

PHT *newsletter*

PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG • PENANG HERITAGE TRUST

c/o 11 Free School Road, 11600 Penang • Fax/Tel: 04 - 281 3187

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November 1994

Talk and Slide Show

WINNING BACK OUR CITIES

Dr. Jeff Kenworthy

Wednesday
26 October '94
8.00 pm
120 Armenian Street

Dr Kenworthy of Murdoch University
has been a consultant to
the local, state, and federal
governments of Australia
in public transport systems and policies.

He is the co-author of
Cities and Automobile Dependence,
a major study comparing more than 40 cities
in Asia, North America, Australia, and Europe;
and *Winning Back The Cities*,
the book that made
the Australian people and governments
rethink their cities' priorities and future.

Dr Kenworthy will examine
the social ills and environmental problems
brought about by the motor-car

Save the CONVENT Light Street

The historic Convent buildings
are in bad disrepair. The time has
come to rehabilitate with care the
oldest girls' school in the country
Support its fund-raising project –
the International Charity Bazaar.

INTERNATIONAL CHARITY BAZAAR

SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER 1994
10 AM - 5 PM
BINTANG FUNCTION ROOMS
I, II, & III
GROUND FLOOR, NEW WING
RASA SAYANG RESORT
BATU FERINGGI BEACH
11100 PENANG
TEL: 811811

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preservation efforts
in your community.
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PHT members for
your coupons:

James Lee - 899 2177
Catherine Lee - 228 4115
Patricia Chan - 372 877
Loke Bee Keow - 229 2970
Tan Teong Kooi - 281 3187

The Third Asia-Pacific NGO Environmental Conference

18 & 19 November, 1994

Kyoto, Japan

The PHT has been invited by the Japan Environmental Council to participate in the international conference. En Amiruddin Fawzi, PHT Council member, will represent the PHT. Below he outlines the paper he will present.

The Environmental Dimension in Urban Planning & Development in Penang — Case Studies

This paper highlights a changing trend in the philosophy and practice of town planning in Malaysia. Amongst several important reasons attributable to this change, the two relevant to this conference theme are: first, with economic development and progress the country is more receptive to democratic practices and, second, the effects of global environmental concern and awareness have transcended into the local scene.

Several events have also necessitated Malaysian town planning to make important and significant changes or adjustments: from the traditional design and physical planning style, to the modern socio-economic planning-systems approach, and now serious strategic incorporation of environmental planning and management. In other words, in the age of public accountability then, Malaysian town planning too has had to 'sensitise' itself and subsequently become susceptible to an old but most fundamental town planning concept — **public participation**.

Arguably, the two cases in this paper reflect this changing trend in Malaysian town planning today. Although these are Penang cases, they can be generalised as being "Malaysian" enough since the Penang characteristics depict the future Malaysian development scenario — rapid urbanisation and industrialisation against a backdrop of a community which is traditionally, socially and economically quite staid.

In the case of Penang Hill, the people of Penang were able to demonstrate their displeasure to a plan which would radically alter an existing historical asset and environmental ambience of Penang. Here, the environmental impact assessment (EIA), as a mechanism had to be discredited for being environmentally superficial and incomprehensive and as a procedure dismissed for being ineffective almost to the point of being 'unconstitutional'.

What is important to note here is that the proposed plan had received the blessing and backing of the political masters. Against such a backdrop, the achievements of Friends of Penang Hill — an impromptu pressure group — must be appreciated and commended. This pressure group managed to stimulate Penangites to abandon caution and inertia and hence to demonstrate the importance of public accountability in decision making. The impact of this 'controversy' was enough to encourage the new state political leadership to capitalise upon the prevailing public sentiment and commission a fresh and new study to develop Penang Hill in an environmentally more sensitive manner.

As a contrast, the second case study, "Historical and Cultural Enclave of George Town", is a result of many years of studious and painstaking groundwork undertaken by the then Development Unit of the Town and Country Planning Department, Penang Municipal Council. Here, the departmental vision and leadership was instrumental in ensuring continuity and 'open-mindedness' in the exercise of information gathering and brainstorming. Also, various NGOs (both local and foreign) have contributed to help the eventual implementation of the pilot project. The recently completed restoration of the historic Syed Alatas mansion is a culmination of various success stories since apart from the major conservation and heritage achievements, it provided the opportunity for the three tiers of Malaysian government — local, state, federal — to cooperate. The support from abroad was also strategic — 'spiritual' assistance from *Nara Machizukuri* of Japan and technical aid from France.

