



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**URBAN REVITALIZATION OF HISTORICAL TOWN CENTRE:
A CASE STUDY OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE ZONE OF
GEORGE TOWN, PENANG.**

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GEORGE TOWN, PENANG.**

By

YEAP SOON LYE

Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the
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To grand ma . mother . father and my two brothers.

Who are always there for me.

To my aunt, Ms Khaw Ai Poh.

Who I deeply miss.

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Landscape Architecture

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Supervisor : En. Abd. Aziz Othman

Faculty : Faculty Of Design And Architecture

George Town, due to its historic background, has a large pool of pre-war building and a reasonably intact historic center. Among Malaysian states, Penang alone has an impressive collection of early 19th century Anglo- Indian building where British Indian architecture influences were disseminated to the rest of the Straits of Melacca.

The Rent Control Act 1966, which covers private owned buildings completed before 31st January 1948, has contributed to the retention of thousands of inner city residential structures built the 19th and 20th which are rich in multicultural representation, lifestyles, religious and traditions. With the issue of Malaysian Government's repeal the Rent Control Act of Malaysia (1966) by the year of 2000, this action will threaten to bring changes, as many worship houses in the inner city of George Town are set up on rent control premises. It would tear apart the last vestiges of the remaining clannish communities in George Town and the area concerned would lose their original identity.

Furthermore, today's world is increasingly dominated by global culture. Major cities have begun to resemble due to the contemporary steel and glass buildings that fail to present the tradition and lifestyle of the Malaysian people. Through these uncritical adoption of

western ideals, we loss our cultural identity. Thus, unless a balance is achieved in the construction of new building with the preservation of the old historic structures, if not, it will become difficult to tell them apart from many other country.

The rich cultural history of Penang can be preserved as the foundation for economic renewal through cultural tourism. This can be achieved with incentives and by careful management as the principal driver for economic renewal. The study of cases in the downtown areas in Singapore, Europe and America, evolved over hundreds of years with its own identity and personality, shown that carefully done economic and planning studies may provide strong reason to pedestrianization the area. Thus, to convert the existing Cultural Heritage area into a pedestrianised, attractive, integrated, highly specialized shopping zone in a historic setting. The traditional cultural activities serving the existing residential and business community will be support by this new business development.

From these analysis, to ensure an success a pedestrian shopping zone, a strategic approach will be necessary, in a way of involves the participation of all levels of government, institution and individual stakeholders. It is recommended that independent authority will sustain the development of the historic enclave and achieved incrementally in partnership with the private sector. Coordination of the renewal of urban infrastructure and development activity will be required in association with the management of social change and the implementation of a legislative and organizational framework to conserve the historic character of the area.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Seni Bina Landskap

**PEMULIHARAAN PUSAT BANDAR BERSEJARAH
KES KAJIAN MENGENAI ZON WARISAN BUDAYA GEORGE TOWN, PULAU PINANG.**

Oleh

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George Town yang kaya dalam aspek sejarah, mempunyai bangunan - bangunan bersejarah yang paling banyak di Malaysia. Bangunan – bangunan ini semuanya mempunyai ciri – ciri dan identiti tersendiri yang menggambarkan awal kurun ke-19.

Dengan wujudnya Akta Kawalan Sewa (1966), yang berkuatkuasa terhadap bangunan – bangunan yang dibina sebelum 1948, secara tidak langsung mengekalkan ribuan bangunan yang didirikan antara kurun ke-19 dan ke-20 di bandar George Town. Ini telah membentuk satu kawasan yang terdiri daripada pelbagai budaya, cara hidup, agama dan adat tradisi. Kerajaan telah mengambil keputusan untuk membubarkan Akta Kawalan Sewa (1966) menjelang tahun 2000. Tindakan ini dijangka akan mendatangkan banyak perubahan memandangkan banyak bangunan yang terletak di pusat bandar George Town adalah tertakluk kepada Akta Kawalan Sewa. Perubahan ini akan mengikis tradisi budaya dan tinggalan sejarah komuniti di George Town yang berkisah berdasarkan keturunan. Akhirnya kawasan ini akan hilang identiti asalnya.

