

# PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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## *The Continuing Crisis* ⇒

Last month the PHT called a press conference to express its full support for the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) recommendations for conservation legislation and to urge the Penang Municipal Council (MPPP) to adopt them without further delay (see November PHTnewsletter).

The MPPP must have been none too happy about the conference for a few days later it came out with a statement – the MPPP can sometimes respond with surprising speed – threatening to treat the recommendations “with extreme caution” The *New Straits Times* reported: “The MPPP said it had to do so because some of the recommendations did not reflect the unanimous view of the HAC members.” Said a PHT member long familiar with MPPP speak: “You can take their being cautious to mean discussing, posturing, then simply forgetting about it.”

It was obvious to many observers when last year the MPPP set up the HAC – a committee composed of 12 civic and professional bodies, all with fiercely different views on heritage – that no such committee could possibly solve every single problem it was asked to investigate nor could it be unanimous in support of every proposal made. The thought crosses your mind that the HAC might have been *set up* in more than one sense of the phrase.

Yet the HAC has done very well. As it turned out, the committee voted 11-1 *for* the recommendations. And it might interest you to know that even the initially difficult Housing Developers Association is now happy to “endorse their full content”. Surely, this is overwhelming enough a majority to persuade the MPPP to consider the recommendations with a view to adopting them – that is if establishing an effective heritage policy is what it really wants in the first place.

The MPPP said: “As a local authority, we are entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the interests of all ratepayers (NST)” and “It is prudent for the council to study and deliberate further on the recommendations submitted to ensure that the articulate views of the minority are not unfairly imposed on the silent majority (*The Star*).” A most admirable attitude one must say, but are the HAC members not ratepayers and

representatives of the silent majority? And have they not made a thumping majority decision to take their case to the authorities? One can only wonder why the MPPP has chosen to hear only the one lone opposing voice of the Ratepayers Association. Is it trying to use the ratepayers as a pretext for rejecting the recommendations? It’s all something odd, mad, and sad when you come to think of it – the MPPP apparently ready to let its own grand experiment with a heritage advisory committee end in spectacular failure.



PHT

## *Invitation*

### *PHT Antiques and Collectibles Fair '95*

Official Opening

by Y. B. Dr Sak Cheng Lum

on Friday 1 December at 10.00 am

at Dewan Sri Pinang (Bilek A, B, C)

All PHT members are invited

Light refreshments will be served by the  
PHT Nyonya Food Club

To quote the council further: “In fact, the MPPP was the first local authority in Malaysia to implement the Design Guidelines for Conservation Areas in the inner city of Georgetown in 1987.” Indeed. *Touché*. The implication here, of course, is that the Advisory Committee and its recommendations are redundant; that the MPPP is well aware of its responsibilities, it needs no interference from NGOs and the like, and has everything firmly under control. And yet our old buildings are still falling like ten pins.

It’s all very well for the MPPP to crow about its existing design guidelines, and how, as long ago as 1982, it had “already taken the need for building conservation into consideration when preparing the Penang Island Structure Plan”. But can it tell us how it came about that the fake heritage Asas Dunia was able to rise to 7 storeys in an inner-city area, Chulia Street, where,

according to its own rules, no new building may be more than 4 storeys high? And what about the listed Metropole and its vanishing right under the MPPP's very nose? How come there seems to be nothing at all the MPPP can do to carry out its promise to get it rebuilt? And while we are on the subject, we might continue, what about Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah? What about Logan Road and Anson Road? What about Pulau Tikus? And what about the MPPP's bright idea to turn hotshot developer and its old council bungalows – the magnificent seven adjacent to Suffolk House – into high-rise blocks? And .... And .... but let's not crow over the MPPP's discomfiture.

The NST also reported that "the present serving officers" of the MPPP "took exception" to the PHT press statement because it "indirectly implied" that they might be less than "well-informed, sympathetic, and far-sighted". Well, what can one say but that it's unfortunate they should have read the statement and seen themselves in that light. "What we are looking at now is the real face of the MPPP," says a PHT member. "If you want your heritage policy, you'd better make sure you don't offend its officers."

Perhaps as a signal to the local authority that it should stop making embarrassing noises about its structure plans, design guidelines, and bruised ego, the State government announced that it would soon "gazette a local law to preserve its historical buildings in the face of rapid development on the island (*The Star*)". Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, the Chief Minister, was also quoted as having said: "We need to show the property owners the benefits of preserving them (He must mean the historical buildings, not their owners)." And Madam Kee Phaik Cheen, the State Executive Councillor for tourism, culture, arts and women's development, promptly added: "There are 12,000 pre-war buildings in Georgetown alone. With the existence of the new enactment, we hope to turn Georgetown into a heritage city with all the antiquated architecture and old world ambience retained to attract tourists (NST)." Our highest authorities have spoken, promising Penang what is called the State Heritage Enactment. They've made it quite clear that their thoughts no longer revolve entirely around new development. They're fully aware of what is endangering our heritage and that protecting it can only be done by government fiat. The question is – when, how soon, can they deliver and Penang have this long-awaited enactment?

