

Preservation of Culture and Built Heritage in New Urban Development: A Case Study on Little India Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract. With a long colonial history, Kuala Lumpur city has a diverse range of heritage buildings and sites which still exist until today. Multi-racial community owes its heritage to this city when various communities settled in and around the town as a result of trade and labor since the British administration period. The study was focused on the area of Little India, Brickfields, an ethnic Indian enclave well known locally for its cultural, architectural and historic interest with characters worth to preserve and conserve. The purpose of this study is to reveal the rapid growth of Kuala Lumpur city which has created many exciting new developments but have not integrate successfully its local context and surroundings. The design of new high-rise buildings does not help in preserving the character and identity of Brickfields. This intrusion into heritage and conservation areas is one of the main reasons for deterioration of the overall urban design pattern. Case study was chosen as the research method in order to investigate the significance of culture and built heritage as part of development growth in Brickfields as well as to identify the strategies in deciding development over conservation in order to achieve balanced between preservation and development. The design and planning of new infrastructure were identified as being insensitive to the established heritage areas. The context of culture, economy and urban environment of Brickfields were also analyzed and translated into an improved urban space with enhanced integrity of historic areas, visually and physically.

Keywords: Heritage Conservation, Built Environment, Asian Culture, Ethnic Enclave

1. Introduction

The issue of heritage administration in the city regarding the decisions and challenges in preserving heritage conservation areas with economic development is well known in conservation arena. There are analyses that reveal growing official interest in heritage conservation field from all over the world with questions of what can be benefited from conservation in context of socio-cultural and economics. This research focuses on Brickfields, an area within Kuala Lumpur which was listed as a heritage site from the Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020. Indian community has lived here since the Colonial Administration and later turned it into their ethnic enclave. With strategic location, Brickfields has turn out to be a potential urban development area. Recent upgrade in improving the image of Brickfields by the government in 2010 has also given the boost in promoting its tourism aspects.

In order to safeguard the old buildings which have architectural and historical significance, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall has made an effort in their local plan in 2008 by taking into account heritage zones in line with the National Heritage Act 2005. However, active growth has been sighted in these zones and rapid development has led to deterioration of these identity areas including Brickfields. The design and planning of new infrastructure has been seen to not being sensitive to the established character areas. Architectural expression is, with a few notable exceptions, neither evocative of Malaysia's cultural background nor its tropical environment. Architecturally, this is a disaster, but economically, it has brought fame to Kuala Lumpur as a progressive and modern Asian city. From the perspective of heritage professionals, economic is regarded as an alien, threatening discourse. It is untenable, living in a market-dominated world, not to include economic values from our planning, management and decision-making frameworks. The question should be how (Mason, 2008).

The objective of this research is to investigate the significance of culture and built heritage as part of development growth in Brickfields as well as to identify the strategies in deciding development over

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conservation in order to achieve balance between preservation and development. The incline of awareness level in conservation in Malaysia can be seen with the establishment of the National Heritage Act in 2005. In addition, two of Malaysian historic city has been listed under UNESCO's World Heritage List (Cultural Heritage) in July 2008. The design of the new high-rise building does not help in conserving or preserving the character or identity of Kuala Lumpur. This intrusion into the traditional character areas especially in conservation areas is one of the main reasons for deterioration in the character and also the overall urban design pattern.

2. Literature Review

Malaysia is moving forward especially in developing the country. In line with the national agenda to become a developed country by 2020, The Economic Transformation Programme was launched in 2010. On the other hand, from Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020, it is stated that areas with an attractive character and strong sense of identity must be maintained and enhanced and, where practicable, other areas are upgraded to provide an improved sense of identity and place. This include historical and heritage buildings. There are more than 1000 pre-war buildings in Kuala Lumpur as listed in the research inventory by Malaysia National Museum. The main features of these buildings are group of old shop houses that became the basis of the establishment of the city itself. These old shop houses formed a unique streetscape pattern and sometimes act as landmarks in the heart of the city. Their appearance in most of the main streets creates an atmosphere that distinguished Kuala Lumpur urban areas from others.

2.1. Heritage Conservation and New Development in Kuala Lumpur

National Heritage Act 2005 of Malaysia included tangible or intangible form of cultural property, structure or artefact that is pertinent to the historical or contemporary way of life of Malaysians as cultural heritage. It is about time to include heritage conservation discourse as part of economic growth as it will always be the main issue in making decision whether to conserve or to develop. According to Shuib K.B (2011), until the 1980s development and conservation were two phenomena that were mutually exclusive.