Kebelakangan ini, dunia kita telah didominasi oleh budaya global. Bandar-bandaraya utama semakin menyerupai bandar konkrit yang diciptakan melalui bangunan-

bangunan kaca dan waja. Imej ini gagal menonjolkan tradisi dan corak hidup rakyat Malaysia. Melalui penerapan idea – idea barat tanpa sebarang penimbangan kritikal, identiti budaya tempatan akan pupus. Justeru itu, seandainya suatuimbangan di antara pembangunan dengan pemuliharaan bangunan bersejarah dicapai, maka bandar – bandar kita akan kelihatan sama dengan bandar – bandar konkrit di tempat lain.

Tradisi budaya Pulau Pinang yang kaya boleh dipelihara sebagai asas pembaharuan ekonomi melalui industri pelancongan. Ini boleh dicapai melalui galakan dan pengurusan yang teliti sebagai penerak utama kepada pembaharuan ekonomi. Kajian- kajian kes di bandar – bandar lama Singapura, Europah dan Amerika Syarikat yang mempunyai identiti tersendiri menunjukkan bahawa dengan adanya kajian ekonomi dan perancangan yang teliti akan menjadi landasan yang kukuh “menpedestrianisasi” kawasan. Kajian kes ini telah mewujudkan kawasan yang “moden”, menarik, bersepadu, bebas daripada kenderaan serta zon membeli – belah yang tanpa menjejaskan suasana budaya dan nilai sejarahnya. Aktiviti sosial budaya akan turut dipertingkatkan dengan adanya perancangan yang teliti di samping membantu perkembangan aktiviti perniagaan komuniti tempatan.

Daripada kajian ini, untuk memastikan kejayaan pembentukan zon membeli – belah yang bebas daripada kenderaan, satu pendekatan yang strategik adalah sangat penting. Ini melibatkan penyertaan semua pihak termasuklah kerajaan, institusi, individu – individu yang berkepentingan. Adalah dicadangkan satu badan berkuasa yang bebas dibentuk untuk memastikan pembangunan kawasan Warisan Budaya ini terus meningkat dengan kerjasama sektor swasta. Perubahan sosial dan aktiviti pembangunan serta kemudahan infrastruktur memerlukan penyelarasan pelbagai pihak. Satu garis panduan pengurusan serta pelaksanaan undang – undang juga perlu untuk memelihara ciri – ciri warisan budaya kawasan berkenaan.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PENANG ISLAND

The island of Penang is located in the Straits of Malacca off the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The Island is shaped like a turtle, a mere 24 kilometers long by 12 kilometers wide. Penang or Pulau Pinang, still lives up to its old title “ the Pearl of the Orient”.

Historically, Penang Island was a part of Kingdom of Kedah. The island was locally known as Pulau Kesatu and also as Pulo Pinang. On the 11th August 1786, Penang Island was annexed from the Sultan Kedah to be under the East India Company and became part of British India. Penang was renamed The Prince of Wales Island.

At the time of British possession, the main inhabitants of the island were mostly Malay fishermen, it was estimated that there were only about one thousand inhabitants then. The settlement was built on the northeastern cape and was named “George Town” after the British King George III. The cape was formerly known as Tanjong Penaigre due to the hardy ironwood trees called Penaga which were found in abundance. The commercial town was laid out by Sir Francis Light between Light Street, Beach Street, Malabar Street and Keling Mosque Street. Sir Francis Light governed the settlement from 1786 to 1794. which was declared a free port. His

generous land grants and encouragement of trade attracted a number of immigrants. Penang's trade industry flourished within a short span of time as its fine natural harbor attracted a great volume of business. In 1806, Philip Dundas, the new Administrator of Penang arrived on the island. Penang Island soon became the capital of the Straits Settlements, comprising of Malacca, Singapore and Penang. It flourished into one of the most important port in the East.

However, four years later, the island's status was reduced in economy drive. Singapore, which by that time was a better and more prosperous and flourishing port, became the British Empire's foremost trading post and replaced Penang as the capital of the Straits Settlement. Nevertheless, Penang remained an important stopover and transshipment center for the collection of pepper, betel nut, spices and edible birds' nest as well as the infamous opium trade. Economy on the island began another upward climb when rich tin deposits were found in Perak, on the Peninsula in 1818. The Straits Settlement of Penang, Malacca and Singapore became British Crown Colonies in 1867. The golden age of Penang was ushered in by tin, rubber and shipping industries. In those days, Medan, South Thailand and Rangoon looked to Penang as a provincial capital – which in turn looked to Singapore as the metropolis.

