



Roofscape of George Town World Heritage Site, still retaining its context as a seaport, but encroached upon by modern blockish developments

# GEORGE TOWN

## THE CHALLENGE OF WORLD HERITAGE LISTING

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Historic townscapes, religious pluralism and multicultural living heritage forged by mercantile and cultural exchanges at the crossroads of civilizations – these have been pronounced the Outstanding Universal Values which qualified Melaka and George Town, the Historic Port Cities of the Straits of Malacca, to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

George Town, the younger of the two cities, was established on the north-eastern promontory of Penang island. The latter was a part of the Malay kingdom of Kedah until it was occupied by the

East India Company in 1786. Thereafter, Penang grew quickly into a flourishing trading settlement, attracting ships from Europe, India, China and the archipelago. Merchants and settlers of many nationalities brought their building prototypes to this settlement, as described by Wathen, the celebrated traveller and artist who visited Penang in 1811:

“Turning the eye Southward, George Town and the harbour are seen. The various styles of building used in the construction of habitations in this small town has a strange effect – the European house, the Hindoo

bungalow, the Malay cottage, the Chinese dwelling and the Birman hut are mingled together without regularity, and apparently without any plan, the first settlers having each built his residence, according to the custom of the country...” (James Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage*, in 1811 and 1812, to Madras and China).

Over time, the mingling of styles, transformed by mutual influence and genius loci or ‘spirit of place’, created hybrid expressions and a rich repertoire of Straits architecture.

# From Prosperity to Decline

The port of Penang achieved its prime in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the age of the trans-oceanic steamship. With the wealth accumulated from Penang's role as a trading hub for the Malay States, Sumatra, Southern Thailand and the Mergui archipelago up to Rangoon, the town grew into one of the region's premier cities, setting the pace for education, business, technology and the aesthetics of modernity.

The capital, George Town, was a cosmopolitan city where diverse peoples lived and worked, traded and transacted, worshiped and celebrated. Travellers, pilgrims and migrants were always coming and going. A vibrant street life flourished between the rows upon rows of double-storey shophouses, punctuated by houses of worship and guilds.

After the Japanese Occupation, prewar inner city housing conditions were artificially extended by the postwar Rent Control Act. The decline of the port in the 1970s caused massive unemployment and precipitated an exodus of job-seekers. Their families, however, stayed on in George Town because of the low rents.

From the 1980s onwards, the hike in land prices and the profitability of highrise developments doomed most of the great mansions along the suburban roads, but rent restrictions to some extent protected the tenants of the shophouse neighbourhoods. In the name of "progress", developers pried and prodded the inner city for opportunities to insert those stacked shoe-box forms bearing the superior label of "modern architecture".

In the 1990s, faced with a decline in beach tourism, state tourism saw sense in diversifying its attractions by adding the heritage city as an offering. However, local government, finding it difficult to

keep up with burgeoning office and condo developments in the rest of Penang, gave low priority to the rehabilitation of the city's decaying infrastructure. Ironically, it was the Asian financial crisis of 1997 that slowed down the wheels of property redevelopment and saved old George Town from further wide-scale destruction.

In 2000 and 2002, George Town was listed on the World Monument Watch 100 Most Endangered Sites. At the time, there was still little appreciation for Penang's shared heritage, both locally and nationally. Melaka was recognised as Malaysia's "Historic City", Taiping was recognised as the "Heritage Town" of Perak. But, for the longest time, Penang's strong colonial past and ubiquitous Chinese heritage was seen by some as a badge of historic embarrassment rather than a source of national pride.

## UNESCO Listing

The only way to get national recognition for "shared heritage", it seemed, was to get international recognition. The Penang Heritage Trust and other advocates pushed for World Heritage status, and efforts were stepped up after the first visit of Richard Engelhardt, UNESCO Cultural Advisor for Asia and the Pacific, in 1998.

Engelhardt visited George Town in a year when Thaipusam coincided with Chinese New Year. He saw the kavadi-bearers paying their respects at the Goddess of Mercy Temple, and said, "This is not just a mix of cultures, it is cultural fusion." He went on to encourage the Malaysian government to submit a joint bid for Melaka and Penang.

The application process moved slowly at first, but speeded up once the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage was formed and close collaboration was initiated between government and those in the voluntary sector. Restoration projects spearheaded by government, community organisations and private investors gathered momentum.

What seemed like a Sisyphean effort eventually reached a happy ending ten years later, in July 2008, when Penang and Melaka were declared a World Heritage Site.

The declaration of World Heritage transformed many people's perceptions – instead of urban decay, they now saw a city paved with gold. A surge of interest followed from tourists, tourism players, investors and even the Penang diaspora who were previously more interested in hawker food than heritage. The listing gave a tremendous boost to Malaysian pride and local confidence.

