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Sustainable Urbanisation on the Western Side of the Historic City of Malacca

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Abstract

The paper discusses the implementation of conservation policies, how it helped to ensure the sustainability of the buildings in the area on the western side of Malacca River and the responses of the residents. It covers the historical background, the role of the local government and the responses of the residents. The methodology includes site observation, building study, literature review and interview. The findings of the research suggest that the buildings within the area were well sustained but the local residents also gave negative responses. Some strategies are needed to ensure the continuous use and sustainability of the buildings.

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Keywords: Sustainable; resident; Historic Building; Historic City; conservation

1. Introduction

Malaysia has many settlements of historic and cultural significance that are worthy of preservation for sustainable development. However, many of them are subjected to urban modernisation. In some settlements uncontrolled developments have resulted in the building of new buildings or facades sandwiched in between old buildings. Currently only two settlements or historic cities, Malacca and

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Penang are inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Malaysia. In both cities the historic buildings are still intact and will remain so only with proper management.

The paper discusses the implementation of policies, how it helped to ensure the sustainability of the buildings in the area on the western side of Malacca River and the responses of the local residents. This is elaborated in three sections. The first section concerns the historical background on the transformation of the area from a rural into a well known commercial area. This includes the changes in ownership and function of the buildings in the area over the years. The transformation is evident in the façade treatments and in some cases in the height of the building. Several buildings within the area are studied as examples of the transformation. The second section elaborates on the role of the local government in the survival of the buildings. Both the steady structure of the old buildings and the policies imposed by the local government particularly on the first block had helped to retain the buildings. This happened despite the difficulties in fully implementing the policies and the on going developments in close vicinity to the area. The third section discusses the residents' responses to the suitability of the old structures to the current requirements. The responses from the residents on the use of the buildings were sought.

2. Literature review

Conservation has been regarded as a tool to safeguard the historic buildings. Historic buildings differ from most other cultural property in that they generally have to be used and also withstand dead and live loadings and resist all the causes of decay. Thus, conservation of historic buildings includes maintenance and may according to circumstances include preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adaptation and often a combination of more than one of these approaches.

It was emphasised that some of the reasons that lead to the destruction of historic buildings are natural decay, neglect by owners and occupiers, new developments, lack of awareness by the public, and inadequate maintenance (Nor Zalina, 2007). To ensure the sustainability of the historic buildings they need somehow to be adapted to new uses according to the new needs of the inheritors. The practice of adapting buildings for new uses is not something new and had started even in the Middle Ages as emphasised by scholars such as Fielden (1982) and Jokilehto (2002). Classic examples include the rehabilitation of Roman Baths of Diocletian that were converted to a church, a museum, cinema and planetarium. The other example is the King's Manor at York. The building was used as the lodging, then consequently as king's palace, administrative centre, tenements, workshop for the blind persons and a university building (Fielden, 1982). These examples also show that the historic buildings survive due to their usefulness to the respective inhabitants during that particular period. It also means that the original buildings were easily adapted to the changing patterns of the different stages of society, a value that resulted in their survival.

Local examples in this aspect are the Central Market in Kuala Lumpur and Cheong Fatt Tze in Penang. The Central Market was built as a wet market in 1888. There were plans to demolish the site in 1970s but was halted with the intervention of the Malaysian Heritage Society that declared it as a 'Heritage Site'. The market was renovated in 1985 and currently a big cultural landmark in Kuala Lumpur with souvenir shops and eateries. Cheong Fatt Tze is another example of a historic building saved from demolition. It was built in 1880 as a mansion cum office but now as a boutique hotel after the restoration in 1990s.

In adapting an old building to a new use, it was emphasised by scholars that its original character must be preserved as much as possible (Cantacuzino and Brandt, 1980; Jokilehto, 2002, Zalina, 2009). Therefore, each building need to be studied before recommendation can be made on their new uses in the context of the needs of the community. This is to ensure the preservation of values in the historic building and that move may also reduce costs.

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