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Saving our heritage buildings

Big potential of cultural tourism can help fund preservation, says expert

PETALING JAYA: Malaysia has many beautiful and historic monuments to offer as a tourism haven.

But since these buildings are also expensive to maintain and preserve, an urban rejuvenation specialist says Malaysia should leverage these assets for domestic and international tourism.

“This will catalyse local economic and social development, as well as stimulate cultural and creative economic activities,” said Think City Sdn Bhd managing director Hamdan Abdul Majeed.

Citing successful examples of heritage buildings that became profitable, Hamdan said two shophouses – Unit 62 and 64 on Jalan Tun Perak in Kuala Lumpur and managed by Think City – were restored and are now business venues.

“These efforts show how injecting content and development post-restoration can open viable business opportunities for the asset.

“It creates a spillover effect where other parties also recognise the potential of these heritage buildings and take their own initiative to rejuvenate them and open other businesses, hence creating a healthy economic ecosystem in the area,” he told *The Star* yesterday.

“But the primary focus is to ensure these assets are used to host creative and cultural businesses and practices, as well as other community initiatives that are socially equitable for all.”



Gems of the past: The Kuala Lumpur railway station (left) and Ipoh's Arlene House (right) are noted examples of heritage buildings in the country.



Hamdan noted that cultural tourism is viewed as distinctive, with growing importance for economic recovery and enhancing local economic development.

“Cultural tourism accounts for about 40% of all tourism worldwide. The pandemic has pushed cultural tourism to rethink its role and position in shaping social development and recovering the economy,” he said.

Think City, which has been a major player responsible for reviving appreciation of culture and heritage in Kuala Lumpur, has been allocated RM30mil under Budget 2023 for the urban rejuvenation effort in Kuala Lumpur as a creative and cultural hub.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim added that the collaboration between Think City and Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) will also include the upgrading of public housing in the city.

He also said Khazanah Nasional Berhad will lead the formation of the National Heritage Fund to attract private sector participation in preserving Malaysia's national heritage.

This includes the redevelopment of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building and Carcosa Seri Negara, which will be executed in collaboration with Think City, which was founded by Khazanah.

Hamdan said Think City will begin detailed planning with DBKL

on the mechanics and strategies and identify short-term and long-term goals it can achieve through this allocation.

“For the two projects (Carcosa Seri Negara and the Sultan Abdul Samad Building) announced, we hope to re-energise downtown Kuala Lumpur by renewing the heritage precinct,” he said.

When contacted, Kuala Lumpur & Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (KLSCAH) chief executive Ong Ooi Heng pointed out that the annual maintenance expenses for heritage buildings range between RM100,000 and RM200,000.

Citing the example of the KLSCAH building, which was built in 1934, Ong said they received RM500,000

in allocation from the Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry in 2008, and there has been no government support since then.

“While owners should maintain heritage buildings, the government should also assist because the cost is high.

“Another way is by waiving the building's assessment tax by involving the local government,” he said.

Founded in 1923, the KLSCAH building was officiated by former Selangor Ruler, Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah.

In 2005, the then Culture, Arts, and Heritage Ministry allocated funds to renovate its ground-floor auditorium and it was subsequently awarded national heritage status.