

Press release

WATERFRONT HOTEL IS TOO MUCH

The area around the old Courthouse in Kuching is the heritage core of the city. There are more heritage properties, both officially gazetted and not, in this small section of the city than anywhere else in Sarawak. Of the Brooke Era, we have the Courthouse complex itself, the Square tower and the Round tower, the Pavilion and the General Post Office, not to mention Main Bazaar, Carpenter Street and India

Street radiating out from it. But now, this area is also home to a multi-storey boutique hotel, the Waterfront hotel. Sarawak Heritage Society members would like to register their disappointment that this hotel and shopping centre, which should not have been allowed in the first place as it replaced a heritage property, the Treasury building, should now be allowed to encroach even further on all the heritage properties surrounding it.



The Society begs the planning authorities to intervene in this and all future applications for similarly intrusive projects. There is little point in rescuing heritage properties

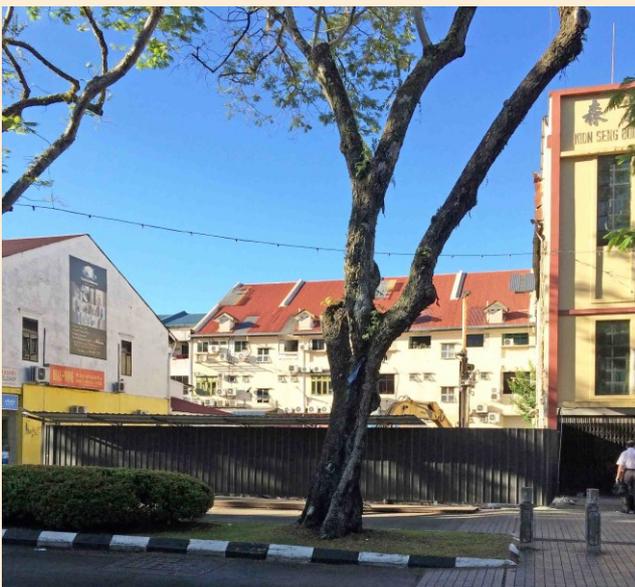
one at a time, if new builds are allowed to dwarf them and remove all the context of the area. Even worse, construction work in the immediate vicinity of old buildings may cause damage and drainage problems; the

Old Courthouse itself is believed to be cracking in areas. Penang has just been voted one of the ten best destinations in the world by Lonely Planet, largely due to its preservation of the heritage core of the city which has seen a creative renaissance there. If Kuching ever hopes to rival it, then town planning must come under the spotlight of the current administration before it is too late.

The literature for the hotel promises that guests can have 'a commanding view' of the surrounding area and 'the many historical architectural landmarks'. It is a shame that none of the other residents of Kuching will be able to enjoy the same now that the new hotel has blocked their view! Not only that, the hotel has obscured the view of a heritage property, the Round Tower built in 1886, by putting its enormous signage directly in front of it! This is in addition to the sad sight of a McDonald's sign which already leans up against the back wall of the Courthouse! The shopping centre and hotel have already been allowed to commandeer two sections of public road for the exit and entrance to

the car park. Now they have erected barriers across the cut through between India and Carpenter streets through the Japanese building. Are ordinary Kuching citizens to be prevented from using this area? What is next? Will they build a high rise on the site of the General Post Office? Will they convert Padang Merdeka and the surrounding area into a car park for Merdeka Plaza staff?

SHS have noted that this trend is not just confined to the Merdeka Plaza problem. Three glorious heritage shophouses on Padungan were recently razed to the ground. The rumour is that the new owner plans to build a budget hotel of several storeys. There is also the ugly extension to another shophouse along Jalan Padungan, which is out of all proportion to the original streetscape. This is one of the truest examples of sticking out like a sore thumb ever conceived. How has planning permission for these two construction projects ever been granted? And if there has been no planning permission, where is the enforcement?



The building site that was once classic shophouses



There is simply no point building hundreds of hotels if the authorities are allowing these to replace the very reason that tourists come to Kuching in the first place. Tourists come to Kuching or any other city to see and experience their uniqueness. Putting up generic McDonalds and Starbucks franchises does not make a place unique. Instead you are transforming something unique and special to something just like any other that can be seen any other place in the world. Once the visible evidence of the heritage story of Kuching is obliterated, tourists will no longer have any reason to stay here, other than a day trip to the Museum and then out to Semenggoh and beyond. The Society requests that the planning authorities consider why they are allowing shopping centre after shopping centre to be built, at the expense of heritage value and green space.

This type of so-called 'progress' has been continuing for decades. Kuching's first cinema, the Sylvia, was trampled beneath the foundations of the Yayasan building, the Aurora Hotel allowed to go to make way for the Merdeka Palace – neither of which will win any awards for architecture. Now we have the example of the Merdeka Plaza, which is not satisfied with just destroying the Treasury building, but now wants to consume the heritage properties around it. It is up to the planning authorities in Kuching, whoever they may be, to control the development of a city, so that rampant commercialism, which ultimately benefits a small number to get rich, does not simply just override all other concerns of the many, including pedestrian access, easy flow of traffic, as well as the character, life and beauty of the city. Therefore, SHS ask the authorities to preserve the heritage of the city so that, in future, the people of Kuching can have a beautiful town to be proud of.

SARAWAK HERITAGE SOCIETY

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