

# PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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

Number 27

May 1996

## Our members speak

We are happy to see that our members are writing not only to the PHTnewsletter but also to the newspapers to express their views on a variety of issues concerning our heritage.

Lim Hooi Siang, former Penang Municipal Council Town Planner, says the trouble with our "man-in-the-street Councillors serving a year-to-year term" is that they have a particular talent for playing havoc with the conservation and building guidelines recommended by their own planning and technical officers and experts. Alan Flux, a regular visitor from London, points to the irony of our economic success resulting in the rapid loss of our rich architectural inheritance. Dorothy Chua, now residing in Muar, is deeply disappointed to see our "once peaceful and scenic island" being further "fashioned into a man-made concrete disaster" whenever she comes back for a visit. The Penang Tourist Guides Association, several of whose members also belong to the PHT, is worried that all this our untrammelled "theme-park" development meant to attract the tourists will soon persuade the foreign ones to give Penang a miss. And a bewildered someone with no name wonders what it is that "makes Penangites hate their heritage so much". He is clearly well-informed and we thank him for his piece in *The Star*. It is odd though that he should be proud to call himself A Faithful Government Officer: it must have escaped him for a moment that our all-powerful city fathers and mothers are as much to blame as those Penangites who hate their heritage for the disappearance of many of our grand old buildings. (See following pages).



### Antique Collectors Club Meeting

Wednesday 15 May '96 • 4.00pm

Syed Alatas Mansion  
(128 Armenian Street)

## Fund-raising Event

*organized by*

American Women's Association Penang

*in aid of*

Penang Heritage Trust & local charities

*sponsored by*

Guinness • Anchor

Pure Water • Yamaha Music

## *Sunset Serenade*

Saturday 11 May '96

5.30pm — 9.00pm

The Heritage Centre Penang

Syed Alatas Mansion

(128 Armenian Street)

**Donation: RM50.00 each**

Featuring:

### **Violin-Piano Duet**

Mark Ostyn, *violin*

Jasmine Teow, *piano*

### **Art Exhibition**

Barbara Ng

Joelle St. Arnoult-Wong

### **Carpet Display**

Khosrow Carpets Sdn Bhd

### **Vegetarian Buffet**

The Temple of Fine Arts

The menu includes:

Samosa & Mint Chutney, Spring Rolls,  
Cakes, Cutlets, Vadai & Coconut Chutney,  
Fresh Mixed Vegetables with Sauce (Pasumbor),  
Noodles (Bee-hoon), Fruit Platter.

### **Lucky Draw**

The items include:

Mattel Toys, Wine, Flowers, Facials,  
Round of Golf at Bukit Jambul.

Please contact Tricia Stevens

Tel: 226 1464, Fax: 226 0380

by Tuesday 7 May.

## Letters

### "Indeed, the Council has revised the guidelines many times to favour the developers"

Firstly I would like to convey my appreciation to the PHT for keeping the heritage building issue in Penang on the burner.

The rekindled debate shows clearly once again the vulnerability of our historic buildings and sometimes pusillanimous attitude of our authorities. Reading the reports in *The Star* (December 1, 8, and 9) one can only conclude that we have a very confused Municipal Council where decision on the fate of a heritage building rests on the planning infrastructure committee. If the Council cannot accept the recommendations of its technical officers that a building has heritage value and is worthy of conservation then on what basis can it make any decision? Can the facts (*The Star*, December 8) be changed on account of the view of a Councillor who has doubts about its heritage value? Should heritage listing be decided upon by your man-in-the-street Councillors serving a year-to-year term?

The Council is all powerful when it comes to planning and controlling development. It is incorrect to say that Council has no control over the use of private land. It has the power to grant the right to development of land, but this right to development of land should be distinguished from the right to the use of the property as enshrined in our Constitution. Development and planning guidelines are not law or doctrines that cannot be changed. Indeed, the Council has revised its guidelines many times to favour developers.

The Housing Developers Association has a strong lobby, and we all know how it works. How can those of us with no vested interests other than wishing that we will be able to continue to live in the Penang with its rich heritage convince the Council to do the right thing? The Council is a creature of the State government you and I elected. So we should all speak to our elected representatives. The *Save Penang Hill* campaign succeeded in what it set out to do and we can learn from that experience. Perhaps it is time to form a coalition of groups with similar concerns.