Of course, our organisation the Penang Heritage Trust, admittedly, has played a small but 'pivotal' contributory role towards the realisation of this new environmental and conservation project. Significantly, enough interest has been generated to inspire the establishment of a supposedly former-residents association from the area — the Acheh Mosque Heritage Group. Not at all a small achievement considering that once anomie and apathy ruled this area!

Both cases then can be regarded as historical benchmarks in the evolution and progress of Malaysian town planning. Significantly, both cases have been prominent in the global environmental concern and awareness era, which translated into the layman's terms means the age of public accountability. The NGOs in Malaysia should feel encouraged with this small but significant changing development scenario and tempo and hence utilise this blessed environmental strategy and its apparatus towards promoting public participation to strive for more effective and accountable planning and decision making.

Mohamed Amiruddin Fawzi

School of Housing, Building and Planning
University Science Malaysia

letters

Nothing but the best

As I'm sure you know, there seem to be misunderstandings on some people's part about the nature and purpose of conservation areas (*PHTnewsletter*, October 1994, p 1, col 2). The idea is not to 'impede development' but to make sure that it only takes place when it 'conserves or enhances' the character of the area concerned. This does mean that the redevelopment of landmark and other important buildings or groups of buildings would not be countenanced. However it also means that selective redevelopment can take place *if the quality of the new buildings would be sufficiently high to improve the character of the area*. Nothing but the best is good enough for George Town, in other words.

I think possibly would-be developers may not realise that good money can be made out of restoration and rehabilitation as well as redevelopment. This requires a bit more skill and patience than 'clean sweep' redevelopment but is far more rewarding and of course preserves the essential character of a place. Who, I wonder, would really be happy if George Town became a paler version of Singapore?

You're perfectly well aware of all this, I know. It's just that perhaps some other people are not.

Dr Arthur Percival
Faversham, Kent, England

Surely there is a way!

Thank you very much for your response to my letter, the *PHTnewsletter*, and membership application form. All delighted my heart! I was so pleased to hear from you! Everything placed me right in the middle of Penang with visual memories abounding and the familiar 'ring' of a lively and vital 'fray' between those who say 'progress at all costs' and those who plead the case of heritage

and roots as necessary prerequisites bearing witness to Penang's rich and varied community. What you said reminded me of the conflict between art and science in this country, as though art were simply a frill, not basic, and as if it does not speak to and for the depths and the soul of a people. You have more than enough to do, many projects occupying your time, commitment as well as conviction to see them through, and good humour about it all. There must be discouragement at moments, but you seem undaunted!

It seems to me that there may be no salaried positions open at PHT, and I have been trying to think of viable alternatives as I cannot come and stay any extended period of time without income. Almost all of the projects mentioned take time and concentrated effort. When I think of the heritage education programme for schools, the restoration of Suffolk House, the fund-raising, the media coverage, and keeping on top of all the events surrounding the various houses and sites of historical significance, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that these things take TIME, vigilance, and careful attention. If I consider the involvement I believe I would feel, even six months to a year seems short!

There were many ideas in your letter which stimulated my interest, and the *PHTnewsletter* served to reinforce my enthusiasm. Suffolk House, from the moment I found it, has been my main impetus. Seeing its condition, after the weeks of study at the library about Penang's history and the long search to discover its location, created an immediate desire to work on the project in whatever way I could. Nothing would please me more than to see Suffolk House restored to its former dignified state and to be part of the realization of that dream. Your heritage education programme for schools is something I am probably particularly prepared for. Part of my training and practice in Art

Therapy has been to design and execute sessions which assist people to get in touch with their roots, honor their history, and incorporate what they have learned in these classes eventually. I don't doubt that a semester of classes involving history, art, field trips and discussion would be effective in motivating children to value their community's and familial past, increase civic pride, and the need to be a part of Penang's restoration. What a sound stroke of genius you have had. There is no question that it will be enriching for the children, and it seems to me that where the children are, their parents are not far behind, and it could be the beginning of a great fund-raising project.

