penang MONTHLY

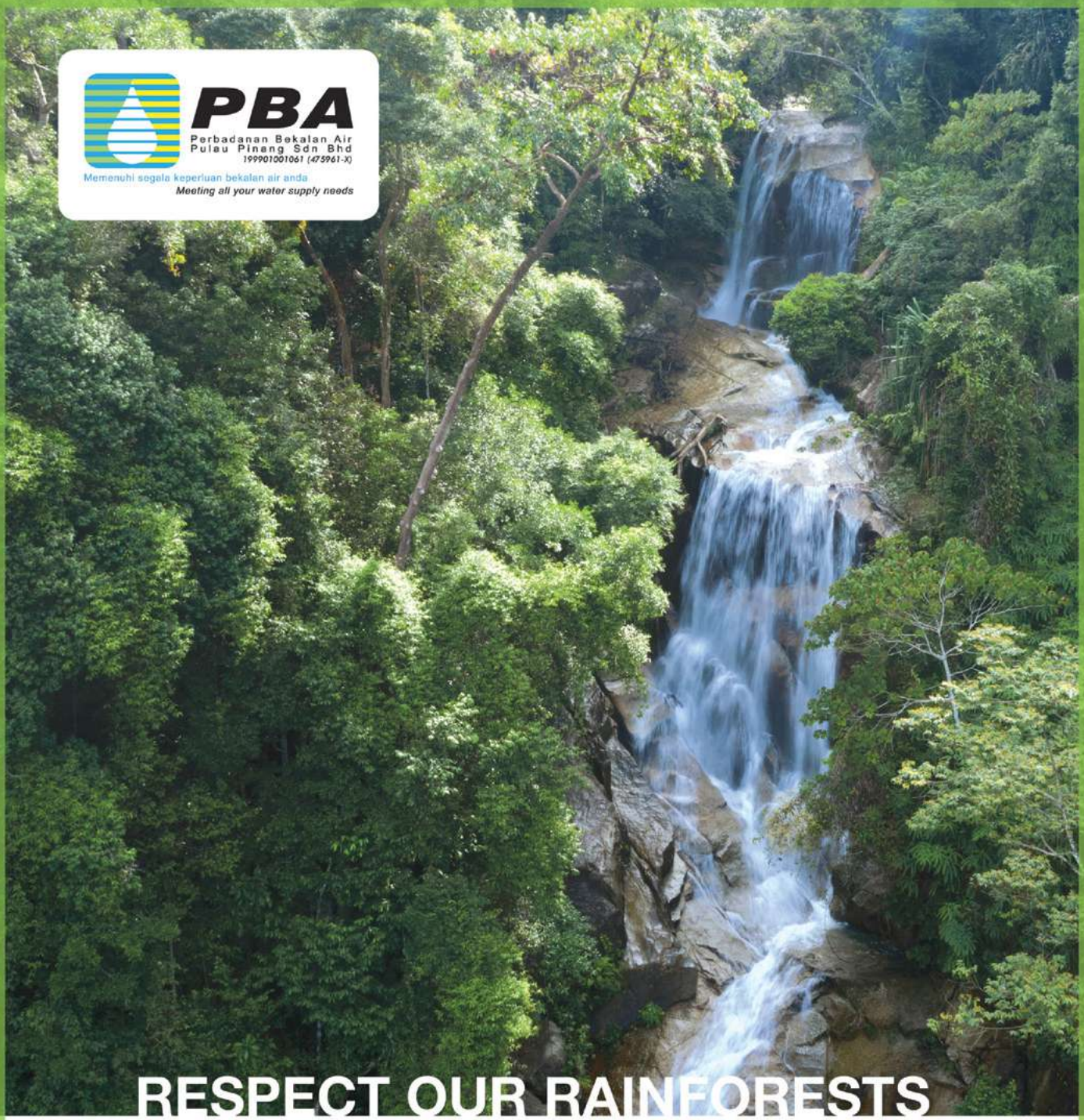
JULY 2024
ISSUE 07.24
FREE COPY

ARCHITECTURE AND THE RECOVERY OF GEORGE TOWN'S HERITAGE

FEATURE
IMAGINE A GEORGE TOWN WELCOMING OF PEDESTRIANS

FEATURE
FORT CORNWALLIS: A LABORATORY FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING IN TRADITIONAL CONSTRUCTION

U-40
WOMEN! LET'S RUSH TO THE GYM AND EMBRACE STRENGTH TRAINING



There are 62.9 sq. km of protected water catchment areas in Penang.

These are the precious wild places that collect rain water for us.

Kindly respect the environment and the wildlife whenever you visit our dams and water catchment areas in Penang.

More info: www.pba.com.my

Scan for videos.

EDITOR
Ooi Kee Beng

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Sheryl Teoh and Rachel Yeoh

COVER PHOTO/SKETCH
Tan Cheng Keat

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
OGL Consultancy

PUBLICITY
Iylia De Silva

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS
Kai Fam and Kevin Teh

PRINTER
The Phoenix Press Sdn Bhd (1723K)
2509 Jalan Perusahaan Baru,
Prai Industrial Complex,
13600 Prai, Penang, Malaysia.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES & CONTRIBUTIONS
editor@penangmonthly.com
or contact +604 228 3306
(Extension 224 or 225)

BUSINESS ENQUIRIES
business@penangmonthly.com

PENANG INSTITUTE
making ideas work

10 Brown Road,
10350 Penang, Malaysia

T +604 228 3306
F +604 226 7042
W penangmonthly.com
IG @PenangMonthly
FB fb.com/penangmonthly

ISSN 2232-0733 07
9 772232 073008 >

PP 14554/11/2012 (031123)
MCI (P) 116/12/2012

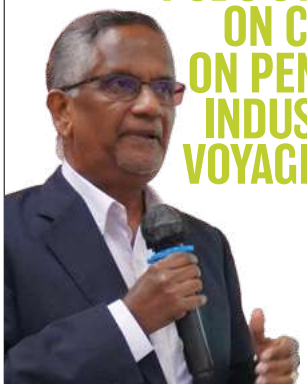
ARCHITECTURE

COVER STORY 14

KEEPING GEORGE TOWN'S HISTORY PALPABLE

SPACES, VIGOUR & FUNDING

CEO HARI: PSDC STAYS ON COURSE ON PENANG'S INDUSTRIAL VOYAGE



NEXT MONTH ON PENANG MONTHLY

EDUCATION

WOMEN! LET'S RUSH TO THE GYM AND EMBRACE STRENGTH TRAINING

KOPI JACKFRUIT MONKEY

FESTIVALS

George Town Festival (GTF) returns for its 15th edition from 19 to 28 July. With the theme "Here & Now", GTF will act as a mirror, beckoning visitors to pause and contemplate the interconnectedness of our past, present and future. Festival-goers can expect more than 80 programmes from more than 15 countries spread across more than 30 venues. Visit www.georgetownfestival.com for details and the full programme listing.

CHARITY

St. Nicholas' Home, Penang Charity Food Carnival aims to raise funds to cover the home's operating costs and enable the home to run various programmes. This family-friendly event features a wide range of delicious food, live music performances by talented visually impaired individuals and more.

DATE	3 August
TIME	9am–2pm
VENUE	St. Nicholas' Home, Penang (enter via the Persiaran Midlands entrance)
WEBSITE	https://www.facebook.com/events/1582039889257670

FUN WALK

Organised by MPKK Pak Abu and KADUN Bagan Dalam in collaboration with Parlimen Bagan, the **Butterworth Fun Walk 2024** is a delightful fun walk that promotes health and wellness. Each participant can expect a t-shirt and a finisher medal.

DATE	21 July
TIME	7am
VENUE	Dewan Dato' Haji Ahmad Badawi
WEBSITE	https://howei.com/event_details/butterworthfunwalk2024

The **Penang Bon Odori Festival** is an annual cultural event celebrating the rich traditions of Japan with the support of the Penang government, the Consulate General of Japan and Japanese associations. This joyful event offers a taste of Japanese culture with captivating performances, delicious food, a lively atmosphere and plenty more.

INCLUSIVITY

Organised by SHANZ Early Intervention & Learning Therapy, the **Perfectly Imperfect Charity Campaign** is an event aimed at raising awareness about the challenges encountered by individuals with special needs or disabilities. Expect a bazaar, walkathon, children's drawing and colouring contest as well as a talent competition.

DATES	5 and 6 July
TIME	11am–9pm
VENUE	Straits Quay
CONTACT NO.	+6011-555 34583
WEBSITE	https://rb.gy/dubtq9

Penang Hill Festival is back for its fifth edition from 19 to 21 July! Aiming to promote and bring about greater awareness of Penang Hill's nature, history and cultural heritage, PHF 2024 offers visitors and locals a glimpse of Penang Hill's uniqueness through its signature event, "Music on the Hill—East meets West", as well as a myriad of fun-filled and educational programmes ranging from insightful talks and interesting walks to hands-on workshops, informative exhibitions and a digital treasure hunt. Visit www.penanghill.gov.my/phf2024 for more information.

COMMUNITY

Supported by the Penang state government and organised by Penang Walkabouts in conjunction with George Town World Heritage Day, the **Penang Lang Community Day** is a celebration of our diverse heritage, culture and community spirit. This family-friendly event features cultural performances, local food vendors, art and crafts, and fun activities for all ages.

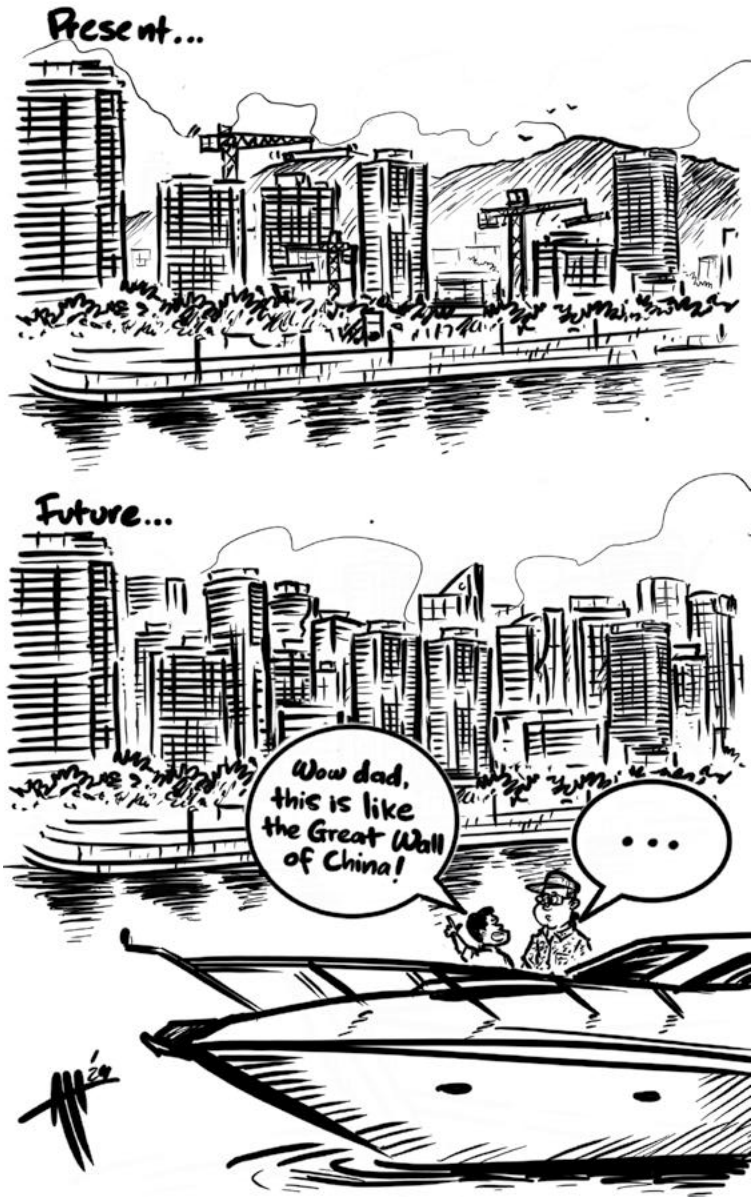
penang MONTHLY

THE PENANG MONTHLY ENDEAVORS TO BE THE VOICE OF PENANG AND AN INSPIRING READ FOR THE CURIOUS MALAYSIAN. A PUBLICATION OF PENANG INSTITUTE, IT AIMS TO:

1. Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
2. Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune;
3. Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state;
4. Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways;
5. Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values;
6. Emphasise present trends in the arts, industry, politics and economics which affect the immediate future of the state and country; and
7. Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

LIKE WHAT WE DO? SUPPORT US!

Penang Institute is a non-profit organisation, relying mainly on research grants and donations. To keep us up and running, and to continuously give you the latest scoop on economic and cultural trends every month, you can make a contribution to Penang Institute. Tax exemption receipts will be given for donations above RM100. Please contact business@penangmonthly.com for more information.



FORTRESS ISLAND
By Azmi Hussin

HANDY PHONE NUMBERS

POLICE & AMBULANCE
999

FIRE
994

RESCUE
991

PENANG ISLAND CITY COUNCIL (MBPP)
04-259 2020

MBPP HOTLINE
04-263 7637 / 04-263 7000

SEBERANG PERAI CITY COUNCIL (MBSP)
04-549 7555

MBSP 24H FREE TOLL
1-800-88-6777

POLICE HEADQUARTERS
04-222 1522

PENANG HILL RAILWAY
04-828 8880

PENANG BRIDGE HOTLINE
04-398 7419

BUTTERWORTH RAILWAY STATION
04-391 0050

INCOME TAX (LHDN)
04-255 2000 (George Town)
04-584 7000 (Bukit Mertajam)
04-578 3930 (Seberang Perai)

CUSTOMS' OFFICE
04-262 2300

IMMIGRATION OFFICE
04-262 2300
04-250 3414 (George Town)
04-397 3011 (Seberang Perai)

STATE SECRETARY OFFICE
04-262 1957

EMPLOYEES PROVIDENT FUND (EPF)
04-226 1000 (George Town)

SOCIAL SECURITY (SOCSO)
04-238 9888 (George Town)
04-388 7666 (Seberang Perai)

ROAD TRANSPORT DEPARTMENT (JPJ)
04-656 4131 (Batu Uban)
04-392 7777 (Seberang Perai)

NATIONAL REGISTRATION DEPARTMENT (JPN)
04-226 5161

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR
04-262 5536 (George Town)
04-575 1957 (Seberang Perai)

MALAYSIAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY NON-EMERGENCY AMBULANCE SERVICE
011-5767 0917/011-5767 0916

CONSUMER ASSOCIATION OF PENANG
04-829 9511

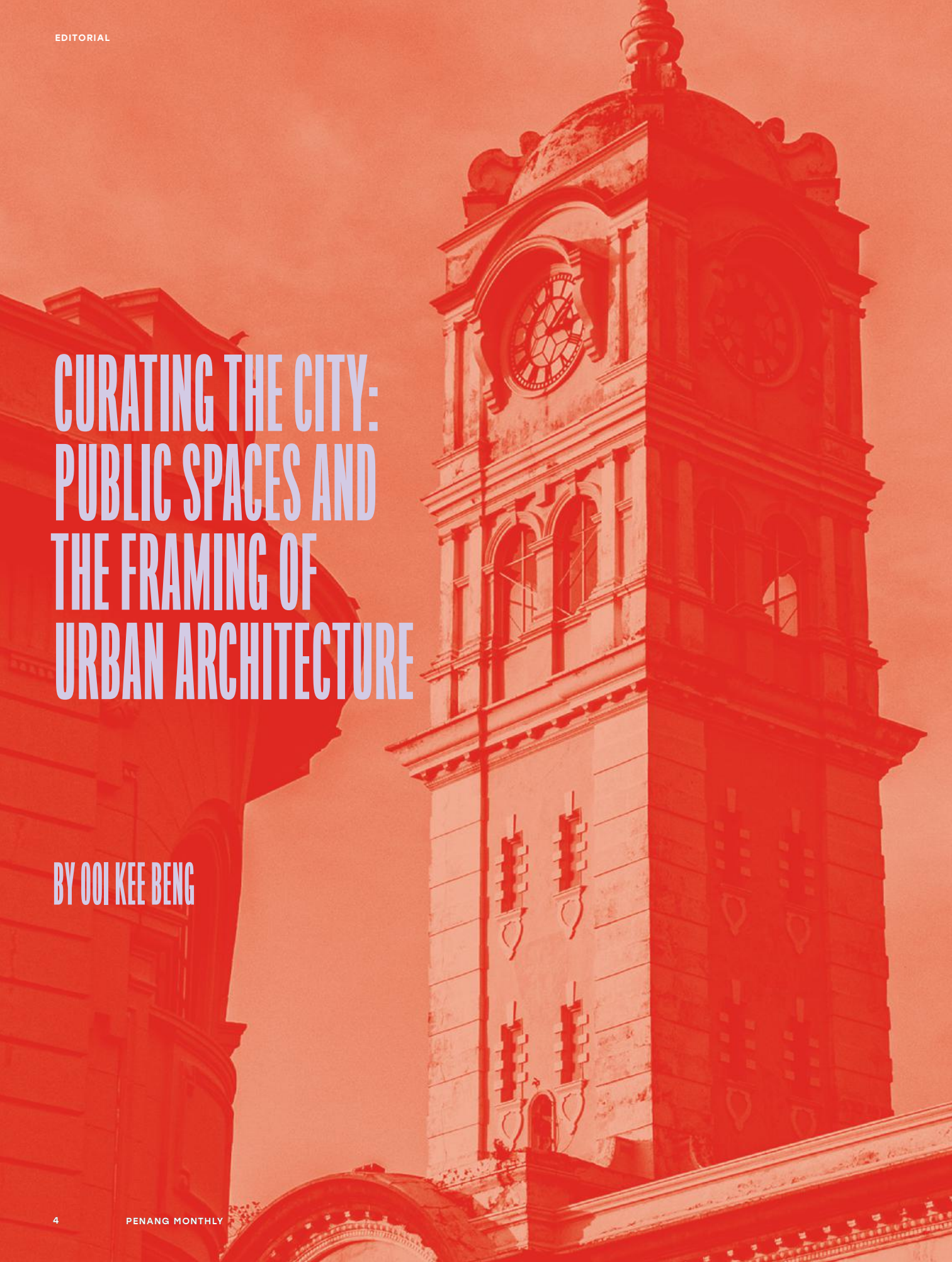
WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR CHANGE
04-228 0342

CHILDREN'S PROTECTION SOCIETY
04-829 4046

BEFRIENDERS
04-291 0100

SPCA
04-281 6559

PENANG PUBLIC LIBRARY CORPORATION
04-397 1058



CURATING THE CITY: PUBLIC SPACES AND THE FRAMING OF URBAN ARCHITECTURE

BY OOI KEE BENG

THE KEY DIFFERENCE that I observe when visiting a thriving city and a striving one is in the manifest gap in ambition and maintenance between private places and public spaces.

In fact, the role of government—be this federal, state or local—is on obvious display when one considers an urban ecosystem that way. What defines modern governance and the nation-state is that all spaces that are not privately owned are under the control and management of the State. Therefore, to what extent the State takes the trouble and the pride to manifest that fact to its citizens informs its citizens how seriously they are to take the claim that their government actually governs.

In a modernising city, be this a skyscraping metropolis like KL or a heritage centre like George Town, architectural trends and aesthetical ambitions respond to what is there and what has gone before in that specific area. Now, how architectural projects get conceived has to consider the surroundings. A piece of art—and I shall consider every architectural undertaking to have such pretentions—does not pose in a vacuum. It is framed by its environment, and it is judged in that setting.

And so, whatever an architect chooses to do in any given city is never really a greenfield project. He adapts to the collection of private places and public spaces where his project is to happen. Functionally and artistically, therefore, his greatest collaborator is the public sector—the state authorities in charge of planning and maintaining the urban landscape around the project, and of granting him permits and conditions.

In a developed, thriving city, one tends to experience a good fit between private projects and properties, and the public spaces and utilities around it. Is there a park close by? Are pedestrians safe? Are there enough car parks around? What is the access to public transport like? Are the streets safe at all times of day? Are there medical facilities close by which can be reached quickly? Are water, electricity and cyber networks reliable and available? Where does the rubbish go, and how are they collected? Are there risks of flooding? If we are talking about a tropical city, are there enough trees planted for shade and for beautification?

This is the tapestry that weaves the liveability of a city.

PLANS THAT DETERMINE STATE CAPACITY

Basically, town planning by the public sector decides the level to which the aesthetical ambitions of the particular urban designer can be achieved.

In short, just as the curator decides the success of an art exhibition, sometimes as much as the artist does, the town planner decides how well the city will function in the eyes of its users, the citizens. And yes, as a piece of living art—as art that is lived in, literally.

When the curation is piecemeal and ad hoc, the city will develop accordingly. However well-conceived and executed an architectural plan may be, its overall impact depends on the quality and execution of the many plans and guidelines that the town planner is subjected to follow, and by the maintenance of the public spaces that frame private places and buildings.

