

Source: The Star, Sunday, 27 March 2011

Let heritage guide the future

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How do we stop the loss of Malaysia's unique built heritage? We can learn about our past and let it guide us in planning a sustainable future that will not destroy our roots.

A CENTURY ago, the double-leafed doors of Ng Boo Bee's town house in Taiping, Perak, stood almost perpetually open to accommodate the endless flow of visitors.

Apart from for the tin tycoon's famous philanthropy, many of the townsfolk had business with him: they were Ng's tenants, for he had built many of the structures in town, including Malaya's first railway, connecting Taiping and Port Weld (now Kuala Sepetang).

Over the years, as Ng's descendants scattered throughout the world, his modest house faded from the town's notice. The peeling paint, broken balustrades and cracks in the walls whispered of neglect.

Last month, though, the old house came alive as curious townsfolk once again trooped in, this time to explore this building that had been such an integral part of Taiping's development but that had been largely ignored for decades.



The Peace Hotel is a glorious example of eclectic, individualistic Straits architecture. Looming threateningly on its left is a building that could exist in any anonymous city on the planet.

Folks had been invited to attend a full day's programme that included a heritage walk around the town, a workshop on built heritage, and an exhibition and film screening to coincide with the launch of *Returning Taiping* (pic, below), a highly detailed and informative book illustrating the town's built architecture and heritage that was put together by 30 architectural students.

Taiping has been described a myriad ways: pensioner's paradise, heaven's waiting room, peaceful, boring, dusty, dreary, even "dying". But how far the truth is from perception, these students from Universiti Malaya (UM) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) discovered last May.

"A town of tin, rain, commerce, leisure and heritage" – that's how they describe Taiping in their book.

In May 2010, the students participated in the fifth UM-NUS Joint Studio Programme to document Taiping as part of a study that began in 2005. Funded by the Tan Chin Tuan

Foundation, the programme documented the built heritage of five Malaysian cities. Malacca was documented in 2005, Penang in 2006, Kuching in 2008, Kuala Terengganu in 2009, and Taiping last year.



Architect Lim Take Bane bemoans how ‘we travel all the way to England’s Lake District when we have our own beautiful Taiping Lake encircled by forested green hills on our doorstep’. “This is an earnest record of the town in the first decade of the 21st century,” explains editor Ho Weng Hin in the introduction to *Returning Taiping*.

“Like an archaeological log, this publication documents Taiping’s many layers and stories excavated during the programme. Above all, the project is about returning to Taiping its rich, variegated identity, accrued through each turn of her many transformative cycles.

“It is about returning the town and her future to the people.”

Taiping, which was Perak’s state capital until 1930, had everyone fighting over the lucrative tin mines discovered there – they were the world’s richest in the late 19th century. With rich coffers, not to mention Ng’s generosity, town planners could afford to create charming environs filled with beautiful and practical buildings.

“The foresight of Taiping’s early town planners and forefathers never fails to amaze me every time I come here,” says architect Lim Take Bane who lectures on the subject at UM.

“Shop house architecture was adapted to local conditions. The early occupants would have been immigrants but they built according to their locality, and then they adapted their homes to suit different needs through different periods.

“And look at the magnificent rain trees lining Taiping Lake that were planted with abundant space between the seedlings.

“The town planners would have known that they’d never get to enjoy these trees in their lifetime, as it takes 100 years to mature to what they are today. They planned for these trees to provide shade and beauty to future generations. Yet, we trim the lower branches to make way for coaches!”



Stately buildings, too, have made way for ugly concrete blocks that destroy the elegant visual continuity the town planners had carefully created.

More than 30% of the town's heritage structures had already been demolished last year; as such, these students felt a keen sense of urgency to record and try to preserve what may be the last vestiges of Taiping's rich heritage.

Even the house of Ng Boo Bee, who built half of Taiping, is at risk of being replaced by the office blocks increasingly dominating the town's centre. The house had originally occupied three lots when it was built in the late 1880s to shelter up to 25 members of his extended family. Over the years, parts have been partitioned off and sold, with one unit becoming a hardware store and another demolished to make way for a four-storey office block.

"Our heritage towns and cities are currently under stress from insensitive development that tears at their urban fabric," says Lim.

"Sometimes the character of an area or locality has been irrevocably changed through careless destruction, resulting in the loss of its very soul.

"This we witnessed in the destruction of the ancient river frontage of Kampung Cina shophouses through land reclamation during last year's programme in Kuala Terengganu. And in 2008, we documented the oldest market on Kuching's waterfront along Jalan Gambier just before it was demolished in the name of riverside 'beautification'.

