? When a developer sells you a house off-plan, who is supposed to make sure the price you paid bore some relation to what the house actually costs to build? When a flyover is announced before an election and is finished after the next one, costing twice what was promised, who, in the system that built it, was paid to ask whether that should have happened? The answer is not the only answer. But it is an answer the public should know about.

Where projects are described in this essay, they are illustrative and fictional. No real project, person, agency, or firm is named, intended, or to be inferred. The patterns described are general patterns, drawn from publicly known features of the Malaysian construction market and from international comparison.

The author writes under a pseudonym to keep the focus on the argument rather than the writer.

Part I — The Building You Did Not Notice

Somewhere near you, right now, a building is going up. It might be a school, a hospital, a flyover, a block of flats, a power plant, a water-treatment works, a courthouse, a community hall, a private bungalow, or a high-rise office tower. Construction is the most visible thing happening in any Malaysian town and the least examined.

It is the most visible because you can see it from the window of any moving car. Cranes against the sky, traffic diversions, mud on the road, hoardings with artists' impressions of glass towers that bear only loose resemblance to what eventually appears. Every Malaysian under the age of fifty has grown up watching the country being built around them. It is the soundtrack of national life.

It is the least examined because almost no one outside the industry knows how it actually works. We know that buildings cost a lot of money. We know that some are built on time and on budget, and many are not. We know that the country has produced its share of cost overruns, abandoned housing schemes, hospitals that opened years late, and rail and water projects whose final price bore no resemblance to the figure announced when the ribbon was first to be cut. We grumble about it. We make jokes about it. Then we look away, because the technical detail seems forbidding and the explanations offered in the news — “scope changes,” “variations,” “approved supplemental claims” — seem designed to make the eyes glaze over.

Construction is the most visible thing happening in any Malaysian town and the least examined.

This essay is an attempt to fix that, partially. It is written for the general reader: the homeowner, the strata council member, the citizen who reads the news and wonders why so many big projects go wrong, the parent whose child is thinking of studying something built-environment-related, the journalist who covers construction stories without quite knowing whom to ask, the policymaker who wonders why the Auditor General's reports keep saying the same things in slightly different words. It does not assume that you know anything about how buildings are bought, designed, or paid for. It tries to explain enough of that, simply, so that the rest of the argument makes sense.

The argument is this. Behind every construction project of any size in Malaysia stands a profession most members of the public have never heard of. It is called quantity surveying. Its members are called quantity surveyors, often abbreviated to QS. There are about 1,800 of them in registered private practice across the country, plus several thousand more in government, in development companies, in contracting firms, and in academia. They work on every public hospital, every flyover, every school, every airport extension, every dam, every airport, every off-plan housing scheme, every shopping centre, every high-rise. They do not design the buildings, they do not engineer them, they do not build them, and they do not sell them. What they do is calculate, in considerable detail, what those buildings should cost — and then they spend the next several years checking, contract by contract, payment by payment, whether the prices being paid bear any relation to the prices that were properly due.

If quantity surveying did not exist, construction in Malaysia would be considerably more chaotic, and a great deal more expensive, than it is. And yet most members of the public have never heard the name. There are reasons for that, some of them historical, some of them institutional, some of them having to do with the profession's own failure to step into the public conversation. The reasons matter, because they explain why the profession has been quieter on national construction failures than its disciplinary equipment would have allowed it to be. The reasons also matter because they shape what you, as a citizen, should ask of the profession in the next generation — because the profession is now at an inflection point at which what it becomes will substantially affect what you, your children, and your country can afford to build.

That is the case for the next twenty-odd pages of your reading attention. The essay traces where the profession came from, what it has become, why most Malaysians have never heard of it, what is changing under its feet right now, and what the public stands to gain or lose by how the profession responds. It is written by a member of the profession, but for readers outside it. The profession does not need another internal lecture; it needs an honest public account.

Part II — How Buildings Actually Get Built (and Why You Have Probably Been Misled About It)

Before we can talk about quantity surveyors, you need a brief account of how a substantial building project actually happens, from the moment someone decides to build it to the moment the keys are handed over. The popular impression — from television, from property advertisements, from the breezy way newspapers report ground-breaking ceremonies — is misleading in important ways. Reality is messier and more interesting.

The decision and the design

Someone decides a building is needed. For a public project, the someone is typically a government ministry, a state government, or a government-linked corporation, acting on a plan that has gone through some form of cabinet, parliamentary, or ministerial approval. For a private project, the someone is a developer, a corporation, an institution, or an individual. The decision is rarely made by the architects or the builders; it is made by the parties with the money and the political or commercial reason to want the building.

Once the decision is made, the project is given to a design team. The architect designs the form: the layout, the elevations, the rooms, the user experience, the aesthetic. The civil and structural engineer designs the bones: the foundations, the columns, the beams, the floor slabs, all the things that make the building stand up. The mechanical and electrical engineer designs the systems: the air conditioning, the plumbing, the electrical supply, the data network, the lifts, the fire-fighting systems. On larger projects, specialist consultants design particular trades — facade engineering, acoustics, vertical transportation, kitchen layouts for hospitals, and so on. The drawings and specifications they produce, taken together, describe in considerable detail the building that has been decided upon.

This phase takes many months. For a complex hospital or a major rail project it takes years. The drawings go through multiple iterations as the client changes its mind, as authorities raise concerns, as engineering problems are discovered, as budgets tighten. By the time the design is considered ready for construction, it has typically passed through what the industry, with a kind of resigned humour, calls many “revisions.” A serious project may carry a design version numbered in the high teens or low twenties before anyone breaks ground.

The first place where money is supposed to come under discipline

Now consider what has not yet happened. Nobody has yet built anything. Nobody has yet been hired to build anything. The drawings are on paper or, increasingly, in digital design models. What has happened is that the client has signed up to a vision, but has been told only an estimated cost. That estimated cost is often a number arrived at quickly, in the early days of the project, before the design has been fully developed, before site conditions have been fully tested, before the authorities have made their final demands.

