

# PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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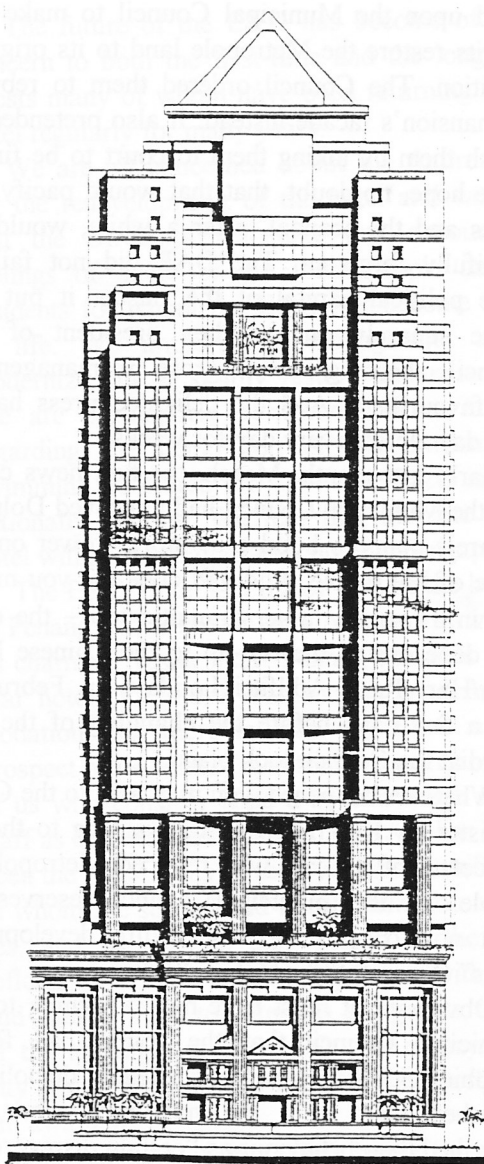
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## The Metropole Affair

A facade in every sense of the word

The mother of all  
architectural fiascos



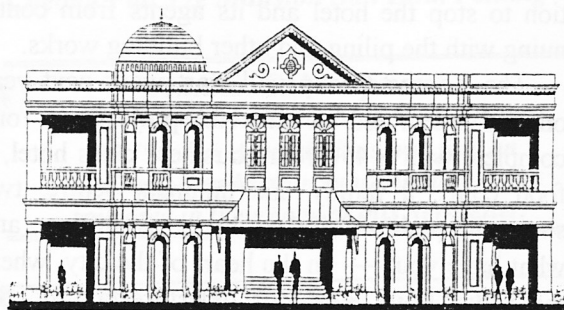
*Artist's impression of the 39-storey hotel Dolphin Square has been given planning permission to build on the 6,580 square metre site of Hotel Metropole, the listed turn-of-the-century building they demolished without planning permission*

Stuffing towers into the  
entrails of old buildings

*They must have gone loco  
To dance the Penang fandango  
In honour of this architectural fiasco  
That is not even rococo*

.....so goes a PHT rhymer's lament.

They vandalized it and now they are pretending to rebuild it. They have paid their peanuts of a RM50,000 fine and evidently that entitles them to bring it back from the dead – as a toy house, a stage-set, a decorative panel on permanent display in the air-conditioned lobby of their 39-storey pastiche of a hotel. No doubt they think they are adding something witty to the city's architecture. "They might as well put it on top of their tower," suggested a PHT member.



*Artist's impression of the facade of Metropole*

Our Dolphins, more shark than whale, more *Jaws* than *Free Willy*, must have got their inspiration from No.1 Penang Road, where what is left of the Khoo Sian Ewe mansion, its facade, is being turned into a fancy entrance to a multi-storey car park. Let us hope they do not also get the bright idea to call their hotel Dolphin Heritage Hotel, or worse Metropole Heritage Door Hotel.

