

Breathing new life into KL’s heritage belt



BY AZAM ARIS

On Wesak Day, I took the opportunity to go around traffic-free Kuala Lumpur, stopping first for Asar prayers at Masjid Negara. I marvelled at the architecture of the National Mosque, one of the few large mosques in the country without an Arabesque or Persian-designed dome. Yes, it has a prominent 73m-high minaret, but instead of a dome, the mosque, which was completed in 1965, features a 16-pointed star resembling an open umbrella, synonymous with Malaysia’s tropical temperature and rainy season. It is a mosque with a local heritage design. There are many newer and larger mosques with bigger domes, but Masjid Negara to me still stands among the most beautiful in the country.

After prayers, I parked my car at the Dataran Merdeka underground car park. Since it was a public holiday, there were ample parking spaces. I realised that lighting at the car park had improved and it now has a better drainage system, as I didn’t see pools of water on the surface despite it being the rainy season, as compared to when I last parked there a year ago.

I then took a walk around the area where many of the country’s heritage buildings are situated. It was about a year ago that I wrote in this column about KL’s heritage buildings, which were in dire need of preservation (Issue 1521, April 29, 2024). There were many other press reports on the state of these historical buildings, some of which were in a dilapidated condition.

We asked why these legacy buildings with beautiful architectural designs, which are tourism assets that can be monetised and are important attractions to many foreigners, had been left neglected for so long. Bureaucracy, ownership and a lack of financing were the obstacles to restoration works then but today, preservation works have started and are progressing well.

In Budget 2025 tabled last year, the government allocated RM600 million to kick-start the rehabilitation and preservation works, bringing some of these architectural gems back to life. The RM600 million will first be spent on two historical buildings.

One is the main tourist attraction in the Dataran Merdeka area — the 128-year-old Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (BSAS) on Jalan Raja which, among other functions, used to house the British colonial administration office and the Supreme and Industrial courts. The building’s design is a blend of Moorish and British styles, incorporating elements like white arches, curved colonnades and domes.

The second are the 129-year-old Carcosa and 112-year-old Seri Negara mansions, situated at Perdana Botanical Gardens (Lake Gardens). The mansions, which served as the official residence of the British resident general and guest house for royalty and dignitaries, respectively, have been closed since 2019.

While many of the city’s heritage and historical buildings are designated as national heritage sites under the National Heritage Act 2005, past preservation works seem to have been done on an ad hoc basis, and were not well planned and coor-

dated. As there is also a lack of funds for preservation work, some of the buildings have been left vacant and are now in a dilapidated condition.

Today, the restoration and preservation of heritage buildings will no longer be done in isolation but instead form part of the Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District (KLCCD) and Warisan Kuala Lumpur master plan. This cultural-led revitalisation effort aims to reimagine KL’s historic heart as a thriving hub of heritage and creativity that promotes inclusive growth.

The master plan is spearheaded by Kuala Lumpur City Hall and managed by Khazanah Nasional and its subsidiary Think City, a consultancy and project delivery company. Think City had managed the urban rejuvenation projects in George Town, Penang.

Think City’s mission is to make cities more livable, sustainable, environmentally and climate friendly, and promote culture-based urban regeneration, which includes the conservation and protection of heritage.

The master plan includes 10 flagship projects. Besides BSAS and Dataran Merdeka, and Carcosa and Seri Negara — which should be ready for Visit Malaysia Year 2026 — others include the Masjid Jamek enclave, Tun Abdul Razak Memorial at Taman Tugu and the Kuala Lumpur Railway station.

The other main flagships are the areas surrounding Merdeka 118, where the historical outdoor Stadium Merdeka and indoor Stadium Negara have been preserved and blended well into the urban regeneration project. The key landmark there, the 679m PNB 118 tower, is the second tallest in the world after Burj Khalifa.

The remaining flagship projects include the Commercial Quadrant, which entails the upgrading of public spaces, pedestrian walkways and shoplots, a green linear corridor, and fashion and textile sections. The master plan will integrate with earlier efforts such as the River of Life (ROL) project, where further enhancement will take place to improve its public appeal through better infrastructure and signages.

KL mayor Datuk Seri Maimunah Mohd Sharif has said the KLCCD and Warisan KL’s long-term vision is to “create a city that is not only livable but lovable — a place where the future is shaped by the past and where development is rooted in identity, memory and pride. It is more than urban renewal; it is a national agenda for cultural and creative resurgence, poised to position KL as a leading creative and cultural capital in the region on the global stage”.

