

PHT *newsletter*

PENANG HERITAGE TRUST • PERSATUAN WARISAN PULAU PINANG

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Portrait of the month

PDC AR&T Total Project Management Sdn Bhd organized a half-day workshop called *Investing in the Past for the Future* to publicize the government's action plan for the Lebuh Armenian/Lebuh Acheh/Masjid Kapitan Keling/Little India historic enclave. Dr Koh Tsu Koon, the Chief Minister, called on developers and property owners to adopt a 'dollars and sense' approach when making plans to build in the inner city. It would make sense, for example, to redevelop the enclave as 'a living heritage theme park' to attract the tourists. 'But not an artificial theme park like Disneyland', he was quick to make clear. Dr Koh added that he would remain firm as regards the action plan and was ready 'for sparks to fly'. Some sparks soon started to fly: said PAM (Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia) in a statement to the press: 'We find it ironic that the restoration of the Kapitan Keling mosque, originally built by Achinese and other Asian artisans in the 18th century, should now be spearheaded by experts who have no real connection to the day-to-day life of the users and inhabitants of the area.' Dr Teng Hock Nan, the president of the Penang Island Municipal Council, told the workshop that he was in the process of 'being converted' to Dr Koh's current thinking on the question of heritage development. He then gave the gathering of heritage lovers and conservationists a talk of some length on the importance of loving and conserving their heritage. He pointed out that protecting the past is not a subject new and unfamiliar to the council: the council in fact started studying and writing about it way back in the 70s.

The Penang State Government established the Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI), whose mission is to bring about 'the betterment of the quality of life for all through adherence to the principles of sustainable development which seek an optimal balance between economic growth, social progress, cultural enhancement and environmental conservation'. At SERI's first seminar - *The Sustainable Penang Initiative: From Concept to Action* - its executive director En Anwar Faizal exhorted the invited participants to guard against being afflicted with what he called the NATO or No Action, Talk Only syndrome. Guest speaker Mr Alan AtKisson, introduced as the co-founder of the award-

winning Sustainable Seattle programme and an accomplished composer and singer of environmental songs, expounded on the two big subjects of the hour — globalization and sustainability, the 'critical distinction' between them, and the need to 'bind them into a more familial relationship'. To quote from his draft discussion paper about the G and S words: 'G tries to make a particular future happen now; S is deliberative, respectful of complexity, and distrustful of irreversibility, especially with regard to ecological and cultural change. G simply glorifies change (especially technological change), the more the better. If G and S were human beings, S would be a thoughtful adult, G a reckless teenager.' Dr M A Khan, from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, dealt with the methodologies and mechanisms for collecting data and constructing indicators to show how a community's social and cultural wellbeing stands in relation to its economic achievements.

Dr Choong Sim Pocy, the vice-chairman of the Penang Heritage Trust, made a press statement urging the federal government to reconsider its plans to build a multi-storey annexe for the High Court on Light Street. (See accompanying pages)

Piling and excavation works for a 6-storey commercial building in Leith Street were found to have caused serious damage to the neighbouring 89-year-old Bengali mosque.

The police tore down their early 20th-century Patani Road station.

The Penang Hill Railway broke down again, leaving many sightseers stranded for many hours at its upper station.

Foreign members of the PHT who visit Penang regularly will be glad to know that blue skies and clean air are returning to the island with increasing frequency. The raging forest fires in Indonesia which kept Malaysia shrouded in choking, poisonous haze the last several months seem to have died out with the arrival of the South China Sea monsoon season of heavy rain.

The minaret of the newly restored 189-year-old Acheen Street mosque was struck by lightning and lost its weather-vane.

Not to be Taken
TTK

Talk & Slide Show

"Paintings of Early Penang by Our Pioneer Artists"

by Dr Tan Chong Guan

Monday 8 December '97
8.00pm

British Council
(3 Weld Quay)

Dr Tan, an active member of the Penang State Art Gallery, has been seriously collecting Malaysian works of art for 20 years. He will show about 50 paintings by the country's pioneer artists — Yong Mun Sen, Tay Hooi Keat, Kuo Ju Ping, and others. He is giving the talk to 'promote understanding and appreciation of our pioneer artists, whose works because of their historical interest and value the public should be encouraged to collect and conserve'.

Dr Tan is by profession Consultant Gynaecologist at the Hospital Pantai Mutiara.