That would be adding insult to injury. It would also make them look a ridiculous lot. Somebody from the Malaysian Architects Association should tell them that giving their tower a post-modern look does not in any way make it a heritage building.

Anyway, we already have The Heritage Club on Jalan Utama and the Heritage Tower at Halaman York, both of which, it goes without saying, have nothing to do with heritage conservation. Says a PHT member: "It's funny, they think all this talk about heritage is stopping development and putting them out of business, yet they have no qualms about calling their new buildings Heritage This and Heritage That. Seems to me they've a love-hate relationship with their heritage they don't quite understand."

**Hardwicke** is the other listed building on Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah that will suffer the same indignity of being reduced to a toy house, that is if it is still standing when the Unipark skyscraper that is about to rise behind and beside it is completed. A PHT engineer is more than a little worried that the mansion will start to shake, rattle and roll as a result of all that primitive hammer-driven piling going on so close to it, and one fine day, probably a public holiday, they will tell you that they have no choice but to declare it unsafe and let it be Metropolised.

The **Cheong Fatt Tze** on Leith Street, the city's landmark heritage conservation event, is also in danger of having its foundations undermined. Its immediate neighbour, Hotel Continental, is hammer-driving a 20-storey extension into the sliver of land that hardly separates them. Indeed, the walls of the Cheong Fatt Tze have cracked. "This is serious structural damage that could only have been caused by the piling," say the owners who have now obtained a court injunction to stop the hotel and its agents from continuing with the piling and other building works.

The Adorna Group will start work next year on "an integrated commercial project" — one complete with a 450-room business class hotel, a food court, a family entertainment centre, two shopping podiums linked by a skybridge, and what have you — in the heart of the city, where the **Loke Thye Kee**, our oldest restaurant, the **Majestic**, our first cinema to show Chinese talkies, and the **Wing Look**, our first Western-style restaurant, form part of a proud ensemble of 48 buildings designed in the 1920s by the most notable of our first local architects Chew Eng Eam. Says Adorna: "Whatever is worth retaining and has heritage value, we will retain. We hope to restore and inject life into the buildings retained." Yes, they will, won't they? — inject a towering erection or two into the lovely entrails of those

buildings whose facades they consider worth retaining..

And there is the **E&O**, our oldest hotel and the favourite haunt of the more enlightened visitors. We hear that come May the owners will begin to 'upgrade' it with extensions and additions. Their secret plans we have not seen, but no one should be surprised if its grand Ballroom, the social centre of Penang society for a hundred years, does not escape the disemboweling.

## Breaking the law is no big deal

**D**olphin Square wrecked the listed turn-of-the-century Hotel Metropole over the Christmas of '93, without planning approval as it turned out.

The heritage lovers called it "a real shame", the developers said it was "no big deal". The PHT called upon the Municipal Council to make the culprits restore the Metropole land to its original condition. The Council ordered them to rebuild the mansion's facade instead. It also pretended to punish them by taking them to court to be fined, in the hope, no doubt, that that would pacify the critics and the scandal, after a while, would be mercifully forgotten. The DAP did not fail to make political capital of the fiasco: it put the blame squarely on the then president of the Council, accusing him of gross mismanagement and favouritism. And the delighted press had a field day almost every day for weeks.

Early last month, March, the bad news came that the Municipal Council had approved Dolphin Square's plans to build a 39-storey tower on the grave of Metropole. And had done so, you might say, in a manner rather dramatic too — the deed was done during the run-up to the Chinese New Year/Hari Raya Adilfitri holidays in February, just a few days before the changing of the top guard at the Council took place.

Whatever happened, you may ask, to the Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon's warning to the no respecters of the law who reduced Metropole to rubble: ".....the (municipal) council reserves the right not to consider their future development plans" (*Sunday Star*, 16 Jan. '94).

Obviously, it must have meant nothing to the Municipal Council that the courts had found Dolphin Square guilty of illegal demolition, punished them with the maximum fine, and described their behaviour as "certain disregard for the law".

