

# PHT *newsletter*

PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG • PENANG HERITAGE TRUST

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

Number 13

March 1995

"The group's  
200 members  
help raise  
public  
awareness  
of Penang's  
heritage,  
history and  
tradition"

## FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW

*has something  
..... to say  
about the PHT  
and its work!*

*Read all about it  
in the  
accompanying pages*

### PHT T-shirt

This popular T-shirt  
is now available  
at the PHT office,  
☎: 281 3187,  
and at PHT events

*Don't miss these PHT events.....*

## SHOPHOUSES



### Victor Chin Watercolours

A Penang Heritage Trust  
& State Art Gallery Event

Friday 24 March to Sunday 2 April 1995

Mondays to Fridays: 9.00 am – 5.00 pm

Saturdays and Sundays: 9.00 pm – 1.00 pm  
2.00 pm – 5.00 pm

State Art Gallery

3rd Floor, Dewan Sri Pinang, Light Street

The event includes:

Saturday 25 March, 3.00 pm

A Talk and Slide Show

*The Shophouses Now and Then*

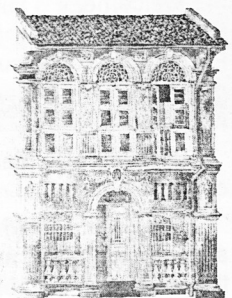
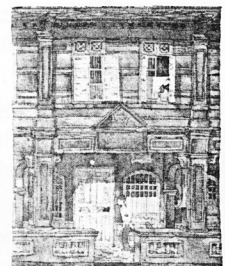
Saturday 1 April, 3.00 pm

A Talk and Slide Show

*Painting Shophouses for 5 Years*

Video Documentary

*Victor Chin and His Work*



## Antiques and Collectors Show

14, 15, 16 April '95

Daily 10.00 am – 8.00 pm

E&O Hotel (1885 Room), Farquhar Street

The days of Adolf Loos' "Ornament Is Crime" are over.  
"Less Is More" has given way to "Less Is A Bore". With  
the demise of the machine-made aesthetic comes a return to  
decoration. Collect the lovingly hand-crafted artefacts that  
don't look like they have been anywhere near a Bayan Baru  
conveyor belt. Have fun decorating your homes with them.  
Go neo-peasant! Explore the ethics of ethnic

# Letters

## Let locals preserve heritage

Reproduced here in full, Datuk Lim Chong Keat's letter to *The Star* (8 March)

I was glad to read of the positive action taken by the Penang Heritage Technical Committee to restore the Surau Haji Mohd Taib at Kubang Semang and Suffolk House and, hopefully, other buildings of merit.

Both were noted by the Penang Heritage Trust when it organised a tour of heritage items in 1987.

Suffolk House (and the Linear Park) was specifically recommended for restoration by the MPPP and the State in 1988.

Incidentally, recent assertions that Suffolk House was built by Light are erroneous and unsubstantiated by evidence.

The fabric of the present mansion was built by W. E. Phillips in 1809 and is not the same as Light's "garden house" which was an attap roofed timber structure.

While moral and financial support and contributions from visiting experts and enthusiasts are welcome, it is important that heritage work should be undertaken by local people, and by Penangites in particular, so that there is full community identification with worthy heritage conservation.

Both projects mentioned are well within our own capability.

The State should rally and enlist our professionals, academicians, and corporations to undertake the work, and thereby give them the opportunity to gain experience in conservation and restoration.

**Datuk Lim Chong Keat**

*Founder Chairman*

*Penang Heritage Trust*

Dear Datuk Lim. Many of our members believe that the "Garden house" Martina inherited in 1794 was something much grander than "an attap roofed timber structure". Would you like to write to the PHT *newsletter* and share with them the evidence you must have found that it was W. E. Phillips and not Light who built "the fabric of the present mansion"?

## Two annoyed Malaysian students

Dear Teong Kooi, First I must say what a wonderful time Alison and I had in Penang. Your hospitality was overwhelming.

The Hanoi Symposium turned out to be better than I had expected. Rather than just sitting and talking for a week, we actually did some hands-on planning, coming up with positive design guidelines for development in Hanoi. However, I still have a problem with the Hanoians' approach: they intend to conserve the old quarter and that's good but they seem to be thinking of the rest of Hanoi – the French quarter – in terms of development. I wanted to push for conservation including development for the whole of Hanoi, but others thought that this would not be understood, and we would finish up losing everything. Already the big development

companies are moving in and the 30-40 storey buildings are beginning to be built.

Back in Adelaide, when we returned from Malaysia, I was handed an ideal job. I now have designed a small religious centre for Mary Mackillop for when she is beatified by the Pope and eventually becomes Australia's first Saint. The places where Mary Mackillop worked as a nun during the late 19th century are now becoming places of pilgrimage to all Catholics. So it was quite an honour to be asked to design the special centre for her memorabilia, particularly as I'm an Anglican!

Recently, I gave some lectures in the University of Adelaide on conservation, using some of the Penang slides as examples. This annoyed two Malaysian students in the group, who could not understand why we have to keep these old places and not be modern like the rest of the world! They have come to Australia to learn how to be architects. Well, I did try my best to explain, but I don't think I got through to them. Best wishes.