This is where the first real cost discipline of the project is supposed to enter. Before any contractor is asked to price the work, somebody is supposed to take the drawings and the specifications, measure them in detail, and calculate what the building should cost to build at honest market rates. This is a serious undertaking. It involves measuring every square metre of floor finish, every metre of wall, every kilogram of reinforcement steel, every cubic metre of concrete, every door, every window, every meter of pipework and cabling, every fitting, every fixture, all in a level of detail that runs, for a substantial building, to several hundred pages of structured tables. The exercise yields what is called a cost plan, and a derived document called a Bill of Quantities. Together they are the disciplined arithmetic of the project.

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This work is done by quantity surveyors. It is the foundational task that gives the profession its name, although as we shall see it is far from the most important thing the profession does. For now, the point is that a properly prepared cost plan and Bill of Quantities give the client a defensible answer to two questions: what should this building cost, in honest current-market terms; and against what document will I check the prices that contractors will eventually quote me, so that I can tell whether they are quoting me honestly or whether they are pricing me as a fool?

If this work is not done, or is done poorly, the project enters its competitive bidding phase blind. The client has no defensible benchmark. The contractors' quotes can vary by twenty or thirty per cent and the client cannot tell which is correct. The lowest quote may be a serious contractor pricing the work realistically at a thin margin, or it may be a less serious contractor pricing strategically low in order to win the work and then make money back through later variations and claims. Without disciplined cost benchmarking, the client cannot tell the difference — and even within a robust evaluation framework, the absence of an honest cost plan undercuts the technical committee's ability to recognise an underbid for what it is.

The bidding, and the moment of choice

Armed (or not) with a cost plan and Bill of Quantities, the client invites contractors to bid. In a public project, this is a tender process governed by procurement rules of varying rigour. In a private project, it may be a closed invitation to a small list of contractors the client has chosen on the basis of past relationships. The contractors prepare their bids, often within tight deadlines and at significant cost to themselves — a serious bid for a major building can cost a contractor a six-figure sum to prepare — and submit them on a specified date.

The bids are opened, compared, and a contractor is selected. In Malaysian public procurement, this evaluation is not a single decision; it is a multi-tier process. A Technical Evaluation Committee assesses each bid against pre-determined technical criteria — contractor track record, programme credibility, methodology, resources, compliance with specifications. A separate Financial Evaluation Committee assesses the pricing. The two committees produce rankings; a tender secretariat applies the predetermined weightings; and the consolidated evaluation report is submitted to an Agency Procurement Board for selection. For higher-value contracts, the recommendation goes further up to the Ministry of Finance. The process is documented and auditable, and from 2026 it operates under the new Government Procurement Act 2025, which mandates open competitive tendering as the default, requires written justification for all award decisions, and imposes personal liability on controlling officers who fail to comply. The framework is therefore considerably more disciplined than the casual phrase “lowest tender” suggests.

This is also how it should be. The harder questions sit one step further on. Even within a multi-tier evaluation framework, weightings can be set in ways that effectively favour price, technical scoring can be applied with varying rigour, and the final award decisions are made by human committees subject to the institutional pressures that all such committees face. The architecture of evaluation is sound; the discipline with which it is applied across thousands of projects of varying size and visibility is more variable. The new Procurement Act is a serious response to the variability, and its impact will be the subject of public conversation over the coming years.

The contract

Once a contractor is selected, a contract is signed. The contract is not a casual document. For a serious project it runs to many hundreds of pages, comprising the Conditions of Contract (the legal terms

governing the parties' relationship), the Specifications (the technical description of how the work must be done), the Drawings (the visual description of what is to be built), the Bill of Quantities (the line-by-line description of the priced quantities), and various other appendices. Standard forms are used — the PAM 2018 form for most private building projects, the JKR forms for public works, the IEM form for civil engineering work, the AIAC Standard Form of Building Contract for projects that opt into it, the FIDIC suite for international and large infrastructure work.

The contract is the most important document in the project. It allocates risk between the parties: who bears the cost if the design is wrong, if the ground turns out to be different from what was expected, if a typhoon disrupts the programme, if a supplier goes bankrupt, if a regulatory change is imposed mid-project, if the client changes its mind. The right allocation of risk, agreed at the outset, is the difference between a project that runs smoothly and a project that ends in dispute. The wrong allocation produces years of subsequent argument, often in arbitration or in the courts, at enormous cost.

Quantity surveyors are heavily involved in the drafting and review of contracts on building projects, and on most large infrastructure projects. They are involved because the contract's commercial terms — how variations are priced, how progress payments are calculated, how delays are compensated, how disputes are resolved — are technical commercial matters that the architect and the engineer are not, by training, equipped to handle. The lawyer drafts the legal architecture; the quantity surveyor writes the commercial machinery.

The build

Construction begins. For a serious building project this phase will run two to four years. For a major piece of infrastructure, five to ten years or longer. Throughout that period, work proceeds in stages: site preparation, foundations, structure, building envelope, internal fit-out, mechanical and electrical installation, external works, commissioning, handover. At each stage, the contractor invoices the client for the work done, and the client pays. The contractor must be paid regularly, or his cash flow collapses and the project halts. The client must not be overpaid for work not actually done, or the public or shareholder money is wasted and the contractor has every incentive to take the money and leave the work incomplete.

This regular reconciliation — between work actually done and money actually paid — is the second great task of the quantity surveying profession. Every month, on every serious project, a quantity surveyor walks the site, measures what has been physically built since the last visit, prices that work against the contract rates, deducts amounts for previously paid items, and produces a payment certificate. The certificate is the basis on which the client pays the contractor for that month. The certificate is also the basis on which, if the work is poor or if the contractor has overstated, the client withholds payment until the work is set right. Without this monthly discipline, the client has no protection against being defrauded, and the contractor has no protection against being unpaid for honest work.

The variations, and the dispute

No serious construction project unfolds exactly as drawn. The client changes the brief. The site reveals conditions the engineer did not anticipate. A regulator demands a change. A subcontractor proposes a better way of doing something. A material specified two years ago is no longer manufactured. A geopolitical event interrupts a supply chain. Each such change is a variation, and each must be valued, agreed, and added to or subtracted from the contract sum. Variations are inevitable. The question is whether they are properly priced and properly recorded, or whether they accumulate as a vague mass of half-agreed promises that will resurface, years later, as a final-account dispute that takes a further year to resolve.

