

Pre-war structures can be saved: Society

By Zora Chan

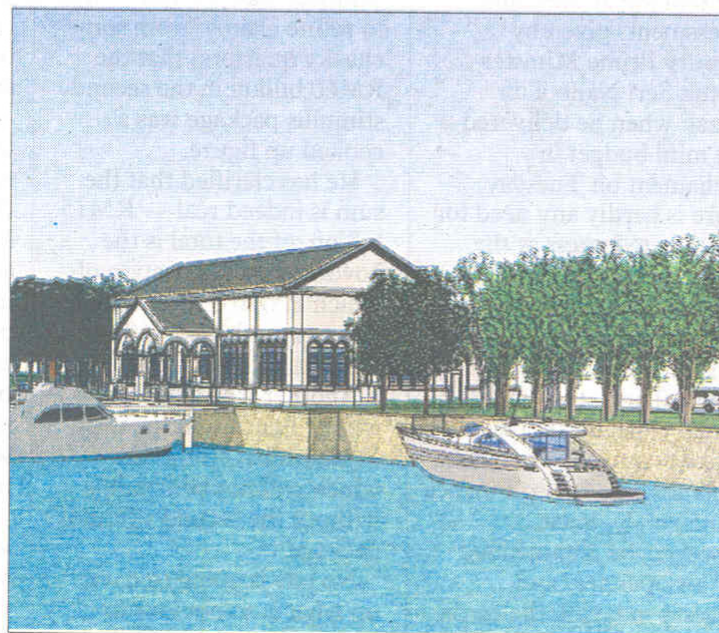
KUCHING: Unique pre-war structures, such as the old Gambier Street markets and the Banka Building, along the river right up to Brooke Dockyard can co-exist with some landscaping to create a green promenade as envisioned by the state government.

Sarawak Heritage Society (SHS) president Mike Boon said these structures, including the concrete retaining wall in front of the markets, did not have to be demolished to make way for the proposed esplanade, which was announced during the Kuching City North Commission's (DBKU) anniversary dinner last year.

"During the DBKU dinner, it was reported in the media that the Chief Minister (Pehin Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud) proposed to turn the place into a green promenade.

"SHS has submitted our proposal to the authorities concerned on ways to conserve the old markets and historical buildings along Gambier Street for adaptive use and landscape the open spaces between the buildings and river. We hope that the authorities will consider our recommendation and proposal," he told reporters at the SHS annual general meeting on Friday.

During the dinner last August, Taib said the old Gambier Street markets site, which housed hundreds of



PRESERVATION: Boon presents SHS vision for the old pre-war structures along Gambier Street.

hawkers right up to Ban Hock Wharf until last June, will be turned into an esplanade as part of the waterfront extension.

He envisioned the esplanade would have lots of trees to provide much needed shade on sunny days and make the city a greener and better place to live.

Taib had said the esplanade would turn the once "unorganised part of the old days by the riverbanks into a scenic recreational place".

On Sept 13, 2008, DBKU Datuk Bandar Abang Mohamad Atei Medaan had said the old markets would be demolished to make way for the proposed waterfront extension as the decades old structures were deemed unsafe.

According to him the structures could not be

salvaged, adding that the Public Works Department (JKR) had recommended the commission not preserve the buildings.

"Safety comes first," he had said.

In a bid to convince the authorities to conserve the pre-war structures, Boon said SHS had, together with a group of volunteers, carried out an initiative to record the vacated buildings last September.

"We also did an independent assessment on the buildings. From our team's assessment, the buildings are unsafe for occupation because the temporary structures and roofing are falling.

"Remove all that and with some repair work, the buildings are safe but failing which, it will fail," he said.

Boon added that the



OUR HERITAGE: SHS vision of what could be done to preserve the pre-war structures as well as create a green promenade. — Photo by the Sarawak Heritage Society

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— Mike Boon, Sarawak Heritage Society (SHS) president

assessment was part of SHS's recommendation and proposal, which was sent to the authorities at the end of last year.

Asked if SHS had received any feedback from the authorities, he said: "No

news so far."

Earlier during a presentation, Boon said between 60 and 70 per cent of free space would be made available at the site once the temporary structures were removed, leaving ample

space for landscaping purposes.

"There will be no change to the street scape except more plants and the place will look like a park," he said.

He said the site formed a part of the city's colourful cultural heritage and it would be a pity to lose the structures altogether.

Boon added that the Gambier Street markets could potentially become a world famous attraction like Fishermen's Wharf in San Francisco, Granville Market in Vancouver, St Lawrence Market in Toronto,

Coventry Market in London, Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne, Fremantle Market in Perth, and Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo.

"A market is always a tourist attraction because it is a place to experience the locals' way of life," he said.

The history of Gambier Street markets, he said, can be traced as far back as the 1860s.

He said over the years it was a magnet that attracted life and economic activities to the heart of old Kuching.

Therefore, Boon said, if conserved for adaptive use, the site could see a new trend in the tourism industry namely cultural heritage tourism and provide research value for technical and architectural accomplishments in Sarawak.

Boon said it was pivotal to conserve the old markets because there were not many buildings constructed before the Second World War left in Kuching.

"We've documented about 50 and are still documenting," he said adding that public support for SHS's cause was also important.

Boon urged the state government to take the lessons learned from Singapore's old market as the republic had to recreate old shop houses it had previously demolished to attract locals and visitors.

"But it's never the same. It's like a Hollywood stage," he said.