KL's heritage buildings are in dire need of preservation

MY Say

BY AZAM ARIS

I love Kuala Lumpur, the city where I was born — to be precise, it was in Maternity Ward 3 of the old General Hospital. The wooden structure of Ward 3 has long given way to new medical facilities, but the General Hospital has remained at the intersection of Jalan Pahang and Jalan Tun Razak since 1870.

As a journalist, I have done my fair share of travelling and visited great cities like London, Paris and New York. All three have their charms, but KL remains my favourite.

It may be a biased choice but to me, KL is a city with its own character and soul where multiculturalism and diversity have always reigned. It is a cosmopolitan city, and adding colour to it now is the sizeable presence of Nepalese, Bangladeshis, Myanmar, Indonesians and Vietnamese, plus Western and Asian expatriates. KL is where modernity blends naturally with the Old World.

Unlike Singapore, which many consider a prim and proper and well-maintained city, I like the sometimes chaotic nature of KL, from the traffic congestion to the street hawkers and the bustling allure of Chinatown or Petaling Street, the enchanting Malay enclave of Kampung Baru and the colourful flavour of Little India in Brickfields. It gives those who grew up in the city a sense of belonging, that the old character of KL has not disappeared.

I have seen KL grow. In the early 1970s, the tallest building was the 28-storey UMBC building (now Menara Takaful) in Jalan Sultan Sulaiman and the shopping havens were the Campbell and Pertama shopping complexes at the intersection of Jalan Dang Wangi and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman.

Today, KL houses some of the tallest buildings in the world. The iconic 88-storey Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest buildings in the world from 1998 to 2004, are still the tallest twin towers in the world. The newly completed PNB 118 is now the second tallest building in the world, while TRX Exchange 106 also ranks among the top 20 tallest. Add KL Tower to the list, as it is the seventh tallest telecommunications tower in the world.

Talking about shopping havens, the city has among the biggest too. KLCC Suria, TRX, Pavilion KL and the Mid Valley City malls are world-class. Tourists often marvel at KL's ability to become an affordable international tourist destination — which is helped by the cheaper ringgit, of course.

Last week, as I indulged my wanderlust with a ride through the city, admiring its past and present charms and reminiscing about my school days, I was confronted with many signs of the changing times where old cinemas and hawker hangouts had given way to new structures. I was saddened by the condition of the heritage buildings along the Colonial Walk and the River of Life (ROL) areas along Jalan Raja, Jalan Tun Perak and Dataran Merdeka.

This is THE historical part of the city, a core tourism asset that we can be proud of and monetise but some of the buildings are very much neglected. Among those of historical significance are the Federated Malay States Survey (FMS) department headquarters, the Sanitary Board, the Federated Malay States Railway headquarters (now National Textile Museum), the Kuala Lumpur Library, Panggung Bandaraya, the old Chartered Bank office and the Supreme and Industrial Court buildings now named as Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (BSAS). The Queen Victoria Fountain, the Dataran Merdeka flagpole, St Mary's Cathedral, the Royal Selangor Club and the Jamek Mosque are also situated within the area.

Some of the buildings have fallen vacant or are partly vacant, some have restoration and repair work that seem to have stalled while others have simply been left to rot. Three buildings — the FMS, the Sanitary Board and the Chartered Bank office — need urgent repairs and must be saved.

The FMS had its spire and dome badly damaged in 2016 and now parts of the wall and ceiling are crumbling. It seems that this building has been deserted for more than 20 years. The Sanitary Board building, which caught fire in February 2021, has not been repaired and has been deserted too. Both of these buildings are located at the intersection of Jalan Tun Perak and Jalan Raja, on the same row as BSAS, which is the most dominant and iconic building in the area.

The Chartered Bank building located next to Dataran Merdeka has been abandoned for some years and is in a deplorable and dilapidated condition. The building is covered with overgrown shrubs and wild plants.

The irony is that all three were designated as heritage buildings under the National Heritage Act 2005, which means they are historical sites that should be well maintained and not left to rot.

BSAS — which, along with the Petronas Twin Towers, is the most Instagrammable spot in Kuala Lumpur — is not in the best of conditions either. It still houses some government departments but most of the blocks are empty and not looked after. Some parts of the building's façade are covered by overgrown wild plants.

Even new building structures like the Dataran Merdeka underground car park and its commercial plaza need upgrading. The plaza is now closed, supposedly awaiting repair and upgrading. With some of the sites surrounding these historical areas in a deplorable state and turning into eyesores for the locals and tourists, the impression one gets is that Malaysia as a nation does not care for its heritage buildings and has a bad maintenance culture.

A lot of the signages and information boards need to be replaced while some public amenities along the River of Life project, which complements the Colonial Walk, require upgrading and need to be kept clean. If not, it is difficult to promote and sustain the whole area as a major tourist site.

There have been press reports that one of the reasons for the poor state of these historical sites was confusion over building ownership among the ministries and government departments and who is responsible for maintaining them. (Do all these buildings fall under Kuala Lumpur City Hall?)

During the tabling of Budget 2023, the government had announced that Khazanah Nasional Bhd would spearhead the establishment of a National Heritage Fund to encourage private sector participation in preserving heritage buildings but things are not moving as fast as desired due to bureaucratic matters.

The National Heritage Fund will be managed in collaboration with ThinkCity, a consultancy and project delivery entity founded by Khazanah, that also specialises in the rejuvenation of old buildings and urban areas.

Bureaucratic matters and the question of ownership of buildings should not be an obstacle to getting things done as all these assets belong to the government. Cut the red tape and, to speed things up, put the task of restoring these buildings and managing them under the Ministry of Federal Territories with support from Kuala Lumpur City Hall, Khazanah and ThinkCity.

Cost-wise, as the government is currently tightening its budget, the country's top 10 billionaires via their listed companies and the top five government-linked companies — with the likes of Petronas, Tenaga Nasional, Malayan Banking, Sime Darby Group and Telekom — could contribute to the National Heritage Fund.

Due to the delicate state of these buildings, most of which are more than 120 years old, restoration work will take time. Even if it starts this year, all will not be ready in time for the next Visit Malaysia year in 2026, which would be a missed economic opportunity. But work must start now; the longer we wait, the costlier it will become and the more challenging the preservation work will be.

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