This applies to any area—residential or business, industrial or recreational, or even oft-forgotten territories such as landfills and cemeteries.

Just to highlight how vital town planning and public space upkeep are to the liveability of a city, and to making a city a thriving metropolis rather than a striving wannabe, one could list for quick impression the types of planning directions a city government, at all its levels, is obliged to provide.

Firstly, a Master Plan is needed. This is to provide a long-term vision for the city and to ensure coordinated development on all matters; most notably, a Land Use Plan for adaptive and sustainable development should be part of this. Then, there is an Accessibility Plan, of course; what is city life if not about the mobility of goods, of capital and of people? Combined to that is the need for an Infrastructure Plan to provide smooth supply of electricity and water, sewage management and telecommunications.

A Housing Plan to provide affordable housing, control density and accessibility is also a basic guide, as is an Environmental Plan to maintain the quality of water, air and green spaces.

Then, we come to the issue that usually decides whether planned cities function or not, and that is the Socioeconomic Development Plan. In the end, all the plans mentioned should aim for economic sustenance, if not growth, and include a component on support for local economic activities, from street businesses to managing state grants to financial undertakings.

At the more concrete and daily level, there is need for a Public Safety Plan, as well as a Community Facilities Plan—the former to provide police and fire services, and emergency and disaster response, and the latter to ensure access to healthcare, libraries, parks and recreational facilities.

Lastly, and especially relevant to Penang, is the Historic Preservation Plan. On the one hand, this plan is to manage the preservation of historic sites and landmarks, but on the other, it also has to adapt to socioeconomic conditions peculiar to the times and the economics involved.

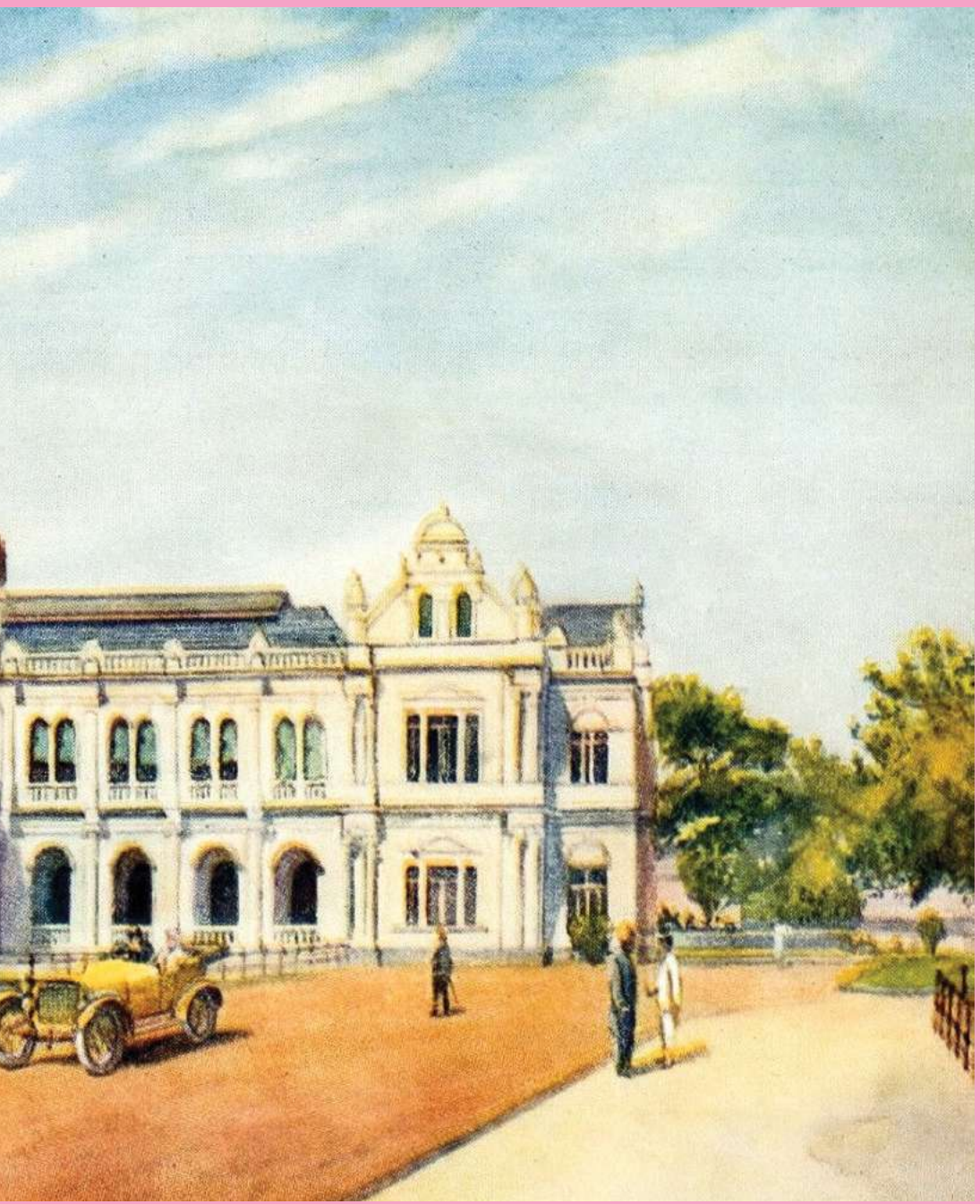
These are not all-encompassing either, and given the three levels of government we have in Malaysia, overlaps and veiled functions tend to abound. How is sewage to be managed? The flow of surface water? Street lighting? Traffic lights? Pedestrian crossings? Hawkers and street vendors?

To sum up, urban designers and architects, seen as innovative artists who are to improve a society's urbanscape, need a dedicated and effective public sector as their inevitable curator to succeed and to excel. If the professional of the one syncs with the other, then you have a good mix going, and we can expect an exhilarating exhibition to unfold.

RECOGNISING PENANG'S GLOBAL LEGACY AROUND ITS ESPLANADE

CAPTIONS

1. Today's City Hall was once called the Municipal Building or the Municipal Offices. It was occupied on 1 April 1903. This postcard is likely from the 1920s, but before 1929. The yellow sports car looks like a 1920 Stutz Bearcat.



1

BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

IN EARLY MAY, I was invited to the annual state-level Vaisakhi festival at Fort Cornwallis by the Sikh community. The choice of the fort as an annual venue for this holy day is symbolic. In 1881, one of the rooms of the fort was actually used as a gurdwara by a contingent of Sikh policemen newly stationed there.

Sunset was half an hour away, and mercifully, there was a slight breeze blowing seawards on that blisteringly hot day. As the dignitaries had not yet arrived, I decided to walk around the ramparts of this 238-year-old fort to soak in the view. From this elevated perspective, I came to appreciate how the rich tapestry of Penang's history is intricately woven into the narratives of the heritage buildings that grace the Esplanade.

FORT CORNWALLIS

On 15 July 1786, Captain Francis Light and his small flotilla of three ships, the *Eliza*, *Prince Henry* and *Speedwell*, were anchored off the small islet of Pulau Tikus. They had just arrived from Kedah right after the sultan agreed conditionally to let the British East India Company occupy Pulau Pinang in exchange for military protection.

Two days later, Captain Light landed on a flat sandy cape called Tanjung Penaga—just across the large bay from where he had anchored—to start the new settlement. Light spent the rest of the month clearing the promontory and erected a flagstaff. On 11 August—the eve of the Prince of Wales' birthday—he formally took possession of the island. The new settlement was called Prince of Wales Island. A wooden fort was also built using local Nibong wood.

10 years earlier, on 4 July 1776, a group of British colonies in the New World, calling themselves the "13 United States of America", formally declared their independence from the rule of the British monarch, King George III. One of the things that instigated the rebellion was something quintessentially British—tea. The American colonists felt outraged when the East India Company was allowed to sell tea from China to them without paying taxes. The rebellion continued until 1781, when, at the Siege of Yorktown in Virginia, General Charles Cornwallis was forced to surrender to the leader of the French-supported rebels, General George Washington.

Despite this humiliating defeat, Cornwallis was later knighted and made Governor-General of Bengal in 1786. Captain Light named his new fort and town after the newly promoted Lord Cornwallis and the British monarch respectively; a move likely calculated to ingratiate him with them. The fort, like its namesake, is not known for its military accomplishments—it has never seen a day of actual battle. The settlement itself would soon become a pit stop for ships sailing to China to obtain tea.

By 1793, Captain Light had started to rebuild the fort in stone. In France that same year, a young and talented army commander from Corsica led the Republican forces to victory by capturing Toulon, forcing the combined British and Spanish fleet who were aiding the Royalists to flee. By 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte had declared himself Emperor of France. The British, wary of Napoleon's intentions in the Far East, further strengthened Fort Cornwallis and added a moat with drawbridges. The brickwork structure was completed to what we see today. There is now also a modern signal mast and lighthouse located on the northeast bastion of Fort Cornwallis.

In 1882, the first lighthouse—a fabricated metal tower on a masonry base—was erected here. Two years later, it was relocated to Pulau Rimau and has been there ever since. The present fort lighthouse is from 1914.

TOWN HALL

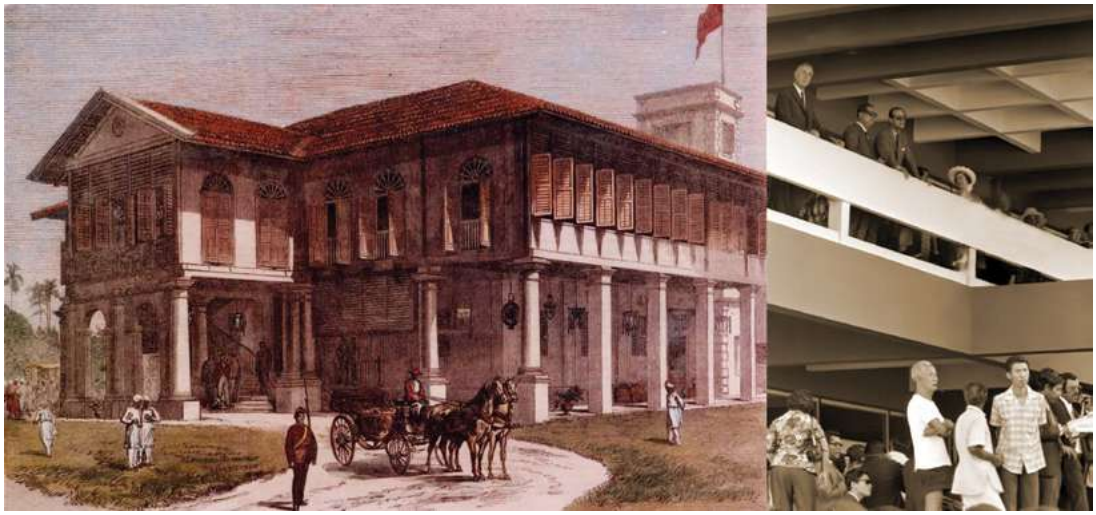
The western side of the fort faces Padang Kota Lama (Old Fort Field), a large public recreation space, which was the original Esplanade. An esplanade, in military terms, refers to a piece of empty land between a fortification and the first buildings of the town. However, most Penangites call the nearby seaside promenade the Esplanade. During the early days, the *sepoys* (Indian soldiers) of the East India Company were encamped here. The field later served as a parade and cricket ground.

Today, at the southwest corner of Padang Kota Lama, stands the Town Hall. The cornerstone for this was laid by then-Governor Colonel (later Sir) Archibald Anson, on New Year's Day 1879, and when General Ulysses S. Grant visited Penang just two months later, it was reported that construction had already commenced. It would be completed by August 1880. The retired US President had embarked on a round-the-world trip soon after leaving office. One of the first Chinese Justices of the Peace, the wealthy Penang merchant and planter, Koh Seang Tat, was chosen by the Chinese mercantile community to read an address to the visiting General.

Koh was the great-grandson of Che Wan (Koh Lay Huan) who had met Captain Light at the founding of George Town. He lived in a magnificent residence behind the Town Hall that was then being built. The English-educated Tat—as he was known to his European friends including Colonel Anson—delivered his speech without a translator, thus becoming the first Chinese person to directly address a former US President [See *Penang Monthly* December 2022 and January 2023 issues].

Tat was no stranger to meeting and hosting world-famous dignitaries. A decade

2



3

4

5

6

earlier, in 1869, Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, had visited Penang. The only place deemed grand enough to host the royal tourist—no less than the son of Queen Victoria—was Tat's opulent home, ever since known as Edinburgh House.

LIGHT STREET

The appropriately named Light Street was the first thoroughfare to be lit by electric lighting in British Malaya. This street, running parallel to the fort's southern wall and moat (which is now restored) and one of George Town's earliest roads, was of course named after Captain Light. At No.1 Light Street, there stands an elegant bungalow, now a branch of Hong Leong Bank. Built in the later part of the 19th century, it was once the home of Foo Tye Sin, a wealthy Penang merchant and Tat's business partner. Their joint firm was called Tye Sin Tat & Co. During Foo's time, the western side of his house faced the Victoria and Albert Hotel. In 1928, the present Chinese Chamber of Commerce building was constructed over the hotel, by then called Central Hotel.

CITY HALL

To the right of the Town Hall stands its more ornate neighbour, the somewhat confusingly named City Hall. The former was originally meant to be a building for the enjoyment of the public. However, upon its completion, the ground floor was occupied by the municipal offices to the annoyance of the ratepayers, who complained about it bitterly. The municipality later commissioned a building beside the Town Hall to house its offices.

Completed on 1 April 1903, the building was quietly occupied without the usual fanfare and formalities. It was known as the Municipal Offices until 1957, when Queen Elizabeth II granted George Town its city status—a good 15 years before KL gained similar recognition. The building has since been known as City Hall.

2. Location of the heritage buildings described in this article. The red lines show the hidden geometrical relationship between them, which seems to use the centre of Fort Cornwallis as reference point. The fort, started as a wooden stockade by Captain Light, is the earliest substantial building on the settlement.

3. Left: A sketch based on an actual photo in the Penang Museum of Koh Seang Tat's house when the Duke of Edinburgh was staying there. It was known as Edinburgh House thereafter. Right: In 1972, Queen Elizabeth II (fourth person from the left on the upper level), seen here at the then-newly completed Dewan Sri Pinang.

4. The Fort Cornwallis Lighthouse was established in 1882 but the current design is from 1914. It is complemented by a massive ship-like signal mast, the successor of the original flagstaff erected by Captain Light in 1786. The lighthouse is the second oldest in the country.

5. Fort Cornwallis and Light Street in 1869 as seen from the tower of Koh Seang Tat's Edinburgh House, then one of the tallest structures in George Town. The visiting Duke of Edinburgh who stayed there almost certainly saw Fort Cornwallis and the Esplanade from this viewpoint.

6. Photo of the Town Hall near completion, probably sometime in 1880. The foundation stone was laid by Colonel (later Sir) Archibald Anson on New Year's Day 1879. The tower of Koh Seang Tat's residence can be seen here.

7

7. Left: No. 1 Light Street was Foo Tye Sin's house—Koh Seang Tat's business partner (the donor of the fountain) and the father-in-law of Cheah Chen Eok (the donor of the clock tower). Right: The old Chinese Chamber of Commerce Building was built over the site of the Central Hotel in 1928.

CLOCK TOWER

On 3 March 1972, Her Majesty's Royal Yacht, the *Britannia*, made a stop at Penang. Queen Elizabeth II was greeted on her arrival by the Governor and Chief Minister. The British monarch visited Dewan Sri Pinang, behind the Town Hall, just across the street from the Supreme Court building, where a large crowd had gathered to see her. The Queen waved to them from the balcony of this just-completed Brutalist public hall, built over Tat's Edinburgh House where her great-granduncle Prince Alfred had once stayed.

At the junction of Light Street and Beach Street, near the south-eastern corner of the fort, stands Penang's iconic clock tower, just where Her Highness would have appeared on coming out from Swettenham Pier. The Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower, as it is officially called, was gifted to the town by Cheah Chen Eok to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, who in 1897 was then the longest reigning British monarch. Queen Elizabeth II's reign would later surpass her great-great grandmother's in length before she died in 2022.

Cheah was an illustrious Penang businessman and philanthropist who was also a son-in-law to Foo Tye Sin. An idea for a memorial clock tower was first mooted by Tat a few years earlier, but it failed to take off. By the time Chen Eok's clock was completed, Queen Victoria had already passed away. On the evening of Thursday, 24 July 1902, this clock tower was officially handed over to the town by Cheah in a ceremony presided over by the President of the municipality, James Wilson Halifax. He told the crowd that the town now had "three public gifts"—Tat's fountain beside the Town Hall (which still stands today), Cheah Tek Soon's Bandstand on the Esplanade and Chen Eok's clock tower.

The band played "Rule Britannia", which was "sung lustily" by the crowd as "the British flag was floated over the Tower". Cheah then told the attendees that the Queen's reign was "to be kept in mind" by the symbolic height of the clock placed "60ft above the ground", each foot representing a year of her rule. At 6pm, "the chimes", ringing out the Westminster Quarters, "were rung and sounded very pretty".

The octagonal clock tower was designed by Robert Pierce, who was Municipal Engineer in Penang and Singapore, while the construction was done by Lee Ah Kong under the supervision of C.W. Barnett. At the base was a circular basin, 28ft in diameter, and a drinking trough. Anwar Fazal, who once served as Assistant Secretary of the City Council, shared with me that the tower's design harbours a secret that has been hidden in plain sight.

He had once come across the original design documents which showed that each floor represented a major civilisation within Queen Victoria's dominion: the dome and belfry—Islam; the clock floor—Indian; the chamber floor—European; and the ground floor—Chinese. The clock tower stands today as an excellent emblem of George Town's living cosmopolitan heritage, reflecting Penang's rich tapestry of cultural influences and its enduring connection to its global past.

9

8. Left: Each section of the Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower represents the major civilisations within the Queen's dominion. Right: The opening ceremony on 24 July 1902, five minutes before the bells were rung for the first time at six o'clock. The press reported that the Union Jack was hoisted and a "photograph of the tower with the assembly was then taken as it stood".

9. View of the clock tower (c. 1910s) as seen along Fort Road (now Jalan Tun Syed Sheh Barakbah) and the eastern moat of Fort Cornwallis toward the junction of Light Street and Beach Street. The building behind the clock tower is King Edward Place. In 1921, the moat was filled due to public health concerns.

8

9

REFERENCES

1. Anwar Fazal (2023), "Design elements of the memorial clock tower". Personal communications in person, 13 May 2024.

2. Arunajeet Kaur (2020), "Police Gurdwaras of the Straits Settlements and the Malay States (1874-1957)", Journal of Sikh & Punjāb Studies, Volume 27, Number 1 - Spring 2020

3. City Council of George Town (1966), "Penang Past and Present 1786 - 1963"

4. Eugene Quah Ter-Neng (2022), "General on the Great Hill: US Civil War Hero Visits Penang – Part 1", *Penang Monthly*, December 2022

5. Eugene Quah Ter-Neng (2023), "General on the Great Hill: US Civil War Hero Visits Penang – Part 2", *Penang Monthly*, January 2023

6. Eugene Quah Ter-Neng (2023), "Penang Hill: A Natural Resource That Shaped the Settlement", *Penang Monthly*, October 2023

7. James Richardson Logan (1850), "Extracts from Journal of Captain F. Light", Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia, Volume 4, pg. 629-632

8. Loh Wei Leng, et al., eds. (2013), "Biographical Dictionary of Mercantile Personalities of Penang"

9. Marcus Langdon (2013), Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, 1805-1830.Volume 1 - Ships, Men and Mansions"

10. Marcus Langdon (2015), "George Town's Historic Commercial & Civic Precincts"

11. Marcus Langdon (2015), "Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India 1805-1830, Volume 2, Fire, Spice and Edifice"

12. *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* (1902), "Penang's New Clock Tower", 24 July 1902, Page 3

13. Rollin Bonney (1971), "Kedah 1771-1821: The Search for Security"

14. *The Straits Budget* (1948), "Time Needs Money", 21 October 1948, Page 7

15. William Dalrymple (2019), "The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company"

16. George Town Conservation & Development Corporation (2019), "Dewan Sri Pinang - CMP"

17. Wu Xiao An (2010), "Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882-1941: Kedah and Penang"

IMAGE SOURCES

1. Public Domain. Author's collection.

2. Google Maps. Overlay by Eugene Quah Ter-Neng

3. Courtesy of the Penang State Museum, Queen Elizabeth II photo (Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia, Resource ID: 722617)

4. Eugene Quah Ter-Neng

5. Public Domain. Royal Collection Trust. Photo album gifted to the duke during his visit to Penang.

6. Public Domain photo via Ganesh Kolandaveloo

7. Ganesh Kolandaveloo (Foo Tye Sin's house), Eric Yeoh Kok Ming (Chinese Chamber of Commerce Building)

8. Infographic: Eugene Quah Ter-Neng, Info: Anwar Fazal, former Assistant Secretary of the City Council, based on unpublished design documents sighted by him.

9. Public Domain

EUGENE QUAH is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called "Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang". He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.