As I passed BSAS, restoration works were progressing at a fast pace as workers were seen even on a public holiday. The construction hoarding around

the site says that the project is “transforming BSAS into a world-class state-of-the-art destination that captivates both local and international visitors”. Other signs indicate the project is “reimagining a timeless legacy”, “an iconic landmark reborn”, “where heritage meets modernity” and “celebrating architectural excellence”.

Upon completion of the restoration, BSAS, which houses government offices, will be turned into an exhibition and commercial centre with offices and a multipurpose hall.

No doubt, once restored, BSAS will be a must for group photo shoots or selfies. Even now, with the building surrounded by perimeter fencing, many tourists and locals still stop to take a photo with BSAS in the background. Along with the Petronas Twin Towers, BSAS is the most Instagrammable spot in KL.

But the Jalan Raja heritage enclave is not all about BSAS and Dataran Merdeka. The historical buildings on the same road, notably the 121-year Sanitary Board, which housed KL’s health and public services and later Town Hall under the British administration and which caught fire in 2021, have been left vacant and are now dilapidated.

Just beside it is the 115-year Federated Malay States Survey (FMS) headquarters. Left vacant for more than 20 years, its spire and dome are badly damaged, and parts of the wall and ceiling are crumbling. This building is a hybrid of neo-Mughal-Moorish architecture and the British neoclassical

Victorian architectural style, which was popular between the late 19th and early 20th centuries in India. It has a majestic 400ft corridor, which must be one of the longest of a heritage building in the country, facing Jalan Tun Perak.

As neither building is covered by perimeter fencing, everyone including tourists can see the heaps of rubbish being dumped there. Ironically, both buildings are just a stone’s throw from the KL City Hall head office.

Once preservation work is completed on BSAS, it cannot sit beside these two dilapidated buildings. They need to be restored immediately, as the longer we wait, the more costly it will get and the more challenging the preservation works will be.

Perhaps in Budget 2026, there will be an allocation for both buildings, but City Hall, Khazanah Nasional and Think City should not wait for an allocation to be available but instead invite the private sector to finance and expedite the restoration and preservation work.

Another historical building in the vicinity that is in a sad condition is the 106-year Chartered Bank building located next to Dataran Merdeka and beside the former British government printing building and KL library. I am sure Standard Chartered Bank, the oldest bank in the country, which started operating in 1875, will be willing to fund the restoration works.

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Heritage buildings must not be left to rot

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For the whole area to be vibrant — Dataran Merdeka also has one of the tallest flagpoles in the world at 95m, the 118-year-old Victorian fountain, the 139-year-old Selangor Club and the 131-year-old St Mary’s Cathedral — these three buildings need to be restored to their former glory.

What is the point of proudly designating the three buildings as national heritage sites under the National Heritage Act 2005 if they are left to rot?

The other project that needs attention is ROL, which encompasses beautification, river cleansing and development of the surrounding area into tourist attractions. For the ROL, RM4.36 billion had been allocated, with RM3.3 billion for river cleaning and RM1.06 billion for beautification and landscaping. So far, RM3.9 billion has been spent and the result of this huge investment has been disappointing.

What is the point of having a ROL project with riverside promenades, cafés and shops when the Gombak and Sungai Klang rivers are still dirty and sometimes smelly?

A fully restored, preserved and rejuvenated BSAS, Dataran Merdeka, ROL and Colonial Walk trail can create an urban regeneration spinoff of the surrounding areas, includ-

ing the 116-year-old Masjid Jamek on Jalan Tun Perak and the 137-year-old Pasar Seni (Central Market) on Jalan Kasturi.

Already we can see the restoration of many private properties in the Medan Pasar area, with some being turned into boutique hotels and offices, cafés and galleries. KL must not just be a city of skyscrapers but one with a heritage soul.

With a master plan in the form of KLCCD and Warisan KL, and with the support of delivery partner Khazanah Nasional and Think City, it is hoped that the restoration, preservation and maintenance of heritage buildings will be better coordinated.

These historical sites have been restored in the past, but how some of them were left to rot and not preserved after restoration is beyond comprehension. The past mistake of not practising good maintenance must not be repeated.

Malaysia cannot continue to have world-class and prized heritage assets and build first-class infrastructure but still possess a Third World mentality when it comes to maintenance. It needs to discard this. ■

Azam Aris is an editor emeritus at *The Edge*