"Much of our priceless architectural heritage has been and will be lost through apathy, neglect or ignorance. So it is timely that our architectural students be introduced and taught to appreciate their heritage through study and research, and to disseminate this vital knowledge," Lim says.

Documenting living heritage

Over a month, four teams of eight students each from both universities conducted urban studies and made measured drawings of four buildings in Taiping: Ng Boo Bee's vacant town house, the Cheah Png Sou residence, the Peace Hotel, and a dilapidated workshop that started out as horse stables and became the beginnings of Taiping's transportation system. (see *Buildings stories* opposite).

The students noted each building's exact dimensions to produce drawings and models, and researched the histories to understand the aspirations of the families that used to live there (or that are still there). The idea was to depict lost lifestyles in media such as film or scaled models.

“This programme exposes students to urban study, so they can understand how a town’s identity and character is uniquely shaped by its culture, topography, location and history,” explains Lim.

Dr Lai Chee Kien, of NUS’ architecture department, adds, “Much can be learned from the wisdom and harmony employed in Taiping’s built environment. The shophouses are very versatile dwellings, functioning as both residences and a trading place.

“And look at the century-old dhoby lines (laundry services) near the early Indian settlement. The overflow of Taiping Lake provides for this trade, which in turn services the needs of the townfolks, especially its industries.”

Nur Syazwani, 21, from NUS, recall being surprised by the humble abode of Taiping’s richest man, Ng Boo Bee.

“Our first impression was, ‘What an old house it is!’” says Nur. “Yet it held so much history that reflected the town. We were taken aback by the lack of ornamentation or detailing expected in the home of a wealthy man.

“We were thrilled to discover long forgotten belongings in the rooms upstairs, as the artefacts told stories of Ng’s family and how they’d lived.

“There were ribbon-bound stacks of old black and white photographs, certificates, sporting trophies, diaries written in English, letters, luxury goods like perfumes and well-worn antique Louis Vuitton steamer trunks and suitcases.

“They speak of an educated, well-to-do family that travelled frequently and was very much aware of what was happening beyond the limits of this little town.”

New challenges

This town has been resilient enough to survive, if not completely intact, then at least with much of its charm still apparent. But in this new century, it is facing a new challenge: the Taiping 2020 Plan, designed to propel the town from the backwaters into modern times.

Rani Hanifa, 49, a mutton seller at the 136-year-old Old Taiping Market welcomes development.

“It will be better for the entire community. As you can see, the market is old and dirty, as there have not been changes in 30 years. Many young people have left Taiping for bigger cities to seek better jobs and a more vibrant life.”

Vegetable trader Ang Chang Kang, 68, argues: “By all means develop and upgrade Taiping but not at the expense of our heritage and history being bulldozed away. We enjoy harmony among the 100-odd traders here. I’d hate to see that change if we become like the cities.”

Teoh Chee Keong, a Taiping born architecture lecturer who teaches in Kuala Lumpur, adds: “Taiping needs to preserve not just its buildings but its intangible heritage. Many traders at the market have been there for four generations. Under the plan, the market will become like Kuala Lumpur’s Central Market. A lot of intrinsic heritage will be gone.

“What we need to do is not just provide facilities and infrastructure for tourists but, rather, to upgrade the lives of the locals who make Taiping what it is. We shouldn’t just follow strategies for Malacca or Penang, but develop a plan that is committed to contributing to improving the lives of local people.”

Capt (R) Victor J. Dorai, 80, says: “Old people like Taiping. We treasure the fact that our town is a pensioner’s paradise! I can never live elsewhere and I’ll be happy to draw my last breath in Taiping.”

Haji S.A.M. Mohaideen, 78, director of Syarikat S.A. Mohamed Ishack Sdn Bhd, points across the road to a patch of grass under an old angšana tree, where occupying Japanese military forces had beheaded people during World War II.

“History unfolded on these streets,” he says. “We do want development but in a way that values Taiping’s unique culture and heritage is valued, not destroys it. If we want to develop the town, then let us build colleges or educational institutions here to create a community of youth. After all, there is ample space for such facilities.”

Sadly, the realisation that heritage holds value may not come in time to save a building that is significant, architect Lim says somberly.

“We keep letting go of our unique Malaysian heritage. These physical structures hold answers to our search for identities and roots. The building owners must come to see the value in their properties and preserve them as a physical manifestation of something they hold dear, for example a chair we’d tell our children once belonged to Ah Koong (grandfather).”

Perak State Assemblyman for Taiping Yee Seu Kai says 100 shophouses have been identified for conservation under the Taiping 2020 plan. However, Yee adds that much more needs to be done to get local townfolk to actively participate in conserving their properties.

