

The Values of 1950's/60's Buildings

A few months ago we witnessed the demolition of Kuching's former Information Department building on Jalan Masjid "*Another building of historical value has turned to dust*" wrote Sidi Munan in a Borneo Post [column](#). He drew a parallel with the demolition some years ago, of the Audit / Old Secretariat building next to Padang Merdeka that gave way to a high rise shopping mall cum hotel. Indeed, both were similar kinds of constructions.



archive pix of the former Information Building, Kuching
[source: Ho Ah Chon, "Changing Landscape of Kuching", 1995]

This case makes us reflect on the value of post-war buildings. Over the years a number of commercial, administrative or residential buildings of that era have gone but some are still standing, albeit in various states of maintenance, sometimes abandoned. With their distinctive 50's/60's 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.

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

Densification of urban centres may be cited as a motive to replace old low rise buildings with constructions with larger capacity. True, intelligent urban planning often calls for some densification of the city centres, not least to improve the economics of network infrastructure (public transport, water and sanitation, communication networks, etc). But in the context of Sarawak, where population density has remained on the low side even in the core of the cities - with still noticeable stocks of empty plots - we can argue that densification can be achieved without removing older buildings worth renovating or conserving. Where densification is an objective, attention should also be paid to the harmony of the existing streetscape. Such sensitive approach can help revive city centres and counteract the drift to often soulless new outer city suburbs. (Let us ask ourselves if our current American-style, 'horizontal' expansion urban development pattern is limitless, and if it is really what we want).

Perhaps even more importantly, global warming and other environmental challenges should prompt us to prioritise the restoration of buildings over their outright demolition due to the high carbon and pollution footprint of the traditional construction industry. Note in this respect that green architecture is still in its infancy in our country.

On the operations and maintenance side, older buildings may be better suited to our climate than the buildings that replace them: conventional, modern air-conditioned constructions are often energy guzzlers, with poor heat insulation and poor air circulation. Older buildings may offer better natural air circulation, reducing the demand for air conditioning while providing a healthier living environment: the current Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of ventilation in buildings.

Of course, each case has its specifics but there is overall evidence that prioritizing reasonably and, as much as possible, restoration of buildings over demolition and reconstruction contributes to developmental sustainability. Not just for cultural considerations but also for economic, social and environmental reasons. Doing an internet search on this topic makes one realise that it is increasingly recognised as a topic warranting attention*. Aaah, we may anticipate dissenting views and hands raised here, with reactions such as: ‘restoration is often more complicated and more costly than reconstruction’; ‘most calls in this direction come from developed countries’, ‘these are intellectual prescriptions that are unaffordable or irrelevant to us here’; or ‘climate change is a diffuse issue and its fixing is a developed countries’ problem’. When looked at from a long-term and ‘global good’ perspective, would such statements hold water?

All this makes a case for an explicit policy and regulatory shift in Sarawak: an urban regeneration policy that is more environment and heritage sensitive. The recent restoration of the art deco style building by the Padang (previously used by the Sarawak Convention Bureau, lately repurposed as the Songket and Keringkam Gallery) is a commendable – albeit too isolated – case in this direction.

Sidi Munan 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 woven into the fabric of present day Sarawak; whether from the pre-Brooke, Brooke, colonial or Malaysia era, it belongs to everyone. Once gone, it can never be replaced. We count on your help!

* see for example

“Evidence supports how the heritage sector and historical places enhance our wellbeing and quality of life”

[Heritage Counts](#) Report, Historic England, 2020

[Buildings Must be Recycled and Reused to Help tackle Climate Change](#)

historicengland.org, 26/02/2021

“The facts are in – no matter how much green technology is employed, any new building represents a new impact on the environment. It makes no sense for us to recycle newspapers, bottles, and cans while we’re throwing away entire buildings and neighborhoods. It’s fiscally irresponsible and entirely unsustainable.

The simple fact is that we cannot build our way out of global warming, we need to conserve our way out. We have to make better and wiser use of what we’ve already built: the bottom line is that the greenest building is one that already exists.”

[The Greenest Building? One that’s already built](#) - Jerry Holan Architects + Associates, USA (undated, accessed 11/07/2021)

For more technical reading: [‘Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’, Chapter 9 : Buildings.](#) Malaysian scientist Prof. Dr Azni Zain Ahmed was one of the lead authors of this chapter.

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