Our elected leaders and planners have their individual roles to play and their job is to lay out the options for the community. The framework for this process of decision-making and public participation in planning our city lies in the Town and Country Planning Act 1976. Although it is acknowledged that debate is a healthy thing, once a policy has been made it should be allowed to be followed through. If each and every new team of Councillors starts questioning policy that has already been decided upon after debate, such as those in the structure plan, the whole planning process will be rendered meaningless and the planned objectives will never be achieved. The policy on conservation is quite clear in the structure plan and everyone has had the opportunity to comment on it during the publicity period. Now is the time to implement it.

I have always maintained that heritage conservation has to be viewed within the framework of

urban planning. Ultimately it boils down to what kind of city we all want. We should learn from what is happening in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Our Bayan Baru and Seberang Jaya were planned as Penang's version of KL's Putra Jaya. That is where all the high-rises, one-stops, mega-malls and what have you should be located. When there is unwavering policy to conserve our historic areas, owners and investors will then be prepared to invest, restore and bring new life and activities to the old buildings. This is now happening in Singapore where old shop-houses designated for conservation are exchanging hands for millions of dollars.

The Council's guidelines for conservation areas were drawn up ten years ago when we were preparing the structure plan for Penang Island. The guidelines were then meant to be an interim measure. It now has to be improved and updated with the inventory of heritage buildings and introduction of incentives. Singapore's version of conservation guidelines come in several volumes, just for shophouses alone.

The Council's urban conservation policy goes back more than twenty years. Let us not belittle the wisdom and foresight of our predecessors. As far back as 1971, the City Council set up the Central Area Planning Unit (CAPU) to study the redevelopment of the area which now forms KOMTAR and to establish the framework for development control. CAPU produced a concept plan for George Town and this culminated in the city's first interim zoning plan. Among the recommendations made were the establishment of priority comprehensive development areas in the city where largescale developments were to be channeled (KOMTAR, Kedah Road and Macallum Street Ghaut areas), the restoration and rehabilitation of historic parts of the city, maintenance of residential zones and their existing character. The Penang Island structure plan's policy for the city has essentially maintained the salient features of CAPU's proposals while reinforcing the conservation strategy through the designation of historic and cultural enclaves. It is thus apparent that the conservation strategy has reckoned prominently in the Council's planning and those who think it should be otherwise should realise how destructive it is to dismantle the city's structure.

It would be difficult for the Council to gain the confidence of those concerned for our heritage buildings if it does not make clear its vision for Penang. I recall that sometime ago the PHT drew up its vision for Penang in a memorandum to the State government. This should be broadcast continually so that more may appreciate its virtue.

*Lim Hooi Siang, Former Penang Island Municipal Council Town Planner*

### 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.

Beh Thye Boo    Lim Seh Ping  
Gail Kenny

LETTER OF THE DAY

# Stop before all that's interesting is wiped off

OVER the past five years I have been a frequent visitor to Penang, Ipoh, Kuching, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and other historic Malaysian cities and towns which once featured a unique array of old Chinese, Malay, Anglo-Indian and colonial architecture and also superb trees planted to shade the wide roads along which these buildings stood.

You may notice that I use the past tense, as so many of these trees and structures have disappeared in the last few years — often to make way for, frankly, unprepossessing examples of modern development.

I hesitate to use the word "architecture", although there are, of course, interesting modern buildings arising — but these are sadly few and far between.

Malaysia was once rich in what are now known as "heritage" buildings. I don't mean just the few famous, preserved and illuminated

structures such as the Kuching Istana.

I'm referring to the fascinating mix of wooden trellised kampung houses, with their rows of fanlights and shutters — now so often amalgamated into run-down urban areas — streets of decoratively (and often symbolically) plastered Chinese shophouses, small-town mosques, temples and shrines, large ostentatious eclectic bungalows, simpler Anglo-Indian homes, elegant banks and old administrative centres.

Many of these have been or are being demolished, or altered beyond recognition for reasons of commerce.

Maybe it is thought that the humbler species I have listed are not important enough to consider preserving — or that there are so many old shophouses around, for example, that losing the odd dozen here or there is of little import.

Not so, I live in a country

which has already made that mistake.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many 18th-century town squares, great mansions, workaday Victorian shops and terraces were bulldozed; old town centres were ripped apart in a way that would be inconceivable in England today.

We have lost so much that the comparatively little we have left is now carefully listed for preservation.

Singapore has also had too great a purge, and is now trying to re-create its past, as a rather plastic pastiche.

Don't let it happen in Malaysia — stop and assess before all that is interesting is swept away.

It is now not considered a problem — indeed, in many quarters it is now fashionable as well as necessary — to find sympathetic new uses for old buildings, which when restored would grace any townscape.

This is starting to happen in Malaysia and will, I hope, be a growing trend.