**Barry G Rowney**

*Heritage Architect and Planner*

*and Conservation Consultant*

*10 Bosville Grove, Campbelltown, SA 5074*

Dear Barry. You'll find many more of our students going down under and wanting to learn how to come up with buildings that scrape the sky. And, I'm afraid, we are going to have to depend on our man in Adelaide to keep on annoying them until they get the idea that what is the newest and the sleekest is not necessarily what is best for old George Town. I don't know what else you can do to make them understand, but have you tried taking them for a walkabout in Woop Woop to search for old visions and sacred sites, introducing them to Sidney Nolan and Patrick White, and switching their allegiance from Madonna to Kiri Te Kanawa, from mayhem to music, from rap to romance? Best of luck to you!

## New Members

We welcome the following as ordinary members of the PHT. They can nominate, vote, stand for elections, and take part in any of the PHT's activities.

Sue Baskett

Datin Saleena Yahaya-Isa

Esther G L Goh

Robertson E Collins

## Annual Subscription

I am sorry but the time has come to remind those old members who joined the Trust before 1 January 1994 and have not paid their annual subscription (RM36) for the year 1994 kindly to do so as soon as they possibly can.

**You will know that you have not paid your 1994 subscription if you do not receive, together with this newsletter, a receipt showing that you have done so.**

We need to prepare the Hon Treasurer's Report for the year ending 31 December 1994 and present it at our coming AGM in June.

Kindly send **cheque** or **money order** to:

**Mr Kenny Ong**

**Hon Treasurer PHT**

**c/o 11 Free School Road, 11600 Penang**



## ARTS &amp; SOCIETY



Penang's architectural heritage: East and West meet in a potpourri of designs.

P R E S E R V A T I O N

## Rubble Rousers

Razed hotel sparks row over future of Penang's heritage buildings

By Anil Netto

**W**hen a demolition team reduced a turn-of-the-century hotel in Penang to rubble on Christmas Day, 1993, it raised more than clouds of dust. The Hotel Metropole's demise sparked conservationists' ire, fuelling their struggle to protect the Malaysian island's architectural heritage.

George Town's city councillors had declared the hotel a national monument just two months earlier. Built in 1900 in a Moorish style, it sat near the sea-front on "Millionaires' Row" — a street lined with mansions built by wealthy business owners during British colonial rule. But developers with a view to future commercial successes turn a blind eye to Penang's venerable edifices. And the wrecker's ball is poised to knock them down, paving the way for office complexes, shopping malls and high-rise condominium towers.

Today, the city appears trapped in a time warp: 12,000 pre-war buildings huddled

along its narrow streets — the biggest collection of pre-war houses in Southeast Asia. Shades of old China, India, Arabia and Rome blend with traditional Malay designs in an exotic potpourri of architecture, interspersed with traces of the Baroque and Regency periods.

Decades-old rent-control legislation proved to be their salvation. It freezes rentals — discouraging owners from upgrading their properties. "That's the only reason why George Town is still the way it is and we still have the old city," says Khoo Salma Lubis, honorary secretary of the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT). The group's 200 members help raise public awareness about Penang's heritage, history and tradition.

Those same rent-control laws that deter owners from making significant changes to their buildings' architecture have also triggered years of neglect. The structures are sturdy, but peeling paint and crumbling plaster have stripped them of their former glory.

A coat of paint and minor renovations could restore them to their stately selves; abolishing rent control might prompt owners to take such measures. It could also backfire, triggering a real-estate bonanza: Penang is running out of space to accommodate its urban sprawl, and their location, close to the city centre, makes them prime development targets.

Penang's Municipal Council now offers some protection to buildings it has deemed heritage sites. But it may not be enough to save them. Currently, the maximum fine for demolishing such a site is only M\$50,000 (\$20,000) — hardly enough to dissuade a developer from knocking it down. "There is a lot of pressure for the federal government to abolish the Rent Control Act," observes Ahmad Chik, an activist with the Penang-based social-reform movement, Aliran. "If they abolish the act, many of the heritage buildings will be demolished very quickly."

Hotel Metropole's sudden exit from George Town's streetscape suggested just

how quickly. Its bitter end galvanized the heritage movement. Like a phoenix rising from the hotel's rubble, their cries rang out. The PHT issued several press statements and the media gave full play to the story. Under such pressure, local authorities set up a heritage advisory committee, made up of interested groups — including the Housing Developers Association.

The heritage committee's advice to the council must be unanimous. That worries observers like Ahmad, who fear that its proposals will be watered down to make them palatable to developers. What's more, the heritage committee chairman, S.P. Choong, is a prominent leader in the ruling coalition's Gerakan party who is also active in the PHT. He himself may be torn between the interests of his party and his heritage commitments.

Choong discounts his critics, and notes a more serious obstacle to saving Penang's historic facades. When the heritage committee "has worked out all the recommendations and sent them to the council," he says, "the greatest obstacle is implementation."