1

IMAGINE A GEORGE TOWN

BY
TAN
CHENG
KEAT

IT WAS A fine morning when my metro train arrived at the iconic Flinders Street station. The weather had started to get a bit chilly as we entered the winter season. Upon coming out of the majestic Edwardian Free Style station building, I waited patiently at the traffic light right in front of the exit. The wait was not long as the traffic system in Melbourne is pedestrian friendly, meaning shorter waiting intervals with sufficient crossing time.

I crossed the wide road with two-way traffic and a tram route in between with no hassle, and headed north on foot for about 10 minutes to reach my favourite restaurant in the city: Lulu's Char Koay Teow! It serves the best and most authentic Penang Char Koay Teow I have ever had in Melbourne. Walking along Elizabeth Street from the train station was pleasant as I passed rows of shops and restaurants. The occasional street buskers along the way made my jour-ney even more enjoyable. For those who are lazy to walk, there is always the option of the free tram system within the Central Business District (CBD) zone.

After pampering myself with an extra spicy Duck Egg Char Koay Teow and a hot cup of Malaysian Kopi, I walked further north for another 15 minutes to Queen Victoria Market, the largest open-air market in the Southern Hemisphere. Again, the tram option is still available if I were lazy to walk. Walking around the market's huge floor space to burn the extra calories that I had just consumed, I checked out the wide variety of fresh, quality produce on display.

From the market, I headed south to the State Library of Victoria. After finishing a lazy afternoon read with a cup of mocha without sugar, the free tram service took me further south to the other end of Melbourne's CBD, where I checked out the latest exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria. I can easily spend at least two hours in this building just admiring the artworks.

2

3

It was sunset by the time I finished my gallery tour—perfect timing to take an evening walk along Yarra River and finish the day with a nice dinner at Southbank before catching the next available train home.

The above itinerary shows that anyone can easily spend the entire day in Melbourne doing different things at ease without driving, simply relying on trains, trams and a pair of decent shoes. This is made possible thanks to the good public transport system that connects the surrounding suburbs to the city centre, complemented by a good network of pedestrian footpaths and trams serving all the different attractions within the CBD.

Melbourne is furthermore a pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly city, with wide footpaths and good bicycle lanes. To discourage people from driving into the city, a 40km/h speed

CAPTIONS

1. Flinders Street Station.
2. The National Gallery of Victoria.
3. Southbank next to Yarra River with spacious footpath.
4. A typical five-footway in George Town.
5. Part of Penang's Esplanade seawall walkway.

TAN CHENG KEAT is a nostalgic Penangite based in Melbourne who believes that reading and sketching are the best vitamins for the mind. Penang's architecture and streetscapes are his favourite subjects to draw.

WELCOMING OF PEDESTRIANS

limit is imposed, with a traffic light system that gives priority to the pedestrians. Traffic light cameras are everywhere to catch any red light offences—and the fines are substantial. It is also very difficult to find a parking spot within the city, and even if you do find one, parking fees are exorbitant. It makes sense then to just take the public transport and walk. It is healthier too.

Let us now turn our attention to Penang. I did a rough measure on Google Maps and was surprised to discover that the main heritage enclave of George Town has about the same area as Melbourne's CBD. Like Melbourne, George Town has no shortage of interesting places and is definitely a great place to be. We have good eating places (Chulia, Campbell and Kimberley Street), lively markets (Chowrasta Market), museums, street art, parks and a promenade (Esplanade).

Let us see what it would feel like if we were to do all the activities in George Town without driving. Assuming that I live in Sungai Ara, I do not think I will take public transport going into the city due to its unreliable schedules. Like the majority of people in Penang, I would most likely drive my own car to Komtar and park at the multi-storey carpark at First Avenue Mall (because it is by far better maintained than the one at Prangin Mall). I would then walk across the sky bridge from First Avenue to the old Komtar podium; meander through a labyrinth of shops selling mobile phones and computers; walk past KFC at Level 3 to the Urban Transformation Centre (UTC) public amenities centre (formerly the Super Komtar department store); take the escalator down to the ground floor and exit to Komtar Walk.

I would now find myself at a crossroads. I have two choices: use the Octopus pedestrian crossing, or take a short cut—crossing Jalan Dr. Lim Chwee Leong as and when I sense that my sprint across the road can beat the speed of the oncoming car turning in from Penang Road. The GPS in my head calculates that this is the shortest route to take, although I may risk my life.

All these just to walk across the busy traffic from Komtar! Just imagine what else I have to go through if I decide to walk to places like Tho Yuen for lunch, Armenian Street to snap pictures of the street art, or the Esplanade for a walk. After that, it will be an equally arduous journey back to Komtar to pick up my car.

4

5

The truth is, there is no way I would go to all these places on foot for one major reason—the absence of a well-connected footpath network under the intensely hot tropical sun. In Penang, footpaths tend to suddenly vanish and people find themselves on streets with busy traffic. The condition of the footpath itself also needs more care and maintenance to prevent people from tripping over the uneven surfaces. In addition, there is not enough trees and covered walkways to make the walking experience more enjoyable.

Since 2008, more effort has been put into preserving the architecture of individual heritage buildings. However, there is an absence of any comprehensive plan to improve and enhance pedestrians' experience within the core heritage precinct. Our unique five-footways are an ingenious invention designed to enable people to move around the city protected from the natural elements. Unfortunately, individual residents and business owners have claimed the space for themselves by blocking the passageways with their motorbikes, planter boxes, plastic chairs, etc.

From the perspective of public policy, the five-footway is a low hanging fruit to improve visitors' experience of the city. Authorities should look into reclaiming this valuable public space. George Town has huge potential to be a pedestrian-friendly city; it is small enough and is packed with rich cultural and historical elements.

Melbourne is vibrant because it has an extensive public transport network that brings in people from all over the greater metro areas. It also has a comprehensive internal network within the CBD that links all its major attractions and landmarks. Don't forget that the area of George Town is about the same as Melbourne's CBD—I take this as a positive sign that it is indeed possible to make George Town a walking city. We are heading in the right direction with the announcement of the upcoming Mutiara Line that will definitely bring more people into our unique UNESCO World Heritage Site. The next challenge, however, will be to have a comprehensive approach in improving the walking experience within George Town by increasing the coverage area of footpaths and providing shade through landscaping or covered walkways.

Penang's strength lies in the rich cultural and historical architecture that still stands in the urban centre. While most heritage buildings have been knocked down to give way to skyscrapers in most modern cities including Melbourne, George Town's historical core remains largely intact. The challenge is to look at this area as a whole and seriously start focusing more on people's experience during their visits to this beautiful city that we are all so proud of. It is time to unlock the hidden potentials of George Town and transform it into a truly livable global city.

SPACES, VIGOUR

KEEPING GEORGE TOWN'S HISTORY PALPABLE

BY LAURENCE LOH

LAURENCE LOH is an amply awarded architect whose most noted project is the world-renowned Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion in Penang, which won the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards in 2000 for the "Most Excellent Project". In 2008, his restoration of Merdeka Stadium in KL, Malaysia's Stadium of Independence, was conferred the UNESCO "Award of Excellence", and his restoration of Suffolk House in Penang, the only surviving Anglo-Indian Georgian mansion in South-East Asia, was accorded the UNESCO "Award of Distinction".

Sketch by Tan Cheng Keat

& FUNDING

CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION of the highest order descended upon the streets of George Town in July 2008 as it was conferred the honorary title of World Heritage Site through the agency of UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee. The Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)[1] embedded in the place and its setting is now globally recognised. The proponents of "bringing world class ideas home", such as the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) and a small group of conservation experts, had been promoting the listing of George Town by UNESCO since the mid-1990s.

In subsequent years, the image of a once worn-out city defined by its rows of traditional shophouses that form strong street edges on both sides of its narrow lanes was rejuvenated. This happened through the collective efforts of the private sector, supported in great part by the George Town Grants Programme (GTGP), and administered by Think City Sdn Bhd, a special-purpose vehicle created by Khazanah Nasional Berhad in 2009. George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), established in 2010 by the state government, provided RM3mil for the restoration of Category II shophouses.

Building by building, ensemble by ensemble, hundreds of double-storey houses, once neglected because of rent control imposed after World War II, were refurbished and conserved. The impetus grew and renewal slowly transformed the look and feel of the city. Today, George Town has become a delightful and vibrant place to visit.

16 years later, it is a timely signal to ponder over the rate of success and change.

TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC REALM TO RECOVER HISTORICAL IDENTITY

Being inscribed on the World Heritage List has directed public attention towards the value of heritage assets within the historic core of the city. There has been a visible transformation through urban renewal within the World Heritage Site and its wider setting; the adaptive reuse of heritage assets for commercial purposes has not involved the need to mobilise huge sums of money to redevelop properties.

The success, multiplier effect and impact of the George Town Grants Programme combined with co-investments by private building owners and Chinese clan associations have aided the repair and revitalisation of prominent properties in the private domain. The restored eclectic façades of the shophouses that modulated street edges and conversed with the thoroughfares have come to frame a unique urban identity once lost to neglect, disrepair and dilapidation. What was once surrendered to the unforgiving elements of weather has been given a new lease of life.

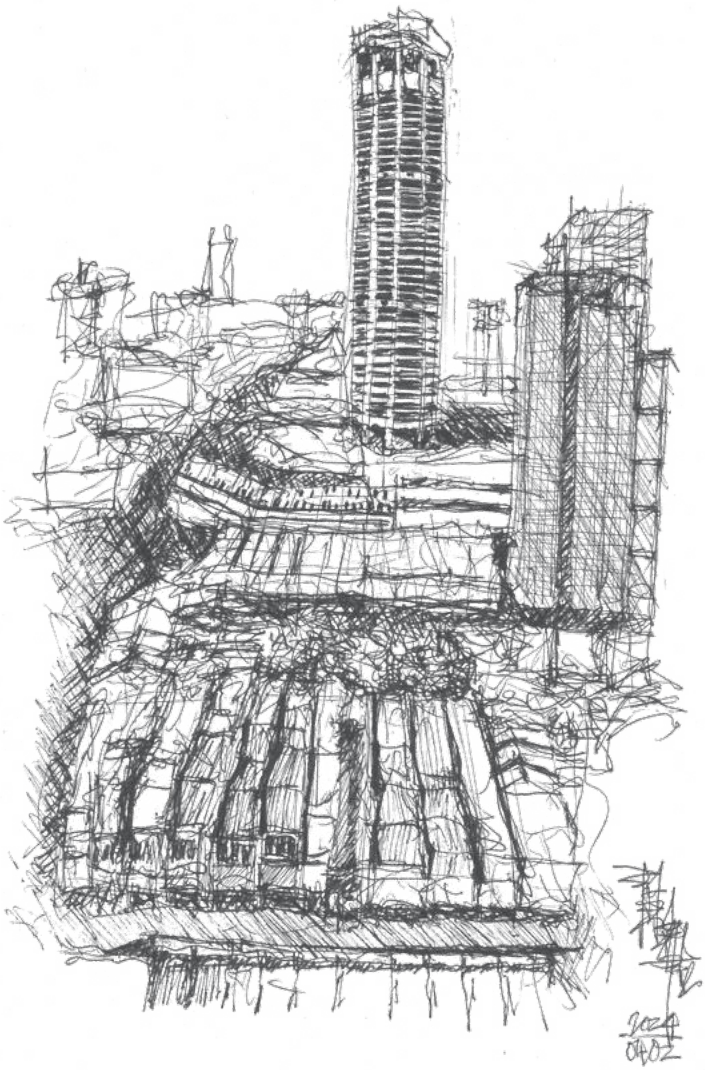
The momentum spilt over into the public realm, where strides of notable size and impact happened through private-public partnerships between the state government, the Penang Island City Council (MBPP) and Think City—with help and expertise provided by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). The lesson learnt from the World Heritage exercise is that by placing our trust in a concept that has saved many a historic city throughout the world, urban revitalisation has taken place in George Town, and the historical identity of the place has been refreshed.

The public realm refers to the interface between and around buildings that are publicly accessible beyond the boundaries of private properties—outdoor spaces consisting of streets and back lanes, squares, parks, open spaces, the foreshore and harbour front; and indoor spaces like arcades, the halls of public buildings, ferry stations and most importantly, the traditional five-footways. High visibility achievements include Armenian Park, tree planting on the central median of Carnarvon Street, China Street Ghaut, the Esplanade and Light Street abutting it, the Fountain Garden next to the MBPP Town Hall, Fort Cornwallis and its west and south moats, and the recently completed North Seawall.

The document that triggered investments in the public realm was a study carried out at the end of 2013, when Think City signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with AKTC to produce the George Town Strategic Master Plan.

The recommendations were accepted by the state, and the Plan incorporated into the Special Area Plan (SAP) as an addendum called the "George Town Action Plan" (GTAP), which recognised how the revitalisation and upgrading of the public realm would create sustainable and impactful change. It would heighten appreciation of the enhanced heritage landscape by employing proper urban design guidelines, and by returning the waterfront to the people and improving public amenities. Importantly, it advocates a structured, planned sequence of inclusive urban interventions to make George Town a liveable city.

Sketch by Tan Cheng Keat



A key area is the combined North and East Seafronts, which consist of major government-owned properties, open spaces, a harbour complete with wharves and godowns, the cross-channel ferry terminal, and Fort Cornwallis. The North Seafront became the primary focus, with Fort Cornwallis as one of the critical sites to tackle.

The tipping point will happen this July with the recovery of Penang's most significant early cultural landscape. It will coincide with the George Town World Heritage Day celebrations, when the construction hoarding comes down and the South Moat of Fort Cornwallis facing Light Street and the State Assembly building is unveiled, completing the historic connection with the North Seafront, the Queen Victoria Memorial Clock and Swettenham Pier—all reminiscent of 19th-century George Town. This is a sequel to the completion of the North Seawall undertaken earlier by the MBPP and a team of consultants, with special supervision and design undertaken by the AKTC team led by Francesco Siravo and Giovanni Santo, head of Think City's Master Builder team.

Within a decade, the team has introduced materials and techniques for traditional building in the tropics—where humidity and heat are often high—utilising only locally produced materials to reduce the carbon footprint of their projects.

In the moat construction around Fort Cornwallis, necessity was the mother of invention. When lumbered with a contractor who had no track record in conserving

historic structures, the master builder formulated a range of special premixed aggregates for lime mortar which was prepacked and delivered to the site. It reduced the complex design of the moat into the equivalent of "painting by numbers". This directly paved the way for cultural conservation sustainability as a marketing concept to be introduced to a dwindling conservation contracting market. By closing the loop, a fresh conservation paradigm was invented.

The high-profile enhancement of the public realm with Fort Cornwallis as the centrepiece, hinging between the North and East Seafronts, will deepen what the OUV regards as the priceless and irreplaceable assets of the cultural and natural heritage.[2] Here, George Town continues as an exceptional example of a multi-cultural trading town in East and Southeast Asia, forged from the exchanges of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures, and the colonial power of Britain for almost 230 years, with their imprints on the architecture and urban form, technology and monumental art. The fact that the public realm, by default, covers a greater area and distance, provides the recovery of its historical identity with a greater chance of success.

Positive action and promotion, together with the injection of funds from state and federal agencies to restore the dilapidated godowns on the East Seafront, will accelerate renewal. Without a doubt, this is one of the most concrete ways to safeguard the OUV of the site.

ELEVATING HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

The prestige that comes with a well-crafted enhancement of the public realm is the road to success. The ongoing Fort Cornwallis conservation project will transform an underwhelming site (which recently received international brickbats for being the second "Most Boring Tourist Attraction in Southeast Asia")[3], into Penang's major landmark.

If the state authorities and agencies earnestly wish to elevate heritage management to a higher plane, they have to look into the disparities between management and planning standards within the UNESCO World Heritage Site and the wider setting. On the one hand, inscription on the World Heritage List has brought innumerable praises to Penang on a regular basis throughout the last 16 years. On the other hand, it sacrifices its reputation as the first mover in conservation advocacy and good practice by approving physical mockeries of conservation within the wider setting. For instance, I consider the approval for an actual heritage building that now sits inside a high-rise building behind a glazed shopfront—totally disconnected from the world, tombed where it once stood proud and free—a grave misstep. How does placing a building in a hermetically sealed glass box send the right signal to future generations about why we are conserving our past?

In tandem with this imperative, the principle of sustainable use as defined in the UNESCO Operational Guidelines[4] should apply, specifically:

> "World Heritage properties may sustain biological and cultural diversity and provide ecosystem services and other benefits, which may contribute to environmental and cultural sustainability. Properties may support a variety of ongoing and proposed uses that are ecologically and culturally sustainable and which may enhance the quality of life and wellbeing of communities concerned. The State Party and its partners must ensure their use is equitable and fully respects the Outstanding Universal Value of the property. For some properties, human use would not be appropriate. Legislation, policies and strategies affecting World Heritage properties should ensure the protection of the Outstanding Universal Value, support the wider conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and promote and encourage the effective, inclusive and equitable participation of the communities, indigenous peoples and other stakeholders concerned with the property as necessary conditions to its sustainable protection, conservation, management and presentation."

The pathway to sustainable development has been set with the promotion of the UNESCO 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. In the realm of climate adaptation, Penang is first in line in Malaysia to be awarded USD10mil from the World Bank Adaptation Fund to mobilise the resources of the MBPP, the Department of Drainage and Irrigation and Think City to undertake climate adaptation programmes related to urban greening, stormwater management, social resilience and institutional capacity.

Urban greening will look at introducing new tree-lined streets, pocket parks, green façades and green roofs, and urban agriculture within the World Heritage Site. Stormwater management will look at blue-green corridors, swales and infiltration wells, and upstream retention ponds. Social resilience programmes will aim to reduce gender vulnerability asymmetry for women and girls, as well as include youth and schools programmes. Lastly, building institutional capacity will pioneer the use of nature-based solutions.[5]

The State Heritage Commissioner appointed under the State of Penang Heritage Enactment 2011 should also initiate a serious planning exercise to incorporate the Historic Urban Landscape[6] (HUL) approach into the pending Local Plan for Penang Island. As an urgent matter, a state list identifying heritage sites state-wide should be compiled in a transparent manner and subsequently gazetted. It was unfortunate that the consultants appointed to draft the Local Plan 2030 were not up to par, leading to thousands of objections in a public consultation exercise record. The draft had to be withdrawn to make way for a fresh plan, giving the authorities a second chance to get the heritage listing correct.

The state appointee should solicit through public engagement the views of stakeholders on their prerogative to advise and for consideration for the wider setting

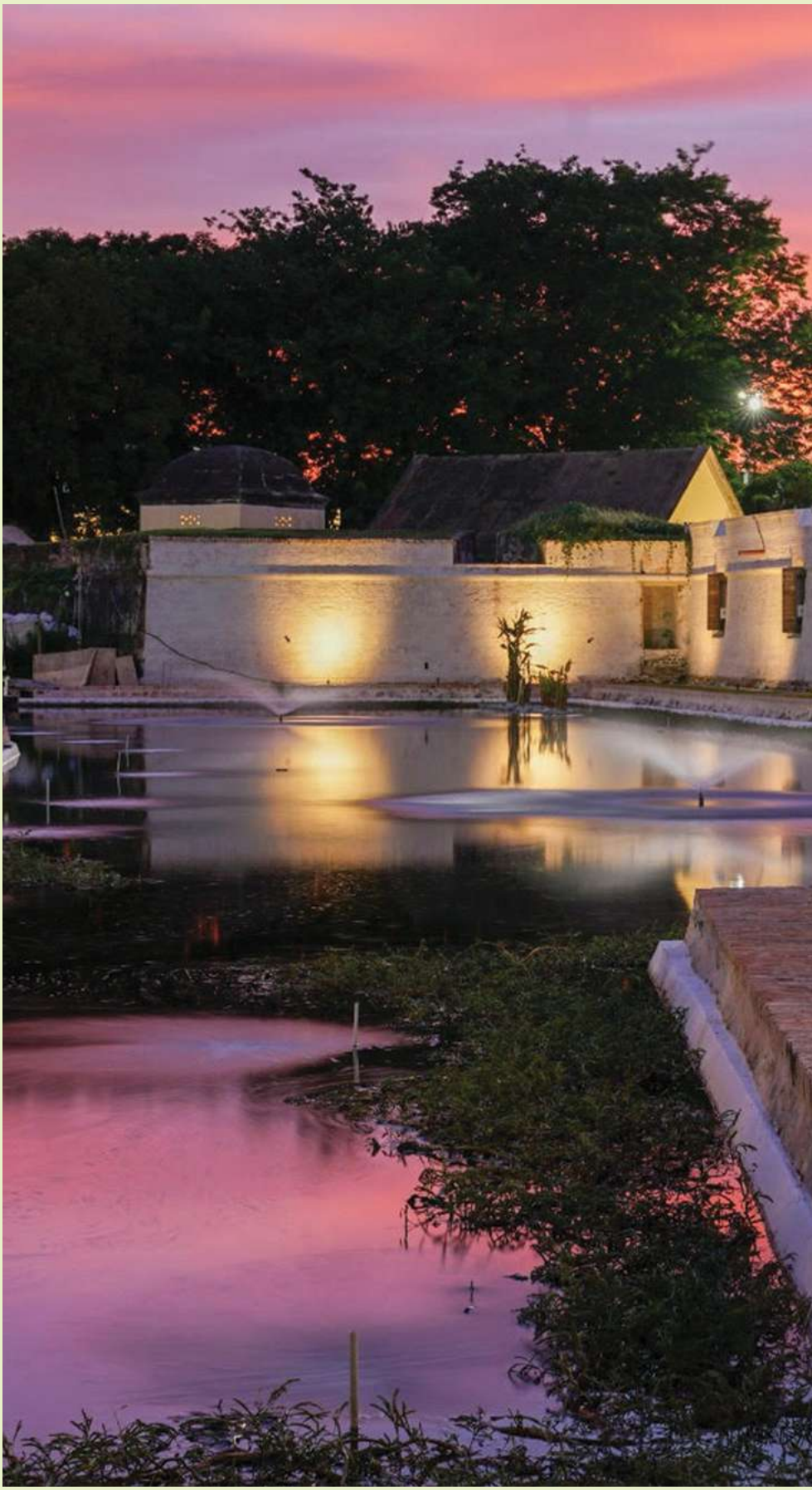
1

(as defined in Paragraph 112 of the Operational Guidelines) to be given in respect of new planning initiatives. It states:

> "An integrated approach to planning and management is essential to guide the evolution of properties over time and to ensure maintenance of all aspects of their Outstanding Universal Value. This approach goes beyond the property to include any buffer zone(s), as well as the wider setting. The wider setting may relate to the property's topography, natural and built environment, and other elements such as infrastructure, land use patterns, spatial organization, and visual relationships. It may also include related social and cultural practices, economic processes and other intangible dimensions of heritage such as perceptions and associations. Management of the wider setting is related to its role in supporting the Outstanding Universal Value. Its effective management may also contribute to sustainable development, through harnessing the reciprocal benefits for heritage and society."

