

## MONEY IN HERITAGE:

Heritage designation leads to heritage tourism, higher property prices and is a catalyst for stimulating local and regional economies

**KHAIRUL KHALID**

**H**eritage designation leads to heritage tourism, higher property prices and is a catalyst for stimulating local and regional economies, according to consensus in the industry. That is a given but in practice, the conservation and preservation of heritage or historic buildings in Malaysia is generally plagued with lack of information, funding, promotion, and proper techniques as well as a general indifference amongst members of the public.

This has led to a constant tug of war between proponents of development and heritage conservators, a prime example of which is the controversy surrounding the proposed compulsory acquisition of several shoplots in Petaling Street and Jalan Sultan to make way for the My Rapid Transit (MRT) project.

Obviously, trying to strike the right balance between preserving the heritage of old buildings and building modern new ones is a struggle that might well continue into the next decade. Our preservation and conservation efforts are still in their infancy, relatively speaking, and there is still a lot more room to grow.

**NSTRED** examines the issues facing heritage buildings in Malaysia. We talked to Kok Kim Tong, the Executive Advisor to the Board of Governor, SMJK Confucian and several local academics well-versed with heritage matters to share their views.



They are Professor Dr. Sr Syahrul Nizam Kamaruzzaman (Deputy Dean Research & Development, Faculty of the Built Environment Universiti Malaya), Associate Professor Dr. Sr Azlan Shah Ali (Deputy Dean, Faculty of Built Environment Universiti Malaya), and Dr Kamarul Syahril Kamal (Building Conservator, Department of Building, Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA).

### **RED: What are the challenges of preserving heritage buildings?**

**Kok:** In Malaysia, a majority of conservation work on heritage buildings are initiated by the government and private sector. The establishment of Jabatan Warisan Negara (Department of National Heritage) in 2006 demonstrated the government's effort to appreciate the existence of heritage buildings in the country. Notwithstanding the efforts initiated by the government to preserve heritage buildings, from our school's point of view, we are still encountering many challenges, which include the following:

**a)** A lack of government planning with regards to the preservation of heritage schools and a lack of a systematic monitoring of preservation efforts. An in-depth understanding of the importance of these heritage school sites among the public and officials is also crucial;

**b)** A lack of active involvement by local and federal governments because preservation goes beyond just maintaining heritage schools. It means preserving the environs and the local culture as well, according to UNESCO's 2007 publication Asia Conserved;

**c)** A lack of regular maintenance and monitoring for risk-reduction of heritage buildings, in particular schools;

**d)** A lack of systematic documentation of the educational, historical, socio-economic and cultural values of the schools;

**e)** A lack of funding and the knowledge to do so, even if the owners wanted to keep their heritage schools existing in their original form; and

**f)** Inability to procure authentic building materials and skills for repairing and retrofitting the heritage schools so as to preserve the heritage value, authenticity, or integrity of a building and its surroundings

### **RED: How do we achieve a balance between preserving heritage buildings and rapid modern development?**

**Kok:** The preservation of heritage buildings and rapid modern development are not mutually exclusive. Preservation and modernisation of heritage buildings can actually share common aims. A balanced approach can be achieved as follows:

**Legal framework** - The main challenge here is for the federal and local government authorities and agencies to construct a responsible and manageable interpretation of heritage buildings in the face of contemporary ambitions, developmental pressures and processes. The above will ensure that heritage buildings are legally protected;

**Implementation** - While harmonising new developments with local cultural,

historic and natural heritage buildings, it is important that new developments be built in harmony with local heritage buildings' cultural and settlement layouts, especially when building new houses within or near existing historic or vernacular settlements. If an urban reconstruction entails the relocation of the heritage buildings, the heritage value of a new site needs to be properly assessed so that irreversible losses can be mitigated or avoided altogether.

The main issue here is how do heritage buildings fit in with the dynamism of modern development while preserving its identity, cultural heritage as well as educational and historical values. The challenge is to improve the quality of life in heritage buildings and to create a comfortable, affordable and sustainable new development while seeking out a good balance between preservation and evolution. Heritage is an integral part of the living city. It contributes to image and quality perceptions, provides special locations for many key urban activities and interactions and has strong economic potential, including the creation of heritage and cultural tourism.

### **RED: What is your opinion on recent developments in the Petaling Street / Jalan Sultan area and how it would affect the surrounding heritage buildings? What should be the proper approach to preserve its historical, cultural & architectural heritage?**

**Kok:** Petaling Street and its surrounding areas are just a very small part of Kuala Lumpur. Together with adjacent areas like Jalan Sultan, Jalan Lekir,

Jalan Tun HS Lee, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Jalan Tun Perak, Jalan Silang, Jalan Raja, Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Ampang, Jalan Pudu, Jalan Maharajalela, Jalan Loke Yew and etc, we have witnessed the tremendous growth and progress of Kuala Lumpur into what it is today.