SUBSCRIPTION

Bringing your annual subscription up to date

Dear Members, Those of you who joined the Trust before 1997 can help us bring your annual subscription (RM36/- only) up to date by sending your cheques, made out to Penang Heritage Trust, to:

The Honorary Treasurer
Penang Heritage Trust
c/o 8-H Jalan Bungah Puduk
11200 Tanjung Bungah
Penang, Malaysia

If you wish to pay in cash, you can do so at the PHT Talk & Slide show on 8 December at 8.00pm at the British Council, 3 Weld Quay.

Growing with the environs

By HWA MEI SHEN

PENANG: Penang can develop without "destroying the environment" if the sources of growth are environment-friendly, said State Education, Economic Planning and Information Committee chairman Dr Toh Kin Woon.

He said economists involved in government planning had shown that growth could be maintained while achieving the goal of ecological sustainability.

"This is possible if you give a lot of attention to consequences on the environment each time you implement projects that generate growth," he told reporters yesterday at the *Ecological Sustainability* roundtable.

Dr Toh said there was a tendency among decision-

makers to believe that the primary focus should be rapid development rather than environmental cost as Malaysia was still a developing nation.

"This is quite erroneous. We should learn from the mistakes and experiences of the developed nations. We have this advantage that they didn't have," he said.

Dr Toh said it was important that factors related to ecological sustainability be incorporated in the drafting of the second Penang Strategic Plan, which would span the years 2000 to 2010.

"If you pay enough attention to the cost of development, then you can have development with minimal social cost. That is basically the thrust that should go into the plan," he said.

Elaborating on this, he said Penangites might have a higher standard of living now but they did not necessarily enjoy a higher quality of life.

"We should emphasise both and not just one at the neglect of the other," he said.

Dr Toh, who said environmental issues were prominent during the recent Sungai Bakap by-election, added that the government would have to address the social cost of development if it wanted to "survive politically."

The people, he said, were growing increasingly aware of such issues because of their experiences with environment-related problems like pollution and floods.



Drawing by Gwyn Jenkins

'Leave historic area intact'

By CHEAH UI-HOON

PENANG: The Penang Heritage Trust has urged the Federal Government to reconsider its plans to build a new courthouse building adjacent to the present court building on Light Street.

Trust vice-chairman Dr Choong Sim Poey said the proposed building should be built elsewhere to ensure that the historic precinct was preserved.

He said he was "shocked" when he read about the government plans to develop a new RM42mil multi-storey courthouse in the open space fronting the present High Court building.

"With all the attention that the government is now giving to the quality of the urban environment, we sincerely hope that the authorities will consider other options before doing something which will ruin the historic precinct," he said.

Dr Choong said the whole area around the present High court building, built in 1905, was surrounded by some of George Town's most important and attractive historical buildings.

"The Penang Museum and Light Street Convent for example, together with the High court building and the intervening open spaces, are already part of a unique and picturesque historic enclave

that people have always associated with old Penang.

"The character of a place is distinguished not only by the actual buildings but also by the design of the spaces between and around them," he said.

Dr Choong appealed to the federal government to consider decentralising the court buildings to new areas of development as it would also be an opportunity to provide civic amenities in new urban

growth centres.

"Another option is to use the space in some of the existing office blocks without building yet more office space," he said.

In September, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Mohamed Nazri Tan Sri Aziz had said that the new multi-storey courthouse, to house five High courts and five Sessions courts, would be built adjacent to the present court building next year.

Key in sustainable growth: CM

By TUNKU SHAHARIAH

PENANG: The ringgit depreciation, drop in the share market and current haze problem are reasons enough for the state government to "ponder" new initiatives, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon said yesterday.

He said five new initiatives would be focused as the basis for developmental framework for Penang's sustainable growth from the year 2001 to 2010.

Dr Koh said the govern-

ment through collaboration with NGOs, the private sector, intellectuals, individuals and environmentalists would focus on the initiatives to work towards a more balanced and sustainable growth for the state.

He said the initiatives — *ecological balance, social justice, cultural vibrancy, popular participation and economic productivity* would be the guidelines under a new development plan termed as the *Sustainable Penang Initiative*.

"Under the new plan, the

government will seek a more sustainable growth with emphasis on an equitable, progressive, integrated, caring society and an efficient Government," he said in his keynote address at the launching of the *Sustainable Penang Initiative, Socio-Economic & Environmental Research Institute (SERI)* at Bukit Jambul Country Club yesterday.

Dr Koh said Penang, after five years of developmental process, had reached a "crossroads" where it needed a plan for a more sustain-

able development with emphasis on human development.

"It is time for the Government to undergo a review process to ensure that Penang achieves a more balanced and sustainable growth economically and ecologically.