The above approach has not been developed and sufficiently socialised with stakeholders in the Structure Plan, the SAP and the initial Draft Local Plan 2030. As sustainable development and its direct correlation with climate change are clearly an expressed goal of the state and federal governments leading up to 2030, every effort should be made by all stakeholders to push the agenda. Planning is one of the most effective disciplines for managing spatial and social changes and should always be used for the common good.

There is a sense that the state is not imposing its will to propel Arts, Heritage and Culture up to a higher plane, all while other destinations have recognised that the soft power of culture and the creative arts can be a strong, stable and sustainable economic driver that benefits every level of society. The State Museum has been closed for more than a decade whilst precious treasures remain unsighted, with human resources not being productively redeployed. Funds for major crowd-pullers like the George Town Festival and the Butterworth Fringe Festival have been drastically reduced year by year until it is now a trickle, whilst Penang still awaits the emergence of a world-class performing arts venue. There are talented emerging musicians who are craving for a chance to perform in public, but opportunities are few and far between. Kudos must go to private venues like the Hin Bus Depot that keep the Penang flag flying despite having to run on its own steam. Raising the tempo and energy level will make a difference.



2

CAPTIONS

1. The Esplanade seawall.
2. The South Moat.

FOOTNOTES

[1] UNESCO, Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, Section I.B The World Heritage Convention, Paragraph 4, pg. 11; https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines (English)

[2] According to the World Heritage Convention 1972: "The cultural and natural heritage is among the priceless and irreplaceable assets, not only of each nation, but of humanity as a whole. The loss, through deterioration or disappearance, of any of these most prized assets constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all the peoples of the world. Parts of this heritage, because of their exceptional qualities, can be considered to be of "Outstanding Universal Value" and as such, worthy of special protection against the dangers which increasingly threaten them".

[3] https://worldofbuzz.com/penangs-fortcornwallis-rated-as-the-2nd-most-boring-tourist-attraction-in-southeast-asia/

[4] UNESCO, Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, Section I.B The World Heritage Convention, Paragraph 119; https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines (English).

[5] https://thinkcity.com.my/pnbcap/

[6] The Historic Urban Landscape approach, according to UNESCO, moves beyond the preservation of the physical environment, and focuses on the entire human environment with all of its tangible and intangible qualities.

PUBLIC HOUSING CAN BE APPEALING IN DESIGN

BY LEOW KWONG CHOON

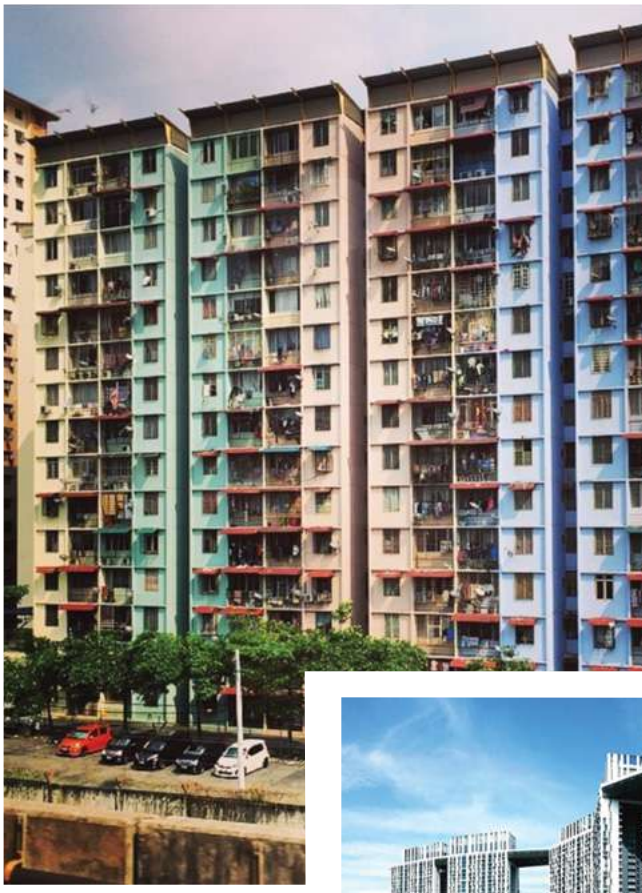
A **FREQUENT QUESTION** posed by the public and by construction industry stakeholders is, "Why is the architectural aesthetic design in so many public housing schemes so unimaginative and ugly?"

Public housing in Malaysia, like in many other countries, often appears aesthetically boring for reasons mainly related to economic, social and policy factors. If you have ever looked at any of these building blocks and wondered the same, understanding those factors can help us explore the possibility of architects pushing for more innovative designs for future public housing projects.

THE UNINSPIRING AESTHETIC: AN EXPLAINER

The frequently touted responses for poor design are:

1. Cost constraints: The obvious and most prevalent challenge is budget limitations. Budgets for such projects are often very much strained when compared to other types of housing projects since the focus is primarily on providing the maximum number of units possible within the allocated budget. This leaves little room for aesthetic considerations. A change here will require architects to find innovative ways to envision designs within financial boundaries.
2. Economies of scale: Public housing projects usually involve fairly large numbers of dwellings; and to reduce costs, public housing often relies on standardised designs and construction methods. This leads to repetitive and uninspiring architectural forms.
3. Policy and regulatory factors: Most local authorities prioritise functionality and efficiency over aesthetics. The main goal is to provide safe, affordable and secure housing.
4. Regulatory standards: Strict building codes and regulations can limit design flexibility. Compliance with these standards can lead to uniformity in design.
5. Time constraints: The need to quickly accommodate growing urban populations can pressure developers to use time-efficient, standard designs that can be rapidly deployed. This could lead to a "cookie-cutter" type of monotonous building design.
6. Administrative efficiency: The approval and construction process often favours simpler, conventional designs over more innovative and complex ones, and is geared towards saving time and costs.
7. Social and cultural factors: There might be a perception that public housing does not require the same level of architectural finesse as private developments do, leading to less emphasis on creativity in the design. Necessary elements like



1

2

3

CAPTIONS

1. An example of public housing in Malaysia.
2. An example of an imaginative public design in the region with similar environmental conditions.
3. An interestingly designed public housing in Singapore.
4. Vila Loca by GDP Architects won 1st prize in a recent architectural competition.

LEOW KWONG CHOON (KC LEOW) is a member of ARB and RIBA since 1988, and registered with the Malaysian Architect Institution (LAM) and the Malaysian Architectural Association (PAM) in 1997 before becoming the PAM Northern Chapter Chairman 2021-2023. He founded KCLA DESIGN in 2008 with projects in healthcare, education, hotels and high-end residences under his belt.

sun shading, drying areas, and spaces for services are not incorporated, resulting in the owners or tenants adding these items at a later stage, which can make the building and its environment appear visually messy and uncoordinated.

8. Community integration: Simple designs are often chosen for easy blending into the existing urban fabric. There is a tendency for the housing blocks to look the same to avoid possible social or cultural disruption. This approach can make the development look monotonous.

THE PATHWAY FORWARD

Now that we have breezed through some reasons why public housing tends to be especially uninspiring, allow me to inject inspiration to show that there is room for creativity and innovation when it comes to designing for those who earn less than the average Malaysian. After all, that goal is essential to architectural design thinking. Creativity provides new ideas and innovation allows those ideas to become reality.

The creative use and detailing of materials in the design can help enhance the aesthetics of buildings. The sustainable use of materials is highly encouraged and regarded, especially if these are locally sourced. Adopting recycled or sustainable materials is one way to introduce unique textures and forms while maintaining cost-effectiveness. To start, architects need to work with industry experts and suppliers of new materials to master and understand their application in construction. This process can help produce new and innovative design aesthetics for the buildings.

Currently, most design and construction of public housing utilise traditional reinforced concrete structures with masonry, external enclosures and internal partitions. However, modular or prefabricated construction methods can offer flexibility in design and lower costs, allowing for more creativity. Modular construction is not a new concept and was largely used during the post-war period in Europe both for being cost-efficient and for shortening construction time.

To break the monotony mentioned earlier, design diversity is needed. Introducing variations in building façades, colours and layouts can bring variations without significantly increasing costs. Experimenting with façade treatments such as shading devices, balconies and mixed materials can add depth and interest to the buildings. Playing with light and shadow can also give depth and visual interest to the elevational design of the buildings.

The outside should also reflect whoever lives within its walls. It can be wise to engage future residents in the design process. Public housing should be community-oriented with adequate communal spaces. Before the pencil hits the bumwad, input from its future occupants may help the architect design housing that better reflects their needs and aspirations, adding a personal touch to the aesthetics.

Designing with sensitivity to the local culture and to community needs can produce more meaningful and engaging public spaces too. Socially, inputs from residents will bring a sense of ownership to the spaces and building elements, and it is more likely that these spaces would then be better looked after by the community.

Integrating services and amenities like a playground, a multipurpose hall, exercise areas, shops and other community-related activity spots to the design of a development can create a vibrant, multi-use environment that enhances the living experience. If done well, the whole development could look visually coherent.

Shared green and communal spaces also encourage community interaction and add aesthetic value. Weaving greenery into the building design can enhance visual appeal and improve environmental sustainability. However, careful consideration must be paid to the maintenance of these items in the long run.

One path to aid maintenance is smart design. With digital solutions readily available today, one could move away from the old construct and make full use of smart technology. Using the latest technologies may also provide avenues to construct energy-efficient systems and to make adaptive re-use of spaces, which can enhance both functionality and aesthetics.

However, architecturally appealing public housing will not happen naturally. Governments and local authorities should encourage innovative designs by offering incentives or recognition for architectural excellence in public housing. Open competitions are also a method that can elicit creative and innovative designs in public housing.

A recent architectural competition organised by Gamuda Land highlighted the ability and availability of Malaysian design talents in designing interesting public housing. The first prize was awarded to GDP Architects, whose design, named Vila Loca, featured a 50-storey public housing complete with apartment units and co-living pods with communal living space.

By understanding the reasons for poor designs in public housing and investigating the possible ways forward, architects and planners can move towards more creative and aesthetically pleasing public housing designs that not only meet the practical needs of the residents, but also enrich the living environment and community experiences.

4

1

2

3

CAPTIONS

1. Terracotta roofs of George Town.

2. A five-footway linking the heritage homes that line George Town.

3. Colourful and playful tiles that can be found in heritage shophouses.

4. Gable ends are shaped to express the five Chinese elements—metal, wood, water, fire and earth.

5. The six main shophouse styles in George Town. From left: Early Penang style (1790s–1850s), Southern Chinese Eclectic style (1840s–1910s), Early Straits Eclectic style (1890s–1920s), Late Straits Eclectic style (1910s–1930s), Art Deco style (1930s–early 1960s) and Early Modern style (1950s–1970s).

ANATOMY OF THE PENANG SHOPHOUSE

BY LIM WAN PHING

LIM WAN PHING is a freelance writer based in Penang. She has a short story collection, *Two Figures in a Car* published by Penguin SEA.

MIXED DEVELOPMENTS AND integrated communities are a trend today among property developers. But long before the shiny brochures promoting these new home concepts appeared, shophouses in George Town stood as a one-man mixed development flaunting residential, commercial, retail and entertainment outlets, all in one urban community.

Over 200 years ago, as rapid urbanisation took place at the periphery of Fort Cornwallis, the influx of migrants and settlers led to the creation of a town centre, and the shophouse form was born.

A PEEP INTO THE PAST

Defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a shop opening on to the pavement and also used as the residence of the proprietor," the shophouse is a building type found in Southeast Asia, of which Penang is thought to have the largest collection in any one location.

George Town alone has about 7,000 shophouses, where historically, a family business would operate on the ground floor, with accommodation above providing convenience, shelter and security. Simply put, a shophouse serves as a "shop" and a "house". Talk about integrated living.

Today, with a UNESCO World Heritage badge in the bag, rapid gentrification is taking place and is once again changing the landscape. It can be argued that there is now more "shop" than "house" as older residents sell up and move out, making way for boutique hotels, cafés, galleries and retail stores, among others.

TO PROTECT, SAFEGUARD AND ENHANCE

But like all cities with a rich cultural heritage, there is a balance to be struck between preserving the historical values of a property and generating economic income from repairing, renovating, conserving and adapting it for new life and new uses.

In 1791, Captain Home Popham drew a map showing that the earliest shophouses were built along the grid of streets adjacent to Fort Cornwallis. This makes present-day Lebuh Pantai (Beach Street), Lebuh King (King Street), Lebuh Penang (Penang Street) and Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling (Pitt Street) the most historic—but also the most fragile—enclave.

Enter safeguarding organisations like George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), consultants like Think City, non-governmental bodies like Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) and heritage enthusiasts like Penang Hidden Gems. Even the Municipal Council of Penang Island (MBPP) has published a detailed "Guidelines for Conservation Areas and Heritage Buildings". Architects also play a pivotal role, with one such person being the late Tan Yeow Wooi. His book, *Penang Shophouses: A Handbook of Features and Materials* (2015), now serves as an important reference guide for

4

6

7

5

6. Window shutters on a building.

7. A restored wooden door in George Town.

conservation work, and comes in especially handy for professionals, investors, property owners, landlords, tenants, contractors and interior designers.

Drawing on many years of research and practical experience, Tan outlined the evolution of Penang shophouses into six eras and styles; the Early Penang style (1790s–1850s), Southern Chinese Eclectic style (1840s–1910s), Early Straits Eclectic style (1890s–1920s), Late Straits Eclectic style (1910s–1930s), Art Deco style (1930s–early 1960s) and Early Modern style (1950s–1970s).

There are overlaps in each era, which create sub-styles. But each is starkly defined by the sign of their times. As Penang's society became more affluent with the boom in tin and rubber, simple and basic styles gave way to more ornate and gaudy ones. It returned to a more practical, minimalist style post-World War II as people recovered from hardship.

In the grand scheme of things, Penang and Malaysia may be small on the map, but the world was highly interconnected even in those days, easing the availability of materials, changing tastes and a more international outlook as time passed. For example, Paris's International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in 1925, which kick-started the Art Deco movement in Europe and the US, evidently also reached our shores. It is visible for all to see with present-day buildings like India House, Burmah Road Gospel House, Dato Kramat Market and Hin Bus Depot.

THE BARE BONES OF A SHOPHOUSE

Tan's book opens with a general overview of evolving architectural styles in Penang, but focuses mainly on the anatomy of a shophouse. With plenty of photos and sketches, it makes possible for even non-technical readers to digest the information related to roofs, gables, ceilings, beams, walls, columns, doors, shutters, windows, air wells, floor tiles, balustrades, staircases, paints, colours and finishings. He furnishes the pages with delightful details such as cooling materials used (terracotta tiles for floors and lime mortar for walls), the five types of roof gables designed according to the five elements of Chinese philosophy (gold, wood, water, fire and earth), and how the popularity of tiles evolved from six-inch European majolica ones in the 1920s to plain-coloured Japanese tiles in the 1940s to tiny mosaics in the 1960s.

Heritage shophouses, often built in a row, are the predecessors of the modern-day terraced homes—a testament to a community working and living together. The ones that came after—in the 1950s, as internationalisation and individualism crept in—evolved into a group of mixed-use shophouses designed in a block to look like a single building.

From there, the suburb was created, leading to the creation of service roads and rows of homes built behind shophouses, as found in townships like Jelutong and Air Itam. Back in the day, the archetypal shophouse played a dual role—business and residence. But as work-life balance became more important, people understandably no longer wanted to live where they worked.

Now, society's needs are changing again; and as new models of housing are being explored, we see the rise of mixed-development townships where communities can live, learn, work, play and explore healthy lifestyles in residential hubs that have commercial, retail and entertainment uses integrated or at close proximity. We see it in the up-and-coming The Light City by IJM along the Tun Dr. Lim Chong Eu Expressway. In the inner city, millennials and young couples choosing the nomad-rental lifestyle are contributing to the rise of co-living spaces and shared housing.

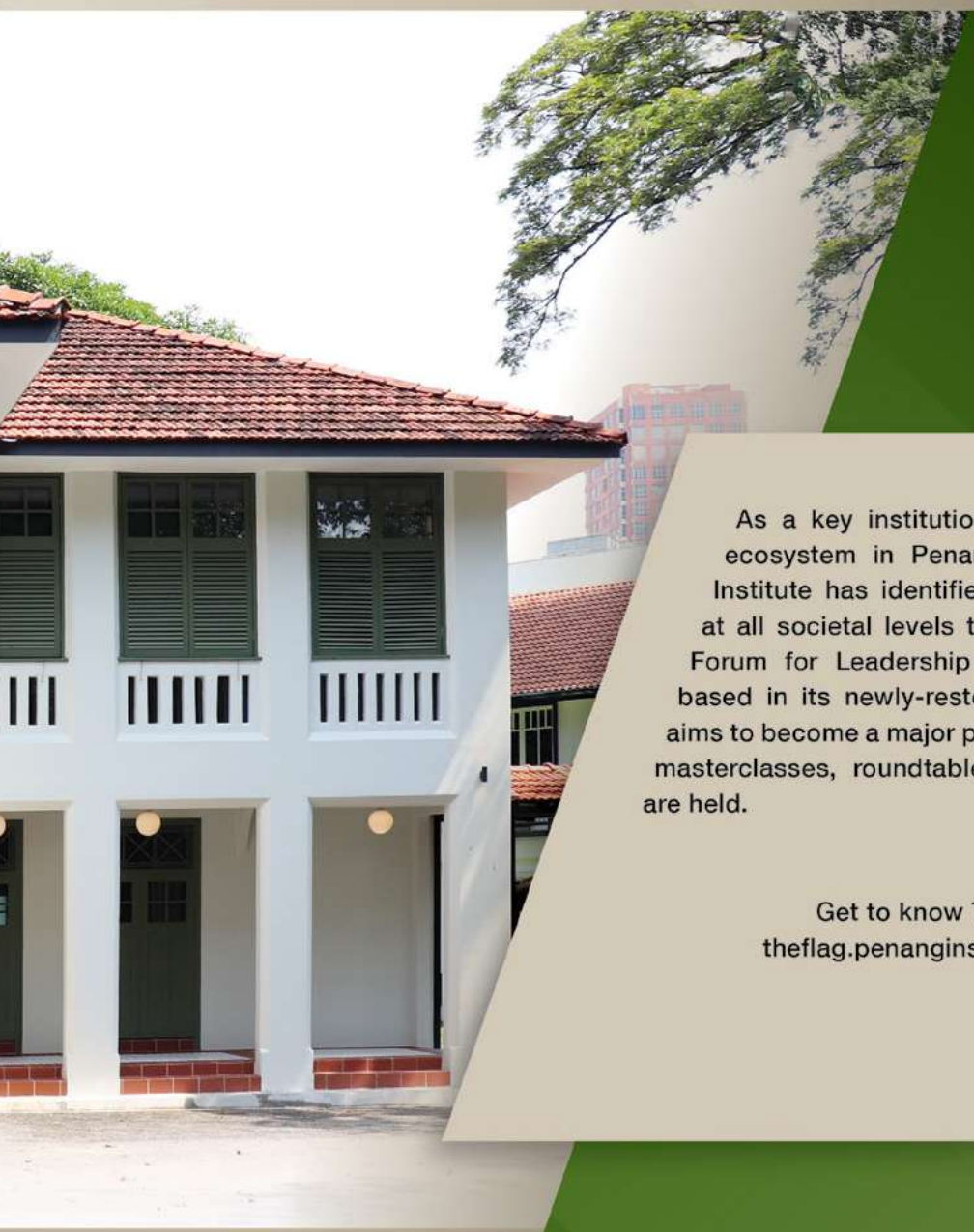
That said, modern architecture can still take a leaf out of the heritage shophouse blueprint by incorporating some of its timeless features: natural ventilation, local materials, high-quality craftsmanship and the use of communal courtyards as shared space.