Quantity surveyors handle variations. The good ones handle them well: each variation valued promptly, agreed in writing, paid or deducted with discipline. The poor ones handle them badly, or are not given the time and authority to handle them properly, and the project drifts into the haze that produces,

eventually, the bitter end-of-project arbitration that consumes the savings of two or three years of competent execution.

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If a dispute does crystallise — and on a meaningful percentage of major projects, one does — it is resolved through one of several mechanisms. Statutory adjudication under the Construction Industry Payment and Adjudication Act 2012, administered by the Asian International Arbitration Centre, provides a fast-track route for payment disputes, with decisions of “temporary finality” until further reference. Arbitration under the Arbitration Act 2005, conducted under various institutional rules including those of AIAC, ICC, PAM, and IEM, provides a more thorough but slower route. Mediation under the Mediation Act 2012 provides a settlement-oriented alternative. Expert determination handles particular technical or valuation questions. Court-annexed mediation has become more common. The contracts themselves often impose multi-tiered dispute resolution clauses — negotiation, then mediation, then adjudication, then arbitration — with strict compliance points along the way. Quantity surveyors with the necessary further training serve as adjudicators, expert witnesses, and party representatives in this dispute architecture. It is a substantial and growing area of professional practice.

The handover, and the long tail

Eventually the building is finished. The contractor hands it over. The client takes possession. Over the next twelve to twenty-four months, defects that emerge during use are corrected under the Defects Liability Period. The final account is settled — the last reconciliation between everything paid and everything that should have been paid. Retention monies, held back during construction as a guarantee against defects, are released. The contractor moves on to the next job. The client begins to operate the building. The architects and engineers and quantity surveyors who built the project disperse to other projects.

Years later, perhaps, the building requires major refurbishment, or extension, or eventually demolition. The carbon embedded in its construction, never measured at the time, has been part of the country’s carbon budget for decades. The cost in maintenance and operation, often a multiple of the construction cost over the building’s life, has been borne by whoever owns or operates it. The project is, in a real sense, never quite over.

Why this matters to the public reader

That, in compressed form, is how a building actually gets built. Notice how many decisions, how many discretionary judgements, how many opportunities for cost discipline or cost indiscipline, sit between the moment a project is decided upon and the moment it is finally settled. Notice how much of what determines whether the project succeeds or fails happens inside the contracts and the certifications and the variation procedures, where the public never looks.

The quantity surveyor is the professional whose disciplinary specialism is precisely those parts of the project: cost planning before construction, payment certification during construction, variation valuation throughout, final account discipline at the end, dispute work when things go wrong. None of this is glamorous. None of it appears in television programmes about construction. None of it has the visual drama of architecture or the structural marvel of engineering. But it is the work without which the architecture and the engineering, however brilliant, can be undermined by financial chaos. It is the cost spine of the project.

This is the profession most members of the public have never heard of. The next part of the essay will explain why.

Part III — Where the Profession Came From, and Whom It Was Designed to Serve

The British origin

The quantity surveying profession is not Malaysian in origin. It is British, and like much else in Malaysia's institutional architecture, it arrived as part of colonial rule. In 1934, two British quantity surveyors, David Waters and Eric Watson, established the firm Waters & Watson in Singapore, then part of British Malaya.^[1] The first major project for which formal Bills of Quantities were prepared in this region was the Singapore Supreme Court building, constructed between 1937 and 1939 under the supervision of David Niven of the colonial Public Works Department.^[2] The Japanese occupation interrupted the work; in 1947 Eric Watson re-established the firm and opened a Kuala Lumpur branch.^[3]

In Britain itself, the quantity surveyor had emerged in the nineteenth century to perform a particular function. Before the discipline existed, building owners had no defence against contractor pricing. Each contractor would price a job from scratch in his own way, the building owner had no benchmark, and the prices that resulted bore little relation to the work's honest market value. The quantity surveying profession arose to provide that benchmark: an independent, disciplined measurement of work and materials, against which contractor pricing could be tested. The Bill of Quantities was its central instrument.

Transplanted to Malaya, the discipline served the same function on behalf of the same class of building owner: the colonial government, the British trading houses, the rubber and tin enterprises, and the institutions that supported their senior personnel. The buildings being put up — government offices, residences, hospitals, schools, ports, railway works — were not, by and large, being built for the wider Malayan public. They were being built for the apparatus that licensed and taxed an extractive economy, and for the European population that ran it. Local Malaysians, where they participated in the profession at all, were trained as junior assistants — “workers-up” in the language of the trade — not as principals.

The quantity surveying profession was not introduced into Malaya as a gift to a developing economy. It was a British technology of imperial fiscal discipline, and its primary loyalty ran to the British building owner who paid the fee.

This origin is not a moral indictment, simply an honest historical description. The technical content of quantity surveying — the methods of systematic measurement, of priced description, of cost discipline — was and remains genuinely useful. What the colonial origin shaped, and what continued to shape the profession long after independence, was the answer to a deeper question: whom was the profession ultimately for? The British answer was clear: the building owner. The post-colonial Malaysian answer was, and to a considerable extent remains, an unreflective continuation of the same. The client paid the fee; the client received the loyalty. That this client base, after independence, became progressively Malaysian — government, government-linked corporations, private developers, institutions — did not cause the profession to revisit, in any deep sense, the question of whether it owed something more than client service to the wider Malaysian public.

Independence and the formal architecture

Political independence in 1957 brought formal sovereignty over the Malaysian state but not, immediately, over the construction professions. The first wholly Malaysian-owned quantity surveying practice, Juru Ukur Bahan Malaysia (JUBM), was not founded until 1972, fifteen years after independence. The Quantity Surveyors Act came into force in 1967, originally regulating both quantity surveying and valuation surveying together; in 1981 the two professions were separated, and the Board

of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia (BQSM, in Bahasa Malaysia, Lembaga Juruukur Bahan Malaysia) was established in its current form.^[4] Further amendments to the Act in 2014 and Rules in 2016 modernised the regulatory framework. The Royal Institution of Surveyors Malaysia (RISM), as the principal professional learned society, traces its lineage to 1961.^[5]

These institutions are real and substantive. By 2026 there are more than 1,800 registered Consultant and Professional Quantity Surveyors in Malaysia, more than 350 registered private practices, several thousand additional practitioners working within government and corporate organisations, and a steady annual flow of new entrants from a network of accredited universities. The profession has its own Standard Methods of Measurement — the most recent, SMM3, was released by RISM on 8 July 2025. Malaysia has hosted the Pacific Association of Quantity Surveyors (PAQS) regional Congress three times — in 1999, in Kuala Lumpur in 2009, in Kuching, Sarawak in 2019, and most recently in Kuala Lumpur in 2023 — and currently has a Malaysian Chairman of PAQS.

