

REBUILDING SIX UNITS OF GAMBIER STREET OLD SHOPHOUSES DESTROYED BY FIRE ON 22ND DECEMBER 2009

Before midnight on 22nd December 2009, about 6 pre-war shophouses were destroyed in a massive fire that was speculated to have started from a 2-unit fabric store. This struck a massive sentimental cord in a lot of Kuching citizen who grew up with memories of this place, and especially for the traders. Thus, almost immediately a 'Rebuilding Committee' was set up to assist the shopowners.

the earliest footprint in record to develop a plan for rebuilding.

The proposed plan reinstated traditional airwells to let in light and ventilation for shophouses that is minimum 120ft long. Party wall and rear-yard are introduced as fire breaks.

shophouses up in smoke

It took 47 firemen from five stations four hours to contain Gambier Street blaze; no lives lost

By Gary Adit

KUCHING: A SECTION OF THE city's historical heritage went up in smoke last night when a massive fire destroyed seven pre-war shophouses along Gambier Street.

Fortunately, there were no reports of any injury to the 80 people who were sleeping in the shophouses and the fire did not spread to the two units belonging to a fabric shop, which then rapidly spread to adjacent lots to the left and right.

These very old shops were built without any fire breaks in between, and I was told that was one of the reasons the flames spread so quickly from one shop to another.

But Police Sgt George Dan Buse Chief Master

Among the businesses rased in the blaze were a discount store supermarket and a hobby goods store.

A total of 47 firefighters from five stations - Padawan, Tasek, Jambatan, Batu Lintang and Siburan - responded to the alarm in six minutes after a distress call was received at 8.45pm.

The men spent the next three hours battling the blaze as flames roared from one shop after another with no signs of abating.

A massive crowd gathered at the scene of the fire, and many were heard grumbling at the seemingly slow work pace which initially hampered efforts to contain the blaze.



CITY FIRE: Fire raged through seven shophouses at Gambier Street in Kuching around 8.30 last night. It took firemen close to four hours to bring the blaze under control. Many city folk drove to the scene and more Gambier Street properties could have been lost, if not for the growing rain. - Photo by Chuan Sipa

Lin Lan Koo, who owns one of the affected shops and the fire could have been controlled earlier had the initial water pressure been sufficient.

However, he conceded that fires were doing their best and he was in awe as they raised their hoses in the line of duty.

Police Chief Minister Danial Puteh said that the fire was a tragedy for the city and that the government would be going to assist the shop owners with rebuilding.

He was later berated by Fire Department officials regarding the operation and even ended up getting scolded when a fire hose slipped out of a fireman's grasp and doused the deputy chief minister from head to toe.

Nonetheless, Dr Chuan praised the firemen for risking their lives in their attempt to put out the fire.

He pointed out that the six-incident fire breaks between the shops caused the fire to spread at an alarming speed.

"These very old shophouses were built without any fire breaks in between, and I was told that was one of the reasons the flames spread so quickly from one shop to another," he said.

He added that the state government would be

the shop owners with rebuilding.

Meanwhile, Batu Lintang station chief, ACP Mohamad, who spoke to the media on behalf of the Fire Department deputy director of operations, Puan Zaiton Abdul Salam, said the cause of the incident was not known, but that fire investigators would be arriving in the morning to begin the probe.

He added that no injuries

several of his men were affected by the thick smoke in the course of battling the blaze.

Total loss in the incident, though still unascertained, is believed to be massive because of the ageing shophouses along Gambier Street.

Last night's incident was the second time that fire destroyed the historical shop houses along Gambier Street, with four lots going



▲ Proposed 'rebuilding' footprints overlaid on 1937 surveyed plan

Out of 6 units, 2 elevations are restored where the remaining 4 takes on new facades that interpreted the architecture elements of the surrounding historical shophouses (i.e. scale, texture, colour, rhythm, materials, etc.) to continue the 'character of old Kuching'.

▲ The incident took frontpage headlines on *The Borneo Post* on 23rd December 2009.

SHS was invited to be the 'Advisor' on Heritage Conservation and Design matters pertaining to the 'rebuilding' exercise.

Architects from 3 local firms (i.e. Design Network Architects, I-Jong Architect and Arkitek JFN Sdn Bhd) volunteered their time to brainstorm on the concept for 'rebuilding'

A design proposal was developed by a team of volunteers from JFN's staff, led by Ar. Mike Boon.

All the owners agreed to the design proposal. The same will be submitted by the 'Rebuilding Committee' Chairman Mr. Wee Hong Seng to State Planning Authority (SPA) on behalf of the owners.

The design proposals addressed the following issues:

1. How to meet Government Regulations and at the same time satisfy Owners' Requirements?
2. How to establish 'existing conditions' as there are no records of Approved Building Plans?
3. What is 'original'? How far can we trace back?
4. What is Authenticity and how is it relevant?
5. What are the Government Policy, Guidelines and Procedures relevant to this rebuilding situation?

Subsequently a 1937 surveyed plan was found in Land & Survey Department Kuching. It gave the basis for tracing

It is a contemporary interpretation of the past rather than a replica of what was lost. The proposed 'rebuilding' of the shophouses once completed, will tell the story of their past, responding to the present conditions and as a bridge to the future.

