

SHS Statement on Kuching's old India Street Mosque, 2012

(Editorial from SHS Newletter Oct. 2011-June.2012, pp. 1,10,11)

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. 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, ...continue pg. 10



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'. 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 have 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?





THE BORNEO POST

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thesundaypost

Restoring Gambier Street Mosque - a test of Kuching's true values

RECENTLY our daily papers told us that the old mosque at Gambier Street was to be torn down and a new one built. What really hit me hard was a statement saying that it was too old, in a terrible state and couldn't be restored. It had to be demolished completely.

This is the oldest mosque in Kuching, and possibly in Sarawak. It is frankly one of the best attractions of old Kuching, hidden away in an alley that takes one back in time... to another era which is the essence of what any visitor to Kuching really appreciates. Its ambience, its location and its age outweighs every modern value available in Kuching today. Much, much, much more than our glittering malls, flashy restaurants and bars, the neatly paved walkways, the waterfront.

"Kuching is full of old buildings", I've heard someone say. Really? As a person to whom Kuching is home, let me give you some examples of what we have lost. We once had a very old and beautifully decorated Chinese temple at the end of Carpenter Street. Then one day, it was torn down, and rebuilt from the foundations up. It stands shining in the exact same place it stood for over 100 years. But it is not the old temple any longer. It is a replica of what stood there. It is a new

Less than 100m away, Kuching's oldest Chinese temple used to stand on a small hill, once at the mouth of the stream that we say gave Kuching its name: the Sg. Mata Kuching. Called the Tua Pek Kong temple, this was reputedly the first stone building erected in old Kuching. Then we tore it down, brick by brick. We rebuilt it. Today, it looks (almost) exactly the way it looked for over 100 years, but not a single timber, not a single stone brick, not a single tile, or roof shingle is old. It is another replica.

Let me ask this question out loud. Why? Why do we do such things to our beloved town? Are we even aware what it is we are doing to ourselves? Do we know what it is we are tearing down in a naïve push to develop Kuching?

To those of you who have travelled to distant lands, and been a tourist yourself, have you not felt the presence of people just like you and I as you leaned against a stone wall, a wooden doorway, that is 3,000 years old? Can you not feel the connection of humanity being in the same space that ordinary people like you and I walked, laughed, ate, prayed and lived fulfilling lives?

That is what history is. That is what old monuments and ruins mean to our humanity. That is what our forefathers have left for us to appreciate, to value... and to care for. This is a real treasure left in our care, and it is ours to use as well.

This leads me to differentiate between re-building and re-storing. Malaysia passed a heritage bill a few years ago, aimed at conserving our structural heritage. There exists an organisation (The Badan Warisan). dedicated to the appreciation and conservation of our country's heritage.

I urge you to type "restoring old buildings" into your browser and see what is happening in the world today with regards to how countries are dedicating resources and huge efforts to preserve old buildings. Check out how many international conferences are happening focusing on technologies and skills in restoring buildings.

One by one, we here in Kuching continue to lose our old buildings. One by one we are taking away the very treasures that visitors want to see, touch, and pay good money to feel our history.

Our old mosque should not suffer the same fate as the Carpenter Street temple, or the Tua Pek Kong temple. We should be restoring it, and preserving our heritage. We owe it to ourselves. There is no old building in the world today that cannot be restored. The only question is whether we choose to preserve it or not.

Tony Sebastian

Kuching Mosque to be demolished, rebuilt

THE BORNEO POST Tuesday, March 27, 2012

KUCHING: The Kuching Mosque at Gambier Street will be demolished and replaced with a new one.

The plan is ready and it will consist of a three-storey mosque, with shops at the ground floor. The project will be on open tender and is expected to start by end of the year," said Islamic Affairs Assistant Minister Datuk Daud Abdul Rahman.

He said once the new mosque is completed it would be able to occupy up to 1,300 patrons.

On the perception of some quarters claiming that the mosque is a heritage building that should be preserved, Daud pointed out that the mosque has never been classified as heritage building

"Unlike other heritage buildings like the post office which has very solid structures and unique designs, the mosque's structure is quite weak and it does not have any special design. There are leakages, which are difficult and costly to repair. It has become a safety hazard.

"The safety of patrons is more important. The time has come for us to build a more secure and beautiful mosque," he said.

A new mosque to replace Masjid **Bandar Kuching**

KUCHING: The vicinity of India Street, Gambier Street and the waterfrontwill see an ewlandmark

waterfrontwill see anew landmark in a form of a new mosque.
President and administrator of Masjid Bandar Kuching Dr Shajahan Sayeed Ahmad revealed to The Borneo Post yesterday that the trustee of the mosque namely Lembaga Amanah Kahriat has decided to construct a new mosque to replace the present one.
"Currently, the plan for a new mosque or for Masjid Bandar Kuching is in the final stage of approval and very soon we can start building from the present site," he said.

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"The mosque will have a different architecture and design and the construction should start by the end of 2013," he added.

Dr Shajahan pointed out that the new mosque costing between RM6 to RM8 million is financed totally by the trustee and hoped to be completed by 2015 or 2016. He said that to keep on their

He said that to keep on their tradition and a strong link with India, the new mosque will still depict Indian and also the Malaysian culture.

Partof the funds for building the

new mosque will be derived from rental of properties along Gambier Street which are owned by the mosque. Some of these prop

mosque. Some of these properties will be demolished to make way for the new mosque. However, Dr Shajahan also revealed that the new mosque is also designed for commercial purposes to accommodate the present and future business communities to ensure that the new mosque will continue to be

new mosque will continue to be self sustainable.

He revealed that the ground floor will be exhibition and shop lots while the first and second floor will be for prayer, religious schools and accommodation for

Dr Shajahan anticipated that there would be between 30 to 36 shops for commercial purposes

and that the present Indian
Mosque Lane will be widened.

"We want to modernise the area
but still keep it true to its heritage
and its cultural concept. The new facelift will hopefully make the area more active, busy and lively. This new approach will also help to bring people from the business communities here as well as

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Dr Shajahan Sayeed Ahmad

with other developments in the area including the new Merdeka Plaza," he added.

"I want people from all walks of life be they visitors or tourists who come to the city to be able to

admire the place especially the

admire the piace especially the waterfront and yet have a spiritual place to pray," he said.

Dr Shajahan is very pleased that the proposal that has been in the pipeline for 30 years is going to become a reality.

become a reality.

"Iamgladthatthere is something new in the vicinity especially for the Indian Muslims who had come from Southern India to have a better life and who built the mosque in 1837," he concluded.

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