Whatever the evolution, perhaps we will realise that what we want out of our work and home lives, how we mix our "shop" and "house", and how we integrate our communities are not so different from what our ancestors wanted after all.

the FLAG

Forum for Leadership and Governance

@ Penang Institute



As a key institution within the policymaking ecosystem in Penang and Malaysia, Penang Institute has identified leadership development at all societal levels to be an urgent matter. Its Forum for Leadership and Governance (FLAG), based in its newly-restored South Wing building, aims to become a major platform at which leadership masterclasses, roundtables, seminars and courses are held.

Get to know The FLAG
theflag.penanginstitute.org

FORT CORNWALLIS

A LABORATORY FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING IN TRADITIONAL CONSTRUCTION

ONE OF MY passions from young is visiting urban areas that have their architectural heritage within their cultural and traditional identities preserved. I am always fascinated by the means by which humans pass down history through the use of local materials, which then become the methods used to transform spaces into living places according to the needs of the community within that locale.

One such city is George Town: the history of those who have resided here in times past can still be traced through its buildings, narrating the time and the historical and cultural passages that have forged it. From colonial buildings to shophouses, and from religious places of worship like temples, mosques and churches to civil dwellings, these structures were, until the beginning of the 20th century, built using only natural materials: wood, stones and terracotta.

I want to bring your attention to Fort Cornwallis, a military architectural structure dating back to the late 18th century located on the northeastern shore of the island of Penang. Observing the architecture of the current fort, one would notice that its history, even if it embraces a relatively short period compared to human activities visible in other places, involves all those historical processes that usually take place over a much longer period of time.

The construction of the fort began in 1786 using wood, a material abundant and easily available on the island. It was used as palisades to fence it off from the residential settlements. However, by the beginning of the 1800s, there was a need to build a structure that would provide greater solidity, durability and above all, a greater defence function. A star-shaped fortification was built—as is still evident today—using complex techniques of construction. Instead of using just wood, one of the main materials

1

2

used is local granite which abounded on the island. It was a crucial material used to fortify the walls and the buildings within the walls, and to erect the walls of the moat surrounding the main fortress.

Terracotta bricks, however, were used for the walls, internal floors and ceilings of the fort. At the beginning of 1940, the fort experienced a transition in its functional and architectural structure. Cement had been introduced into the building industry a few decades earlier, making it possible to reconstruct portions of masonry destroyed by the bombing of the rooms in the southern portion during World War II. It was also used to form bases for the installation of tracks used for the movement of goods to and from the fort and esplanade.

All these phases distinguish the history of this place and reading the architecture of the current fort, we have established that its history narrates all processes that have revolutionised and modified the field of construction. Even though these events are usually only evident over much longer periods, the fort unites them in a time span of only 150 years, from timber to concrete.

It is, therefore, safe to assume that this place holds the potential to become a real laboratory/school that describes the history of construction—a tangible cultural site to improve the skills of local operators through practical and theoretical activities for the re-evaluation of the cultural heritage of Malaysia.

Practical activities, sharing, research and experimentation are among the purposes set by the George Town Conservation and Development Corporation (GTCDC) team, an entity established in 2015 in partnership between the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), Think City (a subsidiary of Khazanah Nasional Berhad) and the Penang state government through its agency, Chief Minister Incorporated (CMI), which collaborates with local and international consultants, and seeks to transfer knowledge to local operators on how to "read architecture", not only through theoretical investigations, but tactile contact with the monument and its environment.

The science behind practical restoration allows us to examine architecture directly, while allowing operators to codify all the aspects that make up the monument. Before each intervention, the architectural monument was scanned in all its parts to understand its state of conservation, the forms and causes of degradation, the construction techniques, the type of materials used, the application methods and the construction phases, etc. This information came from direct on-site investigations and is then compared with historical paper documentation. Subsequently, a technical record chart of the monument was created, describing the processes studied so as to ascertain the types of interventions most suited to the monument—bearing in mind that these interventions must be carried out in complete respect of the original.

After combining all these indications described on the technical record chart of the monument under examination back in 2018, we started on the selection and study of the existing materials on site. We knew this was fundamental for the preserving of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

We wanted to create mixtures that did not contain cement. We wanted it to be as close to the original fort fabrication as possible. To undertake a conservative restoration approach based on this expectation would mean that each reconstructive or additional intervention had to be based on existing historical evidence and no interpretation should be admitted. Moreover, each addition had to be carried out using materials similar to those used for the construction of the original in the physical and chemical aspects, but at the same time, it had to be visibly different and recognisable. That was not all. Each reconstructed element had to be performed out of structural necessity and not just for aesthetic effect.

This methodical approach has created a new way of operating in the field of architectural restoration in Malaysia, a principle that is based on the total exclusion of cement and industrial materials from construction sites, replacing them with natural mixtures prepared specifically to treat surfaces with natural substances.

After having successfully tested and carried out the interventions inside and outside the storage rooms within the fort located in the south zone (we carried out the reconstruction on the arches and the entrances of the south rooms, and laid plasters using hydraulic mortars and breathable paints carried out on site (mortars to create monolithic floors, etc.)), we are currently completing the first phase of the moat in the south zone.

Although this intervention was carried out in a difficult environment, we want to showcase that it is possible to restore an entire area following the principles of the original fabric. We had to use hydraulic mortars to consolidate the original existing walls. The entire wall was then protected by applying six layers of plaster with different hydraulic properties and hardness before the entire surface was treated with recycled oils collected from local food courts. This creates a breathable waterproof surface that connects the environment with human activities.

The combination of these aspects has allowed us to guarantee quality, reduce the costs of materials, share our knowledge with future generations, and respect the monument not only as part of history but also the environment surrounding it.

BY GIOVANNI SANTO

CAPTIONS

1. Adding the finishing touches to the South Moat.
2. The South Moat with the Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower at the background.
3. The restoration of the storerooms at Fort Cornwallis, located by the South Moat, was completed in 2022.

3

GIOVANNI SANTO is a researcher of ancient techniques of architectural construction, who began his career as a technical restorer and conservator to deepen ancient methods of architectural construction techniques and surface finishing.

THE FADED AND THE FALLEN

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER DE SOUZA

LIKE MANY STREET photographers, I am intrigued by old houses that at first glance seem faded and misplaced. They are overshadowed by shinier, swankier modern buildings—yet, when you do pay attention, they offer glimpses of what a place used to be.

Development is no doubt vital—for housing people and facilitating modern living. But through photography, I can look beyond and focus on the "Faded" to recognise and pay respect to the character and heritage of these buildings.

LAYERS OF DEVELOPMENT

Along Jalan Selangor in George Town, an old house is eclipsed by layers of development. Each layer looks out upon the surrounding generations—KOMTAR upon a hotel, and the hotel upon the low-rise commercial and residential buildings nearby. Big lorries, food and beverage vans, commuters in cars, and traders on motorbikes form a constant flow and hubbub with fleeting moments of calm. Yet, the Faded shelters its inhabitants in privacy.

Renters sustain a home in the twilight years of the Faded, one that is perhaps a little gritty, but far from grim. A letter hangs partially out of the mailbox, awaiting their return, and pot plants are watered each evening.

THE CORNER HOUSE

Over on Jalan Seang Tek, high rise buildings tower in the distance as an old house clings determinedly to a corner.

From this angle, the house seems to have a massive, futuristic chimney.

Jalan Seang Tek bustles with small businesses, but the Faded has been passed over by potential renters. It lacks intricate features, its barebone structure costs too much to be refurbished.

And so there will be no opposition to the demise of this Faded, no letters to the media, petitions or court cases. After all, no records were kept and stories told of the families who lived there.

The Faded awaits the bulldozer. The demolition and "clean up" will be quick and go largely unnoticed. The traffic jam caused by the dump trucks will be a brief inconvenience which will stay in the memories of bypassers longer than the old house that once stood and shone.

HOPE?

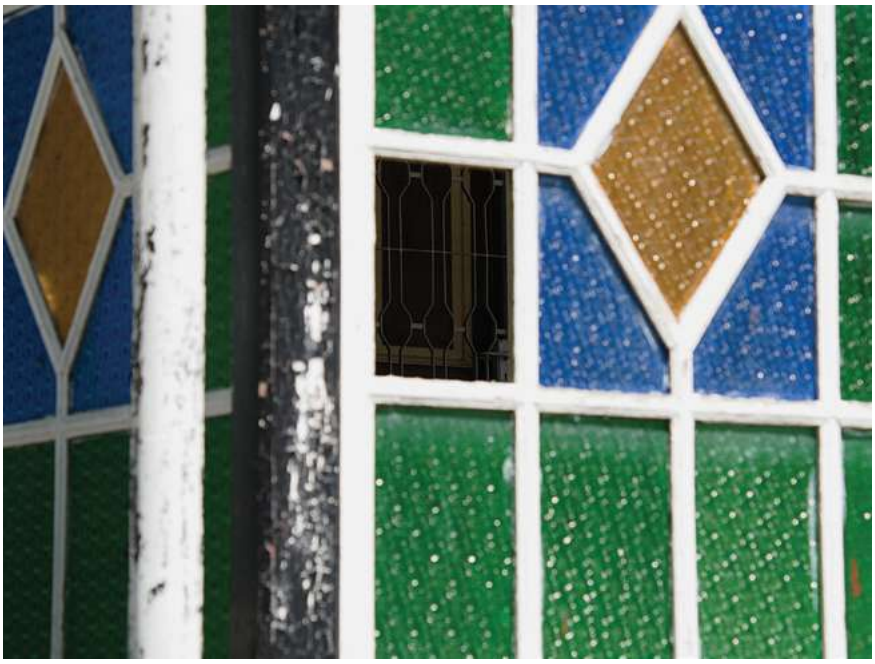
At Lorong Pulau Tikus, there may be hope still for an old house with a simple façade, symmetrical lines and stained windows. Typical of traditional Malay houses, this one has stairs with ornate tiles that reach the elevated interior. The house sits steadfast but shy opposite a well-maintained house with gleaming white walls and meticulous gold leafing.

In the right light and from a distance, this Faded looks healthy. The house has been redone by owners over many years, but lives on borrowed time. Recently sold, it had nevertheless been left empty, with its future and neighbours uncertain. Perhaps the house cannot be saved.

COLLAPSED NEIGHBOUR

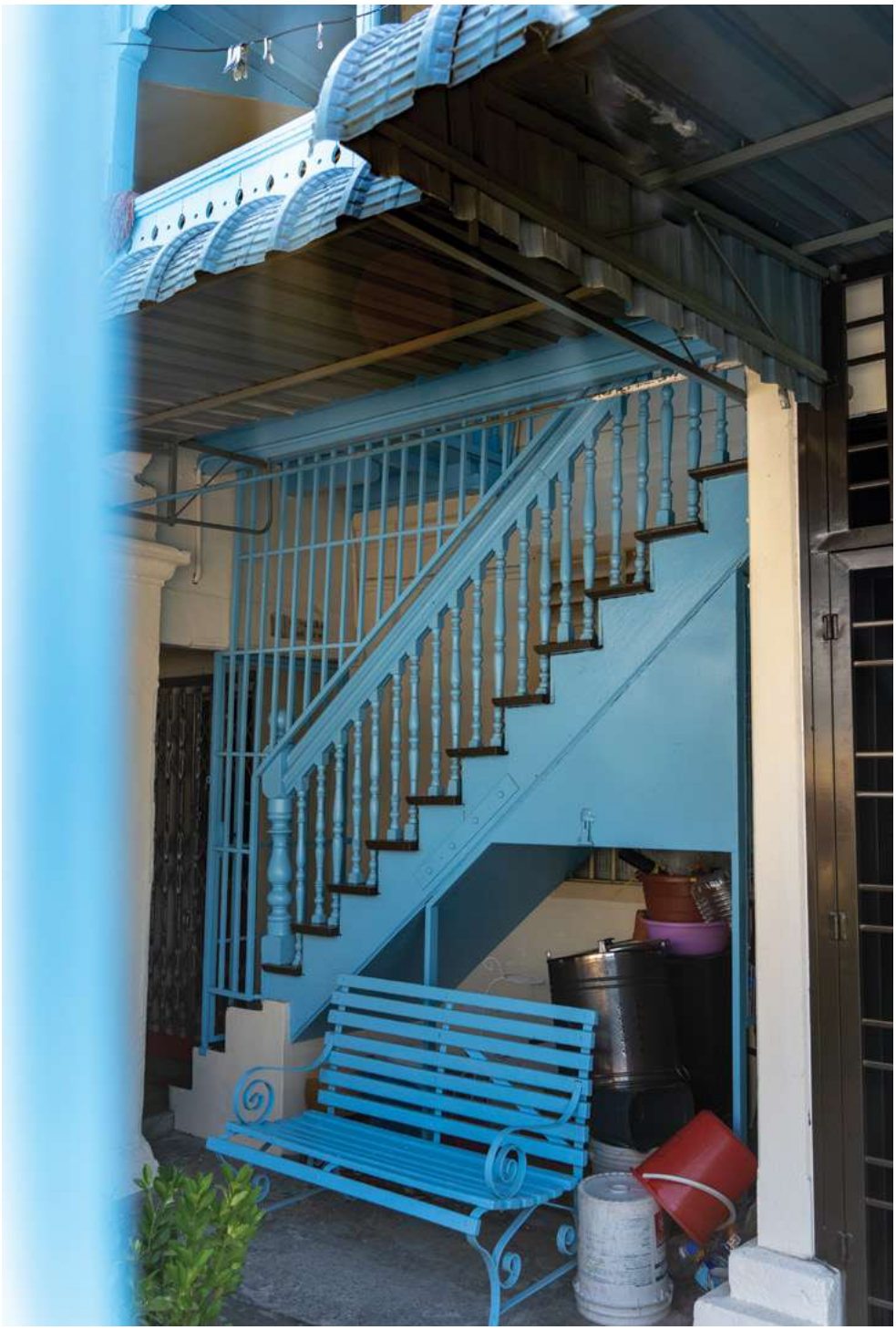
Next door, a house has collapsed into oblivion, as had many such houses in this part of George Town. Neither the structure nor the cladding could be saved. Only the back portion of the house still stands, but this too, will soon tumble. Pots lie about shattered and bound one-to-the-other by the dry roots of now-dead plants. Here lies a past that did not endure.

Yet, there is colour and beauty in the repose of this Fallen. In its dilapidated state, it provides a green and sun-dappled place for pigeons and starlings to forage and flutter up with fronds for their nests.



Here, away from Penang's urban centre, nature offers stronger protection for the house. A welcome breeze occasionally makes its way down the street amid the mid-morning heat. There are moments of peace when tiny grey-and-white birds utter calls too powerful for their small stature. And from certain angles, the old house almost eclipses all traces of modernity.

Admiring the house, I think of past couples and families who stepped out each morning and returned in the evening, glad to be home. Those who painted and cleaned, tended the flower beds, took out the washing and watched the street trees grow from saplings. Those who peered through the louvre windows, who grew up in the house with fond memories, and who would drive past years later and say to their children: "… and over there, that old house that's empty now, that's where I used to live".



THE BLUE HOUSE

At the junction of Jalan Irving and Lorong Susu sits a shocking blue house with the architectural elements of a traditional Malay house. The intricate designs on the roof and the balcony railing serve the function of air ventilation.

Based in Penang, **JENNIFER DE SOUZA** comes alive on the street taking photos of architecture and simple, overlooked scenes. "I often feel like I discovered something new, and I ask the viewer to think about what they see from their perspective. Abstracts are my favourite, as I can let my imagination go wild."

CEO HARI: PSDC STAYS ON COURSE ON PENANG'S INDUSTRIAL VOYAGE

BY GRACE SUDITA

APPOINTED AT THE start of 2024 as CEO of Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC), Hari Narayanan has led a long career juggling both academia and industry for almost four decades.

After more than 30 years in Motorola, he decided to become an Adjunct Professor at Universiti Malaysia Pahang (2015–2019). He soon became Chairman of the Board of Governors for Universiti Sains Malaysia (2018–2020) alongside taking senior executive roles at Asia Pacific University (APU) for four years. He then returned to the industrial sector, serving in key positions at MIMOS Berhad and MPC before commencing his new role at PSDC.

Penang Monthly was grateful to meet up with Hari at the PSDC headquarters to chat about issues plaguing Penang/Malaysia and how PSDC aims to resolve them.

Grace Sudita: **You had a long and fruitful career at Motorola before retiring to become an Adjunct Professor. What made you decide to come out of academia for the second time to join PSDC?**

Hari Narayanan: This is the first time someone has asked me this! Really, if you look at my career, this goes back 30-plus years, directly after my PhD. I think the opportunity was given to me at my alma mater, University of Manchester, to become an academic staff member. I enjoyed that because you get all energised to do research and so forth. Even during that time, I think it was about three years into my academic career, that I really felt that I needed to go out to complement my academic experience with knowledge about the industry.

In fact, I had a job in the UK then but I did not take it up. But with family commitments, I remember walking into Motorola and getting the job immediately. I decided then to leave the UK to get into industry. I wasn't a perfect fit, because my expertise was more mechanical engineering, but at the time, Motorola had a huge challenge in terms of developing their design capabilities.

You know, within nine months I got bored, but my boss read my body language and later asked if I would like to try a section manager position and run a small project. I had some challenges because I came from a hardcore mechanical engineering field and this was more of electronics, but I picked

it up. I've always been blessed with having fantastic leaders, who gave me opportunities to move around, learn a lot of new things and so forth. It made me ready to become a managing director. I did what I could to grow the organisation, and when the retirement age came, I felt that it was time to pass the baton to my successor.

When APU got my resume, the founder, Datuk Parmjit Singh, spoke to me. He wanted some cultural change: top-level leadership, governance, structure, management, process and attitude changes. I was only partially successful because a culture change isn't going to happen within a year or two, it takes years.

When I was the head of research and development, it was always about the speed of execution, product cycle time and how fast you go from ideation to launch. In universities, you hear "Oh, changing the curriculum takes years," blah, blah, blah. So I suggested improving the process and got a new programme running within a year—I was partially successful. I left APU because I felt that I had a stronger successor in place and I did not want to be an impediment.

My intention of coming into PSDC was really to combine all my experiences, whether it's industrial or academic, and help PSDC grow.

GS: **What are your plans to spur PSDC onward? Based on what you picked up in Motorola, is there anything other than the speed of production that you want to implement in PSDC?**

HN: In most organisations' growth, success or failure depends on the leadership. If you don't have the right leadership—the guide, the captain—you are really in trouble, yeah? So, what I learned is the ability to think far ahead, or at least a couple of steps ahead. This is something I hope to put into good practice at PSDC. I want to make sure that I hear people's views, people's ideologies, approaches and so forth. There's the business aspect, the growth aspect, but I'm always keen to get the "people stuff" correct first.

At the same time, you know, I do have some aggressive goals for PSDC. I don't think there was any competition or equivalent training centres, commercial or private or government, that provided the same services as PSDC. But that has changed. Today, other organisations are providing similar types of services. Rather than thinking that clients will come to us, we got to go out there! Not just sit down and ask, "What are your training needs?" But rather, "Hey, you know, what's your strategy? What are your challenges?" You know, don't prescribe but understand first. Those are some of the cultural shifts that I'm trying to encourage within PSDC.

We also run diploma certificates and TVET [Technical and Vocational Education and Training] programmes but we need to think differently in terms of bringing talents through the pipeline. People are not going to walk into PSDC because it has a reputation. We got to improve our marketing, our business development, the branding and communications.

Then, how do we continue to provide value and add value to our member companies? We will look at the portfolio or the programmes that we have—we have three TVET programmes at this point, but the need to improve or increase them will depend on the industry's needs. We will continue to support the Penang state's strategy of growing the GBS (Global Business Services).

The semiconductor industry is growing, albeit there being a lull over the last two years; but all indications are that it is picking up. Therefore, we have to make sure that we are proactively offering training or talent development solutions to this huge semiconductor footprint that we have in Penang. We are also strategically looking at what we need to do in terms of end-to-end semiconductor design and development. Within the Penang state, there is also a drive towards encouraging more integrated circuit (IC) design activities. I think PSDC can create the environment to develop talents in this area.