By every visible institutional measure, the profession arrived. It has the regulatory architecture, the publication infrastructure, the international engagement, the steady supply of new graduates. What it has not done, in nearly seven decades since independence, is develop a confident public account of why it exists. It has answered, at length and well, the question of what it does. It has not yet answered, in terms a public reader can understand, the question of what it is for.

Why this is the public reader's problem

You might reasonably ask: why does this matter to me? It is the profession's own problem if it has not articulated itself well. I have my own profession to worry about.

The answer is that the public bears the cost of the profession's under-articulation. Every time a public construction project goes badly wrong — every cost overrun on a hospital, every abandoned housing scheme, every flyover that arrives years late at twice the announced cost — the public conversation that follows is conducted by politicians, journalists, economists, and the occasional academic. None of these voices, with respect, has the disciplinary equipment to explain in technical detail what went wrong with the cost discipline of the project, what procurement design choice produced the overrun, what variation procedure failed, what risk allocation was wrongly drafted, what payment regime collapsed.

The profession that has that disciplinary equipment is largely silent in those conversations. The reasons are not sinister; they are the ordinary reasons of professional life in a small market. To speak in public on a public project is to risk embarrassing a current or future client, a fellow practitioner, a friend within the procuring agency. Better, the unspoken professional norm runs, to speak only on technical platforms read by other practitioners. The cumulative effect of that norm, exercised across thousands of practitioners over decades, is that the public has lost the chance to learn that the profession exists and has something useful to say.

The public bears the cost of the profession's under-articulation. Every cost overrun is debated by politicians, journalists, and economists. The profession that has the disciplinary equipment to explain it is largely silent.

This silence is not the only reason public construction projects in Malaysia have a chequered record. As we shall see in the next part, the deeper causes are political, governance-related, and cultural — they sit upstream of any single profession's capacity to fix them. But silence is one of the things the public legitimately can ask the profession to address. A profession that does not speak in public has no public. A profession that has no public has no constituency to defend it when, in the next quarter-century, the disruptions now in motion come for the work the profession has historically done.

Part IV — Why Construction Projects in Malaysia Sometimes Fail (and Where the Profession Sits in That Picture)

Before we examine why some construction projects fail, it is worth pausing on what has gone right. The Malaysian construction industry of 2026 is not the industry of 1996. By international comparison, it is now in many respects a sophisticated industry. According to the 2024 Autodesk-Deloitte State of Digital Adoption survey, Malaysia ranks second in the Asia-Pacific region for digital technology adoption in construction, ahead of both Singapore and Australia. Building Information Modelling (BIM) adoption has reached approximately 55 per cent and is mandatory for all government, government-linked corporation, and private projects of RM10 million or above since August 2024. The Construction Industry Development Board's Construction 4.0 Strategic Plan, the Industrialised Building System (IBS) Roadmap, and the National Construction Plan 2030 set out a coherent national modernisation programme. Major contractors operate digital prefabrication facilities; AI-assisted project management platforms are in mainstream use; carbon capture research is institutionally established at university level. The construction sector employs roughly 1.2 million people, contributes 4.6 per cent directly to GDP, and grew by 20.2 per cent in 2024 alone. This is not a backward industry.

Public procurement has matured in parallel. The multi-tier evaluation architecture described in Part II — separate technical and financial committees with pre-determined weightings, agency procurement boards, MOF oversight for large contracts — has been in place for decades and has been continually refined. The new Government Procurement Act 2025, effective from early 2026, replaces the previous patchwork of Treasury Instructions and circulars with a unified statutory framework. It mandates open competitive tendering as the default method, requires documented justification for every award decision, establishes tiered approval thresholds with a full audit trail, and imposes personal liability on controlling officers who fail to comply. The Audit Act 1957 was substantively amended in 2024 — its first major amendment in thirty-three years — strengthening the independence of the National Audit Department. Auditor-General's Reports are now tabled and debated in the Dewan Rakyat as a matter of routine, with parliamentary scrutiny of specific delayed projects and named ministries. None of this is window-dressing; these are real institutional reforms.

By international comparison, Malaysian construction in 2026 is in many respects a sophisticated industry. The architecture of discipline is more mature than the public discussion of project failures sometimes suggests.

And yet some projects still fail. The Auditor-General's Report Series 3 of 2025, tabled in October 2025, identified 157 federal development projects classified as "sick" — critically delayed — as of December 2024, distributed across 18 ministries. The Education Ministry led the list with 46 stalled projects, followed by the Rural and Regional Development Ministry with 34. As of October 2024, the Housing and Local Government Ministry recorded 113 abandoned private housing projects, 212 delayed, and 382 sick — collectively representing tens of thousands of affected buyers and a gross development value in the tens of billions of ringgit. Specific cases reported in parliamentary debate included a federal forward operating base in Sabah approved under the 11th Malaysia Plan and still not complete; military housing projects whose contractors had to be terminated for financial mismanagement; and museum and heritage upgrades whose costs trebled from RM20 million to RM60 million through cumulative variations.

So both pictures are true. The architecture of discipline has matured. Project failures continue to occur at meaningful scale. The honest causal explanation lies in the gap between architecture and execution — between what the formal systems require and what happens in practice on individual projects in

particular ministries and particular markets. Three forces, working together, account for most of that gap.

The first force — the political-administrative interface

Public construction projects in Malaysia, like those in every parliamentary democracy, are decided through a political process and delivered through an administrative one. The two work on different timescales and respond to different incentives, and the interface between them is where most large project failures begin.