(Expensive over-restoration is not required — buildings should be allowed to show their age, and grow old gracefully, as opposed to being tarked up like wedding cakes).

Malaysia's history of multi-racial, multi-religious settling has resulted in a rich architectural legacy; and while modern-day Malaysians are to be congratulated, certainly, on the current economic success, it would be ironic if this very success were to lead to the disappearance of all but a few obvious examples of the glory which once was.

Local cultural issues aside, there is great tourist potential in the past; and I read that Malaysia is hoping to multiply its tourist industry.

It seems that Penang is already difficult to sell as a package destination be-

cause it is considered to have lost too much to be of interest to the discerning tourist — who increasingly demands more than just a beach and a bar.

The most photographed building in Kuala Lumpur is the old railway station — not any of the glittering high-rise banks, or garish blocks of condominiums teetering on raw red slopes gouged from some once-verdant hillside.

I was recently talking to a group of design students in the Federal capital, many of whom will eventually be designing for some segment of the tourist industry; and I asked them to consider whether as designers, their future could depend on how they treat their past... a question which needs attention in the present, before it's too late.

Alan Flux  
Berkshire  
United Kingdom

# Preserve Penang's old buildings

FOR any professional it is quite depressing to read the letter "Only some old buildings have heritage value" (*The Star*, March 14).

All terms and laws in respect to land development continue to get confused by Penang's housing developers, architects, rate payers, and now by "faithful residents."

This is especially so with the statement that heritage conservation is "ignoring progress and development of the State" which can only mean that destroying all of Penang's remaining heritage would bring the most progress to the State.

Indeed, just the opposite is the case. The unbalanced development of Penang has, for instance, already led to the loss of an important economic market: major European tour operators do not offer Penang as a tourist destination.

Industries and tourists are free to go where they please and may seek cheaper labour or better beaches than those found in Penang.

The heritage of Penang would have been a stable permanent asset for the State's development and future, as it is unique in Asia, only paralleled by Singapore.

Why did Singapore restore thousands of heritage buildings if it was

not for its progress and development?

Investors in Penang would not run away just because there is a heritage building on the land of his choice. He simply could have invested into the heritage building (as the Distd College in Macalister Road, KFC at Larut Road, or the "Follow me" Company did in Burmah Road), or he could have relocated his investment to another site, perhaps within an impressive "Central Business District" of high-rise towers.

Methods to compensate owners of heritage sites, like the "transfer of development rights" to another site, where additional floor space can be utilised, has been mentioned in Penang's Structure Plan, but was never seriously followed up.

It was found easier in Penang to do away with heritage conservation altogether.

Again terms are getting confused: "Antiquities" are "museum objects" that once listed, is not allowed to be destroyed or even altered under the Antiquities Act.

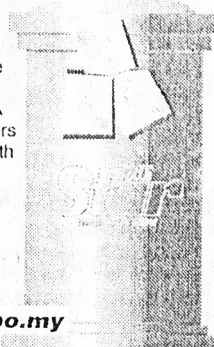
Although this Act was used for heritage buildings of national interest during the past, "heritage buildings" under the Town & Country Planning Act 1976 (amended 1996) are considered part of the urban development pro-

## Letters

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*The Star*, No. 13, Jalan 13/6,  
46200 Petaling Jaya.

e-mail: editor@thestar.po.my



cess, allowing them to be modernised, extended or pulled down if other matters of public interest are dominant.

To identify a "heritage building" is as certain as identifying a row of shops as "shophouses". No "activists, who simply declare" (or developers with "fancy whims") are needed for this process, because Malaysia has enough conservation experts who know how to do this professionally.

The statement that "only some of the buildings have heritage value" is a baseless assumption, as long as Penang's inventory has not been completed.

It seems that most Penangites still have to learn the laws of Malaysia governing urban development. According to my lecturer, the previous Director-General of the Federal Town and Country Planning Department,

there is no provision for "freedom to build" or a "right for development", unless it is granted in line with formal development policies by the appropri-

ate Local Authority (Local Government Act).

The "consent" of individual owners, whose properties are "listed" is not required, as long as the present use of their buildings is not affected.

Without any doubt, however, owners of heritage buildings deserve all assistance possible for the restoration of their buildings. Indirect incentives are very crucial since direct funds are limited.

One should also not forget that lots of "extended families" in Penang. For them the existence of traditional shophouses is vital, even after the houses are restored and are

put on a "free" housing market.

Rent control will soon be phased out and owners of these rent controlled houses will stop offering high compensation payments to tenants. This will make the tenants reluctant to move out.