"We should not be in a haste to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) while we ignore Sustainable Development Initiatives (SDI)," he said.

Dr Koh said between 1991 and 1992, Penang went

through an intense period of consultation where the blueprint for the state's development — the *Penang Strategic Development Plan 1991-2000* was formulated.

"In Oct 1992 the blueprint became the framework for development efforts by the government and private sector with emphasis on the state becoming a fully developed society in line with Vision 2020.

"The new plan will collaborate with the blueprint but will be more focussed on initiatives and ideas from vari-

ous diversified groups," he added.

The state's investment arm, the Penang Development Corporation will lend its support to SERI and has injected RM2 million as a launching grant for the pilot project, to be funded by the Institute on Governance (Canada).

Other co-operating agencies include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Unesap).

Decadence Restored In Hanoi

Renovating a colonial legacy, Vietnam honors its war-torn past and defines its ties to history

BY TIM LARIMER HANOI

IF A CITY'S ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS are rooted in its politics, then the 86-year-old Hanoi Opera House is an unmistakable reminder of Vietnam's colonial past. The building's location, near the original French concession along the Red River, is itself testament to the absurdity with which the colonialists tried to recreate a slice of Paris in an inhospitable climate. It took ten years to build, and 35,000 bamboo piles had to be sunk in the swampy sub-soil to support the structure. Back home in France, one academic derided it as a "pretentious caricature" of the Paris Opera. "*La folie des grandeurs*," the colonial architecture of Indochina came to be known. Four decades after Ho Chi Minh's revolutionaries drove the French out of Vietnam, such folly has become a Hanoi treasure. Yet in a capital of fiercely nationalistic people, what kind of statement is it that \$14 million is being spent to restore this most visible symbol of colonialism to its pre-revolutionary glory?

"It is very easy to explain," says Le Manh Cuong, a 47-year-old architect and Hanoi planning official. "Yes, it is the French style. But it was built by the hands of the Vietnamese." The local sense of proprietorship is based on more than just that, however. Vietnam's emotional claim to a building that would look more at home in Europe than Asia does not derive from the sweat of its laborers, but from the blood of its soldiers. Indeed, the Opera House's transformation from grandiose symbol of colonialism to landmark of nationalism can be traced to Dec. 12, 1946, when nationalist forces had seized Hanoi and were facing a counterattack by French troops bent on restoring colonial rule. Inside the Opera, the

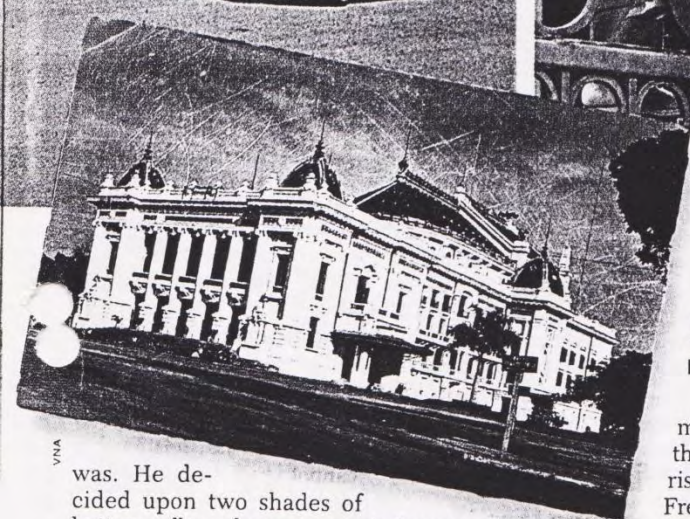
theater's electrician and his son had taken up positions to keep the cultural edifice in the hands of Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas. They held off the French for most of the morning but ran out of ammunition. Captured, the two men, and others with them, were killed. Cuong, the planning official, is that brave electrician's grandson. "For me personally, of course, it is a place where my grandfather sacrificed his life," he says. "It is very sorrowful for me to see it. But it does not mean I hate the building because it was built in the French style." In fact, he serves as an adviser to the restoration project. "I sat down with my French colleagues and said, 'Before, my father and your father used guns to fight against each other. Now we use pens and brushes to work together.'"

The renovation of the Opera House, scheduled for completion before a major summit in Hanoi in mid-November of Francophone nations, has evolved in a spirit of reconciliation. The architect is Ho Thieu Tri, a *viet kieu*, or overseas Vietnamese, who left Saigon shortly before the former South Vietnam capital fell to Communist forces in 1975. That Tri, 52, who has lived in France ever since, was put in charge of a project of such importance says

much about the slow thawing of tensions between the government and the Vietnamese who fled their homeland after the fall of Saigon. It also reveals a comfort level some officials now have with foreigners, have long been mistrusted.