“Taiping stands for history, culture and heritage,” he says. “It is a myth that Taiping is a dying town. Local folks value their gentler way of life which may be different from big cities.

“In our global village today, I believe more people will return to settle down here, including young people who will see the benefits of staying out of the rat race but remaining connected to the wider world through technology.”

Dr Lai says that Taiping’s resilient spirit is reflected in its continual transformation, from a tin mining town to vibrant commercial centre for rubber, place for leisure and now as a heritage town.

“It is very important for the council’s plan to be strengthened by voices from the grassroots. No one plan fits all. We can learn from models and examples of heritage towns but we do not need to wholly emulate them.

“Taiping folks must take ownership of their town’s fate. It’s crucial for them to play a role in what they want with their town.”

‘Returning Taiping’ (ISBN 978-9810834993) is jointly published by the Centre of Advanced Studies in Architecture, Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, and the Centre for Conservation Studies and Records, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Malaya. For more information and to purchase the book, go to www.arch.nus.edu.sg or fbe.um.edu.my.

Winds of change

PART of the *Returning Taiping* project involved providing suggestions to improve some of the Taiping 2020 Plan's proposals. These are excerpts from the book.

Proposal: Incentives for the preservation of heritage buildings: To encourage adaptive reuse, the town council will impose lower taxes and provide paint subsidies to heritage building owners. They are also granted permission to change the shophouse function for more economical use based on the condition that these changes are consistent with preserving the essence of a heritage town while maintaining the building's façade.

Discussion: While this will facilitate development while conserving Taiping's heritage, an awareness of the town's cultural value should be given more focus. A level of authenticity should be maintained to preserve the town's history and heritage.

A complete overhaul of the tourism industry could result in the loss of Taiping's character, as commercial tourism is suddenly imposed on the heritage town. An example is the Ng Boo Bee house where plans have been made to replace it with a five-storey museum that will contain a replica of the original house; although the building's façade is preserved, its authenticity is compromised. More emphasis should be given to preserving the building's history and its interiors instead of just its façade. Ultimately, it is not only the tangible aspects but the buildings' intangible character and history that embody the town's heritage.



Should the trees make way for vehicles?

These rain trees took 100 years to grow to this stately size

Proposal: Introduction of rain trees: Rain trees to be planted along Jalan Kota to provide shade and enhance the town's nostalgic quality with these "heritage trees".

Discussion: The trees' heavy foliage would overshadow and block buildings and obstruct traffic; the trees are also difficult to maintain. Furthermore, trees in this location would blur the boundary between the urban town area and its famous picturesque garden landscape.

Proposal: Thematic main roads: Areas will be allocated for pedestrian walkways and informal commercial activities to facilitate pedestrian movement and enliven commercial activities. Jalan Pasar will be turned into an art street with old shophouses reused as art and handicraft studios

and galleries; Jalan Berek will become a night food and festival street, with hotels; Jalan Stesen will become a seasonal fruit and festival street.

Discussion: While these developments might bring life and vibrancy to the town, the proposed themes and commercial activities have little or no relation to the histories and functions of the areas. This will destroy the heritage in these places.

A better idea would be to turn Jalan Pasar into a night food and festival street or seasonal fruit and festival street instead of an art street. Its proximity to the Central Market means it could ideally function as an extension of the market.

The risk is that as these streets become increasingly commercialised, their histories and heritage will be forgotten as commercial and tourism activities take over. An example of what could happen is embodied in Malacca's Jonker Street: Its historical significance as a "rich man's street" is completely lost and it is today merely a tourist hotspot and night market.

Proposal: Market and cultural market: The Central Market will be converted into a cultural market featuring a bazaar selling antiques, handicraft, flowers and food. The market's structure and architecture will be preserved but existing stalls will be shifted to a new market on Jalan Tupai. The end of Jalan Chung Thye Phin will be turned into a cul-de-sac with an open theatre.

Discussion: This would divide Taiping into two distinct areas, one serving tourists in the north-west, the second serving residents in the south-east. While the move is well intentioned, it would adversely affect the residents' sense of belonging to the town, as the market has been a fixture in their daily lives and memories of Taiping.

The conversion would also be detrimental to the business of the supporting shops around the market. Instead of converting the Central Market into a cultural centre, it should be preserved in both form and function to demonstrate Taiping's rich, complex "sights and smells".

Proposal: Heritage Trail: A Taiping Walk is aimed at strengthening Taiping's unique identity by highlighting 33 "firsts", such as being the location of Malaysia's first railway station, port, airfield, swimming pool and hill resort through a looped public transport trail.