They have a point, those Penangites who say it is not the Dolphin Hotel, a mistake of the cityscape though it will be when built, that is really sad and disappointing about the wretched affair.



Nor is it the loss of old Metropole, a real shame though that is. Rather it is the government's abject failure to grasp the opportunity offered by the affair to show itself to be, when all is said and done, not incapable of doing the right thing, and the right thing is, surely, not rewarding its citizens for violating the law.

There is an unmistakable shift in the Penang public's perceptions of the rights, responsibilities, and *raison d'être* of development. There is every sign that in the wake of our economic boom will come an ethical boom, in which the authorities are fully expected to have ethical standards higher than those of the likes of Dolphin Square.

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## Letters

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### Not like *that* hotel in Singapore please!

The future of the E&O has become of great concern to both the first-time and the long term guests many of whom have been returning to the hotel regularly for many years.

We are all concerned about the future plans for the redevelopment of the hotel and we hope that the Directors will take into account the feelings of many of the local people and the residents for whom the E&O has become a way of life. We implore the management not to modernize but to simply restore and redecorate. We are particularly concerned about rumours regarding the demolition of the gardens and swimming pool area for which the E&O is internationally famous. We fear that the fate of the hotel will go the way of *that* hotel in Singapore.

The E&O Hotel is a major part of the heritage of Penang and is known and loved world-wide for its charm of yester year. Penang abounds with 5 Star hotels for those who require modern accommodation, but there is only one E&O and the prospect of its demise is extremely worrying to all of us who consider it as a second home and the staff as an extended family. The E&O has always been the main focus of the lives of the staff, some of whom are second and third generation employees, and the service they extend to the guests reflects this. The 1885 Dining Room with Albert and Nancy Yeoh to entertain the guests are part of the nostalgia of the E&O that money cannot buy at any other establishment in the world that I am aware of.

The thought of the E&O being transformed into a 5 Star chromium-plated shopping mall fills us all with horror. We want it to be preserved in its 1920s style for our grandchildren to enjoy.

New carpets, curtains, upholstery, paint – Yes; modernization – definitely No!

Please save the E&O, save this unique hotel for future generations.

**Shirley P. Nixon**

14 Lancaster Gate, London W2 3LN, England

### Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion - In danger of structural damage

Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (circa 1880s) is a unique heritage building without equal, as acknowledged by local and international architects, historians and conservationists.

Painstaking restoration works have been carried out over the last four years and is nearing completion. The building remains a showcase of the times on display to visiting dignitaries of the State and to be enjoyed by present and future generations of Malaysians.

Approval for a 20-storey hotel extension has been granted, 20 feet away from Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion. Cracks are appearing on the mansion, only a week after piling started. The damage will worsen upon further piling.

While we are seeking legal advice and urgent action to resolve the matter, it is noteworthy that approval of multi-storey blocks next to heritage sites pose clear endangerment. The new buildings are, more often than not, non-sympathetic in scale and context. And the piling systems, which are not damaging and non-vibrating, are not presently required by approving authorities.

Any action on your part would be timely and crucial for the betterment of our quality of life, our environment, and the preservation of our built heritage.

**Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion Sdn Bhd, Penang**

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### Annual Subscriptions

*Those members who have not paid their '94, '95, '96 subscriptions will find an "ordinary membership subscription" form enclosed in their copy of this newsletter.*

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### 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 its activities.

**Mohd Ariffin Tahir**  
**Ambiga Devy**  
**Mara Buchanan-Jones**

**Chong Lee Lin**  
**H V Speldewinde**

Tuesday 26 March

NEW STRAITS TIMES

**Ratepayers  
rise up  
in arms  
against the  
authorities  
and  
developers  
over  
questions  
of land-use**

RECENTLY in the Klang Valley, an innocent woman was punched by a motorist because she had kept to the stipulated speed limit. The culprit knew only too well that he was committing a crime, yet he did it. And sadly, not only did he get away scot free, no one came to her rescue.