“As it is well known from the past 50 years in Europe, time of economic growth are much more destructive to historical continuity than times of stagnation (and even war). For this reason, we find the best preserved examples of former splendour in smaller towns and “hidden” landscapes, in Asia as well as anywhere. (Kammeier, 2003). Preservation of the architectural heritage is a requirement of regional and urban planning legislation. In particular planning provisions are laid down in the building code, which stipulated that to incorporate heritage and conservation areas in any local plan which also includes districts and urban design that are worthy of preservation in line with National Heritage Act 2005. In addition the building code provide that a local authority can make a heritage conservation management plan to maintain the structural character of an area, which means that changes of use and structural alterations to buildings not protected through the conservation legislation come under special control. The conservation legislation also requires that a local authority and the relevant conservation authority draw up a heritage conservation management plan for each listed heritage buildings or site.

Based on the KL Structure Plan 2020, at present the preservation and conservation programme covers historic buildings and landmarks through the formulation of policies and guidelines, evaluation of planning applications and advice to developers, owners and agencies involved in conservation works. The programme has been successful in preserving and conserving important buildings especially in the primary conservation zone, but the maintenance of the character of conservation areas has been less successful.

2.2. Economic of Heritage and Conservation Management

The argument between “conservation discourse” with “economic discourse” in heritage conservation is inevitable. Economic discourse is not totally rejected by conservation professionals but it is separately discuss. It considered as a different subject matter or not significance to conservation discourse that always focus on saving and preserving built, cultural or natural heritage. Legislation matters, public policy,

cooperation among professions, integrating conservation with development or other social agenda are emphasizing decision making rather than problem solving. One has to admit that decisions about conservation are made by politicians, bureaucrats, investors, owner and outsiders to conservation discourse. The town planning policy and administration (Town and Country Planning Act 1976-Act 172) in Malaysia stated that politicians (government) are in control over development, thus with integration of “economic discourse” in heritage conservation will provide output to gain political support in conservation activity. This is why conservation professionals should be interested in economic discourse for the pragmatic reasons that cultural economic values strongly influence decision making process. The demolition of the historic Metropole Hotel (built in 1900) in George Town, Penang in 1993 was a classic example of the inadequacy of the Malaysian laws to protect heritage buildings (A. Ghafar, Kamal and Lilawati, 2008). A thoughtful, critical engagement with economics discourse will lead to dynamic new research agenda and strengthen the conservation field’s hand in policy discussions and decision. A development process that is balanced and can benefit both economic growth and conservation activity.

3. Research Methodology

Case study on Little India, Brickfields has been applied as the research methodology due to the fact that it was identified as heritage conservation area based on Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020. Robert K. Yin (2003) defines the case study research method as an experiment which investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real – life context. In conducting this research, the researchers seek answers of the hypothesis by selecting small geographical area as the subject and investigate contemporary real-life phenomenon through analysis of a limited number of events. The information gained mostly comprised of opinion based on facts, supporting data, information and objective evidences.

Besides that, in gaining primary data the researchers also conducted surveys in a form of unstructured interview and goal-oriented interview among community members, local authorities as well as local and foreign tourists. From the observations and interviews, the researchers know how reliable the data is and that it is up-to-date. (Brod, Tesler and Christensen, 2009). Understandings gained about different concepts and issues of heritage conservation from secondary data were accumulated and compared with the findings from the observations and interviews. Study on implementation and application of conservation plan by local authority was also conducted. From the case study and literature review, an evaluation of the current strategies and mechanism used by selected local authorities was done.

Through the observations conducted on this area, evidences of cultural, religious and economic activities can be seen clearly. The tangible and intangible culture identified through the 3 main pillars that are commonly practiced at this ethnic enclave which consist of the spoken language, religion and tradition has been analyzed. Besides that the researchers also identified and studied a total of 6 religious building types and 3 cultural/social organization buildings with significant historical values within the area of study. Because of the new development in the area, many landmarks that once contributed to the character of the area in the early 1950s and 1960s are no longer in existence. However, throughout the observation and interviews with the locals it was found out that there are still establishments around Brickfields which have certain degree of architectural significance that makes the character of Brickfields. Few building has been identified and they are part of Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) weekly free heritage trail tours for visitors.