City celebrations were organised at the end of July, and local stakeholders chipped in to make the event a success. Houses of worship offered prayers of thanks. Ten trees of Penaga Laut (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) were symbolically planted in acknowledgement of George Town's original name Tanjung Penaga. Cultural performances were staged by new and traditional cultural groups, and the idea of living heritage was meaningfully expanded to include Penang music through the ages.

## Religious Pluralism and the Cycle of Festivals

A month later, on the eve of Merdeka, Dr. Abdul Kalam, former President of India, visited George Town and took a walk down its 'Street of Harmony'. The Muslim rocket scientist and poet inspired the adoring crowds through his message and example – reciting the peace invocation of St. Francis of Assisi at the St. George's Church, holding up three joss-sticks in quiet supplication at the Goddess of Mercy Temple, taking part in the aarti ritual at the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, and joining the congregation in zohor prayers at the Kapitan Keling Mosque.



Armenian Street, a venue for Cheah Kongsi's lion dance during the World Heritage celebrations



The Sikh minority performing the Bhangra in front of the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple



Dr. Abdul Kalam, former President of India, saying a prayer for peace, demonstrating the true spirit of the Street of Harmony

Dr. Kalam, who believes that youth with “ignited minds” can transform a nation, ended his tour with a public message: “Every primary school teacher should walk along the street to learn how religions can stand together in unity and harmony.”

He praised George Town’s Street of Harmony as one of the schools of the world, where children can learn “righteousness of the heart”. Indeed, the centuries-old peaceful co-existence of world religions is probably the factor that clinched the international support for the Malaysian sites at the World Heritage Committee meeting.

Religious pluralism is only one aspect of George Town’s “intangible heritage”. In addition to regular worship, the inner city communities also maintain the “cycle of festivals”.

Annual processions still trace 19th century routes. Feasts and religious celebrations are observed with all the attendant rituals, decorations and ceremonial foods.

## Destruction of the Human Fabric

The social fabric of George Town was woven with the warp and weft of family, locality, business relationships and mutual benefit organisations, the kongsi, sangam and dargah.

This was partly a result of the dense urban patterns of a city made up of urban villages and shophouse neighbourhoods. Each shophouse is socially connected to at least a dozen of its neighbours. Children typically grew up in extended families and were watched over by immediate neighbours; every adult, it seemed, was an “uncle” or “auntie”; any two people from George Town might be distanced by only three degrees of separation.

With the Repeal of Rent Control around the year 2000, many working-class families had to relocate to low-cost housing in the city’s periphery. Many homes were emptied, their treasured possessions and

memories thrown out into the streets. The shake-up has thinned out the very communities who are responsible for the survival and authenticity of George Town’s living heritage.

The loss of cultural diversity can take many forms. In recent years, the historic interiors of Straits Chinese homes have been stripped bare, calligraphic plaques which used to grace house entrances have disappeared and many rare Jawi Peranakan bungalows have been demolished. Meanwhile, the survival of historic minorities, such as the mosque community at Acheen Street, or the Catholic community behind the Eurasian church, is also cause for concern.

The gradual vanishing of the tinker and tailor, who have lost their clientele, makes life even harder for the elderly who have remained. Grocery shops have virtually been replaced by 7-11s, while some coffee shops can only survive by catering to backpackers as well as locals.

The plight of endangered trades, as highlighted by groups like Arts-Ed, has caught the public imagination. But the problem is



Nyonya Beaded Shoes – the Anak-Anak Kota (Arts-Ed) youth making an attractive signboard to enhance the inner city cobbler’s business



Inner city housing - this early 19th century Jawi Peranakan compound house was tenanted by multiple families until recently

not just in gaining more customers for the last lantern maker or the last signboard maker, it is not easy to get the artisans to pass on their skills, or to find apprentices who have the patience and commitment to learn and continue those trades.

## Reversing the Trend

If the city is to retain its historic communities and trades, it has to reverse the flight of the population and restore George Town once again to its pre-eminence as the vibrant heart of Penang. Three important strategies should be pursued – enhancing the city as a place to live and work, creating affordable housing, and revitalising the local economy.

The local government is already stepping up its efforts to tighten development controls, enforce building regulations, and ameliorating public transport. It must also take the lead in improving public amenities, making streets and five-footways more walkable, solving flooding problems, planting trees and creating parks. The

derelict site next to KOMTAR, for example, presents an opportunity to create a green landscaped park, reinstating the Prangin Canal as a central feature.

A city without inhabitants would be a mere business district by day and a ghost town by night. But as George Town was previously zoned a commercial area, the needs of its residents have often been overlooked.

Home-makers need markets and local shops. Children need play areas, parks, recreational facilities, community libraries, inner city schools, and perhaps even a public swimming pool. The lower strata of society need jobs in close proximity to affordable housing.