Finally what's special about Campbell Street market? It is suitable to be used as a kind of Heritage Market along the lines of many other successful heritage developments, e.g. in London (Covent Garden), Sydney (it was a Malaysian investor), Singapore (selling antiques) and last but not least Kuala Lumpur

(Central Market).

Why does the writer of the letter require from the interested developer to consider "all the markets in Penang"? This does not make any sense.

Perhaps such developments should be forbidden, in order to prevent Penangites from "suffering the heritage syndrome" and to "be fair to development and progress". Actually it would be interesting to find out what makes Penangites hate their heritage so much.

**A FAITHFUL GOVERNMENT OFFICER,**  
Penang.

## Keep Penang 'as it is'

MY wife and I have returned from a wonderful holiday in Penang — a city which has had the foresight to resist the modern development excesses of Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

I am writing to say please keep it that way. The old areas have such a unique charm and so much history — a great attraction for visitors.

Penang's old streets were not designed for motor cars. Bicycles, pedestrians and trishas should have priority with expansion of existing public transport system. It would be tragic to see Penang grind to a halt as have so many other cities.

Congratulations on the way you have kept your magnificent trees and

not sacrificed them to new road systems; but we did notice that although some of the old merchants houses are being restored, many are being abandoned for new development.

Penang's hills form such a dramatic backdrop to the city and to allow further encroachment would be sad indeed. You have a magical island, wonderful cuisine, and friendly people.

We hope to return many times as I am sure will countless others because of your history, your variety of culture and, of course, for what you are. Please keep it that way.

**DAVID SNELL,**  
Kent.

## VIEWS

TUESDAY December 5, 1995 THE STAR

# Penang going to the dogs

Speaking up

**S**IX years ago, I moved from Penang to Muar which is my husband's hometown. The recent devastating floods in Penang and the adverse front page news portray the island as a potential congested settlement like Hong Kong.

Hasn't anybody given a thought to the fact that maybe in less than 20 years, Penangites from the lower income group might be living in riverine boats?

The whole island is now so terribly congested with everything under the sun; from high-rise flats to illegal extensions.

Even the once remote Relau, Balik Pulau, Batu Maung, Teluk Kumbar, Teluk Bahang and Bayan Lepas are not spared. Development is surely but sadly and rapidly spreading all over the once peaceful and scenic island.

I still travel back at least once a year and each visit is becoming less comfortable. The cost of living has definitely skyrocketed and the friendly hawkers are now aggressively competing with one another. Food centres are all over the island, open 24 hours a day but hygiene is sadly lacking.

Everybody seems to be talking about buying high-rise units somewhere on the island. I always make it a point to drive around the island when-

ever I'm back but I dread to see the "development" in Paya Terubong and Relau.

Any layman would agree that the cutting of hills all over the island is scary. Penang is such a small island and yet the tremendous amount of piling works and land clearing all over the island do not bother a soul.

Are these people - or should I say the relevant authorities - for real, to undertake and allow such fastpaced development?

The undesirable toll on the island is showing already but many still have plenty of money to purchase high-rise units, throwing caution to the wind.

Doesn't the recent spate of electricity, flood and landslide woes scare anybody? Must there be repetitions of man-made disasters before the authorities sit up and do something? I dread to see Penang in the year 2000.

I feel saddened by the pace of devel-

opment allowed on Penang island. Driving around town is definitely not scenic because those huge and shady angsa trees are almost all gone. And to think I used to say that nobody gets lost on Penang island; at worst you just drive round the island and enjoy the ride. I cannot say the same now.

I love narrating to my children on my upbringing in Penang but sadly I can no longer substantiate what I tell them.

More than 30 years ago my childhood friends and even my siblings enjoyed the bi-coloured ice balls with the red bean fillings, mud pies on rainy days and frolicking on the thick piles of yellow angsa flowers around May each year.

I especially loved the annual family trips to my mother's fishing village in Teluk Bahang even at the expense of throwing up on the Hin Co blue bus.

There were real clean sand dunes along the miles of beautiful beaches then.

Now nobody can even tell me what has happened to the "Ting Ting" man who sold rock candy with bits of sesame seeds for five sen. He carried his candy on a tin tray balanced on his head and would place it on a foldup structure during a sale with kids hanging around waiting to spend their five sen.

I was flabbergasted to actually see occupants coming out and going to work from little boats around the makeshift jetty near the island end of the famous bridge amidst the morning joggers.

I was told that some of them are foreign workers. This piece of information reminded me of the pathetic living conditions in Hong Kong.

