

Works at Kuching Reservoir Park – Adequate focus on nature and heritage preservation?¹



Several members of the public have approached the Sarawak Heritage Society (SHS) Committee with questions on the current works at Kuching's Reservoir Park (Taman Budaya) and concerns that the site becomes overly built-up and that its quality be affected.

Indeed, there are on-going concrete works at the site. Besides upgrading works on the lake and its outlet, and of the main baruk-style building sitting on its edge, some 7 units of what appear to be gazebos are coming up. Below are pictures taken early July.



The Reservoir Park will be renamed "Unity Park" further to an initiative of the Yayasan 1 Malaysia Foundation (an NGO) which declared Kuching a 'City of Unity' in 2015 and which suggested that Sarawak seek UNESCO listing of Kuching as a 'City of Unity'.

¹ Article published on the [website of the Sarawak Heritage Society](http://www.sarawakheritagesociety.org) on 25/07/2020 - updated 12/2020

The redevelopment comes under the purview of Kuching North City Council (DBKU) and its 'Clean Beautiful, Safe, Smart, Sustainable' 2019-2023 plan, with a budget of RM 20 million reportedly approved for the project.



DBKU has held consultations with some civil society organisations on how best to make the park a representation of Kuching's unity (a workshop with ethnic associations took place in 2016). Members of the public however do not appear to have been widely consulted and presented with the final content of the project, beyond general statements relayed by the media. These have mentioned works to improve the environmental quality of the lake; water features; restoration of the existing buildings to turn them into restaurants, cafeteria, craft centre, gym; gazebos where Sarawak's various ethnic groups will be represented; a possible butterfly park; and installation of CCTV and improved lighting. It has also been reported that DBKU has been looking to acquire an additional 14 acres to the existing 32 acres (some 15 ha) (1)

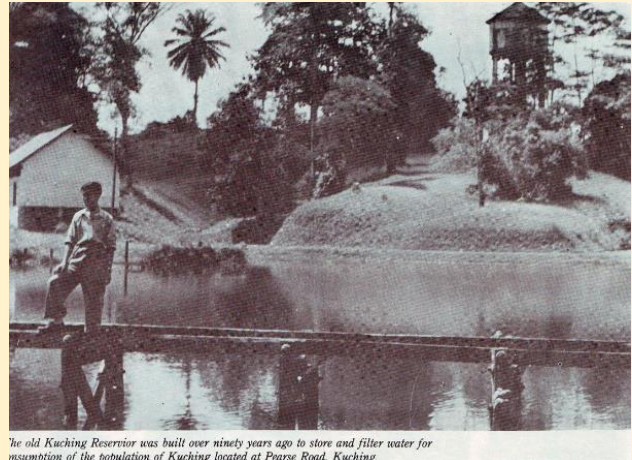


The Reservoir Park is a green gem in the midst of the town, deeply prized by Kuchingites. It is so valued that the project has been seen as aiming to bring Reservoir Park on par with New York's Central Park or London's Hyde Park!

Although the project appears to be designed to minimise the impact on the existing greenery, the added new structures and other features may carry a risk of making the Park less close to nature and affect its serenity and charm. Let us hope that will not be the case.

Reservoir Park is not only a recreational park: it houses significant cultural heritage. As its name recalls, it is the site of a water supply infrastructure which provided Kuching with treated water from 1895. Kuching is in fact known to be the second town in present Malaysia to have urban water supply after Penang. At the site of the Reservoir Park the infrastructure included a water tower and, like in Penang, an aqueduct. That part is said to

have fallen in disuse by the 1930's. When it was decided to convert the site into a public park, the director of the Singapore Botanic gardens was invited to advise on its planning. The Park was re-landscaped in the mid 1970's with footbridges, pavements, walkways and construction of the amphitheatre after the Park was extended to include parts of the former Sarawak Club golf course.



An early postcard of the water works, and a photo with the water tower in the background (photo by Ho Ah Chon)

Remains of the Brooke era infrastructure are still there. A KINO magazine article recalls them nicely as follows:

“Explore this park (...) and you will find the old water supply structures built in 1887. At its highest point, the old waterworks lie hidden amidst old trees, comprising two square shallow tanks, lined with brick embankments. At its lower end, its outflow still remains, with iron joints and piping. Stroll around the facility and see if you can spot circular stone arrangements. These were the flowerpots of old, very popular during the late 19th century across the British colonies, used to create circular beds where roses and other flowering plants were grown. [...]

Most of [the aqueduct] still stands, although overgrown and broken in some places. It crosses a small valley, and takes a turn on the far slope. Here, a section of the aqueduct has fallen, and lies next to the pillars. Try and trace the supply lines down to where the lakes are now.

Although not the most spectacular of aqueducts, Kuching's small over-100- year-old aqueduct is an important remnant of Malaysia's structural heritage. As a historical monument, it is even more valuable because almost the entire waterworks system still remains.”

[[KINO \(Kuching In & Out\) magazine 2015 article by Tony Sebastian](#)]



The old aqueduct

The statements that we have seen on the project barely mention the historic water works. It is hoped that the construction of the new gazebos does not affect their remains. The aqueduct and key imprints of the old facilities ought to be carefully preserved and restored under supervision of heritage conservation specialists. They could also usefully be equipped with appropriate heritage signage, perhaps at some of the Park's shelters, to inform the public on the history and the features of the original installation.

As far as we know, the remains of the Reservoir Park's historical water works have not been registered by the Sarawak Government as protected heritage. There would be good grounds for their gazettment under the Sarawak Heritage Ordinance. At the 'Heritage Quest' campaign that SHS ran in 2018/2019, several members of the public actually suggested the listing of the aqueduct as an important heritage asset to be protected.

Surrounding the Park is a trove of heritage assets. The nearby WW2 Air Raid shelters (a heritage site approved to be gazetted in 2007) can be accessed from the Park by a path towards Park lane (formerly Pig lane); the 'Segu Bungalow' (declared/ proposed to be gazetted as Sarawak heritage monument in 2008) lies just across the road from the shelters. In the immediate neighbourhood is the elegant old 'Rumah Masra' building (which houses currently the Atelier society). Adjoining and overlooking the Park, just across the Park's fence, stands the majestic old Hokkien School building, one of Kuching's precious heritage assets; adjoining also are, to the North-West, the Museum Gardens and, beyond, Kuching's Central Padang. The whole area merits to be gazetted as a heritage zone with specific protection features.



The old Hokkien School, view from the Park

(1)

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