If conservation and efficiency are not dreaded words with the walking wounded in the MPPP, here's something they could do. They could stop feeling sorry for themselves and start behaving like the obedient civil servants they're supposed to be and get on with their job of bringing about the heritage legislation their political masters have declared Penang needs and deserves. We can all then give them a pat on the back instead of a knock on the head and say: "Well done. That's brilliant. You deserve a medal."

## Up there where they don't belong

We must be grateful for small victories. We complained about the rash of giant billboards that is transforming our streetscapes and the Municipal Council (MPPP) has taken action against the people who put up two of them in old Penang Road. According to a recent *Sunday Star* report, the MPPP objected to the two rooftop adverts because "one did not have the Building Department's approval while the other was larger than what had been approved".

What is strange and disappointing, however, is that the MPPP has done nothing about the even more enormous hoarding wrapped round the entire facade of the former *Straits Echo* building. "Well, it looks like here the advertisers have found a way of getting round the regulations about size," said a PHT member. "They've obviously confused the go-by-the-book MPPP by making their billboard graphics a composition in several panels."

*Learning from Las Vegas – the famous Straits Echo building now an infamous decorated shed.*



*And they tell me the tourists come to see our old world charm!*



## LETTERS

## MPPP's Action – An Eyewash

I am astonished at the Penang Municipal Council's (MPPP) line of action in the Hotel Metropole scandal which seems to (1) pacify the PHT and all other concerned persons by trying to get the maximum fine of RM50,000 imposed on Dolphin Square and (2) approve Dolphin's plan for a multi-storey structure on the grounds that it complies with the rules!

If I may borrow a minister's recent words, this is mockery of the highest order. By this line of action the MPPP is plainly extending an open invitation to developers to be bold and go ahead and demolish any heritage buildings that they have set their eyes on, then submit plans that meet the MPPP's rules. They can rest assured that their plans will be approved.

For destroying heritage buildings, they will at the most have to pay a mere token sum of RM50,000 which is kacang puteh or peanuts compared to the profits to be made by destroying the nation's heritage.

If the MPPP is genuinely angry with Dolphin Square, then there is only one thing that it needs to do – make sure that Metropole is fully rebuilt to its original specifications. The MPPP can forget about their appeal for the maximum fine as RM50,000 will not be able to rebuild Metropole. The appeal is merely an eyewash.

In fact with all the power in the MPPP's hands under the Town and Country Planning Act 1976, there was no need to charge Dolphin for the demolition of a heritage building. Right from the start, their action should have been to compel Dolphin to rebuild Metropole and not pay a fine. Almost two years have passed and the MPPP has only been playing games, the winner of which will be Dolphin with the acquiescence of the MPPP.

I believe there is no law requiring as a matter of right that all plans submitted, so long as they comply with the rules, must be approved. In the absence of such a law, when Dolphin's plans are approved (which I suspect may have been approved 'in principle' and are only awaiting official announcement after the outcome of the appeal), the MPPP would be seen as having abetted the destruction of Metropole, and be seen to be openly encouraging further destruction of the nation's heritage.

Nothing, not even life sentences on the directors of Dolphin, can justify the MPPP approving their plans and the public outrage can only be mollified by demanding for the full restoration of Metropole.

**Quo Vadis MPPP**

Kedah

Source: Aliran Monthly 1995 15(8)

Dear Quo Vadis MPPP,

Thanks for your strong support. We assure you that the PHT will not be pacified, mollified, or satisfied until Metropole, as we have made clear in our June editorial which was reproduced in the Aliran Monthly 1995 15(7), is rebuilt, brick by brick and tile by pre-war tile. We appreciate your point that not even putting the Dolphin Square directors behind

bars for life "can justify the MPPP approving their plans" to build a 29-storey tower where Metropole stood. Yes, what kind of Penang are we living in when its government can reward its citizens for breaking the law? The developers have pleaded guilty as charged and been fined. That makes their demolition of the listed Metropole a self-confessed illegal act. It's unthinkable that the MPPP can give their tower planning permission now. The MPPP cannot do it without appearing to have made it worth their while to break the law and then treat its own building guidelines as a joke. The reward will smack of gross mismanagement, banditry, favouritism, to say the least. And, don't forget, still there is the DAP veteran bruiser, Mr Lim Kit Siang, who will no doubt have something interesting to tell the voters about this whole weird, wretched affair.

## Meeting

## Nyonya Food Club

Saturday 18 November, at 5.00 pm

No. 19 Jesselton Crescent

(residence of Mr Anthony Khoo)

Tel: 228 4343

## State Heritage Enactment

Referring to the article "Penang to enact laws to 'save' historical buildings" which appeared in *The Star* on Thursday 26 October, 1995, the Penang Heritage Trust urges the Penang State government to introduce a state conservation enactment of its own rather than wait for the Federal government to pass a Heritage Conservation Act. This is because many of Penang's heritage buildings are in imminent danger of being demolished and there is as yet no definite date for the Federal act to be tabled.