4. Analysis and Findings

The area of study is unique with a combination of architectural and cultural significance being displayed within its ethnic enclave. There are a total of 6 shophouses with Eclectic style available along Brickfields road. (Syed Zainol Abidin, 2010). These buildings are related with the early mining history of Kuala Lumpur and later the centre for British administration which portrays various architecture styles from Straits Eclectic, Early Colonial Style, Neo Classical and Early Shop House style (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Straits Eclectic style shophouses in Brickfields

In news reported by Bernama dated July 5, 2011, Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd (MRCB) subsidiary has entered into a privatization agreement with the government to undertake projects worth RM 128.713 million in Brickfields. The “Little India Project” focuses on upgrading and beautification works in Brickfields. It was also mentioned that entirely at its own cost and expense, two pieces of land in that area measuring approximately 20,000 sq m will be given to MRCB to be developed into a mixed property development. Similar with any other developing country, the balance between conservation and development on the Brickfields urban renewal agenda has not been easy. MRCB as the sole developer for this urban renewal project start it with a community outreach programs.



Figure 2: Awkward juxtaposition of new development in relation to each other in Brickfields.

Unsympathetic intrusion of new development into traditional character areas like Little India Brickfields can be seen and this creates an awkward inter-relation of new development with existing development. (Figure 2). Findings from the Kuala Lumpur City Hall is that the structure plan formulated in 1984 regarding general policies related to landscape, townscape and conservation which were generally appropriate. However, implementation of these policies was limited by the lack of follow-up instruments such as local plans as well as urban design plans and development guidelines. With the absence of an overall urban design framework and guidelines added with no single body with overall responsibility for devising or implementing urban design policies makes the situation from bad to worse. There are needs to give greater attention to aspects of community involvement in urban conservation alongside aspects of modern development that have visually and physically changed the authenticity and integrity of historic areas. Document analysis and site observations conducted in this research as per recommended by Merriam

(1998) have been focused on built environment, building facade, architectural style, new buildings and development as well as tangible and intangible cultures. The findings from SWOT analysis that has been made include:

- *The Strengths*

The socio-culture of Brickfields displayed rich cultural diversity through their people and activities. Recent facelift and physical improvement by the government has provided Little India Brickfields its much needed publicity in recognizing it as another ethnic enclave.

- *The Weaknesses*

Lack of maintenance of public facilities in the built environment as well as poor level of cleanliness is a major concern. There is a need to include special cultural activities in the calendar for local and foreign tourists' consumptions.

- *The Opportunities*

With the upgrade made in 2010, Brickfields has the physical environment that can be its unique trademark representing the place. Little India Brickfields has given emphasis on its cultural uniqueness will hopefully grow into establishing its own sense of place to be remembered.

- *The Threats*

Too much of unnecessary future upgrading works will cause the area to appear chaotic, superficial and unnatural, losing its authenticity. Being situated at the edge of central Kuala Lumpur, the natural attributes would be threatened with the rapid development encroaching to the area.

5. Discussions

From the research, it is proven that this area has improved in terms of built environment with the privatization of Brickfields urban renewal project by MRCB even though the project still ongoing. A mixed development project might be a solution for MRCB to generate more income in future but whether it will benefits the local community in Little India Brickfields have not yet been tested. The architecture plays an important role in urban conservation as it gives the identity to the area. However due to some factor these aspect seen to be neglected thus causing the site to lose its originality of place. Having rich cultural significance, this ethnic enclave also has its other sets of issues that need to be addressed. Among the most obvious issues are the lack of awareness among the locals and tourists on the specialty of the area and typically, no cultural recognition to the area managed through a proper conservation effort. Despite having vibrant economics activities, they are not properly arranged and stimulating enough for contribution to the economy.

In addition to that, factors of development pressure, insufficient legislations and poor governance, the ever changing lifestyles and consumption pattern are causing the site to lose its originality of place. Moreover presently, there is no conservation management plan in place to manage the conservation and preservation of heritage of the area. Through the management plan, efforts on promoting its cultural attributes are significant towards economic sustainability and tourism of the place.

6. Recommendation

This area can be improved if there is a stricter enforcement of conservation guidelines, management plan or local plan from the local authority. MRCB as the developer should get more involvement from local community in their future plan in order to benefit both parties. Incorporating cultural economic in conservation is practically the best solution to draw more stakeholders into conservation and gain sustainable decision in heritage conservation. City leadership in particular needs to rally full grassroots support to enhance public participation and heritage awareness (A. Ghafar Ahmad, 2006). By participating, the community can sustain it economic growth and at the same time preserving their identity. Being a place with historic significance, it is imperative to preserve the authenticity and originality of its architectural attributes and perform periodical maintenance in improving its condition. It is also recommended that suitable design standards for alterations or extensions to existing buildings with regards to any new development, restoration

of old buildings, new additions to historic structure, on minor improvements in streetscapes, while at the same time also enhancing the character of historic area.

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