On 1st January 1957, George Town was given city. On 31st August 1957, the Federation of Malay States achieved independence from the British and Penang became one of the states of independent Malaya. Today, George Town is the commercial center for Penang and Malaysia's northern region. The population of George Town remains currently estimated roughly a quarter of a million.

1.2 THE GEORGE TOWN

Socially and architecturally, George Town is a point at which the Anglo-indian empire encountered the Chinese civilization in the Malay world. Diverse building tradition was adapted to the wet tropical climate, incorporating Malay building's forms and materials. (Khoo S.N., 1993)

George Town has the South East Asia's largest pool of prewar building and a reasonably intact historic center (Plate 1). Among Malaysian states, Penang alone has an impressive collection of early 19th century Anglo- Indian building where British Indian architecture influences were disseminated to the rest of the Straits of Melacca.

Originally, home were built by local Malay fishermen using Nibong palm. During British rule, Sir Francis Light imported Indian and Chinese brick- layers and began building about 20 houses and numerous godowns and shops belonging to the Europeans using these new material by the year 1793. Already in 1803, Leith noted that “ Brick are now common and the Cajan Houses, of which George Town was originally built, are disappearing very fast.” After the a few incidences of fire in 1789, 1808, 1812 and 1816 which destroyed large area of the town, better houses of bricks and tile roofs were built.



Plate 1 : Aerial view of George Town, Penang.

The first generation buildings were the modest in stature. Striking examples of the early fabric can be seen in Nagore Shrine¹. The mid-19th century observer Cameron commented "The buildings are closely packed together and of a uniform height and character. The style is a sort of compromise between English and Chinese. By the second quarter of the 19th century, the commercial town had consolidated into a grid of brick shophouses run by shopkeepers; the shophouses had open shopfront on the ground floor, which were boarded up at night."

From the mid 19th century until 1910s, Penang offered great opportunities for the Chinese. The Chinese immigrants built their district associations and the institution played important roles during the years of large-scale immigration. This institute bought up large plots of land to build their clan temples and surrounding row

houses for their clansmen. Newly immigrant clan members were absorbed through these lodges.

George Town also boasts a unique range of 19th century South Indian Muslim architecture, which include mosque, shrines and domestic building. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the traditional Malay house continued to develop, incorporating foreign elements and many lodges developed around Aceh Street to house pilgrims from northern Malaya, southern Thailand and northern Sumatra who came to Penang on their pilgrimage to Mecca by ship. Both Indian muslim and Hindus today contribute to the living culture area known as the Little India.

The European perception of George Town in 1891 reveals the town's orientation. Nonetheless, the cultural heritage area maintained its prestige amongst the various ethnic groups as the cultural center of George Town. At the turn of the century, Chinese education was sponsored by many of the existing associations, while Muslim education incubated in the "wakaf" properties. The advent of British Empire architecture in the late 19th century influenced the tastes of the Penang elite. The Straits Chinese discarded their ceramic shard ornamentation for stucco flourishes. European department stores began importing glasses, cast iron beds, Bentwood chair and other for households.

The contrast between the first generation (1820 to 1860), second generation (1870 to 1910) and third generation (1920 to 1940) of buildings are often easily distinguishable from the scale and decoration. They prove, on comparison with surviving building, that the cultural heritage area is a repository of a large number of

buildings over a century old, and hence eligible for preservation under the Antiquities Act. All the prewar rented properties came under the control of Rent Act (1966) which explains not only the widespread survival of shophouse ensembles in George Town, but also the origin condition or dilapidation of these buildings.

George Town, the homogenizing society, both the religious monuments and the vernacular buildings, like living museums of migration, will tell the story of the heterogeneous origins of Malaysia society.

1.3 RENT CONTROL ACT

The Rent Control Act 1966, covers privately owned buildings which were completed before 31st January 1948, was originally introduced to provide equity of accommodation amongst the indigenous Malays. However it has contributed substantially to the retention of thousands of inner city residential structures throughout Malaysia built in various styles and forms during the 19th and 20th century.

