

PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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

Number 19

September 1995

AGM 1995 • Election of PHT Council – Term 1995-1997

Held on Saturday 29 July at the E&O Hotel

No voting was necessary as only ten (10)
members were proposed and seconded.

PHT Council – Term 1995-1997

- 1 Dato' Nazir Ariff (Life Member)
- 2 Dr Choong Sim Poey (Life Member)
- 3 Ms Loh-Lim Lin Lee (Life Member)
- 4 En Ahmad Chik (Life Member)
- 5 Khoo Salma Nasution
- 6 Tengku Idaura Ashkandar
- 7 Mr James Lee (Life Member)
- 8 Mr David Khor
- 9 Ms Lee Laine
- 10 Mr Ong Teng Lam

Furniture Restoration Course

Organised by The Heritage Centre Penang
and Penang Heritage Trust

Venue : Syed Alatas Mansion
(128 Armenian Street, Penang)

Speaker : David Yeo

Sunday, 3 September
Brief History of Furniture Making
European - Oriental - Colonial - Straits Settlement
Theory : 10.30 am - 12 noon

Sunday, 10 September
Timber Identification & Woodworking Tools
Timber properties - Seasoning & Preservation
Traditional Tools - Power Tool
Theory & Practical : 10 am - 12 noon

Sunday, 17 September
Basic Joinery & Woodworking Methods
Western methods - Eastern methods
Dismantling - Faults & Remedies
Theory & Practical : 10.30 am - 12 noon

Sunday, 24 September
Finishes & Conservation
Stripping - Staining - Finishes - Restoration
Theory & Practical : 10.30 am - 12 noon

Fees (for the whole course) : RM120.00
Contact : Ismail Bakar, Tel: 04 - 261 6606

Workshop

Organised by
The Heritage Centre Penang

Sharing Experiences

from a Pilot Project
The Syed Alatas Mansion
Heritage Development

Saturday 26 August 1995

8.30am - 1.00pm

Syed Alatas Mansion
(128 Armenian Street, Penang)

Speakers

Tengku Idaura Ashkandar :
Chairman The Heritage Centre Penang
Didier Repellin : Project Consultant
Goon Li Chin : Project Architect
Khoo Salma : Project Manager
K. M. Lee : M & E Engineer
Cheah Poh Hin : Contractor
Saw Soon Kooi : Quantity Surveyor

Issues : Historical Interpretation, Fire
Safety, Adaptive Reuse, Colour Schemes
Problems : Leaking Roofs, Rising Damp
Techniques : Cleaning Stucco, Treating Old
Timber Floors, Rewiring an Old Building
Procedures : Estimating Restoration Costs.
Conducting a Dilapidation Survey

Workshop Fee: RM20

(Includes Morning Coffee)

First Come, First serve!

(Limited to 40 participants only)

For further details please contact:

Khoo Salma, Tel: 04 -263 3985

Fax: 04 - 263 3970

Ismail Bakar, Tel: 04 - 261 6606

Fax: 04 - 261 6605

NARA SYMPOSIUM

The 4th Symposium of the Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation

October 27-30, 1995, Nara, Japan • "Succession and Development of Historical Streets and Living Culture of Shophouses for the Future"

NARA MACHIZUKURI CENTER INCORPORATED (NMC) is a civic body promoting urban conservation, voluntarily supported by Nara residents who cherish their history, culture and natural environment, and who wish to make Nara "a true hometown for the Japanese".

Urban conservation so far has been under the control of the government and supported by the citizen, but now at Nara it is led by the citizen and supported by the government. Thus the Nara Machizukuri Center must play the role of encouraging our local residents and corporations to have a strong attachment for our town.

The NMC's main work is as a sort of 'thinktank' firmly rooted in Nara, doing research, making proposals, and training interested people from all parts of Japan to be leaders in conservation in their own towns. The NMC's activities have now spread not only throughout Japan, but also into other Asian countries.

In 1991 we inaugurated a project in cooperation with the Civic Trust, the world famous historical environment conservation group in England, to support the efforts of the very active Penang Heritage Trust to conserve the living culture of Penang's historical streets. Other Asian cities became interested in the programme. As a result The Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation (AWPNUC) was formed. Its member countries are Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, Taiwan, and Japan.

The first AWPNUC symposium was held in Penang in August '92, the second in Adelaide in April '93, and the third in Hanoi in November '94.

This year the NMC is celebrating the 15th anniversary of its founding and the 10th anniversary of the designation of our prefecture as a Townscape Formation District. We have also restored a historical wooden shophouse and are using it as a center, which we call Naramachi Monogatari-kan, to train architects, artisans, contractors and others in the building trade in restoration skills and techniques. The NMC is organising the Nara Symposium, the 4th in the AWPNUC series of symposiums, to commemorate the opening of the Naramachi Monogatari-kan last April.

We would like to ask for your kind support and cooperation in making the Nara Symposium a great success.

Katsuakira Kihara, President, Nara Machizukuri Center Incorporated

The Penang Heritage Trust is a Founding Member of AWPNUC

The NARA SYMPOSIUM REGISTRATION FORM is enclosed.
It has some information about registration fee, transportation, accommodation, meals, programmes, schedules, papers, excursions, the keynote address, etc.