In Malaysia's free market system and political climate, public housing has always been a tricky question – what public costs should be incurred and for whom? Could experimental pilot projects in social housing be linked to widely accepted goals such as preserving endangered trades or supporting single mothers?

It is a difficult challenge, but going by

examples in other countries, a housing trust created through public-private partnership might be the first major step. This trust could lease idle housing stock, or recover residential space by renovating underutilised upper floors above shops.

The city also needs to retain and improve its economic basis and core functions. The port, the public sector and banks are major employers. Lawyers' offices are located around courthouses, and their business trickles down to stationers and pubs. Houses of worship, hawkers, hardware shops and all sorts of niche purveyors give suburbanites a reason to come down town.

Wet markets are also anchors which attract daily business to smaller retailers such as suppliers of dried foodstuffs, vendors of cheap clothes, and so forth. The removal of essential functions such as government offices, banks and markets, such as happened in the 1980s and 1990s, should be avoided and reversed if possible.

# A City of the Future

World Heritage listing augurs well for the future of Penang's tourism industry. This will bring in new businesses opportunities and hopefully the improvement of cultural facilities.

However, tourism can be a double-edged sword. It is critical to monitor and minimise the negative impacts of tourism, guarding against reversals of fortune (tourism being a fickle industry influenced by fads and fuel prices) or over-success – in case rapid gentrification, spiralling property prices and living costs drive out the locals.

Through the design of heritage trails, community groups could promote tourism benefits for local communities and stakeholders, training and involving them as custodians, interpreters and retailers. A coordinated information platform could help to advance local initiatives such as cultural programmes, homestays and small enterprises.

Thought should be given to making George Town a city of the future – turning it into a desirable location for creative clusters and ICT enterprises, or a cultural, leisure and service hub for the larger Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle Region. Such strategies should be directed at rehabilitating derelict buildings, not displacing existing communities.

Economic value could also be realised by developing the educational potential of George Town. The local history and significance of the Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca should be taught in Malaysian schools.

With a little more interpretation and cultural infrastructure, George Town could serve as an "open museum" of culture and architecture, catering especially to Malaysian and ASEAN students.

Study trips are already being organised annually by several foreign universities for undergraduate and graduate students, as a field introduction to Asian civilizations. To carry this idea further, the presence of a prestigious university with an urban campus would not only help rejuvenate the city but create a demand for student accommodation and local services.

## Conserving the City's Historic Fabric

Physical management issues are also important. The totality of the World Heritage Site can be grasped from the top of KOMTAR tower; the view will reveal that the World Heritage Site is not picture perfect – far from it. The city's terracotta roofscape is punctured with holes, asbestos and zinc. From street level, one can tell that hundreds of buildings have been modernised instead of being restored, many quite recently.

We will have to act quickly to mend the cracks, before the World Heritage listing review comes up in three years' time. Area-wide rehabilitation could be carried out by formulating and gazetting an action plan.

Several decades ago, the Municipal Council gave subventions to private owners to install modern toilets when the bucket system was being phased out. In the same vein, the government could also consider a pilot project where minimal renovations such as rewiring, plumbing and roofing repairs are subsidised for houses in the designated area.

Since the Syed Alatas Mansion was restored as a pilot government project in 1993, public training in conservation skills has been far from adequate. The traditional technology of our heritage buildings, based on the use of clay, lime and timber, is still little appreciated.

Craftsmen skilled in traditional joinery, masonry and stucco are difficult to find and expensive to employ, because the essential skills and knowledge are not being passed on.

If several dozens, or even hundreds, of buildings are going to be refurbished each year, for the next three years, then a concerted programme is needed to build up a knowledge and skills base, in order to ensure a high standard of restoration.

The aim would be to create a large pool of professionals, artisans and researchers, who have a healthy approach to restoration, use appropriate techniques and materials, and follow a stringent process of research and documentation. A poorly-trained heritage industry means wide-scale irreversible damage to our heritage.

UNESCO has recognised three restoration projects in Penang via its Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation – for the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, the Han Jiang Ancestral Temple and, lately, Suffolk House. Yet, the people involved in restoration are too few and the costs too high. It is time to transform the image of conservation from its association with elitist projects to a popular movement which places restoration within the reach of a higher proportion of the stakeholders.

It would be good to start with the dissemination of technical guidelines, a heritage advisory service where ordinary people can get good advice, a resource centre which stores reference materials, maps and photo archives, and where ongoing inventories and documentation can be deposited.

Last but not least, it is crucial to promote a culture of restoration that enables sharing and exchange across multi-disciplinary teams. Then each project will help to bridge the gaps in knowledge, fostering not just the progress of a few, but the collective advancement of the larger heritage community. **ha**



Malaysians of diverse backgrounds celebrating the Street of Harmony by visiting the Han Jiang Ancestral Temple and other sites