Petaling Street and its cluster of heritage buildings abound with stories of the Chinese community within the context of their contributions to nation building in Malaysia. Its historical and cultural values are intrinsic and immeasurable. Its fabric should be kept intact as it represents an important chapter in our nation's history. As a matter of respect, all these areas should be preserved and allowed to flourish as the nation progresses.

Like many others, we are obviously very concerned today about the Petaling Street and Jalan Sultan issues. There are two key areas for improvement with regards to the conservation of heritage buildings in Malaysia.

**(1)** A lack of a clear and transparent legal framework for the classification of heritage buildings.

**(2)** A lack of consultation, co-ordination, proper planning and the haphazard demolition of heritage buildings during the implementation stage. If these were to persist, KL will end up as a city without cultural and historical values. It will be reduced to being a concrete jungle without diversity, life, soul and heritage.

**Dr Syahrul:** Like many other countries in which preservation and conservation of buildings seem a fairly new practice, Malaysia faces several problems



**Dr Syahrul..Most conservation projects employ inconsistent techniques.**

in dealing with the issues of historic buildings. As far as buildings methods and techniques go, there is not enough technical information available for architects and contractors to use as references in their conservation works. Most projects employ inconsistent techniques, which may be harmful to a building's materials and structures, both interior as well as exterior. Consequently, a renovation project may not achieve its desired effects.

The present systems for preservation and conservation of historic buildings in Malaysia can be improved. Internal criteria of buildings such as indoor air quality and energy efficiency must also be taken seriously. Historical buildings in Malaysia can be saved and maintained with the adaptation of proper methods and techniques similar to those developed in the United Kingdom.

It is equally important that such historic buildings should not be left to the market forces of the normal building



**Dr Kamarul.. Restoring heritage buildings leads to heritage tourism.**

industry. There should be continuous research, technical exhibitions as well as appropriate courses on historic buildings in order to create greater public awareness and understanding towards the importance of Malaysia's architectural and cultural heritage.

**Dr Azlan:** Malaysia needs to have proper guidelines, standards and best practices to govern all conservation works. On top of that, funding and promotional support is critical in ensuring the success of conserving our heritage buildings and structures. So far, Badan Warisan Malaysia has played a distinctive role in the promotion of the conservation of Malaysia's built heritage but the coverage is still limited.

### **RED: Which do you think is more important - the aesthetics or historical aspect of a potential heritage building?**

**Kok:** My view is that a potential heritage building should have multiple valu-



**Dr Azlan.. Funding and promotional support are critical to ensure the successful conservation of our heritage buildings.**

es, possessing architectural, cultural, educational, environmental, social and economical values as well as aesthetic and historical values.

Of all the values mentioned above, I am of the view that historical values are of paramount importance as heritage buildings should always play an important role in the creation of the history of an area or region during its existence. As a result, a heritage building should always be conserved and restored with minimum intervention to its historic fabric, with precise documents, respect for contributions from all periods, maintenance of its authenticity and a requirement to take a holistic view of its historic environment.

### **RED: What is the main socio-economic impact of preserving heritage buildings?**

**Dr Kamarul:** Based on my experience



**Kok..Rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of heritage buildings can be a profitable investment.**

with some case studies in Malacca, George Town and Kuala Lumpur (Dataran Merdeka Area), preservation and restoration of heritage buildings eventually lead to some economic impact in terms of cultivation of heritage tourism and attracting local and foreign tourists. They are interested in viewing and experiencing the architectural heritage of these historic buildings in their original settings.

**Kok:** The main social-economic impact of preserving heritage buildings can broadly be classified as follows:

**Investment Opportunities** - Heritage investment is generally a good investment. The rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of heritage buildings not only preserves cultural values, it can also be a profitable investment;

**Business Growth** - Heritage preservation means business. Bringing vacant and underused buildings back to pro-

ductive life creates business opportunities and adds to the local tax base. Because they offer diverse space and a wide range of rents, historic buildings are especially well-suited to new businesses and small retailers;

**Job Creation** - Heritage conservation supports the development of a skilled, well-paid workforce in the building trades and traditional crafts. It also creates demand for professional services in areas such as architecture and engineering;

**Property Value** - Heritage preservation means higher property values. Extensive research shows that heritage designation often has a positive effect on property values. Studies involving residential properties in 15 American cities found that the value of designated properties was 5 to 20 per cent higher than comparable non-designated properties;

**Enhanced Tourism** - Heritage tourism is a growth industry. Historic places provide the authentic experience that heritage tourists seek. Unlike tourist attractions that must be built new, historic places are unique tourism assets that already exist in most communities. The promotion of historic places as tourist attractions helps local residents develop a greater understanding and appreciation of their own cultures

**Regional Development** - Heritage conservation is an effective catalyst for stimulating local and regional economies. Studies show that rehabilitating heritage buildings has a greater economic impact than new constructions.