

**Address by Karen Shepherd, Sarawak Heritage Society President,
at the opening of the Exhibition of Heritage Buildings Sketches
Old Court House, Kuching, 21 Nov. 2014**

Good morning and welcome to all our honoured guests. Yang Amat Berbahagia Datin Patinggi Dato Hajah Jamilah binti Haji Anu, thank you for gracing us with your presence today. We are very excited to have someone in your position demonstrate so unequivocally her commitment to the preservation of Sarawak's cultural and architectural heritage.

This is what the Sarawak Heritage society is about. Our main goal is to raise awareness of Sarawak's rich cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible and to work towards its preservation for future generations. In fact, it is through the work of the Society's past president Architect Mike Boon that this courthouse complex was restored and so remains even now as a landmark to the unique history of this town and its unique interchange of cultural values.

The word heritage is something we hear a lot. So, what is this heritage thing we are always talking about and why should we as a community spend time and resources preserving it?

Let me give you my view. The society recently gave a workshop for tour guides and the idea of storytelling was mentioned over and over again. Heritage guides are told to use storytelling as a way of 'bringing to life' old buildings.

Why?

Because heritage is our story. Right now we are creating the heritage of the future. We build buildings that reflect both our needs and our aspirations. We fill those buildings with objects that we use, objects

that represent us, objects that we think are beautiful. Then we carry on our lives, in those buildings, with those objects, creating practices and traditions out of them that reflect the people that we are or the people that we want to be.

One day, we will pass those buildings, objects and traditions to our children and they will tell **our** story; the way we lived, the fashions we followed, the beliefs we had and the ideals we cared about. This is our heritage, tangible and intangible: the story of our lives and the lives of the people who came before us. This is why we must preserve it: because if we wipe it out, then we wipe out our own collective story.

As it says on the front of today's programme, in a quote by architect Graeme Shankland: "A country without a past has the emptiness of a barren continent; and a city without old buildings is like a man without memory."

The Sarawak Heritage Society was started in 2006, on Valentine's Day, in fact. The founding members were dominated by architects, including Peggy Wong who is actually here today representing Urban Sketchers. It is no surprise then that the society gained the reputation of focusing on 'old buildings', the tangible immovable heritage of Sarawak. However, this is a misconception. Old buildings are half the story. We want to conserve, not only the key sites of our urban landscape but also the life within them – the trades, the rituals, the sounds and the smells.

To be honest, a lot of people are put off by the idea of heritage because of this word: old. What about modernity? What about

business? What about progress and development?

In my view, the two can live side by side, and **should** live side by side, to provide continuity from past to present to future. This is the only way our story can make sense. Surely there must be some balance between progress and preservation. Therefore, the first step is to identify what is worth saving.

So we come to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organisation, we had to get there eventually. This was formed in the wake of the Second World War. There was so much destruction that they wanted to preserve what was left. The overriding criterion for preservation under UNESCO is the idea of **outstanding universal value**. The idea behind this is that the whole world would benefit from seeing this '*masterpiece of creative genius*', this '*important interchange of cultural values*', 'this '*outstanding type of building*', or this '*event or living tradition of outstanding universal significance*'.

This is where we come down to it. If we think we have anything here in Sarawak that the rest of the world would be better for seeing, don't we think we should set about preserving it before we rob them of their chance?

This is why we applaud the state government for starting to push forward an application for listing, a process that SHS is participating in as part of their government liaison role. Though for any listing, one of the main requirements from UNESCO is community involvement and this is where you all come in.

For any plan like this to work, it needs the support of all stakeholders, both government and private. That is why we at the Society are asking the State Government to put forward a development plan for public consultation. We must all participate if this is to have any chance of success.

So we come to the subject of today's exhibition, the Urban Sketchers, whose work showcases unique views of our tangible cultural heritage and the intangible, the life inside it. This group shares the Society's love of Kuching and Sarawak's urban landscape, raising awareness of it in its own way. They are part of a worldwide organisation which aims to 'show the world, one drawing at a time.' In true Sarawak style, these like-minded people, from different backgrounds, races and ages, meet to sketch views of Kuching. These images are then shared online with other members, other residents and other people around the world. Their work immortalises the story and the image of Kuching, thereby raising awareness of it and preserving it for future generations. I think it is obvious why this collaboration.

To finish, at last, I would like to thank you once again for being here. Thank you to our guest of honour and other dignitaries. Thank you to Urban Sketchers Kuching for sharing their wonderful work. Thank you to my committee and especially Anna Wee, the driving force behind this event. Thank you to the members, old and new. Thank you to the leaders and members of the community here. To use a quote taken from the end of one story to signal the start of ours: I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."