**T**o fulfil an effective conservation strategy, authorities must first identify heritage areas worthy of preservation. Then, only development consistent with the overall character of these areas would be permitted. Outside these areas, however, only buildings of proven heritage value and their immediate surroundings would have protection. If such a policy came into effect in George Town, it would preserve entire streets in certain historical areas — along with their numerous shophouses, temples, churches and mosques.

"When you look at heritage conservation in Penang," says Ahmad, "you have to look at individual buildings, but equally important is the ensemble." The PHT's Khoo, who lives in a restored 120-year-old building that once served as the Penang base of Chinese revolutionary leader, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, agrees. But, she adds, "it's very hard for the developers to understand this."

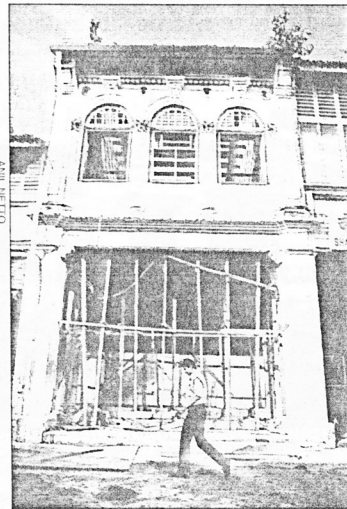
The council had already proposed urban-design guidelines for five historical zones in 1987. But Khoo estimates that only 15% of existing buildings in these zones would be fully protected — obvious structures like churches and museums that are in little danger, anyway. The council also initiated an inventory of individual heritage buildings that warranted protection. But it's not a foolproof idea. Recently, developers announced plans for a high-rise block on land directly behind Hardwicke House, a 19th-century protected building.

"It makes a mockery of the whole thing," says Khoo. "It's going to dwarf the heritage building. The heritage building may start cracking . . . You'll have to widen the road — the heritage trees are gone. And the few mansions left will be so ridiculous, they'll look just like fancy doors to the high-rise buildings."

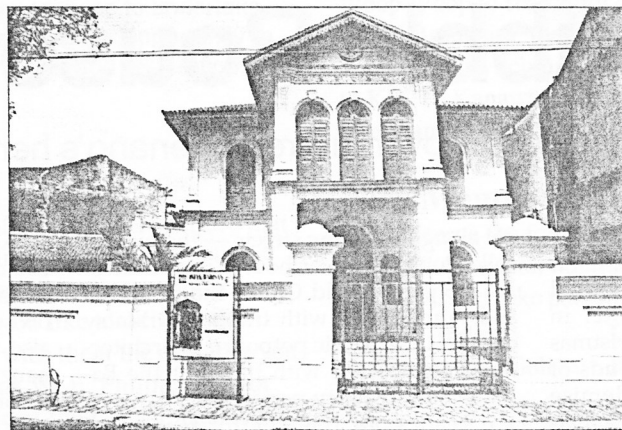
Earlier, a conservation consultant had proposed legislation that would cover all buildings built before 1949, the year rent control came into effect. If an application trickled in to develop such a building, authorities would weigh it carefully, studying the building first to determine what degree of protection they should accord it. This plan would have spread the task of evalu-



Khoo: awareness drive.



Old and threatened.



Saved: The recently restored Syed Alatas mansion in Penang.

ating Penang's many pre-war buildings over many years, as and when development applications were made. But the government rejected it.

"Some of the council servants are quite sympathetic towards heritage," observes Ahmad, "but most of the councillors are really indifferent or quite hostile." He and other heritage activists put that hostility down to politicians' close links with property developers. And they recognize another stumbling block in their fight: The council derives substantial revenue from development charges, particularly from high-rise buildings.

Potential solutions are coming from many fronts. Recently, the heritage committee suggested a list of incentives to encourage property owners to spruce up their buildings. If an owner chose to convert a historic house into a restaurant, for example, the city might waive development charges.

The PHT recommends selectively abolishing the Rent Control Act. For an initial five-year period, say, only owners of heritage properties in conservation areas who restore their properties would benefit. This could also ease pressure from owners who are lobbying to have rent control lifted outright.

These well-meaning proposals offer only temporary solutions without a federal-level Conservation Act. That legislation is necessary to provide real incentives for heritage property owners to restore or upgrade their properties — and increase penalties for illegal demolition or destruction of heritage buildings. The Federal Cabinet has agreed in principle to set up a national council on conservation and to pass a conserva-

tion bill. But coming up with a workable comprehensive draft, however, is proving to be a slow process. The first attempt is reported to be unsuitable, and a new draft may not be ready for two more years. As Khoo points out: "Right now, there is no Conservation Act, so you cannot protect anything."

If people feel strongly enough about conservation, then politicians will have to respond quickly, Khoo says. But she laments: "People don't care enough to get involved in heritage activities."

The answer may lie in education, according to the heritage committee's Choong. Many people wrongly equate heritage conservation with slum preservation. "The heritage buildings have become slums because of a historical development of subsidized housing through rent control," he says. "We have to play for time — put restrictions and incentives in place." As public awareness grows over time, he adds, so will the perceived value of heritage buildings. "And then nobody will want to destroy them."

Anil Netto is a freelance writer in Penang.