Until quite recently the lack of substantial redevelopment in the inner urban areas of George Town has created an exceptional legacy of intact inner city precincts and building ensembles rich in multicultural representation, lifestyles, religions and traditions. The introduction of the Rent Control Act has effectively frozen development of a large number of such properties in the State, of which an estimated 10,000 are located in George Town. The regulations involved in redevelopment of rent controlled buildings has been a major factor in discouraging private sector initiatives in urban renewal. The only major urban renewal project in George Town is

the KOMTAR redevelopment project, which involved compulsory land acquisition of most rent controlled properties.

The Malaysian Government's repealing the Rent Control Act of Malaysia (1966) by the year 2000. This is because it is generally felt that the Act has long since out lived its purpose and has now become redundant to development. The repeal of Rent Control Act will signify an important milestone in the nation's remarkable economic and social development over the last 20 years. The impact of the repeal will be most evident in inner city areas such as George Town. The repeal of the Rent Control Act 1966 will bring changes to the existing areas, as landlords will be tempted to redevelop their properties for more lucrative ventures. According to the Malaysia Historical Relic Survey, the repeal would have a great impact on the socio-economic climate of the city. Old habit, trade and religious practices will be greatly affected. Many small time traders will be displaced as higher rentals force them to move elsewhere, this will change the socioeconomic pattern of this city.

Most of Penang's rent controlled premises are centered in George Town, where a good number of people live in houses untouched by modernization. Some of the original inhabitants had to switch their business as when Penang lost its free port status in 1969. Now they are threatened once more by the repeal of the Rent Control Act. This is because most of them are renting these pre – war premises. According to Universiti Sains Malaysia census in 1993, there are 53, 829 tenants renting 9,787 premises while the remaining 2,790 premises were owners occupied.

The repeal would tear apart the last vestiges of the remaining clannish communities and the area concerned would lose their original identity. The religious practices of the people would be affected as many worship houses are set up on rent control premises. Some of these premises date back to the early settlers' era. The unique characteristics of such places may be lost following the anticipated change in demography after the repeal. Mai Lin Tjoa –Bonatz (1908) commented that the repeal of the Act could bring about changes. It could be the change that will bring down all the heritage buildings. The residents fear relocation, as their livelihood would be threatened. The public is worried that this link to the past would be lost forever. Thus, with thousands of people's lives poised to be uprooted, there is an urgently need for a proper planing to be done to revitalize the area and improve its economic and cultural livelihood.

1.4 THE DOMINATION BY GLOBAL CULTURE

The world today is increasingly being dominated by a global culture. Major cities all over the World is beginning to resemble each other in many ways. This is due to the contemporary steel and glass buildings that have been and continue to be erected as an expression of the sleek and efficient global age. However, architecture has an important part to play in this global desire for ethnicity through regionalism. Regionalism has the potential to uphold individual and local architectonic features against more universal and abstract ones. The productions of box-like structures of the modernist international style are oblivious to climate and location. (Spence R., 1985) Mass public housing in the form of high- rise condominiums which are now

becoming the norm, fail to recognize the tradition and lifestyle of Malaysians. With the loss of a cultural identity through the uncritical adoption of western ideals, individual identity is subsequently lacking.

In Malaysia, favourable economic condition and social and political transformation over the last two decades, have resulted in a state of rapid development. Malaysian society has embraced the perceived western way of life. Unfortunately, this has caused the diverse regional heritage to be mostly swept aside in the tidal wave of homogeneous international culture which is now threatening to engulf Malaysia.

George Town is a historical town, somewhat caught in a cultural time warp and the peak of modernization. George Town boasts some of the most unique architecture with a local community to match. However, according to Sandra Rajoo (1993), it is in an ambivalent relationship to that of many western societies and needing to feel accepted wholly as important. The glamorization of largely American lifestyle and admiration of western stereotypical notions of beauty have locals believing that west offers more in advancement than they can hope for. This of course did not happen in the past so readily and with such subtle pressure than it has today's. Traditional architecture of Penang was never egotistical like the modern skyscraper but rather grand and austere.

Malaysia's heritage will be indigent if it surrenders to this international pursuit of modernization. There is the challenge to preserve history rather than leaving it to memories and written accounts of the significant past. Therefore unless a balance is

achieved in the construction of new building with the preservation of the old historic structures, it will become difficult to tell them apart from many other cities of the future apart.

The concern about George Town is not wholly about its heritage or history of the building but rather the social fabric that is associated with the buildings. When the buildings become important that a place has a sense of identity. Buildings are an artifact of social values at the time.