

**PRESS RELEASE****Gambier Street/ India Street Old Mosque, Kuching**  
*(Masjid Bandar Kuching)*

The Sarawak Heritage Society is committed to raising awareness in the community on Sarawak's Heritage and so we, as an organisation would like to add our voice to the growing concern surrounding reports that the Trustees of The Masjid Bandar Kuching are proposing to demolish it to make way for a new and so-called improved structure.

The news is in stark contrast to the raging controversy surrounding the proposed works at Jalan Sultan in Kuala Lumpur. In that case, a corporation with the blessing of the government (as claimed by certain quarters) were imposing a disturbing loss of built cultural heritage against the wishes of the local community, which caused a political storm resulting in an eventual u-turn. But here in Kuching, this is only the latest example in a long line of private buildings that have been renovated with no thought to preservation of heritage. The Sarawak Heritage Society is dismayed at the realisation that it is private organisations and owners themselves, charged with the care of these historic buildings, who are promoting the destruction of these venerable examples of their own heritage, as in the case of the

Summerhouse in the Museum Gardens, traditional shophouses, two town-centre Chinese temples and now the Masjid Bandar.

As the Sarawak Government strive to promote heritage concerns in the state through the creation of its new Heritage section under the Ministry of Social Development, Culture and Heritage, this decision by a private body appears to undermine those efforts. A recent claim was made in the press that the mosque has never been classified as a heritage building. Established in 1834, over 170 years ago, by the Indian Muslims who came from Southern India, this building falls clearly within the purview of the ordinances in place which govern antiquities. Its age alone makes it a heritage building, let alone its significance in the religious and social history of one the founding ethnic groups of Kuching.

Neither do the claims that the mosque does not have any special design hold any weight. Its longevity makes it unique and its charm and dignity are appreciated by huge numbers of Kuching residents, both Muslim and Non-Muslim alike. It has been a well-loved landmark of Kuching for the

whole lives of every resident here and the spice shops that form part of the complex are of great architectural significance.

As to the claims that the structure of the mosque is quite weak, these are not surprising. Built in a time before proper building codes and after 170 years in existence, we could expect nothing else. But should we consign it to the scrap heap or work to strengthen it? Both the Courthouse and the Square Tower required reinforcement as part of their restoration and these now stand proud on our Waterfront. No one is suggesting that the mosque should remain untouched in its current condition. Quite the contrary, the goal must be to return the complex to the height of its beauty so that we can ensure that it continues to stand for the next 170 years, a monument to the community that built it and the long-standing ties that community has to Kuching's history.

What of the claims that it is 'difficult and costly to repair'? Surely no one can dispute the financial value of heritage in a month that has seen an unassuming ceramic bowl of no special design that was once used to clean brushes sell for US\$26.5 million at auction. Both Penang and Malacca, designated UNESCO World Heritage sites, have reported significant increases in the values of properties within the heritage core, on top of seeing their tourist numbers swell exponentially. Here in Kuching, we have received feedback from locals and tourists alike that they can no longer relate to either of the Chinese temples

rebuilt from the ground up in entirely new materials, consigning the antique materials and fixtures of their predecessors to the rubbish dump. A similar view was expressed in a letter to the Borneo Post on 8 April 2012 that highlighted these changes. We also echo the writer's joy at feeling the 'connection with humanity from being in the same space that ordinary people like you and I walked, laughed, ate, prayed and lived fulfilling lives' in. We are sure that many Kuching residents feel the same way.

So, the Sarawak Heritage Society asks all those who hold the future of Kuching's heritage in their hands to preserve these private buildings of public interest. We ask that they support the aims of the government in promoting heritage concerns in the state. Of course the Indian Muslim community want a testament to how far they have come. But how do you measure how far you've come if there is no evidence of where you have come from? The community certainly do deserve a 'more secure and beautiful mosque' to worship in. But what could be more beautiful than the one they already have, restored to its former glory?