In thinking of how I might be able to come back to Penang and spend enough time to be of any real benefit to you,.... I have even thought there may be a combination of places where I might work and 'float' from one position to another thereby not imposing an inordinate financial burden on any one establishment. My only concern with this idea would be that I would need flexible hours so that I could contribute my services to PHT at times when you needed me. I have wondered also if I could help you with fund-raising and perhaps achieve a salary through some of the funds raised. It is only because of my exuberance and desire to come that I place these possibilities before you, and I certainly understand if you consider that they are not feasible. I simply cannot let it go until we have pondered over all possible options. Surely there is a way!

Susan Collins
Austin, Texas, USA

Dear Ms Collins, I'm afraid I've had to shorten your letter quite a bit, but as you can see I've not left out any of the nice bits you've written about us. Thank you. Yes, there must be a way. You'll never know, one of our members may just want to contribute to the efforts of the PHT by making it possible for you to work with us for a year or two.

Heritage trees Xed for an ignominious end

By now most people would have noticed the large white crosses which mark 26 magnificent road-side trees, some almost a century old, for death by early November.

It was reported that these trees are diseased and a danger to the public, but there is more to it than that. Firstly, not all of them are diseased and secondly the question is being asked why so many of these lovely trees, part of Penang's heritage, were allowed to reach the state that they have to be destroyed.

An examination shows that at least 6 of them, including that spectacular rain tree at the junction of Jalan Utama and Brook, will in fact be cut down for road widening, while many of the rest which are diseased could have been saved if preventive action was taken early enough.

Much of the charm and character of Penang derives from the huge trees that dominate the streetscape. It is a matter of grave concern that these living relics of another age, a heritage which is the envy of many other cities, are not valued and given the care and attention that they deserve.

Engineers are trained to look for the cheapest solution, and indeed there is no cheaper solution than to cut down a tree that happens to be in the way of a wider road; that is, if it is assumed that a 100-year-old tree has no value.

To replace an old tree with a sapling is not the answer. A 100-year-old tree is a 100-year-old tree and even 10 one-year-old saplings are no substitute.

But there are other solutions, if only road planners are willing to be just slightly more creative, ambitious and bold. When Jalan Scotland was widened, it was possible to save many of the old trees that stood in the way. Similarly, in KL, when Jalan Bukit Bintang was widened recently, many of the old trees were left untouched, even though it meant leaving some of them standing slightly

incongruously on their own in the middle of the road.

There is, for instance, a huge rain tree on Jalan York which will be cut down merely because it happens to be in the way of a pedestrian walkway. Is it not possible for the walkway to go round the innocent tree? It takes only a little imagination to turn the exposed roots of the tree, regarded as a hazard, into an attractive feature of the landscaping in that area.

It is probably too late to save the majority of the other trees, and this brings into focus another issue. It is clear that they are diseased as a result of neglect, abuse, and bad maintenance. Some of the trees showed signs of having been burnt, others were allowed to be attacked by white ants or suffer damage by being pollarded badly. If prompt action had been taken even those trees struck by lightning could have been saved. The huge angšana tree, planted by Curtis over 100 years

ago, by the traffic lights near the General Hospital is an example of a tree that could have been saved even though it was struck by lightning.

What is of even greater concern is that many of the seemingly good trees are already in poor health, again because of neglect, ignorance, and abuse.

The MPPP has a unit looking after road-side trees, but to be effective it has to be better staffed and given more funds. Unless this is done quickly, we have a very good chance of losing many more of our old trees in the coming years.

There is no denying that public safety is of primary concern but perhaps the destruction of these irreplaceable trees (certainly within our life-time) should always be the solution of the last resort, to be used only when every attempt to save them has failed.

Ahmad Chik
Penang

Hostess

During coffee, three clients
in suits appeared and engaged the dinner
hostess in protracted conference.
Two guests stayed on,
drinking and exchanging private laughter.
At last, rising with mirth from the carpet,
they slipped away with the wine.

One guest meets the hostess in Court.
In the crowd of black gowns,
she avoided his gaze.
A flush rose from her neck to her cheeks.
Seeing the diffidence, he kept
his place. Discretion is a mild retreat.
He vaguely felt his painter's ears.

In his studio, he imagines her at work,
shifting papers, books and files.
From the typewriter that was her piano,
she laughed a string of crystal.
He knew he was undone.
First with love, comes the pain
and then the anaesthetic of despair.

Ghaniman
Penang