GS: **There's been a global trend where STEM is being integrated with TVET to maintain competitiveness. PSDC, in many ways, has already done that. But there's a two-pronged concern going forward. People often perceive TVET as a "second-class" education. And secondly, according to your interview with *Buletin Mutiara*, you said that there's a declining interest in STEM among SMK (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan) students. How do you think this issue can be handled?**

HN: Over the years, I have been working with government agencies on talent development, coming out with different initiatives—I still do that. The biggest problem is supply, right from primary school to secondary school. Now, we are just tweaking the need at the graduate level.

PSDC plays a key role in the Penang STEM board. We now have what I call a "draft blueprint" that identifies what we need to do to encourage kids at the primary school level to be more curious and more interested in STEM-related

activities. And then, what do we need to do with the lower secondary school students to encourage them to get into the science stream? Once they're in the science stream, what do we need to do to continue to encourage them so that they would go into a STEM-related, technology-related or TVET-related kind of programme?

Kudos to the Penang state because they already have things like the Tech Dome, Penang Science Cluster, Penang Math Platform… and what the blueprint is now saying is, "Hey, let's look at aligning rather than overlapping. Let's make sure that every one of them has a KPI (Key Performance Indicator) to measure. Let's see the impact of a 300-pax programme and whether we have moved the needle."

If you look at the last 12 years, there is a decline in the number of kids going to the science stream—around 30%. That's significant. And here we are having exponential growth in the industries at the same time!

We got to really go to the root cause. Of course, PSDC plays a significant role in, I would say, containment, i.e. looking at school dropouts and SPM leavers who probably do not know there is an opportunity or a career in technical areas and so forth.

We should also widen our footprint nationwide—if talents are coming from other states, is there any way we can provide some level of incentive for them to stay in Penang? We need to have a more holistic view of these things.

Going back to your question about TVET being second class. Over the past decade, PSDC has been doing the German Dual Vocational Training (GDVT), where they complete at level four and enter the industry with the equivalent of a diploma. As long as the programmes that institutions develop are truly aligned to the industry's needs, job opportunities will always be there. If you look at PSDC's TVET graduates, they all get employed. That's not a problem. But the perception that TVET graduates are second class is simply because it's skills-based.

The other part is the low salary. Our experience is that most, if not all of them, have a successful career. For example, there's a guy I met who did TVET in precision machining who got an offer at one of our member companies; within a short time, he has progressed to be a technical manager in the area.

The more we communicate TVET success stories, the less the public will view it with negativity.

GS: **There is talk about the TVET syllabus being outdated, causing a serious mismatch between what is taught and what is required in the industry. How can you combat this critique?**

HN: I wouldn't be able to comment on what other institutions are doing or have done in TVET, but I think it's important that the programmes offered are contemporary, staying relevant to industry needs.

I see TVET as 70% practical, 30% theory. So, if the pedagogy is right, I don't see an issue of why these programmes are outdated. Maybe I'm oversimplifying it. One of the things that we tend to do is invest quite significantly in the infrastructure to make sure students are able to practice using machines and equipment.

GS: **News coverage has often indicated a shortage of skilled workers. Do you think there would be a reduction in this if more women stepped into the role?**

HN: It's a great question. I do not have the statistics, but my answer is, yes.

The number of students in engineering over the years has gradually dropped. But the good news is that there are more women doing engineering and STEM-related topics. The problem is, once they are on board, they don't stay long because of societal or cultural bias where women are expected to stop working and start a family once they are married.

I always use this analogy: When travelling on a highway at speed, women encounter more potholes than men. So, how can we reduce the potholes so that women can also travel at the speed men do?

I think TalentCorp also has certain initiatives to encourage women to return to work. If we could get a percentage of women back into work, it would be great.

The pandemic has also shown us that a job can be done productively remotely. Many companies are still providing the flexibility of working from home. This can be used as an incentive to attract talent. When you look at women returning to work, you should also look at the technological aspects. How can we make it easier for them to manage?

GS: **With digital implementation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), how does PSDC remain committed to assuring employment for their graduates?**

"WE SHOULD ALSO WIDEN OUR FOOTPRINT NATIONWIDE—IF TALENTS ARE COMING FROM OTHER STATES, IS THERE ANY WAY WE CAN PROVIDE SOME LEVEL OF INCENTIVE FOR THEM TO STAY IN PENANG?"

HN: Supporting the talent needs of the industry covers two aspects. First, should we create a kind of AI academy or a focused training centre? The second is having AI embedded in the programmes, using Generative AI to improve productivity.

GS: **Do you have a timeline of when you would want to push it out?**

HS: We should be able to implement it by the end of this year.

GS: **What do you see as the future of Penang's industry? Will there be a plateau/stagnation because of limited land, resources and workforce, or do you think these industries will continue to expand in Penang? And are we equipped for it?**

HN: Working with member companies gives us some kind of preview on investments coming in. Penang continues to be an attractive destination for both foreign and domestic investments. I mean, if you look at Batu Kawan, seven years ago when I used to drive down the bridge I would see one or two companies. Seven years later, it is all filled up by factories!

I assume the state will do whatever it can to find additional land. But Penang has to be more selective in terms of the type of industries that you want to attract. Going forward with more digitalisation, automation and also more Generative AI, I think Penang should be looking at higher value-added activities. For example, design and development. Even if it's manufacturing, we have to attract manufacturing that has sufficient automation, and that are less reliant on lower-skilled operators.

Based on a study by Penang Institute, for every engineer you would need three or four technicians going forward. PSDC can provide that.

I think Penang is attractive because after 50-odd years of foundational experience in specific areas, we have enough talent doing "musical chairs" at times. Talent is an issue but we have to start birthing new talent through long-term goal setting.

GS: **Do you think we should be competing with other industrial parks like Kulim?**

HN: I think the word is parochial. I think we have to look at the country as a whole. Penang cannot have *everything*, you know? I think it's good that we have clusters in different parts of the country. Johor has a cluster, Klang Valley has a cluster, and even in East Malaysia, there are one or two fabrication companies. I do not believe in competition per se, within a country. We all have to aspire to do the best; our benchmark should be an international benchmark. So I think it's good for the country to have all of these different clusters. And that would also help to develop talents.

GS: **Thank you so much Dr. Hari for your time and insight.**

GRACE SUDITA is often referred to by her friends as "BBB" (British, Burmese and Balinese) because of her unique ethnic background. In her free time away from her internship at *Penang Monthly*, she spends time adding gazillions of films to her watch list on Letterboxd and yet rarely actually watches them.

BANDAR CASSIA

PDC'S FIRST SMART-ECO CITY

IN LEADING PENANG'S industrialisation, Penang Development Corporation (PDC) went beyond job creation and Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) to transforming rural areas like Bayan Baru and Seberang Jaya into modern townships in the 1970s. These residences were initially offered to reduce commute times and costs for workers in Bayan Lepas and Perai, but over time, these areas have grown into major cities. The legacy continues, and this is what we will cover in this feature.

A CONTEMPORARY TOWN BEYOND GEORGE TOWN

Located a stone's throw away from the Bayan Lepas Free Trade Zone (FTZ)—now known as the Free Industrial Zone (FIZ)—and the Penang International Airport, Bayan Baru officially opened in October 1975, after 3,455 acres of paddy fields were developed into an urban municipality, attracting population migration from George Town to its outskirts.

A self-sufficient town featuring a sub-centre with commercial facilities, schools, playgrounds and community spaces, Bayan Baru is Penang's first comprehensive town, integrating elements of "Live-Work-Play-Learn". By 1989, some of PDC's 6,600 housing units were home to an estimated 33,000 people.

Today, Bayan Baru is geared to become a major epicentre for the emerging Global Business Services (GBS) sector. Anticipating the rise in the digital GBS as a key contributor to Malaysia's economy, PDC has established two focal GBS facilities within Bayan Baru, known as GBS@Mayang and GBS@Mahsuri in 2021. Bayan Baru now houses more than 60 GBS companies, and PDC plans to attract to it more talent, greater development and better facilities.

BRINGING CITY LIFE TO THE MAINLAND

Seberang Jaya was the first integrated and planned township on the mainland, and was the place that the state's heavy industries called home, owing to it having been the logistics hub where the railway, ferry terminal and seaport converge.

In 1976, PDC converted 1,124 acres of rural land into this comprehensive township. The land availability inspired PDC to put in place many recreational facilities such as parks and football fields, including the Penang Bird Park. PDC constructed SP Arena in 2015, a multi-purpose hall for MICE events.

The construction of the Penang Bridge in 1985 and Penang Sentral in 2018 linked land logistics with commercial components in Butterworth. A focal point of many industrial clusters and residential townships, Seberang Jaya continues to be a vibrant and compactly integrated township.

PENANG'S PIONEER SMART-ECO CITY

Once an island bordered by the Jawi and Tengah rivers, Batu Kawan tells a fascinating tale of urbanisation and innovation. The thriving new township here is Bandar Cassia, named after the *Cassia siamea* flower, which blossoms unrestricted in Batu Kawan—this is Penang's largest township development, spanning 6,326 acres.

PDC envisions Bandar Cassia as a smart eco-township that promotes a balanced lifestyle within a vibrant community. This vision was conceived in the late 1980s, when Seberang Perai Selatan (SPS) was the most underdeveloped district in Penang. Tasked to locate a potential area that would eventually spur development in SPS, PDC acquired Batu Kawan in 1990. Today, the vast agricultural island has witnessed transformation into a smart and sustainable eco-township with residential, commercial, industrial and recreational components.

Following the completion of Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge (also known as Penang's Second Bridge) in 2014, Bandar Cassia saw accelerated development. Well-connected road networks to the North-South Expressway and the Second Bridge ensure easy access to the island and mainland, spurring investment, local economic activities and population growth—making Bandar Cassia a rising and exemplary vision of a 21st-century township.

The birth of Batu Kawan Industrial Park (BKIP) in 2011 as a home for high-tech and skills-intensive industries was followed by Bandar Cassia Technology Park (BCTP) and Batu Kawan Industrial Park 3 (BKIP3), which accommodate electrical and electronics (E&E), medical technology, aerospace/avionics as well as precision engineering and equipment industries. Together with the upcoming Batu Kawan Industrial Park 2 (BKIP2), they safeguard land availability and indirectly, the legacy of Penang's high-impact investment contributions to the Malaysian economy.

Using SMART infrastructure embracing ESG principles and global best practices, PDC works closely with industry stakeholders to form a supportive ecosystem. It involves SMART traffic management system, SMART pole installation, 5G infrastructure, efficient waste management systems and more importantly, SMART Industrial Park management, followed by centralised workers' accommodation. As such, Bandar Cassia is poised to be the choice destination for MNCs and local SMIs/SMEs alike.

Strategic partnerships with private developers also aided the acceleration of Bandar Cassia's development. Since the Batu Kawan Stadium was built in 1999, along with the initial phase of a residential development, private developers have introduced more residential and commercial lots. They include Penang Design Village (PE Developments), Vision City (featuring IKEA), a mixed-development of commercial and residential units (Aspen Group), landed properties known as Eco Horizon (EcoWorld), a university metropolis with UOW Malaysia KDU campus alongside residential and commercial lots (Paramount Property) and One Auto Hub (PKT Group), to name a few. The highly-anticipated, Medi-City Bandar Cassia project also aims to promote eco-tourism, while providing world-class medical services. Together, this smart-eco city should accommodate an estimated future population of 250,000 residents, with provisions of 45,000 to 50,000 housing units.

NEVER RESTING ON PAST LAURELS

Bayan Baru, Seberang Jaya and Bandar Cassia's successes demonstrate the potential a well-planned, integrated city holds. For an integrated township that stimulates the economy and enhances the overall living quality of its population, Bandar Cassia reflects PDC's innovativeness, forward planning and commitment to drive sustainable urbanisation in Penang.

KEEPING THE CURTAIN OPEN FOR PEKING OPERA

BY YEE HENG YEH

"WHAT'S MOST IMPRESSIVE is that their physicality isn't diminished at all, but in fact stands out as their strongest weapon," Ling Tang exclaimed. "It's like an intense 45-minute action movie right in front of you!"

You might have thought that the Artistic Director of George Town Festival (GTF) 2024 was referring to circus acrobats, or some high-wire act—but Ling was talking about Peking Opera, or *jīng jù* (京劇).

Last September, she had seen a few performances staged by GuoGuang Opera Company, Taiwan's only national *jīng jù* troupe, and immediately became enthusiastic about bringing them to Malaysia. Having attended the talk and demo given by GuoGuang at the Penang Youth Centre, it was easy now for me to understand her enthusiasm.

Double Bill of Jingju Magic 魔幻雙齣 will be staged as part of GTF 2024. Organised by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Malaysia, George Town Festival and the National Centre for Traditional Arts, it is presented by GuoGuang Opera Company and sponsored by Taiwan's Ministry of Culture Taiwan and Advantech Foundation.

Here are the event details:
Dates: 20 and 21 July
Time: 2:30pm
Venue: Dewan Budaya USM
Ticket: From RM65

1

ANCIENT STORIES, MODERN TIMES

Given its 200-year history, *jīng jù* is known as the "ocean that contains all rivers", a moniker that speaks to its influence on subsequent genres of Chinese performing arts. In 2010, it was inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

GuoGuang Opera Company, formed in 1995, was the outcome of the historical development of *jīng jù* in Taiwan. Today, it is celebrated for its innovative approach of presenting the stories of traditional opera through a modern lens, alongside creating new scripts for performance. This allows GuoGuang to preserve traditional *jīng jù* conventions while evolving the art form, thereby ensuring its relevance to contemporary audiences—audiences not just in Taiwan, but also in Shanghai, Hong Kong, France, Russia, the Czech Republic and Singapore (with their last appearance in Malaysia in 2015, during the Kuala Lumpur International Arts Festival).

Much of GuoGuang's success—attracting young crowds, selling out shows—have been attributed to this evolution, or what they term the "new aesthetics" of *jīng jù*.

For one, certain sensory details—like the costumes' colours or the accompanying music—might be reimagined to better fit modern tastes. But besides what you see and hear, adaptation also occurs at the dramaturgical level. Chang Yu-hua, CEO of GuoGuang, notes that people often applaud the acrobatic performances in *jīng jù*, but feel alienated from the stories. So the challenge is to re-contextualise these classical tales for today's world.

In this creative process, the artistic director (Wang An-chi, in this case) plays a crucial role, Chang explains. "The artistic director must be familiar with the traditional repertoires of *jīng jù*, which, as they're passed down, will even have multiple editions." In selecting which script to stage, they have to consider factors like the suitability of actors and the story's appeal to the youth. "The artistic director would review the script and consider if any of its lyrics or ideas are no longer in line with current thinking," Chang says.

For example, the original story of "Zhuangzi Tests His Wife" betrays a patriarchal basis: a philosopher fakes his death to test his wife's fidelity—the tragic ending only confirms the morals involved, and is a critique of a woman who was just not "loyal enough". GuoGuang's version, however, departs from this vilification simply by giving voice to the wife, who talks

CAPTIONS

1. Li Jia-de decked out in the Wusheng costume.

2. Lin Ting-yu demonstrating the use of water sleeves.

about her relationship with her husband. This exploration of her inner psychology makes her more complex, which questions society's skewed expectations of women. "We'd be able to understand why this woman, in that instant, could commit such a 'deviant' act—she has her own motivations," Chang points out.

Sometimes, changes may be made for practical reasons. The script for "Avenging Zi-du" is pared down to four central characters—the generals Zi-du and Ying Kao-shu, and their stable boys, since the cast cannot be too big to accommodate their international tours. But the plot still charts Zi-du's descent into madness; he is plagued by guilt after killing Ying out of jealousy (this thematic focus is why the play is known as the "Eastern Macbeth"). Flashbacks are also introduced to tighten the pacing, so now the play begins with a scene featuring the underworld judge—who promises a flashy entrance with pyrotechnics!

As with any endeavour to preserve tradition, it is all about striking a balance to ensure people do not lose sight of the purpose of these cultural inheritances—which are, in this case, the performance techniques themselves. "When we're staging these stories, we retain the traditional performance elements as much as possible," Chang says. "These techniques aren't just technical skills; they affect how characters are brought to life onstage. This is what needs to be preserved in traditional *jīng jù*."

2

AN ACTOR-ORIENTED ART

The magic of *jīng jù* thus lies with the performers, who shoulder the burden of evoking different spaces and landscapes using just their bodies—after all, the typical *jīng jù* stage features minimalistic sets and lighting. During the demo, the audience got a taste of the Four Skills of *jīng jù*: singing, reciting, physical acting and martial arts, courtesy of performers Li Jia-de (who plays the Wusheng, or male martial arts, role) and Lin Ting-yu (who plays the Dan, or female, role). The demonstrations were simple but educational, enthralling the crowd who cheered and applauded at all the right moments.

These skills do not just serve to impress. Sometimes, they ensure the performer's safety during a dangerous move. In a fainting movement to portray death or shock, the actors follow specific steps to minimise the impact of the fall: first, arching backwards, then bending the knees, before dropping to the floor.

Just as crucially, these techniques convey specific details about a character, so that audiences immediately grasp their role and social status just by the way they move. A warrior needs to have the appropriate energy and posture, whereas a noblewoman only glides across the stage in small, deliberate steps. The simple act of stepping through a doorway, or straightening one's clothes, becomes a series of choreographed gestures. Even a calculated glance can serve to direct the audience's attention.

The costumes are not just ornamental, but a vital communication tool for the performers. The fluttering pennants and skirts of the Wusheng magnify each twist of the shoulders and each high kick, whereas the water sleeves, when manipulated masterfully, create varying shapes and lines in the air, signifying grace, anger, joy or pain. All this, combined with the performers' stylised actions, create clear characters who are larger than life, discernible even to an audience member sitting in the back row.

Such feats can only be accomplished after years of dedicated training, and the performers, like athletes, must train every day, sometimes up to eight hours. Lin noted that the most challenging aspect of this role is the ability to persevere. "The journey of learning will never stop," she says. "The more you know, the more there is for you to learn. So each time you're faced with this, you have to persist and try to break through."

CARRYING ON THE LEGACY

Both Li and Lin are graduates of the National Taiwan College of Performing Arts, and are now award-winning *jīng jù* performers. Incidentally, neither of them ever intended to embark on this path as a kid.

"They lied to me, saying if I joined, I wouldn't have to study! So I joined, only to discover that not not only did I have to study, I also had to train," Lin recalls, laughing. "As I grew older, I started liking *jīng jù* more—maybe also because I had good teachers who inspired my love for *jīng jù*." Li only became involved in *jīng jù* later through the fact that his martial arts teacher was also a *jīng jù* teacher.

Evidently, education is an important link in the preservation of this art, and the next generation always has to be actively nurtured. Therefore, GuoGuang has dedicated itself to revitalising *jīng jù* for nearly three decades. Chang explains that to develop young talents, Guoguang allows them to play leading roles. "This differs from how it was in the traditional troupes of the past—whoever was more senior would mostly take the lead roles."

GuoGuang has also spearheaded programmes to expose *jīng jù* to young students, corporate circles and audiences abroad. This talk and demo, Chang points out, is one such example of outreach, providing the local audience with a framework for approaching *jīng jù*.

In the same vein, Chang is big on the use of surtitles, emphasising that it too is part of the stage's aesthetics—though it has to be well coordinated to avoid becoming a distraction. "Once, after a show, an audience member said that our surtitles seemed to mirror the actors' every breath."

When it comes to sharing *jīng jù* across cultural borders, these are some of the challenges. But Chang is optimistic. "In terms of getting an international audience, I think as long as you're taking the right steps to promote it strategically, it won't be too difficult to bring people into the theatre."

YEE HENG YEH is a writer and Mandarin-to-English translator whose work has been featured in The KITA! Podcast, adda, Strange Horizons, NutMag, Nashville Review and Guernica. You can find him on Twitter at @HengYeh42.

After capturing the evil spirits onto the boat, the Lord of Seven Clans is sent off with them in a blazing fire, restoring peace to the area.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REVIVAL OF THE SENDING-OF-THE-ROYAL-SHIP CEREMONY IN PENANG

BY TONG WING CHEONG

TONG WING CHEONG graduated from the National University of Tainan in Taiwan and enjoys observing and documenting local Chinese folk beliefs, customs and traditional crafts.

SINCE THE INCLUSION of the Sending-of-the-Royal-Ship ritual (送王船) in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list on 17 December 2020, this ceremony, which originated in the coastal areas of China's Fujian Province before flowing to Melaka, has been gradually gaining attention. In Melaka, the tourism board promotes these ceremonies at Yong Chuan Tian Temple (勇全殿) and Cheng Wah Keong Temple (清華宮) as a crucial and unique attraction.

Due to its ancient history and widespread influence, the Sending-of-the-Royal-Ship belief has developed into a complex and versatile tradition. It honours a group of deities who are heavenly envoys, with the deities typically having no personal name, except for a title like "Lord of Some Clan". Although there are Fujianese people too in Penang and other parts of Malaysia, the Sending-of-the-Royal-Ship ritual is not commonly carried out. In Penang, it is the Nine Emperor Gods Festival that remains much more popular and widely celebrated.