The restoration work, like the original construction, uses mainly Vietnamese labor under foreign supervision. Italian experts in mosaic tile were hired to oversee the remaking of a foyer floor. Firms from Germany, France and Britain were hired to rehabilitate the outdated lighting and sound systems and enlarge the stage. French artists are painstakingly repainting the auditorium's decorative details. Tri's philosophy was to replicate the Opera's original appearance, while upgrading the materials. Concrete floors and wooden stairwells have been replaced with marble, for example. Yet unearthing exactly what the Opera House looked like in its original state has been challenging. Archives in Hanoi turned up few photographs or drawings. Tri eventually found blueprints stashed away in France. Some details remain mysterious, though. After chipping through eight layers of paint on the exterior walls, Tri still isn't sure what the original color





they want something new and modern."

It's the old architecture that appeals to nationalistic impulses, despite its colonial roots. In fact, many intellectuals concede that their culture is a blend of foreign influences that have been locally modified. Vietnamese architects like Quynh actually designed many of the French-style villas, adding Asian touches such as pagoda-like roofs. "We are like an old shirt with holes that has many patches holding it together. This patch is French, this one is Russian, this one Chinese," says 26-year-old artist Nguyen Minh Thanh. "The Vietnamese have a particular ability to absorb from the outside and to sort of melt it into their own identity," says Ton Nu Thi Ninh, an assistant to the Foreign Minister.

In recent weeks, Hanoi's identity has begun a modest return to those colonial roots. Long stretches of city sidewalks are being paved with terra-cotta bricks, antique lampposts are popping up along what was once the tony Rue Paul Bert

STEADFAST: Beneath all the scaffolding, Hanoi's Opera House exudes the same colonial majesty it showed in an early 1960s postcard. Craftsmen have restored nearly every graceful period detail of the building, including the metal latticework at its entrance

Four office and apartment towers, each more than 20 stories high, have risen above the elegant old French Quarter in the past year. Before he retired in Sep-

tember, Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet enacted tougher guidelines on building heights and styles. Yet Hanoi's deputy chief architect, Dao Ngoc Nghiem, says 30 high-rises were approved before the new laws were enacted and can't be canceled. "It's like a cancer eating away at the city, piece by piece," says Peter Ryder, an American investor in Hanoi. On many streets, rows of ochre-colored shop houses, their second-story windows framed by green shutters, are jarringly interrupted by narrow, tall glass-and-chrome boxes. To many, of course, the aesthetic concern is a luxury that pales next to basic human needs. "You have eight families crowded in an aging villa with no indoor plumbing," says Ryder. "Of course

and some shop signs are being scripted in French. This gussying up is for the Francophone gathering, Hanoi's first attempt at hosting an international summit. The question is what will happen after the delegates leave. Some hope the Opera House renovation will serve as an inspiration for Hanoi to preserve more of its architectural heritage. Certainly, there is value in Vietnam's past. The director of the renovation project, architect Hoang Dao Kinh, has figured that out: a bullet-shattered mirror from the 1946 battle hanging in the upstairs foyer, he insists, will not be replaced. "People should realize that keeping our national identity and the character of our city will help development," he says. Officially, the government states frequently that it wants to turn the page on its wartime past and look to the future. Yet the past, after all, is what draws many Europeans and Americans to Vietnam, what differentiates it from a host of other emerging economies. A nostalgic retrofitting like the Opera House renovation might seem trivial, even decadent, in an impoverished country like Vietnam. But the symbolic embrace of this cultural legacy makes a powerful political statement. And besides, as Ninh, the Foreign Ministry aide, puts it: "We're quite fond of French bread. What's so bad about that?"

was. He decided upon two shades of buttery yellow, chosen to mimic the natural color of sandstone.

But even as the Opera House regains its gleam, forces of modernization are threatening to take a toll on the rest of Hanoi's old look. In some ways, the city has been spared the haphazard development that has turned many Asian cities into urban nightmares. Three decades of war and ten years of impoverishment prevented Hanoi from doing much to alter its tree-lined streets and charming villas. "We built very little," says architect Ngo Huy Quynh, 77, chief city planner during much of the 1960s and '70s. But what economic hardship and American B-52s couldn't destroy, Vietnam's flirtation with market reforms, begun a decade ago, just might.

