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# SPOTLIGHT

connecting with SHS members

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## Sarawak Heritage Society

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## CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES DURING A LOCKDOWN

The pandemic has put us in a lockdown state for a good part of a year and a quarter, under an alphabet soup of restrictions including MCO, CMCO, RMCO, EMCO, FMCO, etc. This has made it difficult for SHS to implement some ideas and initiatives.

We've been having a number of digital meetings and conversations. It all takes some getting used to, but for well-defined and properly moderated discussions, it can work, even though we certainly miss the physical human interaction. The increased (forced) use of digital communication has actually introduced some plusses: there's no time wasted on commutes; more people, from almost anywhere in the world, can be involved; some conferences which required physical presence or high expense are now openly inviting everybody to join at little or no cost. This provides additional precious references and new learnings, and helps us look at the status of our heritage with a wider perspective.

We hope you will enjoy this issue of SPOTLIGHT. You may still consider joining one of our three thematic sub-committees (Intangible Cultural Heritage; Conservation of Built Heritage; Heritage Outreach to the Youth). And do continue to give us your suggestions and insights to improve future issues. Stay safe everyone!

## POINT OF VIEW

### **The Heritage Value of 1950s/60s Buildings**

As of 26<sup>th</sup> April 2021, the former Information Department building on Jalan Masjid, Kuching is no more. "Another building of historical value has turned to dust" wrote Sidi Munan in his Borneo Post 'Uncle Di' column of 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Upon witnessing the demolition in late April, he recalls that the building was, for a number of years, a place from where the media were controlled. He draws a parallel with the demolition, some years ago, of the Audit / Old Secretariat building next to Padang Merdeka (now replaced by a high rise shopping mall cum hotel), both being similar kinds of post-war constructions. Over the years a number of buildings of that category have gone, but some are still standing, in various states of maintenance. With their distinctive 1950s / 60s flavours, some do carry an intrinsic heritage value, beyond historical significance ("this or that happened there") or mere nostalgic sentiments. This is true even if their architecture is unexceptional. They may also be better suited to our climate than the buildings that replace them.

The value of a number of buildings of that period has been disregarded too hastily. Don't get us wrong here. True, some were too bland or too poorly constructed to be conserved. But there are also those for which restoration, possibly with re-purposing, could have been a nice, feasible option. Had the Information building become structurally too weak to be conserved or was it just a matter of needing more parking space or another high-rise? Will its replacement be a more inspiring building? Would Kuching's streetscape not be more charming if the Information Building and Old Secretariat were still there, sensitively renovated?

Perhaps even more importantly, global environmental challenges (e.g. climate change) should prompt us to prioritise, as much as possible, the restoration of buildings over their outright demolition, due to the high carbon and pollution footprint of the traditional construction industry. Research has shown that restoration ultimately will contribute more to the sustainable development of Sarawak. All this makes a case for a policy shift. The recent restoration of the art deco style building by the Padang (previously used by Sarawak Convention Bureau) and its re-purposing as the Songket and Keringkam Gallery is a commendable – albeit too isolated – case in this direction.

Uncle Di concluded his column with "In future, I'm sure the [Sarawak Heritage Society] would be alert to hints of government's move to remove or demolish a building or a monument of historical significance. The best thing for them is to get government's interest in preserving things of historical interest in Sarawak". Spot on! We would just add an appeal to all Sarawakians: Be sensitive to our built heritage. It is our asset, woven into the fabric of present day Sarawak. Whether from the pre-Brooke, Brooke, colonial or Malaysia era, it belongs to us. Once gone, it can never be replaced. We count on your help!

2021



2014



## HERITAGE WATCH



### ICHLinks to Highlight Sarawak's ICH

The ICHLinks portal ([www.ichlinks.com](http://www.ichlinks.com)), a digital platform that provides information on Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia Pacific region, was officially launched on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021 by the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia Pacific Region (ICHCAP), which celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

The launching ceremony conducted by ICHCAP virtually across Asia Pacific countries, included Malaysia, which was represented by MoTAC Sarawak as well as the Malaysian Arts and Cultural Practitioners Association (MACPA). The MoTAC Minister expressed the hope that ICHLinks will help promote the arts, culture and heritage of Sarawak to the world. MACPA's president also reported that the association will implement research and documentation on five Sarawak ICH elements, namely Sarawak songket, keringkam, ngajat dance, umai and pua kumbu.

### Kuching as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy?

In April 2021, it was announced that Kuching City South Council (MBKS) was applying for Kuching to be recognized as a 'Creative City of Gastronomy' under the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN). MBKS had been working on this together with the Culinary Heritage and Arts Society Sarawak (CHASS) and Society Atelier Sarawak (SAS) since November 2020. The initiative is supported by MoTAC.



### Launch of Kuching Old Bazaar Book

In late March / early April, the Kuching Old Bazaar Community Association launched a most interesting book titled "Kuching Old Bazaar: Its History and Changes" in conjunction with the cultural mapping exercise they had done. They have since also released a series of videoclips on various aspects of life in the Old Bazaar area of Kuching. Many thanks to Kapitan Lim and Mr Chai for gifting SHS copies of the book.



### Demolition of the Information Department Building

In April 2021, Kuchingites witnessed the demolition of the building on Jalan Masjid, formerly occupied by the Information Department (official name 'Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia' or 'Malaysian Information Service'). [See **POINT OF VIEW article**]

## SHS NEWS



### Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

Members who had volunteered for the ICH Sub-committee had a good meeting (via Zoom), facilitated by Donna Yong, on scoping our ambitions and proposing projects to be initiated. This included creating a directory of ICH of Sarawak, doing some pilots on specific cultural aspects or a specific sub-ethnic group. Subsequent meetings will crystallise and structure the projects going forward.

Another side project, already in progress since early May, involved a photoshoot for a new booklet under our "Vanishing Trades" series. The planned publication is tentatively titled "Blacksmiths of Kuching" and the research is being led by James Yong.



### Conservation of Built Heritage (CBH)

Our CBH team, led by Ar William Khoo, has recently engaged with the Kuching Hokkien Association on the Old Hokkien School, one of Sarawak's iconic built heritage assets. The Association is the owner of the building. Dato Richard Wee, its President, has assured SHS that the Association will conserve the building. SHS is in the process of drawing up a MoU that will provide for a photographic and measured drawings documentation exercise, with involvement of architectural students from UNIMAS Faculty of Built Environment.

### Youth Heritage Outreach (YHO)

SHS has approved a proposal for engaging with students of three schools to better understand their perceptions of heritage. The results from this study will inform SHS' future decisions and plans on how to more effectively increase the awareness of heritage among young people. The commencement date of the exercise is as yet pending due to the current MCO rulings.