1

2

3

CAPTIONS

1. The temple prepared a lavish feast during the celebration to welcome the Lord of Seven Clans and various deities.

2. The statue of the Lord of Seven Clans worshipped in Thean Thay Tong Sum Poh Keong Temple in Seberang Perai.

3. The Taoist priest using a cinnabar brush to mark various parts of the boat, symbolically transforming it into a "sacred ship" capable of dispelling misfortune.

4. By hoeing the ground and sprinkling water along the way, it symbolises a water path for the royal ship to navigate during the procession.

5. For this celebration, the temple used a unique royal boat with a cabin.

6. Early in the morning, under the guidance of a Taoist priest, they performed a ritual by the well to obtain the water needed for the upcoming ceremony.

4

5

6

THE HALL OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Thean Thay Tong Sum Poh Keong (天地堂三保宮 or The Hall of Heaven and Earth and the Three Protectors' Temple) in Seberang Perai is unique because it worships Chit-Hoo-Tai-Jin (七府大人 Lord of Seven Clans), which is not widely seen in Penang. The temple, which was formed by the merger of two temples—Thean Thay Tong and Sum Poh Keong—was registered in 1987.

Originally dedicated to the Jade Emperor, historical records suggest that Thean Thay Tong may have been present at its current location as early as in 1853. The nearby Sum Poh Keong, meanwhile, was built next to a port warehouse during colonial times for traders to pay their respects. The golden statue of the Lord of Seven Clans was brought there in the 1920s or 30s by a Burmese merchant ship, and enshrined in Sum Poh Keong.

After the Japanese Occupation, residents of Teluk Air Tawar, who had evacuated inland, came back to find both Thean Thay Tong and Sum Poh Keong in ruins. The golden statue of the Lord of Seven Clans was salvaged and kept in the homes of devotees by rotation after 1946. In 1966, Sum Poh Keong proposed to Thean Thay Tong that they be merged during reconstruction; since then, Thean Thay Tong has housed the Jade Emperor, the Lord of Seven Clans and Guan Yin.

THE SENDING-OF-THE-ROYAL-SHIP CEREMONY IN PENANG

Over 40 years ago, residents of Teluk Air Tawar took to Thean Thay Tong Sum Poh Keong the problem of frequent traffic accidents in the area. Through the temple medium, the Lord of Seven Clans instructed that a ceremonial ship be constructed and burned to dispel evil spirits and restore peace. Obligingly, worshippers made a crude 5ft paper ship, and Taoist priests were invited to gather the evil spirits at the two traffic intersections. The ship was burned on the spot in a simple ritual.

In early 2023, the day after the Jade Emperor's birthday, the Lord of Seven Clans suddenly communicated through a medium in the temple that due to the long absence of the Sending-of-the-Royal-Ship ceremony, there had been frequent accidents again at intersections along the main road in front of the temple. Temple authorities decided then to reinstate the ceremony at the end of the year.

However, due to the long interval and unfamiliarity with the Sending-of-the-Royal-Ship ceremony, Thean Thay Tong sought advice from Yong Chuan Tian Temple in Melaka, with whom they have a longstanding friendship.

This time, the ceremonial ship was made of wood and measured 15ft-10in-long, 5ft-10in-wide and 4ft-3in-high. Yong Chuan Tian Temple guided the design and construction of the ship, and skilled craftsmen were commissioned to build it according to the specifications. After the ship was transported to the temple from the furniture factory, authorities from Yong Chuan Tian Temple came to assist with the rituals, including installing the ship and the ship's keel (安船和安龍骨).

Unlike the Nine Emperor Gods' ship, this one had compartments for daily necessities and food, a shrine for deities, sails, a rudder and a compass. The lion head at the bow, as well as the weapons and plaques (兵器和執事牌) on both sides of the deck were also provided by Yong Chuan Tian Temple. Inside the ship's shrine were three papier-mâché figurines: the Lord of Seven Clans in the centre, Mazu on his left and the Tiong-Kun-Hoo (中軍府 Officer of the Central Military Authority) on his right.

THE THREE-DAY FESTIVAL

The entire ceremony, unlike the previous one, was observed on a much grander scale, and lasted for three consecutive days. Presided over by Taoist priests from Bukit Mertajam's Hean Chin Tua Temple (玄真壇) and according to advice provided by Yong Chuan Tian Temple, the whole process, involving not only the construction of the ship but also the logistics and coordination of various rituals, proved arduous. But it marked an extraordinary precedent for such celebrations in Penang.

The ritual started with water drawn from a communal well near the Caltex gas station in Teluk Air Tawar. After the water was brought back to the temple in buckets, Taoist priests chanted prayers over it and it was boiled to make tea to be offered to the deities. After which, the remaining tea was distributed to devotees as protection and blessing. Devotees were also encouraged to take some of this holy water home for protection and harmony. The anchor of the ceremonial ship was then dipped into a bucket of well water, symbolising it being safely anchored and ready for its spiritual voyage.

The ship was provisioned with a list of essentials to ensure that the deities aboard were well-equipped for their journey; they were provided with stoves, cooking utensils, pots, kettles, basins and buckets. Then there were food staples like rice, oil, salt, sauces, vegetables, fruits, chickens and ducks, as well as leisure items like musical instruments and gambling cards. All were consecrated before being placed aboard.

Given that the Lord of Seven Clans serves as an emissary of the heavens, inspecting and patrolling the earthly realm, the local devotees prepared a grand feast to honour and entertain him. This hospitality was extended to seek the deity's intervention in warding off misfortune and ensuring local peace. Unlike the feast at Yong Chuan Tian Temple in Melaka, which featured 108 Peranakan dishes, this feast comprised 72 traditional delicacies.

On the final day, the ceremonial ship and the deity's palanquin were taken out for a procession through the streets to drive away evil spirits from the community. Before the procession began, the priests symbolically created a waterway by cutting into the ground with a hoe and pouring water from a teapot, signifying the ship's journey. Thus, the procession was led by the hoe and teapot to open the way, with the ceremonial ship behind.

The procession stopped at each intersection of the road, and exorcism rituals, where a ritual broom and mat were used to sweep and capture malevolent entities into the ceremonial ship, were performed. Mediums from the Yong Chuan Tian Temple assisted with this, channelling the Lord of Seven Clans to collect the spirits and guide them onto the boat.

The procession route took the whole morning to complete. Once back at the temple, a ceremony was conducted to appease and pacify the captured evil spirits. In the evening, the ceremonial ship was taken to the beach behind the temple and burned, symbolically sending off the Lord of Seven Clans along with the malevolent spirits, and restoring safety and prosperity to the local residents.

The ceremony concluded with the sending of the deities to heaven through a fire ritual at the temple, marking the successful completion of the entire event.

This was one of a handful of instances in Penang where the Sending-of-the-Royal-Ship ritual was performed, and marked a significant cultural revival of this intangible heritage. This effort highlighted the importance of maintaining and revitalising heritage traditions, whose continuity could be ensured through community involvement and documentation.

WRITE FOR THE CURIOUS CHILD, READ TO THE INQUISITIVE MIND

BY RACHEL YEOH

OUR BELIEF SYSTEM is formed by what we are taught and our lived experiences, which then influence our decisions and perceptions. What stands in between with one foot on the "taught" and the other on the "lived" are the materials we read. Through books, we pick up societal norms—what is deemed acceptable—and we experience a faux lived experience through an author's worldbuilding. Books have historically spread ideologies, whether good or bad, that chartered the course of world history.

As a child, I remember huddling in the reading corner of a grocery store while my parents did their weekly shopping. On two shelves, children's storybooks were lined neatly, waiting for my eyes to devour. At a time when mobile phones had yet to be ubiquitous, I would find other children sitting cross-legged on the epoxy flooring, hunched over books opened on their lap—I would join them, present physically but mentally transported to another world. What I read made me believe in happy endings, that girls can do anything and that good deeds do get rewarded. Seeing that much of the foundation of our values is built on what we consume as young children, it is, therefore, crucial that narratives highlight the values our world needs.

Recently, the Swedish ambassador to Malaysia, Joachim Bergström and his team ran a conversation starter initiative titled "Jom Kita Bincang" at the Penang Public Library in George Town to discuss sustainability, health and social issues through children's literature. The ambassador highlighted how children's books brought change into Sweden's rather "conformist society" to one that celebrates spirited individuality and creativity. The narratives present in the children's literature encouraged the current generation to embrace creativity, diversity, innovation, strong civil rights and tolerance. Looking to inspire the same in Malaysia, several Swedish children's books on topics such as planetary health, circular economy, authority and social issues such as bullying have been translated into English, Chinese and Malay.

The initiative was birthed when Bergström inquired about what Malaysians thought about Sweden. To his surprise, their perceptions were jarringly different from actuality. He was advised by local partners to "change the conversation" since it was not aligned with facts. He decided that one of his initiatives should

1

CAPTIONS

1. *The Malaysian Squirrel* series. The author, Roger Cowdrey, was inspired to write this series after encountering a squirrel when visiting Penang Spice Garden.

2. *Two Sisters, One Sarong* is a story that conveys life's complex situations to children in a simplified way.

involve children's literature. Together with Nor Azhar Ishak (educator and storyteller), Abyan Junus-Nishizawa (author and storyteller), Josephine Yoong (children's author and publisher at Precious Pages), and Lova Berggren and Therise Flodqvist (both children's educators from Tranströmerbibliotek—a Stockholm library), they discussed subject matters, illustrations and storytelling methods that should be part of children's literature to instil good values in young readers.

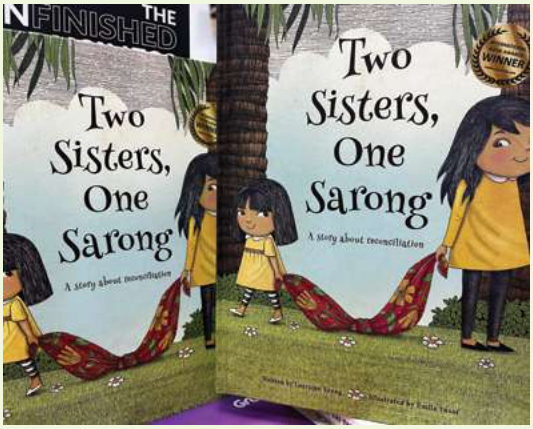
However, Malaysia is plagued by a related issue: declining literacy rates. According to Global Data, Malaysia's literacy rate decreased by 2.74% from 98.42% in 2010 to 95.72% in 2021.[1] Seeing that there is an association between literacy and democracy, the continued downtrend may affect the system of government; if children who are not literate grow into adults who cannot read and thus, be informed, then democracy, which heavily relies on informed decisions by its citizens, will be compromised.

"If we don't already create a habit and love and respect for reading, then how will we be able to govern our societies? It is a hopelessly idealistic question, but I think it is something we can bring with us to the conversations," Bergström said.

Children are most impressionable when very young, especially from birth to five years old.[2] It is then that a child's brain develops more rapidly than at any other time in their lives. It is crucial to have the right values instilled in them when they are most mouldable. Yoong explains that these principles are becoming more essential for setting the next generation on the right footing even as screens and social media vie for their attention. "Some of the content on these platforms, I believe, can be totally wrong but packaged nicely—that is why I wrote a book series where I simplify good values using animal characters so that children can understand them. At the end, all the characters in the book spell out the word 'INTEGRITY'," she explained.

Just last week, I was observing a friend reading a body safety storybook for pre-schoolers to her young nephew, where it explains "good" and "bad" touches. When she detailed a "bad touch" situation, he was quick to bellow "NO" with his eyebrows knitted. "Well, that transfer of information went well," I chuckled to myself.

It then brings me to ponder what other topics children's literature should cover. As a publisher, Yoong hopes to see more compelling narratives about the different races coming together to highlight the importance of unity. One such series published by her is the Malaysian Squirrel series, written by a Briton, Roger Cowdrey. The latest in the series entitled *The Mission of the Malaysian Squirrel: To Stop the Taman Negara Feud* was inspired by Penang governor, Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, who suggested that Cowdrey write a book about the different races coming together with their unique



2

strengths to solve a mission—a suggestion he gave when Cowdrey launched his third book, *The Penang Sea Mission of the Malaysian Squirrel*, in 2023.

However, if we are to instil the good values present in our culture in the young, or educate them about our heritage, locals should see it as their responsibility to tell such stories. From our folk tales to the home life practised by the different races and ethnicities in Malaysia, there are many stories left untold. "Perhaps a story about Malaysians' favourite sport—badminton—is something that will unite all of us," Yoong suggested.

With these resources, it is then the parents' responsibility to get them into their children's hands. Benice Malini, a counsellor at The Safe Harbour, commented: "Children would rather you read them the storybook than they read it for themselves, which is a better choice because it is an avenue for brain processes. A book is a medium that allows a child to 'use' their parents' understanding of the world when it is read to them. It is also a type of social-emotional learning, where the baby or toddler regulates their emotions to yours." Repetition and exposure to a variety of books, be they in different languages and reflecting local culture, can enrich a child's early experiences.

Yoong cautions parents to not be too quick to replace the wonder of storybooks with academic books. "Get involved with their reading by reading with them and prodding them with questions; introducing drama and play based on the stories will create lifelong memories and foster creativity." To equip the next generation well—we are edging towards the tail end of Generation Alpha now—more books must be penned and more stories narrated, more illustrations must be drawn and more children's literature created to fill the shelves of bookstores. Malaysia is blessed with a rich tapestry of culture, heritage and values, but how would the children know if we do not make this part of their conversation?

RACHEL YEOH is a former journalist who traded her on-the-go job for a life behind the desk. For the sake of work-life balance, she participates in Penang's performing arts scene after hours.

FOOTNOTES

[1] https://www.globaldata.com/data-insights/macroeconomic/literacy-rate-in-malaysia/#:~:text=Literacy%20Rate%20in%20Malaysia%20(2010%2D2021%2C%20%25),-20.00%25%2040.00%25%2060.00&text=The%20literacy%20rate%20reached%2095.71,decreased%20by%200.40%25%20in%202021

[2] https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/

ALL ABOARD THE STEAM ENGINE AT TENBY SCHOOLS PENANG

BY SAMANTHA KHOO

A **NEW ANNEXE** in a school is a clear indication of student population growth. It might also mean that the educational establishment wishes to introduce enhanced facilities and upgrade learning spaces to enrich their students' educational experience. The economist will conclude that the school is investing and preparing for the upcoming generation.

For Tenby Schools Penang, the last two years have been abuzz with anticipation. It took a leap to adopt STEAM, for Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics—a curriculum that offers a holistic approach to learning that develops the whole child.

The STEM curriculum (without "art") developed in the 1990s had generations of students deeply immersed in learning logical and technical skills. Now, to stay competitive in a post-pandemic, AI-centric world, STEAM promises to be the answer.

Tenby has been gradually injecting the STEAM approach into its curriculum over the last two years to lead the way as a STEAM Specialist School. All this work has culminated in the opening of their STEAM Engine—a 75,000ft² landmark in its Penang campus, which proves apt in its alignment with all the four strategic initiative themes in the Penang2030 vision focusing on improving liveability, upgrading the economy, encouraging civic participation and investing in the built environment to strengthen connectivity and digital infrastructure.

"Our STEAM learning approach focuses on giving students the skills they need to cope with an ever-evolving world. These skills will enable them to become future leaders in the Penang community, envisaged for the future through the Penang2030 vision," says Jeanne Denyer, campus principal of Tenby Schools Penang.

Penang Monthly was invited to preview the STEAM Engine on 9 May 2024, and though not all the rooms in the building were fully equipped at that time, we could already hear the excited chitter-chatter and swift footsteps of the students and teachers as they weaved their way through the building. We were particularly

impressed by the advanced facilities made available for the students, such as a Makerspace, Robotics and Coding Lab, Design and Technology Room, Food Technology Kitchen, Digital Media Suite and a black box theatre. In fact, the school's teachers and students were already making full use of the available equipment during our visit.

BUILDING A PERSONAL PORTFOLIO OF SKILLS

The STEAM Engine at Tenby is a state-of-the-art facility that has adopted a revolutionary approach to teaching and learning. The three-storey building consists of unique learning spaces, each to fulfil one of the five STEAM elements. The Robotics and Coding Lab allows students to immerse themselves in mathematics and engineering, while the black box theatre is used for the performing arts, where the application of design thinking and science concepts were used to bring a stage performance to life. The Food Technology Kitchen is where science, technology and art meet in the creation of a new recipe. When asked, 16-year-old Ravishanker replies, "In the new STEAM Engine, I'm most excited to learn about programming emotions and intelligence into robots in the new Robotics and Coding Lab."

The idea is simple: if we want innovators for tomorrow, we need to hone the arts and sciences together in students today.

STEAM emphasises the application of knowledge in real-world situations. During our tour, Year Five and Year Six students were using engineering design processes to build a structure to withstand earthquake. Not only did they code using Micro:bit to create earthquake simulations to test their prototype, they were able to connect this to the UN SDG11 as part of their IPC lesson. Meanwhile, in the science lab, the junior forensics department had their heads down trying to investigate a murder mystery using readily available chemicals. Towards the end of the tour, our noses were drawn to the fragrance of food. Little did we know, a class of students were whipping up lamb burgers, meat tacos and pasta during their culinary class for us visitors.

By having these advanced and varied facilities available, "students can discover their passions and build a personal portfolio of skills in an atmosphere where confidence grows," Denyer adds. The STEAM approach allows the learning outcomes of the curriculum to be met by showing its real-life relevance, allowing the lessons to adapt to new technologies and current real-world challenges.

The result? An atmosphere where innovation and curiosity drive learning. Students develop critical thinking skills by evaluating information, considering multiple perspectives and making evidence-based decisions.

STEAM FOR ALL

Partnerships are a crucial element in STEAM education. As part of a global network of schools under the International Schools Partnership (ISP), Tenby ensures that the benefits of STEAM extend to all students, providing meaningful opportunities for engagement and collaboration.

It is also about ensuring that learners are career-ready when they complete their secondary and tertiary education. Partnerships with institutions like TechDome, VEX Robotics and various universities offer meaningful opportunities for Tenby's students

to extend their learning. "The activities provided by our partners support the progression of our students, helping them understand how their learning will benefit them when they enter university or start a job," explains Sathisha Goonasakaran, the STEAM Coordinator at Tenby.

The STEAM Engine extends beyond being an educational facility just for Tenby students. "It is meant not only for our students, but also for the wider community of Penang," Denyer says. "Through our partnerships with industry, non-governmental organisations and the government, we are hoping to develop STEAM programmes particularly for marginalised communities who don't have access to STEAM learning opportunities, so that we can help them develop the skills they need to adapt to a changing world," she adds.

"The main intention behind the STEAM Engine is to ensure students break free from rote learning and engage in purposeful learning that provides them with future pathways," echoes Sathisha.

May this milestone be a step in raising confident and resilient leaders, not only at Tenby, but all over Penang as well.

REFERENCE

http://www.recsam.edu.my/sub_LSMJournal/images/docs/2022/2022_9_ASPIN_125139.pdf

A personal blogger since her teenage years, **SAMANTHA KHOO** has always enjoyed stringing words together. Her dream is to live off-grid in a cottage with all the coffee, ink and paper she can have.

LEFT IN LIMBO

THE STRUGGLE FOR CITIZENSHIP FOR THE "OVERSEAS-BORN" IS NOT OVER

BY EMILIA ONG

"AND NOW HERE we are," Amelia Tai is saying. She pauses, sighing a little. "He's turning three in June, but there's nothing I can do. I'm powerless."

She is talking about the situation facing her second, Levi: being born in the UK, he is not automatically entitled to Malaysian citizenship. This is the case both in spite of Amelia's efforts and of the fact that Amelia herself is Malaysian. Like thousands of Malaysian women who have given birth abroad, her gender renders her unable to confer citizenship on her children born outside of the country.

Or at least it did.

According to amendments announced in March this year, children born overseas to Malaysian mothers and foreign fathers will henceforth be accorded the same rights to citizenship as those born to Malaysian men—with a caveat. A clause in the legislation specifies that the change will not be applied retroactively.

Nearly 40 years have elapsed between my own birth and that of Levi. But the situation Amelia's family is presently facing is depressingly similar to my own. Like Amelia, my mother left Malaysia in her 20s. Like Amelia, when my mother left, she did so with neither the intention nor the expectation that she could be doing so for good. Like Amelia, she met her future husband while away, and had a child. And, like Amelia, she stuck around in her adopted country to bring me up.

Now, my mother is a pensioner living alone in Tanjung Tokong. Long divorced from my father, she returned to the land of her birth in 2011. I want to be with her. As her only child, I *should* be with her. But I am only ever able to enter the country on a tourist visa. When, nearing the end of a visit, I tell people that I will be leaving my mother again, they widen their eyes and say, "How can?" But it is what the government demands of me. My 90 days run out, and I am sent "home" again.

As Amelia says: it is like being in exile.

Some point out that Malaysian women could choose to not give birth in a foreign country. That is not always so—take Amelia, for example. Levi was born during the Covid-19 pandemic, when countries' borders were closed.