A new school, a new hospital, a new highway, or a new public housing scheme is announced as part of a five-year plan, a budget speech, or an electoral commitment. The announcement carries a budget figure and an indicative completion date. The technical work that should support those numbers — site investigation, scope definition, programme assessment, market sounding — sometimes runs ahead of the announcement, and sometimes runs behind it. Where it runs behind, the announced budget and the announced completion date have been set before the project is fully understood. By the time the proper technical work catches up, the procurement is already underway, the political expectations are already set, and the choices facing the implementing agency have narrowed. Adjustments are still possible, but each adjustment must navigate political visibility, administrative process, and inter-ministerial coordination, all of which take time the project can no longer afford.

This is not a uniquely Malaysian phenomenon, and it is not a moral failing of any particular set of officials. It is a structural feature of how political commitments and administrative delivery interact. Mature systems manage the interface through stage-gated approval processes that require technical confirmation before political commitment. The new Government Procurement Act 2025 strengthens documentation and approval at each stage; it does not, by itself, alter the political timing pressures that produce premature commitments. That alteration requires sustained political-administrative discipline of a kind that builds over decades, not legislation alone.

The quantity surveyor sits inside this picture. By the time the project reaches detailed cost planning, the political budget has often already been announced. Where the honest cost plan differs from that figure, the conversation that should follow — reduce scope or revise budget — is one that procuring agencies have varying space to have. The cost plan is filed; the project proceeds; the variation is later booked. The system is gradually getting better at requiring this conversation to happen visibly, but the underlying tension is structural and persists.

The second force — the gap between procurement architecture and procurement practice

Malaysia's procurement architecture is, on paper, good. The new Procurement Act 2025 makes it better. The harder question is whether the architecture is consistently applied across thousands of projects of varying size, varying visibility, and varying institutional capacity — and the honest answer is that the application is uneven.

The Auditor-General's Reports of recent years document the unevenness without ambiguity. Contractors who win tenders and then fail to perform; extensions of time granted in numbers that suggest the original programme was unrealistic; variation orders whose cumulative value would, if disclosed at the start, have caused the project to be reconsidered; payment progress that runs ahead of physical progress; intervention teams deployed by the Public Works Department to rescue contracts in distress. None of these patterns proves that the procurement architecture is broken. They suggest that the architecture is applied with greater rigour by some agencies than by others, and that the consequences of weak application are absorbed by the system rather than by the parties responsible for them.

Some of the unevenness is local-authority and small-agency capacity. The technical depth available to the Ministry of Works and the larger agencies in Putrajaya is not always available to a district education office or a state housing department, particularly in non-metropolitan and East Malaysian contexts. Some of it is contractor capacity. The Malaysian construction market includes a small number of well-resourced contractors and a long tail of under-capitalised ones; the long tail wins work it cannot reliably deliver, defaults, and produces the rescue interventions and the rehabilitation task forces that the public eventually reads about. Some of it is private-sector procurement culture, where the Sell-Then-Build housing model identified by the Khazanah Research Institute in October 2025 places the financial risk of project failure on the buyer rather than the developer, and produces the abandoned-housing problem that the Task Force on Sick and Abandoned Private Housing Projects has spent recent years trying to resolve.

The picture is therefore one of a sound architecture imperfectly applied, in which the imperfections are concentrated in particular agencies, particular regions, and particular market segments. The new Procurement Act, the strengthened Audit Act, and the active TFST rehabilitation programme are all responses to the imperfections; their effectiveness will be visible over the coming years.

The third force — the long tail of contractor and procurement habits

Beyond architecture and political-administrative timing, there is a third force which is harder to legislate against: the operational habits that have built up across the long tail of the construction supply chain over many decades. Some of these habits are positive features of Malaysian commercial life — the willingness to accommodate, to work through problems by negotiation, to maintain working relationships across multiple projects. Some of them are less positive. The undocumented site instruction reconciled at final account; the variation valued months after it was issued; the substandard work made good at the end of the Defects Liability Period under cumulative pressure rather than under contract; the subcontractor paid late because the main contractor was paid late, with the consequence cascading to the bottom of the supply chain. None of these is universal. None of them dominates the better-managed projects. But each of them is a real feature of a real proportion of the work done in the country, and each erodes the cost-and-time discipline that the formal architecture intends.

Mature construction cultures — the British, the Australian, the German, the Japanese — have, over many decades of incremental reform, replaced these operational habits with contract-based discipline as the routine default. The 1994 Latham Report and the 1998 Egan Report in the United Kingdom identified the same patterns Malaysia identifies today, and produced a sustained reform programme whose effects took fifteen years to be fully felt. Singapore's Building and Construction Authority has driven a similar regional programme, embedding quality scoring (CONQUAS), procurement standards, and public-sector best practice as conditions of contractor qualification. Malaysia knows the international literature; the Construction Industry Transformation Programme (2016–2020) and Construction 4.0 Strategic Plan (2021–2025) implement substantial parts of it. The reforms are real and ongoing; their impact, like the impact of the British and Singaporean reforms before them, is generational rather than overnight.

Command-economy construction systems — China is the most visible contemporary example — achieve cost-and-time discipline by means that depend on unified state direction of state-owned contractors building for state-owned clients. The delivery numbers are striking, and Malaysian readers may take an interest in them. They are not, however, a model that a parliamentary democracy with a mixed economy and an independent contractor base can or should adopt; the trade-offs that produce that delivery efficiency are trade-offs in transparency, in independent oversight, and in the political accountability of procuring agencies that the Malaysian constitutional and economic system properly rules out. The descriptive lesson is bounded but real: cost-and-time discipline at scale is achievable; the path Malaysia must take to it runs through procurement-and-contract reform within an open system; and the closer comparator for that path is Singapore.

Where the profession sits in the picture

Set against these three forces, the quantity surveying profession is one player among several. The profession does not set political timetables, design procurement legislation, or write the cultural defaults of the long tail of the construction supply chain. The profession's gift is technical: cost planning before construction, payment certification during construction, variation valuation throughout, contract administration at the end, and dispute work when things go wrong. Within that gift, the profession can be more or less rigorous, more or less articulate, more or less willing to resist the pressures that work against discipline.

The honest description of the profession's contribution is therefore neither "the QS caused the failures" nor "the QS could have prevented them." Where the political-administrative interface, the architecture-practice gap, and the long-tail habits pushed a project toward failure, the profession was largely structurally limited in what it could do alone. Where it could have made a difference — by sharper cost reporting, by more disciplined variation administration, by clearer warning of trajectory before disaster crystallised, by refusing to certify what could not honestly be certified — the profession sometimes did, and sometimes did not. The strongest practitioners and firms have records of resistance they can be proud of. The market average has been steadier than heroic.