Autumn in Nara is beautiful

Update on the Nara Symposium

Members of the Nara Machizukuri Center presented plans for the October Nara Symposium at a special meeting of AWPNUC members in Kuala Lumpur in late May this year. The key points to emerge from the meeting were the confirmation of the theme of the symposium; the use of The Heritage Centre Penang and the Nara Machizukuri Center as case studies; the topic for the commemorative speech (to be given by a prominent Nara resident); the two keynote addresses on the historic and economic importance of conservation (to be delivered by representatives from the Penang Heritage Trust and the Nara Machizukuri Center); and the need to meet regularly and discuss the significance of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the Asia/Pacific region.

The Nara Machizukuri Center, aware of the high cost of living in Japan for visitors, has worked hard to organise free registration for AWPNUC members, and to arrange for participants to stay in either a local ryokan or a western style hotel. The Seikan-so Ryokan offers shared rooms, Japanese or Western breakfast, and is in quiet beautiful Japanese landscaped gardens close to the NMC heritage centre. The Western style hotel is also conveniently sited and offers either twin share or single accommodation, albeit at a higher price than the ryokan. More information will be sent to you when your registration form is received.

The Nara Machizukuri Center is handling all arrangements for the Symposium. Please address any queries to the Chairman of their organising committee, Mr Kihara, or to their programme officer, Mr Joe Kanatani. Their contact numbers: Tel: 0742 - 26 - 3476, Fax: 0742 - 27 - 0969.

Penny Ramsay, Hon Secretary, Asia and West Pacific Network for Urban Conservation

Letters

National Monument in Peril

THE ACHEEN STREET MOSQUE - DESTRUCTION IN THE NAME OF CONSERVATION

Lim Hooi Seang, a former Penang Island Municipal Council planner, and Khoo Salma Nasution, a Penang Heritage Trust Council member, are deeply disappointed to see evidence of negligence and incompetence in the restoration of the Lebuah Acheh Mosque.

Everytime I return to Penang, I have this urge to pass through Lebuah Acheh and Lebuah Armenian to see whether there are any changes or improvements to this historical enclave. The "correctly" restored Syed Alatas building is the first official restoration project in Penang and one hopes that it has been a valuable learning experience for all concerned, from the Municipal Councillors to the building craftsmen. Indeed the background to its restoration and eventual use as a heritage resource centre is probably more colourful than the history of the building itself. But that is another story.....

During my last trip to Penang in May, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that work on the restoration of the Lebuah Acheh Mosque would soon begin. Ah, I thought, "My efforts in planning the implementation of the conservation plan for the area and bid for government funding have succeeded after all!" When I visited the site in July, I was quite appalled to see not a restoration of this almost two-century old mosque, but a "development" project.

Apparently a new verandah is to be added to extend the praying area, and this was done by constructing rather huge reinforced concrete columns. One of the tenets of good conservation is that one should be able to tell the new additions (if they are at all necessary) from the original building. I hope that the architect responsible has taken note of this, if not even the old aluminium awnings would have seemed inappropriate because we can tell that they are added on and can be easily taken off.

Although I do not question the rationale for expansion, I believe that there could have been more sensitive and perhaps innovative solutions. One important consideration that should have been the *raison d'être* for the restoration is that this is a unique

national monument, one of the few in Penang gazetted under the Antiquities Act.

The contractor had also removed the roofing and left it exposed to the elements. Needless to say the interior was flooded, an unforgivable mistake. I happened to be present at the meeting when the project consultant explained to the contractor how the roofing was to be done and the need to cover the whole roof with a plastic tarpaulin as was done with the Syed Alatas building. Surely ignorance is no excuse in this case.

A more experienced and competent contractor should have been appointed for an important restoration project like the Lebuah Acheh Mosque. Unfortunately the lessons from the restoration of the Syed Alatas building have not been learnt by people who matter most.

*Lim Hooi Seang, Universiti Brunei Darussalam
Department of Public Policy & Administration*

In August 1994, it was announced that the Federal Government had allocated RM3.5 million to the State government for the Acheen Street Mosque and museum project. Out of this sum, RM2.5 million was budgeted for the restoration of the mosque alone. The funds were awarded after the Prime Minister himself visited the site at the end of 1993.

The mosque was built circa 1810. It appears to be the oldest mosque in Penang which has survived in its original form and condition. It is indeed a national monument and I believe it has been gazetted by the Museum authorities as such.

Until recently the mosque had changed little from a historic view painted by Thompson in 1848, or from the evidence documented in a survey map of 1893. Only a modest sympathetic extension, consisting of an extra arcade and colonnade and a parapet roof, was added at the turn of the century. Having survived the Penang Riots of 1867 and two World Wars, the mosque has been tragically damaged in the current project carried out in the name of conservation and restoration.

The "restoration" works began sometime in June this year. The original terracotta tile roof had long been substituted with asbestos sheets and the first phase of the project was to replace the leaking asbestos roof.

