

# Heritage sites in peril

Many of Kuala Lumpur's historical landmarks, which are already in a state of neglect and disrepair, face further damage as restoration works are delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic and a lack of funds. A national conservation body calls for urgent action to stop the rot. >2&3



**Significant sites:** An aerial view of the Jalan Raja stretch which houses several heritage buildings, including Sultan Abdul Samad Building, Panggung Bandaraya and the now defunct Kuala Lumpur Music Museum. — IZZRAFIQ ALIAS/The Star





Plants and creepers growing on the facade of the Malaysian Industrial Court Building.

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IT HAS been weeks since the historical giant clock at the Sultan Abdul Samad building in Jalan Raja, Kuala Lumpur stopped ticking.

Dubbed Malaysia's own Big Ben, no one knows exactly when it stopped but this iconic symbol has been a silent witness to many memorable moments of the country's history, including the Federation of Malaya's independence from the British Empire on Aug 31, 1957 as well as the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in 1941.

The fact that the clock stopped working and its keepers being unable to carry out maintenance work during the pandemic shows the wider impact of the city's battle against Covid-19.

Across the 124-year-old clock tower is a 100-year-old colonial building that used to house the Kuala Lumpur Music Museum before it was abruptly closed in 2017.

The charming looking structure which was home to the Natural History Museum for over a decade now has trees and shrubs growing on its rooftop.

The building's unique cream bricks were a sight for sore eyes in the past as it embodied the romantic elements of a bygone era.

Built in 1919, it was the office of the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China.

In December 1926, when Kuala Lumpur experienced devastating floods after the Klang River burst its banks, floodwaters gushed into the premises, rising steadily and forcing employees to move their work to the upper level which was the living quarters.

The current condition of the historical buildings do not only show the fragility of our heritage sites but that they too have been exacerbated by the pandemic as it results in stalled repairs and conservation works that are due to be carried out by the government this year.

Architect and heritage expert Datuk Hajeedar Abdul Majid said unless urgent action was taken to sustain and preserve these buildings, we would lose them to decay.

"The buildings are in a state of

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# Injecting new use into old buildings

Turning them into boutique hotels or cultural hubs can be one way of preserving some of these landmarks, says heritage expert



Known for its magnificent columns and domes, the former FMS Survey Office building is in dire need of repairs. — Photos: IZZRAFIQ ALIAS/The Star

neglect and will only get worse the longer they are left abandoned.

"Heritage conservation may seem to be a lesser priority in the midst of the pandemic, but we should continue sustaining what is left of our heritage."

He said there were already indications that the buildings were not in good condition, with parasitic plants growing on the facade and

some of their roots penetrating into the brickwork.

Hajeedar, who is past president of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Icomos) Malaysia, said heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur could potentially be conserved through adaptive reuse.

He said buildings such as the old Supreme Court and FMS Survey Office could be repurposed as cul-

tural hubs or boutique hotels.

"We can inject new use into these heritage buildings, especially since they are located in the historic core of the city.

"Together with Merdeka Square and the sites around it, this area can become the centre of information with touristic facilities and activities, besides regaining its social significance."



# Consider all aspects in applying to gazette buildings, owners told

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OWNERS of historical buildings who are thinking of getting their premises nominated as a National Heritage site, must weigh all the pros and cons before making such a decision, says National Heritage Department (NHD) director-general Mohd Azmi Mohd Yusof.

Mohd Azmi, who is also the Heritage Commissioner, said many people who were sitting on the fence with regard to the matter (gazetting heritage building) tended to have the misconceived notion that once the building was gazetted, they would lose ownership of it.

"This is not true. Building owners will always retain the rights and ownership to their buildings."

Such building owners are also concerned about being free to carry out any repair works or even being able to paint the building unless they get the department's approval.

"Once it is gazetted, there are



Mohd Azmi says while historical building owners retain rights and ownership, there are restrictions when a site is gazetted.

restrictions placed on the building that require seeking permission from the National Heritage Department.

"The guidelines are contained in the National Heritage Act 2005, to help building owners in knowing what to do.

"This is to make sure the building's historical significance, value and aesthetics are preserved for the future generation," Mohd Azmi explained.

"So if the owners plan to do any kind of refurbishment or painting work, they need to come to us with a proposal on how to go about it and we will guide them," he added.

In the past, the department had to deal with building owners who did not understand the significance of having their buildings gazetted.

A good example is the Batu Caves temple where the management found itself in a pickle when it did not seek the department's permission to paint the temple steps for a religious event in 2018.