The incident brings to mind the attitude of our local authorities. Residents are virtually given a slap in their face by the local authorities who see it fit to flatten every forested hill in sight to enrich some mercenary developer.

The latest casualty in the already cluttered Klang Valley is Taman Seputeh. Without any warning, Kuala Lumpur City Hall placed an advertisement dated March 11, declaring that a project would be sited at the housing estate's remaining forested land.

The notice, which did not disclose the name of the developer, states that the development will increase the density from 60 persons per acre to 135 persons. Who cares if they have to suffer more congestion? Who cares if there are no more green lungs in the area? Who cares if the monkeys living there lose their abode? Who cares about the silt, and the mounting garbage?

Of course, the residents there got all riled up when they found out about it. And rightly so, as City Hall made it a point to only invite residents living within 20 metres from the proposed project to give their views. Even then, they are only given four weeks to respond.

"Why only those within 20 metres? City Hall should consult all the residents of Taman Seputeh because invariably all of us will be affected. More so when there is only one road leading in and out of the housing estate," protested one irate resident.

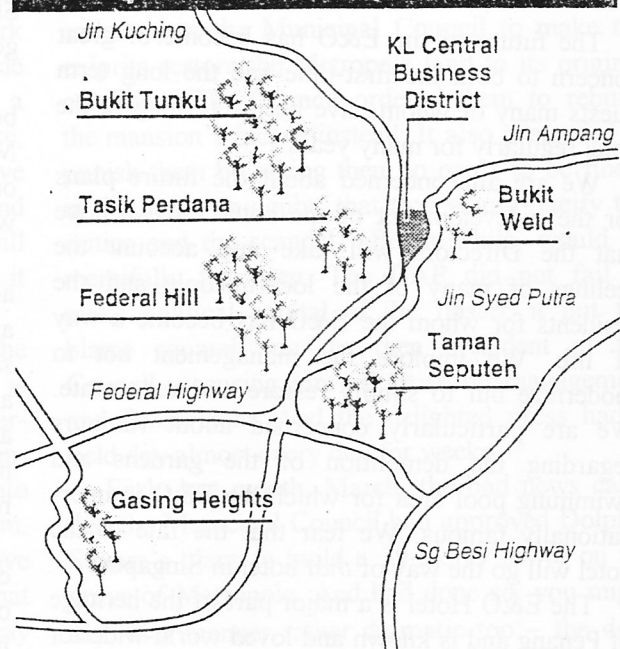
City Hall's high handedness only reaffirms our

## GREEN ZONE

BY PANG HIN YUE

# We condemn the West but repeat their mistakes

## KL'S REMAINING GREEN LUNGS



worst fears of the local authorities. In many cases they are inept, indifferent to ratepayers and they hardly give a toss to sound planning and management. Who cares as long as there is money to be made from unscrupulous developers?

Taman Seputeh residents are so fed up that they have decided that the only way to get the authorities' attention is to mobilise the rest of the residents to unite and fight the apathetic local authorities.

Last Tuesday, residents' association president Dr K.A. Nagalingam and several committee members, including architect Jimmy Lim and Datin Nik Zahara Nik Din, called for a Press conference and appealed to other residents' associations to join forces to save the remaining forests in the city and to demand for the right to be heard.

This is an encouraging sign. If all residents' associations unite with one voice

and exert their rights as ratepayers, local authorities can no longer remain complacent.

As rightly pointed out by Lim, Malaysians have very short memories. We seem to have forgotten the tragedies caused by uncontrolled development: the collapse of Highland Towers, the landslides at Genting Highlands and Cameron Highlands, the flash floods in Penang and Johor — all of which happened not too long ago. Yet, the local authorities who approve building plans continue to allow developers to clear more land without adequate care to mitigate the damage they inflict on our precious land and water resources.

We are so vociferous in condemning the West for environmental degradation. Yet one wonders why we seem to be replicating their mistakes. We are no better off unless we clean up our act and give more thought to proper land use planning.

Love is...



6-6

...telling her about it, often.

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