

The North Seafront that has been restored as the Esplanade, which is now part of the George Town Public Realm.

Propelling preservation of historic cities

Honouring the past while building the future — this is the dual mandate of historic cities in our modern world, writes **Izan Satrina Mohd Sallehuddin**

AS cities evolve, they must strike a delicate balance between progress and preservation. Historic cities, with their rich cultural heritage and architectural marvels, stand as testaments to our shared history and identity.

However, they also face unique challenges in adapting to the many demands of our rapidly changing world. In the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) World Heritage site of George Town, Penang, this delicate balance between past and present has been masterfully orchestrated through a long-term collaboration.

Think City, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the Penang government and Yayasan Hasanah have strategically joined forces to preserve and celebrate the rich heritage of this historic city.

The completion of the historic Esplanade seawall and public promenade in May 2022 is one of the successes of this collaboration.

This project not only revitalised a key waterfront, but also demonstrated a commitment to environmental stewardship by preserving the city's historic wall and protecting marine life.

Similarly, restoration work at Fort Cornwallis, a landmark British



The store rooms of Fort Cornwallis in Penang were restored using an innovative traditional materials technique.

bastion dating back to the 18th century, exemplifies a dedication to preserving tangible links to history while creating opportunities for cultural exchange and education.

SENSE OF TRANSFORMATION

Beyond George Town, the impact of such initiatives extends to other historical cities. The AKTC, founded by His Highness the Aga Khan, for example, has successfully restored or rehabilitated 346 historic sites globally, and also inspired more than 50 million

visitors to its parks and gardens.

Meanwhile, closer to home, in the Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District, Think City is leading efforts with Kuala Lumpur City Hall and key partners. With movements already underway in iconic locations, such as Dataran Merdeka and Masjid Jamek, there is growing momentum and a sense of transformation in the air.

As pockets of the city undergo rejuvenation, including initiatives such as building green corridors and preserving iconic monuments, there is



An aerial view of Masjid Jamek in downtown Kuala Lumpur.

a tangible sense of change. This work not only enhances the city's liveability, but also instills hope and pride in our shared heritage.

As the country prepares to host Asean 2025 and embark on Visit Malaysia Year in 2026, it's imperative that we fortify our historical narratives through compelling storytelling, curated content, space rejuvenation and preservation initiatives.

SHIFT IN APPROACH

To truly revitalise historic cities and turn them into vibrant economic hubs, the commitment of the highest levels of government is crucial.

While initiatives led by organisations like Think City and collaborations with esteemed entities such as the AKTC have laid a solid foundation, there is still a pressing need for an inter-ministerial effort, that includes the private sector

and the community to work together, leveraging resources and expertise.

A shift in how we approach urban development is essential to ensure the capital city of Malaysia remains relevant on the global stage. The transformation of our historic cities is not merely an aspiration; it is a reality within our reach.

With visionary leadership and bold partnerships, we can preserve and unlock the full potential of Kuala Lumpur, ensuring that it remains a beacon of cultural richness, economic prosperity, and social cohesion for generations to come, in line with the MADANI aspiration.



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