NHD had sent a warning letter and cautioned them that they risked being delisted as a National Heritage site if they continued to flout the regulations under the Act.

The Act clearly specifies that any development, renovation or paint job within a 200m radius of the heritage site will require written permission from the department.

"Owners must be clear of what it

means to be listed in the heritage registry.

"Some owners want their buildings gazetted as they have the expectation that the government will pay for maintenance.

"The department cannot pay for maintenance of all the buildings out there.

"Restoration work is costly.

"If owners want to gazette their building, we can help but they still have to maintain it themselves.

So owners need to understand what they are signing up for," said Mohd Azmi.

Appreciating the historical and cultural significance of Batu Caves, the department had invited the temple management to have the cave temple site nominated (for gazette) as a National Heritage site in 2007.

It is now one of the country's national treasures.

Mohd Azmi, who is the former National Museum director, cited SMK Convent Bukit Nanas (CBN) as another case.

The 100-year-old school has historical significance and the depart-

ment has been trying to gazette it since 2008, but the school's trustees have rejected the offer.

When asked if there was a misunderstanding regarding the matter, Mohd Azmi said: "There is no misunderstanding at all.

"They (GBN trustees) gave a lot of reasons for not wanting the school building gazetted.

"Part of it was the fear that they would not be able to do anything to the building without having to go through an application process.

"They don't realise that once gazetted, the building will have a connection to other historical buildings in the area.

"It has 'to go with' the aesthetics of the heritage zone.

"We don't want to disrupt the heritage value of the area because this is for history, and for the country," he highlighted.

"Remember that being registered (as national heritage) gives the assurance that any changes will be managed in a sustainable manner besides ensuring the place remains authentic and is preserved for future generations," he added.



The main corridor of the former FMS Survey Office building is in poor condition.

He said private entities could be roped into these plans, with the government providing tax incentives for the restoration of heritage buildings.

"For example, a 100% tax exemption for the conservation of heritage buildings would encourage owners, which includes the government, to restore and revitalise such properties," he explained.

This proposal is one among several other suggestions that have been detailed in the Kuala Lumpur Heritage Agenda prepared by Icomos Malaysia.

The over 100-page document details the group's review and recommendations on heritage policies within the Kuala Lumpur Draft Structure Plan 2040 and Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020.

According to Hajeedar, who served as adviser for the review committee, the agenda was presented to Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) last year.

Meanwhile, a recent statement by Icomos Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur Heritage Review Group highlighted its concern over the state of the once magnificent FMS Survey Office.

Stretched along Jalan Raja and Jalan Tun Perak, it noted that one of its dome structures now resembled a "squashed onion".

"It is obvious that the base of its original pinnacle is collapsing with-



The entrance to the former Kuala Lumpur Music Museum building is blocked by an overgrowth of plants and weeds.

in the dome. Hoarding has been put up between the arches on the ground floor.

"Water penetration is affecting the entire structure within.

"Structural movement caused by vibrations from the adjacent road traffic and LRT trains are among matters to be wary of."

The group stated that the pinna-

cle of the particular dome was first seen tilting in late 2016, and so the top portion was hastily removed and sealed in 2017 as a safety measure.

"Four years have since passed. Unfortunately, due action is not as yet evident.

"Much has been said about the old FMS Survey Office by relevant



The iconic clock, which is part of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Jalan Raja, is not ticking anymore.



With or without the pandemic, we should continue sustaining what is left of our heritage, says Hajeedar.

organisations in the past.

"Still, it seems that nothing has been done to arrest this 110-year-old building's state of decline.

"We look back at our legal papers and ponder, what good is an Act if no action is taken?" the group questioned.

"Section 42 of the National Heritage Act 2005 requires owners to ensure that their heritage site

remains in a good state.

"If the owner is proven to neglect his listed property, the Heritage Commissioner may give him a two weeks' notice of intention to carry out necessary repair works, with all costs and expenses reasonably incurred to be reimbursed by the owner.

"The situation for the FMS Survey Office however is not so straightforward as it is government property."

The group added that the heritage building and public safety remained threatened by the fear of the dome collapsing on its own.

The review group is appealing to those responsible, either as custodian or owner, to immediately attend to the issue or risk losing the building.

However, all is not lost as Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri has assured that the ministry is working on establishing a partnership with the private sector for the preservation and conservation of the city's cultural heritage.

> See **StarMetro** tomorrow for an exclusive interview on plans to revive the flagging fortunes of Kuala Lumpur's tourist attractions.