What the profession's under-articulation has cost the public is therefore not the failures themselves — those have many parents. What it has cost the public is the credible technical voice that should have been part of the public conversation about why the failures occurred and what should be different next time. That voice exists. It has, until recently, been confined largely to internal professional channels and academic publications. The signs of change are visible — the RISM-AIAC ADR conference of November 2025 and the increased PAQS engagement on decarbonisation are both examples — but the change is fragile and depends on continuing demand from outside the profession.

The next part turns to what is changing in the wider world, and why it matters to you.

Part V — What Is Changing in the World, and Why It Matters to You

The construction industry is on the threshold of changes more substantial than any since the introduction of mechanised building methods a century ago. Five forces are now in motion. Each will, separately, reshape the way buildings get planned, paid for, and delivered. Together they will redefine the work of the quantity surveying profession and, more importantly for this essay's readers, will redefine what the public can expect from the construction industry over the next twenty-five years.

Force one — artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence is now competent at the routine technical work that has, for nearly two centuries, defined the quantity surveying profession at its visible surface: measurement of drawings, take-off of quantities, basic cost build-up. Software platforms used in better-resourced practices today already perform substantial parts of this work. Within a decade, the consensus view across the profession internationally, supported by recent Malaysian academic research, is that artificial intelligence will automate roughly forty per cent of the time currently spent on routine measurement and basic cost calculation.

For the public reader, the implication is twofold. First, the quantity surveying work that affects your projects — your housing scheme, your hospital, your school — will be done faster, more accurately at the routine level, and with fewer human-hours expended on the routine parts. This is good. Second, what remains for human practitioners is the harder work: judgement under uncertainty, integration of incommensurable values, dispute reasoning, public communication of cost truth. This work is not automatable, but it requires a profession that has been trained for it. The Malaysian profession is not yet, at scale, so trained. The next generation of practitioners must be — or you, as the eventual user of their services, will receive a thinner profession than your projects deserve.

Force two — carbon

Every significant building constructed in Malaysia from now onwards will, increasingly, have to account for its carbon footprint. The pressure will arrive from multiple directions: international green-finance standards required by lenders and investors; ESG reporting obligations imposed on multinational tenants whose own corporate disclosures depend on it; carbon pricing regimes that will, sooner or later, attach a financial cost to embodied and operational carbon; and public procurement preferences that will, in time, weight carbon performance in award decisions.

The implication for the public reader is that the buildings being put up now have a second cost — their carbon cost — that has historically not been properly counted, and that future generations of Malaysians will pay through climate consequence. The profession that should be counting this second cost, integrating it into the financial cost plan, and reporting both together, is the quantity surveying profession. The international standard for doing so — the third edition of the International Construction Measurement Standard, released in 2021 — was discussed at the Pacific Association of Quantity Surveyors Congress hosted in Kuala Lumpur in 2023, on the explicit theme of decarbonising construction. Whether the discussion translates into mainstream practice in Malaysia within the coming decade will materially affect what your country builds and what it has to live with.

Buildings have a second cost — their carbon cost — that has historically not been properly counted, and that future generations of Malaysians will pay through climate consequence.

Force three — a more dangerous world

The cost of construction is, increasingly, downstream of geopolitics. The pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the disruption of the Red Sea shipping lane in 2024, the more recent tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, and the broader fragmentation of global supply chains have made the assumption of stable input prices over a multi-year construction programme increasingly heroic. Steel, cement, copper, aluminium, and a wide range of mechanical and electrical components are now subject to price movements that have no relation to the local construction market and that cannot be predicted from historical Malaysian unit-rate data alone.

This matters to you because the cost projections you are shown for any major project — the announced budget for a public hospital, the indicative price for an off-plan apartment, the budget figure in a development partner's prospectus — increasingly carry a layer of geopolitical risk that the cost professional should be analysing and disclosing. Sophisticated cost advice now requires capability in supply-chain risk analysis, in scenario-based cost modelling under explicit geopolitical assumptions, in the reading of upstream commodity markets. None of this is, currently, a standard component of Malaysian quantity surveying training. Whether it becomes one in the next decade will affect whether the budget figures you are shown can be trusted.

Force four — better dispute resolution

Malaysia's construction dispute resolution architecture has matured substantially over the past two decades. Statutory adjudication under the Construction Industry Payment and Adjudication Act 2012, administered by the Asian International Arbitration Centre, provides a fast-track route for payment disputes. Arbitration under the Arbitration Act 2005, conducted under various institutional rules, provides a more thorough route. Mediation under the Mediation Act 2012 provides a settlement-oriented alternative. Court-annexed mediation has become more widely available. The contracts themselves are now routinely structured with multi-tiered dispute resolution clauses.

This is good news for the public, although it is rarely reported as such. It means that when a construction project goes wrong, there are now more, faster, and cheaper routes to a fair outcome than there were a generation ago. It also means that the quantity surveyor, properly trained, is increasingly active in the dispute architecture as adjudicator, expert witness, and party representative. The profession's integrative training — its fluency in cost, contract, technology, and construction reality — makes it, in many respects, a natural fit for dispute work. This is one of the few areas in which the Malaysian profession is visibly expanding rather than contracting, and it is an expansion the public should welcome.

Force five — the loss of public trust

The fifth force is the most political and the most consequential. Even with the substantial reforms described in Part IV — the new Procurement Act, the strengthened Audit Act, the Construction 4.0 modernisation, the active rehabilitation of sick and abandoned housing projects — the Malaysian public has, across the past decade and a half, accumulated a substantial reservoir of frustration with the way major construction projects are delivered. The 157 critically delayed federal projects identified in the most recent Auditor-General's Report, the 113 abandoned private housing projects under TFST monitoring, and the steady flow of parliamentary debate on individual delayed schemes are not abstractions to the public; they are visible failures whose consequences are borne by buyers, taxpayers, and the families who waited for the school or the hospital that did not open.