Without being prejudiced against anyone but speaking my mind about my once beloved Penang, I pray that the island's young and popular Chief Minister and/or his representatives will take note and make a strong stand to preserve Penang sensibly and not allow it to be fashioned into a man-made concrete disaster.

**Dorothy Chua  
Muar**

# Heritage the main tourist draw

WHAT gives Penang its identity? Its *heritage buildings*. These buildings are the state's greatest treasures.

We are tourist guides belonging to the Penang Tourist Guides Association.

What exactly is the job of a tourist guide? To disseminate to our visitors what we know of the history, geography, culture, traditions, and the heritage of our people.

Now it looks like soon we will be left with nothing much to say for the history and geography of Penang.

All our important street names have been changed.

We never had Jalan Utama in our textbooks, but Western Road; we never had Jalan Kapitan Keling, but we still hear of Pitt Street.

No doubt, Kapitan Kel-

ing existed, but why change the original name?

In recent months, we have seen a spate of reports in the papers about conservation versus development in the city. Well, why are we not learning lessons?

Several tourists have commented sarcastically about the fast development that is taking place in Penang.

Well, we do understand Penang needs housing due to the growing population and its economy but why can't we have a proper town planning?

We can't even boast of clear, blue waters, so what do we have left — warm, friendly people a caring society? And this is slowly dying off.

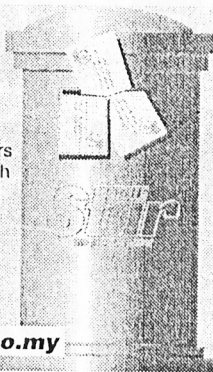
(The surrounding environment is also the one that makes the people warm and friendly.) —

## Letters

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A Singaporean tourist once said that he liked to visit Malaysia because of its nice, friendly people; its lush greenies; and its food.

Besides, he added, it was cheaper to shop here.

We know that tourism is the No. 2 money spinner for Penang — next to the manufacturing industry and that we (tourist guides) are the front lin-

ers and ambassadors to our beautiful country.

Now we need tourism products to sell; products that relate to Nature — like the Botanical Gardens (if it still remains as it is today); the Penang Hill (without any severe development or hill-cutting/clearing); the historical streets like the Armenian Street, Acheen Street area, Chulia Street;

and last but not least our cultures and traditions.

And, most important of all, our *heritage buildings* as well as streets.

As we drive along Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, the tourists comment about the ugly sights of high-rise buildings that are sprouting up next to some of the fantastic old colonial buildings.

*The Streets of George Town* — an illustrated guide to Penang's city streets and historic attractions — by Khoo Salma Nasution is one book every Penangite should possess.

This book has helped a lot to identify old buildings and it has also provided us (tourist guides) vital information.

We should preserve and maintain our heritage buildings. There should be no reservations whatsoever in preserving

these buildings.

As members of the Penang Tourist Guides Association, we would like to strongly voice our concern on preserving these buildings.

From feedback we get from tourists, Penang is certainly losing its charm as a popular tourist destination because of rapid development.

This is just the beginning. We do not seem to realise this now but in a few years from now, we would ask this question of "where did we go wrong?"

It would be too late then. Heritage is one of our strong tourism products. Let's not destroy it.

Foreign tourists are not interested in "theme parks". This is more for the local tourist industry.

Since tourism is now under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Cul-

ture, we hope that something fruitful will be done for the industry.

We would like to appeal strongly to MOCAT, our state government, MPPP, and other relevant authorities to really preserve our heritage buildings.

In appointing a conservation committee, one must remember to appoint the correct people, consisting of recognised experts. May we suggest that a tourism representative be present in this committee?

Once the wrong people head the committee, it will be a disaster and one can say goodbye to Penang's heritage for good.

Let us wake up before it is too late. Let us learn from the mistakes of other countries.

**THE PENANG TOURIST GUIDES ASSOCIATION, Penang.**

## Group concerned over cracks in mansion

By CHEAH UI-HOON

PENANG: The Penang Heritage Trust has expressed concern over cracks which have appeared in Hardwicke Mansion at Millionaire's Row here.

Its honorary secretary Khoo Salma Nasution said it was ap-

parent the cracks were caused by a development project near the 19th century building.

Piling work for a 20-storey apartment block has been in progress over the past month.

Khoo said the municipal council, in approving the pro-

ject, should have asked the developer to use a less destructive piling system.

She said some measures should also have been taken to stabilise Hardwicke Mansion, such as consolidating its foundation, before piling work be-

gan.

Hardwicke Mansion is classified under the municipal council's *Conservation Category 1* list, where demolition, alteration or extension to the building is not permitted except for restoration and maintenance work.