The Soul of Cities

The historic cores of Asia's cities are doomed. Rapid economic growth has unleashed forces that have little regard for the tangible past. Heritage buildings are being demolished faster than the region's nascent conservation movement can tally them up. Understandably, Asia's poor have more urgent concerns than conservation—proper sewage treatment, for one. But if culture is for those with full stomachs, then one would assume that countries such as Singapore and Malaysia should be ready for it. Although these two nations appear earnest about saving their historical building stocks, they haven't figured out how to do it without reducing old cities into touristic pastiche.

In the last decade, Singapore has assiduously carried out a conservation programme as comprehensive as its urban-renewal plans—and the results are marked by the artificiality of themed retail developments. Downtown Singapore has been transformed from lively streets with laundry hanging out of windows into lanes of boutiques and hotels selling manufactured nostalgia.

In theory, Singapore's conservation programme ought to have been the model for Asia. It has, after all, managed to conserve entire prewar precincts. But Singapore discovered to its dismay that strong planning and legislation were not enough to preserve the flavour of the past. Developers, misunderstanding the specific needs of conservation, opted for makeovers that edged out the original neighbourhood dwellers, who took with them the sound, smell and flavour of neighbourhood life.

The results of gentrification are the theatre set of Clarke Quay's remodelled godowns; the fickle glamour of Bugis Street, once known for life's more risque pleasures; and the trendy restaurants of Boat Quay, where in the past lingered the pungent smells of the preserved foodstuff wholesale trade. "Raffleization," so-called after the refurbishment of the Raffles Hotel, became a catch-phrase for a complete remake, stripping the old down to a few bricks, and then dolling it all up with reproduction fittings and finishes.

Across the causeway, Malaysia fared worse, mainly because it had no clear idea of what to do, beyond a conviction that history can bring in tourist dollars. As a form of historical conservation, Kuala Lumpur opted for "facadism," literally: monstrous tower blocks rising out of the shells of colonial-era buildings. A gratifying exception is the revitalization of the art deco Central Market and its surrounding area of Chinese shophouses. But the success of the Central Market plaza has not been followed up. And it will remain to be seen if Petaling Street, the only "Chinatown" left in Kuala Lumpur, will

By Khoo Salma Nasution



The writer is secretary of the Penang Heritage Trust.

survive the impending repeal of rent control—which, since it guarantees continuing habitation by successive generations of tenants, has been a de facto hedge against wide-scale demolition.

South of Kuala Lumpur is Malacca, declared a "Historic City" and allocated as much as 700 million ringgit (\$269 million) over a 10-year period for historical development. The money has been mainly lavished on ill-researched museums and a sound-and-light show presenting a glossy version of the city's history. Tacky "heritage" real-estate developments are about to encroach on the old town, with its core of Chinese, Muslim, Portuguese and Dutch buildings dating back hundreds of years. Too little has been spent on restoration itself.

A historic city is more than just old bricks—it is communities, religious festivals and vernacular traditions. Up north, Penang still has

a vibrant mix of cultures and urban street life. For the moment, its soul remains intact: a city where neighbourhoods, precincts and buildings—the two-century-old fort and waterfront, hill station, eclectically styled mansions, ancient houses of worship and about 10,000 prewar shophouses—still breathe a culturally rich and organic life. But admittedly, some buildings need intervention to restore their grace.

The local government, however, has failed to understand the importance of maintaining a historic urban environment where human scales and traditions set the tempo of everyday life. Its inertia imperils Penang. Recently, a developer ignored the official heritage status of the Metropole Hotel and pulled it down. It was fined just 50,000 ringgit and then allowed to proceed building a high-rise on the site. The Cheong Fatt Tze mansion, a spectacular Chinese courtyard-residence that had undergone a multimillion-ringgit restoration, was not spared damage from an adjacent worksite. And in a professed restoration exercise, the grand old E&O Hotel was gutted and its turn-of-the-century ballroom demolished. Here, the authentic and living had to make way for what foreign tourists expect of old Penang.

It is true that there is as much a need for change as there is for conservation, which may be achieved in the sensitive rehabilitation of individual buildings and using mixed zoning laws to preserve neighbourhoods. The latter puts a limit on commercial use and helps protect the residential character of old cities and the traditional economic activities found at their core. Authorities must make sure that such areas don't always succumb to the demands of commerce, and at the same time ensure that conservation isn't only for tourist snapshots. Historical conservation means keeping alive the soul of the old.

‘ A historic city is more than just old bricks—it is communities, religious festivals and vernacular traditions ’