This loss of trust has consequences that cascade back into the industry and into your life. Voters become reluctant to support continued public infrastructure investment. Buyers become reluctant to commit to off-plan property purchases under the Sell-Then-Build system. Investors become more demanding in their due-diligence requirements. Honest contractors find the business of bidding for public work demoralising when their competitors include parties unlikely to deliver. Competent young

professionals consider leaving the industry. The reforms now in motion will eventually rebuild trust, but the rebuilding will be measured in years, not months.

The quantity surveying profession sits at the heart of this trust problem, in a particular way. It is the cost profession. It has the technical equipment to explain, in measured and authoritative terms, what causes cost discipline failures and how they can be prevented — not by lecturing other parties, but by visible, disciplined, and articulate practice on every project, and by being heard in the public conversation when the lessons of major failures are being drawn. Its relative quietness to date has not insulated it from the trust deficit; it has merely deprived the public of a credible voice that might have helped to rebuild the trust faster. The profession that finds that voice over the next decade will earn a public legitimacy it has never fully possessed. The profession that remains quieter will be carried, for a longer period, by the cumulative weight of an industry whose failures it has declined to explain.

Part VI — What You, as a Citizen, Should Ask of the Profession

If the diagnosis to this point is roughly correct, then the question for the public reader becomes: what should I, as a citizen, want from the quantity surveying profession in the next twenty-five years? The question is real, because the profession will be reshaped by the forces of Part V whether or not the public takes an interest. The reshaping will go better, for the public, if the public knows what to ask for.

The author offers four asks, in plain language, addressed to the public reader rather than to the profession's internal audience. They are matters on which a citizen who reads the news, votes in elections, buys a house, pays taxes, and lives in a built environment is entitled to take a view.

First ask — a profession that speaks to the public

When a major public construction project experiences a serious cost overrun — and the past two decades have offered too many such projects — the public is entitled to a credible technical voice that explains, in disciplined and non-partisan terms, what went wrong. Why did the budget figure announced at the press conference bear so little relation to the final cost? What procurement choice, what contract clause, what risk allocation, what variation procedure, produced the gap? What should be different on the next project of this kind?

These are not political questions, although they often touch politics. They are technical questions of construction commercial discipline, and the profession that has the technical equipment to answer them is the quantity surveying profession. The public should ask, gently but persistently, why that profession is not in the conversation. RISM and BQSM, jointly, have the institutional standing to provide this commentary. The capability exists. What is required is the institutional decision to use it. The public can encourage that decision by reading, citing, and amplifying the technical commentary that does emerge — and by asking, when commentary is absent on a story that needs it, where the cost professionals were.

Second ask — a profession that counts what matters

Buildings now have a carbon cost as well as a financial cost. The next generation of buildings in Malaysia must be costed both ways, and the costing must be honest. The public should ask the construction industry, and the quantity surveying profession in particular, whether whole-life carbon costing is being done as a routine deliverable on the projects whose carbon footprint future generations will inherit. The international standard for doing so exists. The Malaysian profession has engaged with it at congress level. Mainstream practice has not yet caught up.

This is a slow ask. Carbon costing will become routine in Malaysia over the next ten to fifteen years, in the same way that financial cost planning became routine over the equivalent period after independence. The public can hasten the process by asking, on every major project, what the carbon plan is, who is preparing it, and why it is or is not part of the published cost information. The asking matters. Markets respond to demand.

Third ask — a profession that supports procurement integrity in practice

Malaysia's procurement architecture, strengthened by the Government Procurement Act 2025, is now formally robust. The remaining challenge is the gap between architecture and execution — the quality of technical evaluation in particular agencies, the rigour of cost-plan review at tender stage, the accuracy with which variations are valued during construction, the discipline with which final accounts are settled. These are matters on which the quantity surveying profession has direct technical authority. International experience — the United Kingdom's Latham (1994) and Egan (1998) reforms,^[6]

Singapore's Building and Construction Authority programme,^[7] and Malaysia's own Construction 4.0 Strategic Plan and forthcoming National Construction Plan 2030 — demonstrates that the gap closes through sustained professional engagement, not legislation alone.

The public has a real stake in this. Every project where the architecture is rigorously applied is a school built on time, a hospital opened on schedule, a flyover delivered close to budget. The quantity surveying profession should be visibly contributing to the closing of that gap — commenting on Auditor-General's reports where its technical view adds value, supporting agencies whose capacity needs strengthening, publishing on procurement reform implementation, training the next generation of cost professionals to apply the new Act's requirements rigorously rather than minimally. The reforms that matter for the next decade are reforms of execution rather than reforms of statute. The profession should be heard in the execution conversation, and the public should expect to hear it.

Fourth ask — a profession trained for what is coming

The next generation of quantity surveyors — the undergraduates now reading for their degrees, the young professionals in the first decade of their careers — will inherit a profession in transition. Their training, accreditation, and continuing professional development will determine whether the profession that handles your construction money in 2040 is fit for the world of 2040 or for the world of 1990.

The public can take a constructive interest in this. The accreditation bodies — BQSM and RISM — set the educational standards. The universities deliver them. The employing practices reinforce or weaken them through the work they actually require of new graduates. The public should ask, of all three, whether quantity surveying education in Malaysia is keeping pace with the changes described in Part V: whether graduates are fluent in carbon costing, whether they are trained in dispute resolution and supply-chain risk analysis, whether they are taught to communicate in public, whether they understand integration as a specialism rather than a weakness. Where the answers are not satisfactory, the public has standing to say so. The profession is regulated under the public's authority; the public is entitled to scrutinise the regulation.

The professions that handle your construction money in 2040 will be the professions whose standards are set today. The public has standing to scrutinise the setting.

A note on what the public should not ask for

It is worth being clear about what the profession cannot deliver. The quantity surveying profession cannot fix Malaysian construction by itself. The forces described in Part IV — political incentive, governance weakness, the cultural defaults of a relationship-based industry — are larger than any single profession's gift. The architect cannot fix them either; nor can the engineer, the lawyer, or the contractor. The fix requires reform across the political, administrative, and cultural systems that produce the construction failures the public has come to recognise.

What the public can ask of the quantity surveying profession is therefore bounded but real. It can ask for technical voice. It can ask for honest cost-and-carbon counting. It can ask for procurement integrity. It can ask for an educational standard that is fit for the future. These four asks are within the profession's power, with appropriate institutional will, to deliver. They are not the whole of construction reform. They are the contribution that the cost profession should make to a reform conversation in which it has, until now, been quieter than its standing warrants.