The State government has been talking about saving the country's heritage buildings for some years now, but without legislation the government is a toothless dog barking at unconscientious developers. Proper planning backed by strong legislation will not curb development but will redirect construction activity into more appropriate areas. It will also bring about new sympathetic development that will enhance the quality of the heritage city.

The State government could obtain the same experts as those involved in the preparation of the Federal government's Conservation Act, so that the State's Heritage Enactment will later be reinforced rather than be in contravention of the federal legislation. Penang could even "test out" the legislation before it is implemented for the whole country.

It is amazing that the State has until now placed such a low priority on its heritage buildings, considering that tourism is the Penang's second most important industry after manufacturing, and that cultural tourism has become the most important form of tourism worldwide.

George Town still has a "critical mass" of heritage buildings which gives the ambience of a historic city. Without environmental and heritage protection, the balance however has begun to tilt.



In less than five years, Penang is likely to change from being the Pearl of the Orient to being just another muddy oyster.

It is no exaggeration to say that more heritage buildings have been obliterated in the last ten years than in the previous 40 years put together, including the Second World War. During the present economic boom the rate of demolition has been accelerated. Penang has already lost or about to lose all its major private bungalows – think of Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, Jalan Logan, Jalan Anson, the more than 200 hundred years of built heritage, the legacy of our forefathers, in danger of being destroyed by one selfish generation. What will be left our children?

A draft conservation enactment was submitted to the Penang State government after the 1991 seminar on conservation legislation organized by the Penang Heritage Trust, the United Nations Centre for Regional Development and the State government. The politicians promised the people of Penang that the State Heritage Enactment would be gazetted "after the elections". Now that the government has been returned to power, we hope they will keep their promise. They must act now, not after the next elections, or much of our architectural inheritance, our history, will be lost forever.

**Khoo Salmà Nasution**

*Honorary Secretary, Penang Heritage Trust*

## Approaches to Conservation

When we visited George Town recently we were fortunate enough to visit a number of your city's significant structures. Among them was the Acheen Street Mosque. It was disheartening to see what has happened to the building, especially so after having just visited Syed Alata's Mansion.

My impression of the project was that an opportunity has been lost, and the original fabric of the building damaged. From your newsletters I gather that some reconstruction work has commenced, but there are doubts about how well it will be completed.

There appears to be two issues involved. One is the extension of the building, the other is the preservation and conservation of its original fabric. The comments following are based on the way we approach conservation in South Australia.

From our brief visit to George Town it appears that a traditional approach to extending mosques has been to add another colonnade around the perimeter of the existing building. The Kapitan Keling Mosque, for example, is barely recognisable today when compared with early photographs, because it has been almost completely surrounded by later structure. Adding an additional colonnade around the Acheen Street Mosque may therefore be considered a valid means of enlarging the structure. The method in which the extension is being undertaken, however, is not encouraging. The impact of any new structure should be minimal, with little damage or alteration to the original fabric.

Khoo Salmà Nasution stated in your September newsletter that ".....light materials can be used which will not visually dominate the original building.....". This approach may have been preferable, contrasting new materials with old, allowing the original

building to be easily identified, and the new materials to be easily removed later if necessary.

Conservation work should protect the original fabric, not leave it exposed to the elements or subject to increased deterioration. As much of the fabric as possible should be retained, helping to preserve the integrity and character of the materials, and structure as a whole.

The argument that a "purist" approach to conservation need not be applied to community or the public buildings, and that the Mosque as such should be adapted to suit its changing needs, is also valid. If buildings are to be conserved it is important that they remain usable. However, buildings with a high profile and the opportunity to educate the public should be treated more carefully and have their integrity preserved. It can be argued that the Acheen Street Mosque is such a building: it is after all the oldest mosque in Penang that has survived in its original form and may represent traditional muslim religious beliefs and particular building techniques of the last century. If the Mosque is altered its ability to successfully demonstrate these aspects may be reduced, and its cultural significance diminished. The demolition of the masonry bench and steps and a corner of the Mosque has, I believe, adversely affected the integrity of the structure, and diminishes its educational role as a good example of conservation practices and catalyst for further work. It should not have been necessary for such drastic work to have been undertaken to ensure that the current and future requirements of the Mosque are met.

The principles governing the restoration of a private building or house will again be determined by the importance of the building, who lived in it, what events were associated with it and its architectural significance. If of high significance, the principles of conservation and adaptation should be applied more stringently. Most houses, however, are privately owned, and possibly only of significance in terms of their contribution to the streetscape. In this case it is often recommended to locate new work to the side and rear elevations, preserving the appearance of the front of the house. Good design principles apply both to historic and 'normal' buildings.

On hearing of the RM2.5 million Acheen Street Mosque budget I was certainly impressed with the generosity of your federal government towards this project, no doubt highlighting the Mosque's importance to Penang and Malaysia. There is at least some awareness of conservation issues. Keep up the promotion of your heritage.

**Sam Hosking**

*Heritage Advisor National Trust of South Australia,  
Member South Australian Heritage Consultants and  
Contractors*

## New Members

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

Vincenzo Castelli

Soo Lee Cho

Jenny Lee Soon

Marcel A Thiescira

Teresa Pereira