When my husband and I passed by the mosque in the beginning of July, we were alerted by the blue plastic sheet flapping in the wind. Instead of placing a canopy over the structure to protect the mosque while the roof was being changed, the plastic was hung flimsily from the roof ridge. This gave in after a few nights of rain.

When we visited the site the next day, we found the mosque interior completely flooded. The alcove (mihrab) and the wooden pulpit (mimbar) were standing in about 6 inches of water. The water has seeped into the structure and the moisture may take several months to dry. The plasterwork, some sections ornately decorated, may start to loosen and come off the brick walls before long.

That was not all. In order to widen the access road to the mosque compound, one corner of the mosque was demolished. The reason given was that the access road was only ten feet wide at the narrowest point, while fire department regulations required 12 feet width. Another access point could have been created. At any rate, a long hose would have been sufficient to reach from the fire engine parked on the main road to the furthest building in the compound. One wonders if there was any attempt to negotiate some concession with the fire department for the sake of a 185-year old historic monument.

The narrow entrance was not a drawback but an asset, contributing to the delightful element of surprise in the approach to the mosque. This unique feature of the historic setting and urban design was not appreciated; instead it was sacrificed, one suspects, to provide for a two-way traffic. Even if it was necessary to widen the entrance, it would obviously be less drastic to move the wall on the other side (the back of a shophouse) rather than remove the corner of an ancient mosque!

Instead of a traditional rectangular layout, we now have a five-sided mosque. It would be a bad joke to invite tourists to come and be fascinated by the only pentagonal mosque in Malaysia. The act of hacking off a corner of the mosque is an inane and catastrophic as, say, lopping off a corner of the Fort Cornwallis to make room for car-parking, or removing a dome from the Kapitan Keling Mosque to make room for telephone wires.

Perhaps, the most debatable issue is whether to construct new extensions to the mosque. Formerly a metal awning had been added to enlarge the covered area of the mosque. Now, as part of a "restoration project", the awning will be replaced by a terracotta tile roof extension supported by heavy reinforced concrete columns. From the conservationist's point of view, when an extension is necessary, it should be done with minimal intervention to the old fabric. In this case, the old granite steps and huge sections of the 185-year old masonry bench were destroyed in order to insert the new columns. Secondly, the modern extension should be distinguishable from the old building, while harmonising with it. For example, light modern materials can be used which will not visually dominate the original structure. Thirdly, the extension should be constructed in a way that it can be removed without damaging the original building - the supporting columns can stand apart from the building.

There is a sizable congregation only when the mosque is used for Jama'ah prayers, which is every other Friday. In such a case, the best and most economical solution would have been, for example, an attractive canvass awning which can be cantilevered out twice a month. Instead, what is being erected is an overdesigned roof extension which has destroyed much of the original fabric of the mosque. This goes against all the principles of restoration and conservation.

Why indeed does the Acheen Street Mosque need to be enlarged in the first place? One can think of two

reasons. First, the Friday congregation is concentrated on the north side of the mosque's covered area, because of the stench coming from the toilets on the southern side. This problem could be easily solved by relocating the toilets. Secondly, the mosque has to accommodate a combined congregation of two mosques, because of the current odd practice of holding Friday prayers alternately at two neighbouring mosques, namely the Acheen Street Mosque and the Kapitan Keling Mosque. Incidentally, the practice of "alternating mosques" was introduced by the British in the late 19th century as a way of settling differences between the congregations of the two mosques. In fact, this unIslamic practice should have been discontinued a long time ago.

If Friday prayers were held weekly at both mosques, the new extension would not even be necessary. The former metal awning, unattractive though it was, could have been left in place temporarily until matters were rectified. Public funds could be saved.

The Acheen Street Mosque is of great historic significance as the spiritual centre of Penang's early Muslim traders in the 18th and 19th centuries, and as the centre of Haj activities in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, it has the potential of becoming one of the country's most important tourist attractions for Muslim travellers.

The mosque is also our most important landmark commemorating the more than 200-year old relationship between Penang and Aceh. It is ironic that this landmark is blighted at the dawn of a renewal of that friendship with the development of the IMT- GT.

The project engaged a prominent conservation consultant, but one wonders if the consultant was consulted at all. The extensions should be stopped and the mosque should be carefully restored by experts and craftsmen. Grave mistakes have been made from negligence and ignorance, but the mistakes should be reversed. Moreover, we are not just dealing with any historic building in this case, but a mosque, the House of Allah. The results will stand permanently as an example of how Muslims in Malaysia regard their own heritage.

Postscript : I visited the mosque again yesterday (9 August, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad). More than one month after the committee was informed about the leaks, the rain is still getting in, to the extent that the alcove was in 2 inches of water.

They are proceeding with the reinforced concrete columns and the roof-extensions. One set of granite stairs with the masonry guard and coping has been reconstructed, so have parts of the masonry bench. The workmanship is crude. The fine contours and mouldings, made with thin old bricks (average 1.5 - 1.8 inches thick) and a thin layer of plaster, cannot be recreated with larger modern bricks (average 2.3 inches thick). Surely, what is happening to the Acheen Street Mosque, a national monument, cannot be called a restoration.

Khoo Salma Nasution

150, Armenian Street, Penang