Part VII — What the Profession Is Actually For

The internal version of this argument, addressed to the profession itself, would now examine what each of the institutional actors in the Malaysian quantity surveying landscape — BQSM, RISM, the universities, the larger practices — should specifically do. That conversation is taking place inside the profession and will continue. The public reader has no need to follow it in detail.

What the public reader does need is a sentence. A sentence that explains, in non-technical terms, what the quantity surveying profession exists for, and what the public is entitled to expect of it. The profession has not articulated such a sentence in nearly a century of operation in Malaysia. It is the absence of that sentence, more than any operational shortfall, that has kept the profession invisible to the citizens it ought to serve.

The author offers the following, not as a finished prescription but as a working starting point for the public conversation that should now take place:

The Quantity Surveyor exists so that society may know, before it builds, what a building will truly cost it — in money, in time, in carbon, in risk, in justice between the parties — and so that, having built, society may hold someone accountable for the truth of that knowledge.

Notice what this sentence does, and why it matters to a public reader.

It removes the inward-facing technical vocabulary of cost, measurement, and contract from the surface, and reintroduces their substance as societal functions. It positions the quantity surveyor not as a service provider to a private client — although the practitioner is also that, contractually — but as a truth-teller to society about the true cost of the built environment. It introduces justice between the parties as a public good rather than a private convenience: the contractual administration that the profession performs is, properly understood, a small daily contribution to the rule of law in commercial life. It introduces carbon and risk, which acknowledges that the profession's remit is no longer confined to financial cost in the narrow sense. And it introduces accountability — which is what statutory professional registration was always for, but which the profession has too often allowed to lapse into mere licensing.

If the profession could speak something of this nature aloud — in its public commentary, in its educational materials, in the way young practitioners are inducted into the discipline, in the conversations it has with government, with developers, and with the press — then the public would, eventually, know what a quantity surveyor is for. The silence described in Part III would end. The profession would have something to say, and the public would have something to hear.

This is not a hard ambition. It does not require new institutions; the institutions exist. It does not require new methodology; the methodology exists. It does not require legislative change, although a future review of the 1967 Act would be helpful in the medium term. What it requires is the institutional decision — by BQSM, by RISM, by the universities, by the larger practices, and by individual senior practitioners — to step into the public conversation and stay there. The decision is the missing ingredient. The materials are already on the workbench.

Part VIII — What This Means for You

This essay has been a long argument, and the author is grateful to any reader who has stayed with it to this point. The argument can be compressed, finally, into something practical.

If you are a homeowner, a strata council member, or a buyer of off-plan property: the budget figure you are shown for a building, public or private, has been prepared by someone. The honesty and discipline of that preparation matters to you. Where the property is sold to you on the basis of a glossy brochure and a promised completion date, you are entitled to ask whether the cost discipline behind the project is being run by professionals whose primary duty is to the truth of the numbers, and what redress is available to you if the project fails to deliver what was promised.

If you are a citizen, a voter, or a taxpayer: the public infrastructure being built with your taxes is being costed, certified, and administered by professionals whose work you have probably not previously thought about. When that infrastructure goes badly wrong — as too much of it does — the technical voice that should be helping you understand why has been largely absent from the public conversation. You are entitled to ask why, and to read and amplify the technical commentary that does emerge, so that the profession learns to speak more often.

If you are a parent of a young person considering a built-environment career: quantity surveying is a profession in transition. The work that will define it twenty years from now is not the work that defined it twenty years ago. The graduates who will thrive are those who treat their training as the foundation for integrative judgement rather than as a credential for routine technical delivery. The right university programme, properly engaged, can produce a professional whose career will sit at the intersection of cost, carbon, contract, and public interest — and that intersection is one of the more important places to be standing in the next quarter-century.

If you are a journalist, a policymaker, or a member of the wider construction industry whose work touches the cost professions: the quantity surveying profession in Malaysia has, until recently, been quieter than its institutional standing warrants. There are signs that this is beginning to change, on dispute resolution, on decarbonisation, on procurement reform. The change is fragile and depends on the demand for it from outside the profession. Demand for it. Quote it when it appears. Ask, when it does not appear, why it is missing. The profession will respond to expectation.

And if you are a member of the profession yourself, reading this essay because someone forwarded it to you: the public account of the profession is overdue. The internal account has been written and rewritten in the literature for decades; it has not been the missing ingredient. What has been missing is the willingness to write outward. The author makes no claim that this essay is the right outward account, or even an adequate one. It is simply an attempt. There should be more attempts, by more authors, in more venues. The profession's public legitimacy will not be conferred on it by anyone else; it must be built, essay by essay, commentary by commentary, intervention by intervention, by the practitioners themselves.

The country is being built around you, every day. The buildings you will live in, work in, study in, and be treated in over the coming generations are being decided, designed, and paid for now. A quiet profession sits at the centre of how that paying happens, and it has been quieter than it should have been about what that means. This essay has tried to introduce the profession to you. The conversation, properly, begins with the introduction. It should not end with it.

The Quantity Surveyor exists so that society may know, before it builds, what a building will truly cost it — in money, in time, in carbon, in risk, in justice between the parties — and so that, having built, society may hold someone accountable for the truth of that knowledge.

— ENDS —

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About the Author

Goh MY is a pseudonym used by a registered Consultant Quantity Surveyor in private practice in Sabah, with adjudicator credentials and over twenty years' experience in the Malaysian construction industry. The pseudonym is used so that the arguments in this essay are weighed on their substance rather than on the standing of the writer. The author writes in personal capacity. The publishing entity is identified in the publication footer of every page.

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In keeping with the editorial policy applied to all Etika Hijau publications, the author discloses that this essay was prepared with the assistance of a large language model (Anthropic's Claude Opus 4.7), used as a research and structural collaborator. The argumentative framework, the four-part historical structure, the diagnostic of construction failure causes, the public asks of the profession, and the constitutional sentence are the author's own. The model performed targeted research, assisted in the verification of factual claims, and contributed to the production of a publication-ready document. All argumentation has been reviewed and accepted by the author. Any errors of fact or judgement that remain are the author's sole responsibility.