Amelia fears for the future. "What if something happens to me? We might be separated."

Much is written about the real-world consequences of denying citizenship to children of Malaysian mothers, but the psychological impact upon those children is not so well documented. I know from my own experience that growing up without a sense of

1

2

3

CAPTIONS

1. Amelia Tai and family.
2. The author as a child and her mother.
3. The author as a baby and her mother.

belonging—as nebulous as that may sound—can make it difficult to thrive.

Added to this is a strange sense of guilt—one I have only recently been able to name—that I *trapped* my mother. And its consequences—the feeling that I was a burden—have had devastating impacts on my emotional and mental health, and at times, our relationship.

Given that I possess British citizenship and Amelia's son's place of birth gives him the right to it, many will fail to see the problem. Alicia Dixon, of the advocacy group Family Frontiers, confirms that the predicament faced by this group of Malaysian mothers is frequently regarded as "a privileged person's problem" by their own countrymen. As a result, she adds, the group sees "a lot of rhetoric around it being the fault of the mother for leaving in the first place".

Family Frontiers has long been at the forefront of the campaign for change, and in many ways, the group can be credited with bringing the issue of citizenship rights into popular consciousness.

"Citizenship is the right that provides access to all other rights," Alicia explains. "Affected children have limited access to public education, to affordable healthcare and to the legal protections that citizens are entitled to. Even if they secure enrolment in a government school, they face delayed admission. They also miss out on benefits like the free textbook scheme, vaccinations and dental check-ups that Malaysian children typically receive.

"There are also women trapped in abusive relationships overseas. So many mothers in our network are subject to domestic abuse but they can't escape and come home because they're unable to bring their children with them. That's why it's *vital* we continue to push for retroactivity."

Avenues to citizenship have never been entirely closed, though. Under Article 15(2), Malaysian mothers have been able to apply for their child's citizenship, so long as the child is still under 21. However, as Alicia explains, "It's a long, arbitrary process with no guarantee of approval. Decisions can take years, and they are very discretionary. Everything depends on the attitude of the Home Minister. Right now, we happen to have one who is willing to expedite the process, and that's great. But there's no regularity, and this causes a lot of strain for people."

Though she does not have the exact numbers, she notes that according to Hansard, 41,314 citizenship applications were received between 2018 and 2023. 31,808 of these are still "in process"; out of these, 3,443 were made under Article 15(2). The latter figure is almost certainly not representative of the number of people affected: "There are many who have been rejected and haven't reapplied, or who haven't put in an application at all. And then, there are those who have been rejected so many times they have been aged out."

Article 15(2) is inapplicable to adult children like myself. Should a child over 21 seek naturalisation, their only recourse is to do so via Article 19. "It is much more difficult," Alicia says, "as it requires Permanent Residence status first."

Alicia stresses that the law has woeful consequences not only for individuals, but for the country as a whole.

"It has a huge economic impact," she says. "There are over one million diaspora women overseas. With all the talk in Malaysia about brain drain at the moment, it just doesn't make sense. We're losing talented, professional people just because of a truly archaic law."

On the international stage, it is also a little embarrassing. "Malaysia has international obligations to uphold. In 1995, we acceded to two UN Conventions regarding the rights of women (CEDAW) and the rights of children (CRC), but we're in direct violation of these commitments. We're also in violation of Article 8(2) of our very own Federal Constitution, which does not allow discrimination on the basis of gender.

"Ultimately," Alicia concludes, "it just doesn't look good. It makes Malaysia look like a country that is not family-friendly. We can't claim to live in an equal society until all overseas-born children, regardless of the year of their birth, obtain equal rights to citizenship."

Whatever the case may be, it is unfathomable how it can be regarded as a good thing to separate families. How can it be deemed better for the country to lose the contributions of competent, professional women—as well as the future potential of their children? And how, finally, can it be considered reasonable to leave aging mothers alone, when they have offspring ready, willing and desperate to support them?

Because really, I do not want to take from Malaysia. Like all the other children, I just want to give. How can that be a bad thing?

To find out more about the work of Family Frontiers, follow them on X @FamilyFrontiers. You can donate to their campaign for equal citizenship rights here: bit.ly/DonateToFF

EMILIA ONG is a writer, journalist and former English teacher. She is currently seeking to relocate to Penang permanently.

WOM

L S RU H T E G M

GROWING UP, I often heard adults in my family complain about their inevitable decline in strength and increasing frailty, resulting in higher dependence on others in their daily life. My aunt, who is now in her late 70s, has steadily lost weight—most of which is muscle mass—and has lost the independence in doing many things. For instance, while she used to be able to ride a motorcycle to run errands, she now finds that she no longer has the strength to move it around.

"I am old now, I don't have the strength anymore," seems to be the general concession among older adults here.

I, too, have grown up believing that loss of mobility and independence inevitably come with old age. It was not until I started strength training and studied it more that I realised how misinformed we are; that with physical exercise, especially ones that focus on maintaining and building muscle mass, the progression of sarcopenia (age-related muscle loss) can be delayed and its severity lessened. The disease, characterised by accelerated loss of strength and reduced physical performance, is associated not only with higher risks of fragility fracture, disability and functional impairment, but also premature mortality among otherwise healthy adults.[1]

WHAT SCIENCE SAYS

A new study finds women who do strength training exercises two to three days a week are more likely to live longer and have a lower risk of death from heart disease, compared to women who do none. Martha Gulati, the director of preventive cardiology at Cedars Sinai and an author of the study, says, "What surprised us the most was the fact that women who do muscle strengthening had a reduction in their cardiovascular mortality by 30%. We don't have many things that reduce mortality in that way."

In fact, many studies have shown that muscle mass, instead of the more commonly measured and scrutinised body mass index (BMI), is a much better predictor of life expectancy,[2] while another study indicates that the decline in handgrip strength in older women is associated with cognitive decline.[3]

These findings are illuminating of public health awareness. It begs the question why doctors and health professionals, especially in Malaysia, are still predominantly prescribing solely cardiovascular exercises for general health, instead of a combination of that and strength training (also known as resistance training or weightlifting).

"The greater your muscle mass, the lower your risk of death," says Dr. Arun Karlamangla, a professor in the geriatrics division at the Geffen School. "Rather than worrying about weight or BMI, we should be trying to maximise and maintain muscle mass."[4]

Furthermore, the benefits of strength training are not limited to muscle building alone; it can also improve cardiovascular function, reduce the risk of sarcopenia, and even strengthen joints.

DO YOU EVEN LIFT?

In many parts of the world, and especially in Malaysia, weightlifting is not popular among women—though it has been steadily gaining foothold in recent years. Considered a "masculine" sport, women shun strength training for various reasons, including fears of looking "bulky" or becoming "too muscular", and concerns about injury.

"I am not just a woman who lifts," says Melizarani T. Selva, "I am an Indian woman who lifts. So much of my culture conditions women to be soft, demure and docile. Exercise of any kind is associated with weight loss and even then, Indian women are often told to run a mile and eat less carbs to maintain an hourglass 'saree figure'."

Even when women do overcome cultural and societal barriers to weightlifting, the weights section in gyms, predominantly occupied by men, can be especially intimidating to a female beginner.

"The weights section is a hyper-masculine place—seemingly grumpy big dudes grunting and pushing massive plates with abandon," laughs Melizarani.

Lydia Lim, who has been weightlifting since 2016 when she started her first job, recalls that there were no other women around her who lifted back then. Unable to afford a personal trainer, she figured it out through watching YouTube videos—"I must have watched hundreds of hours of them by now."

Meanwhile, Melizarani engaged a personal trainer when she first started to practise weightlifting correctly and stay injury-free.

"I was determined to find a coach who was willing to take the time to understand my capacities, respect my polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) limitations and push me accordingly.

"For the first year, our main focus was on building my gym independence, alongside learning correct form. This was instrumental for my development because

AND EMBRACE STRENGTH TRAINING

BY ZOE KUNG

ultimately, I need to be able to practise weightlifting independently at any gym. My coach taught me proper gym etiquette and how to take up space at the weight racks. It took a while to quell the anxieties of being the only non-man at the barbell station, but I persistently showed up and got my bench presses done without feeling shy."

Strength training, as it turns out, is incredibly effective in burning fat. By building muscle tissue, your resting metabolic rate, or the total number of calories your body burns when at rest, increases, leading to greater weight loss. A new study on the molecular underpinnings of strength training has also shed light on how it may also shrink fat by changing the inner workings of cells. The study found that after weight training, muscles create and release little bubbles of genetic material that can flow to fat cells, jump-starting processes there related to fat burning.[5]

IMPROVED APPROACH TO FOOD

Many women who weightlift also tend to have a better relationship with food, possibly because of how food is seen as fuel to a good, hard workout, and because of the fact that protein is especially important in muscle recovery and building.

"My relationship with food has improved significantly. I am more conscious of my protein intake and nearly everything I consume is geared to serve my ability to lift better. Weightlifting has empowered me to look towards functional strength—I am more invested in being able to deadlift twice my bodyweight," says Melizarani.

Cecilia T, who started weightlifting more than two years ago, concurs. "Back then, I was doing mainly cardio: running and hiking, mostly. I was skinny, but my body fat percentage was relatively high—around 26%.

"But since starting weightlifting and learning about the importance of eating enough protein, I found that I ate much more than I used to, but my body fat percentage has dropped. I now even have a six pack," she laughs.

Personally, weightlifting has given me a boost in self-confidence. The process of becoming physically stronger inspires an appreciation for what my body can do, instead of how it looks. And this has spread to all areas of my life.

Lydia Lim agrees. "The most rewarding part is being able to see yourself in a new light as someone who is capable of doing difficult things. You are better able to trust yourself to fail and learn new things along the way."

For Melizarani, wearing red lipstick every time she lifts has become a self-affirming ritual. "It serves as war paint, a tiny act of rebellion to have more femininity in the weights section. This sport has made me more confident and sure-footed in all areas of my life. Nothing seems too scary or too difficult to me these days."

Given its many advantages, it is a shame more women are not encouraged to take up weightlifting. But the future looks positive—in my gym, I have noticed more women in the free weights area.

"The science is clear—strength training is one of the things that has a very high return on investment. It's okay to have short-term goals to motivate you from time to time, but it's also important to enjoy the activity regardless of the outcome—that's how habits form!"

FOOTNOTES

[1] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10170113/

[2] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-38893-0#:~:text=other%20age%20populations.-,Conclusion,in%20female%20nonagenarians%20and%20centenarians.

[3] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7890203/#:~:text=Handgrip%20strength%20predicted%20accelerated%201,et%20al.%2C%202011).

[4] https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/older-adults-build-muscle-and-271651

[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/21/well/move/weight-training-fat.html

ZOE KUNG occasionally dabbles in writing but mostly just wants to stay anonymous.

KOPI JACKFRUIT MONKEY

BY NIGEL SENSE

I HAVE ALWAYS loved two things in life: travel and art. Combining these, my wife and I have travelled the world, stopping in particularly inspiring locations like Sri Lanka, Vietnam and India to set up studio and paint. These travel days provide the foundation for my paintings. I call it "going fishing"—not for fish, but for inspiration.

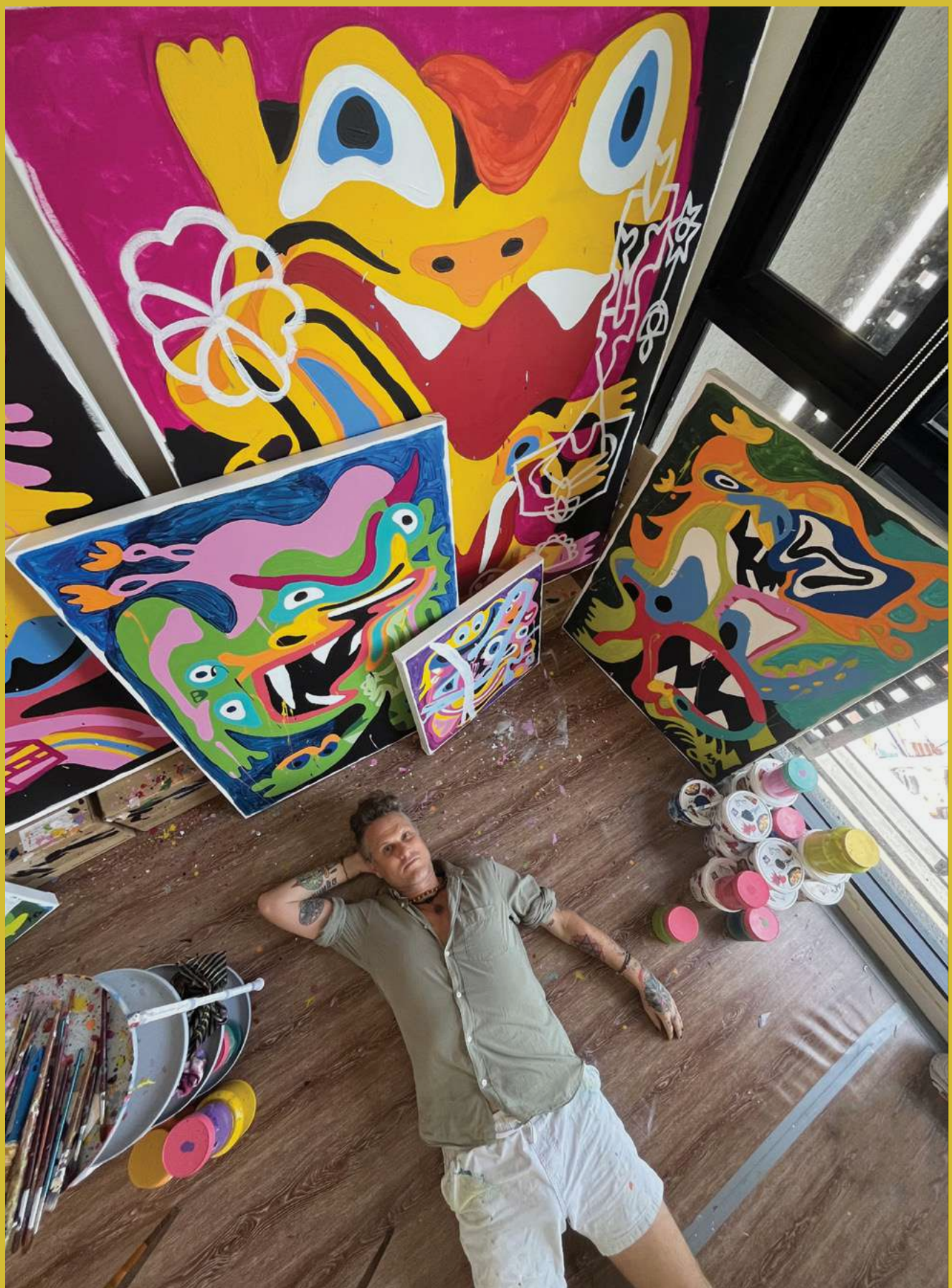
I capture quick iPhone photos of intriguing moments—a handmade tile, a restaurant sign in an unfamiliar language or snippets of conversations. Using my iPad, I then collage these images into a Frankenstein-esque depiction of daily life as a traveller. These digital drawings are the engine room of my art practice. I spend more time drawing than painting because once I have a paintbrush in hand, I want the application to be swift and instinctual. Painting is a primitive, tactile experience for me—the feel of paint on canvas, guided by the right kind of music. The wrong song can change the entire feel of a painting.

I start by transferring the iPad drawing to canvas, and then the fun begins—painting over it with quick, rough gestures or adding a word or two. I embrace imperfection. It is like building a sandcastle for hours just to enjoy the act of destroying it. This approach is a nod to my artist heroes—Basquiat, Warhol, Pollock, Schnabel, as well as the music of Lou Reed and David Bowie—who all liked a bit of imperfection.

I deliberately leave the edges of the canvas raw, making the canvas itself part of the artwork. My pieces often feature everyday objects and scenarios, elevated to the extraordinary through vivid colours and dynamic compositions. Bold strokes and layered textures transform ordinary experiences into compelling visual narratives.

My latest solo exhibition, "Kopi Jackfruit Monkey", is a collection of artworks that reflect my daily life in George Town—the *kopitiams* I frequent, the lively markets and the rhythm of everyday life near my studio. The title is a playful nod to the local culture—"*kopi*" for the beloved coffee, "jackfruit" for the tropical abundance and "monkey" for the lively, untamed spirit of the place.

NIGEL SENSE is an Australian artist currently based in George Town, Penang. He is participating in this year's George Town Festival with a solo painting exhibition at Fiesta by Beaverly Chill, running from July 19 to 28.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

CAPTIONS

1. *Mr. Curry Puff*
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 140 cm

2. *Instant Noodle Breakfast*
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 160 cm

3. *Sports Drink vs. Beer*
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 110 cm

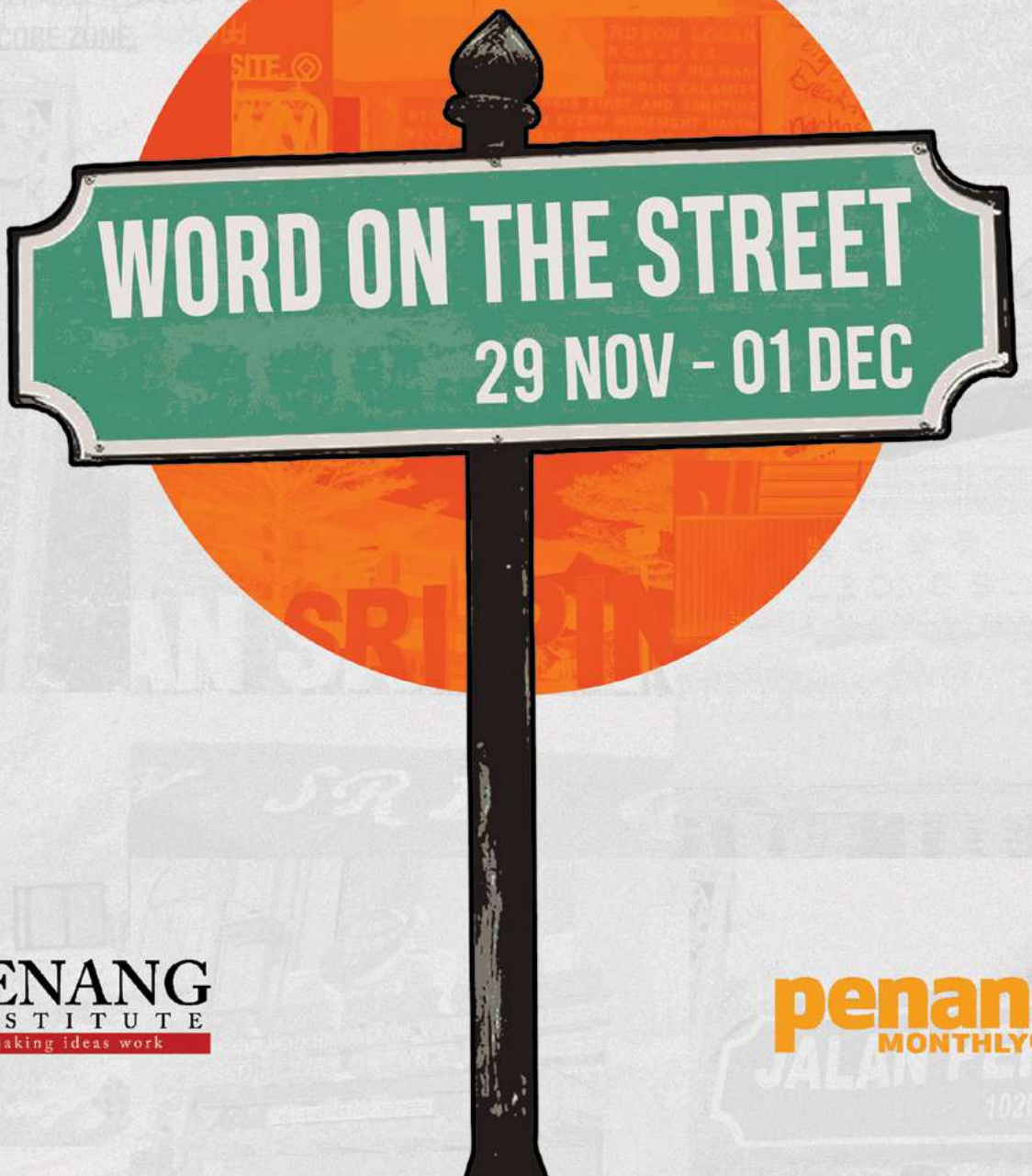
4. *Soy Sauce Boy*
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 160 cm

5. *Sauce Man*
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 110 cm

6. *Sunset With iPhone*
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 140 cm

7. *Papaya is Better Than Bananas*
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 140 cm

GEORGE TOWN LITERARY FESTIVAL 2024



PENANG INSTITUTE
making ideas work

penang MONTHLY

Penang Development Corporation

OUR VISION

To be a leader in Sustainable Socio-Economic Development to achieve Wealth Creation & Distribution

Spreadheading Sustainable Growth

Penang Development Corporation - PDC

penangdevelopmentcorporation