Discussion: This would indeed highlight the town's uniqueness and pay tribute to its tin mining history and colonial era. However, this intervention could also result in commercialisation of these areas due to the influx of tourists and hasten the loss of the buildings' history and heritage. Many shophouses along Jalan Kota and Jalan Taming Sari have already changed, converting from residences to shops and eateries.

Taiping's soul is not just in its historical buildings; it also lies along the streets, among the people, in little shops and townhouses where people have lived for generations. These little gems cannot be given justice by a Heritage Trail that focuses on bigger buildings and major roads.

Proposal: Redeveloping the Taiping Lake Gardens: A large component of developing the Lake Gardens is building mini gardens such as a mini golf course and botany garden. A pedestrian walkway will be built to connect the gardens.

Discussion: Making the Lake Gardens more commercial might result in overcrowding and potentially disrupt the peace with increased human and vehicular traffic. The botany garden is unnecessary because the Lake Gardens already has a large variety of plants.

The proposal should focus on sustaining the Lake Gardens' ecology rather than increasing visitor numbers. Aside from providing shade, the century-old rain trees are venerable landmarks that are fragile; special attention should be given to caring for their roots during construction works. More importantly, the rain trees' characteristic low branches should not be cut or trimmed without consideration just to cater for vehicles. Vehicles above the height of the lowest branches could be diverted to a different route, or a ring road could be constructed, such as the one outside the Flemington Hotel.

Building stories

House of Ng Boo Bee

WHEN Ng Boo Bee died, his funeral procession reportedly took four hours to get to the cemetery due to the massive crowd, and Taiping shut down for the day because most of the people who attended the funeral had been his tenants in town.

A migrant from Fujian, China, Ng arrived in Taiping in the late 19th century and started a business manufacturing bricks and supplying timber. He was the contractor appointed to build Malaya's first railway line, between Taiping and Port Weld (now Kuala Sepetang). His tin mines in another Perak town, Kamunting, employed 3,000 Chinese miners. But his greatest contribution was in rebuilding half the town after a massive fire engulfed Taiping in 1880.

Ng may have been Taiping's richest man but his house is a perplexing study in simplicity and modesty. Perfectly adapted to hot and rainy climates, the front half reveals the cross section of the jack roof (a smaller roof that sits on the main roof to allow heat to escape), with a large space above the windows for ventilation. Adjustable jalousies (louvred windows) allow ventilation while keeping the rain out.



Just one unit of the formerly three-unit Ng Boo Bee house can be seen here. – Photo from Returning Taiping
Due to the frequent floods in Taiping, the house has begun to sink; experts believe it has sunk two inches at an angle leaning backwards, towards the building's rear end.

House of Cheah Png Sou

While the Ng Boo Bee house has been vacant for years, the Cheah Png Sou town house is still a thriving family residence owned by an elderly couple whose son works in Kuala Lumpur.

Sited near the Central Market to allow Cheah's father, a pork seller, to get to work easily, the house today allows the couple to enjoy their daily morning walk at the nearby lake followed by breakfast at the market, also conveniently close by.

Its resemblance to Ng's house suggests it had been built by the tin tycoon. The main door is kept open all day for ventilation and lighting while a metal folding concertina gate provides security. Space usage remains unchanged from the time it was built in the late 19th century although a part of the rear was demolished in 1985 to create an annexe to meet expanded needs.

Like most of the Taiping town houses, this house also sports a jack roof and two air wells that have now been covered by plastic sheets. A certain charm remains in the antique wooden furniture and a little roof garden.

Shop and workshop

Ferns peeping out from the roofs, broken louvred windows and fading paint create a dilapidated image for the old building at No. 193, Jalan Taming Sari. The owner is a Chettiar who now resides in India. For three generations, the shophouse has been divided into two separate spaces for two sets of tenants.

Its latest use was as a photocopy service centre with an adjoining grocery store. The back portion houses a lorry repair workshop. But behind these simple uses is a story about the development of Taiping's transportation system.

In the late 1880s, this space was a horse stable that evolved into a carriage repair workshop that finally became a lorry repair workshop. It is currently the oldest among three similar workshops in Taiping. Its name, Fook Nam, meaning "southern prosperity", is written in Chinese calligraphy on a wooden signboard alongside the word, "wood", which speaks of its trade in wood.

Two interesting features are a peephole in floor of the photocopy shop on the first floor, obviously intended to monitor the grocery store below; the other is the night soil bucket toilet that was common in the past, when waste was collected weekly by the "night soil man" through the opening at the back of the toilet.



The Peace Hotel has a distinct hybrid style that mixes Western architectural elements with Chinese motifs and decorations.

Peace Hotel

The ornate detailing on this 1928 double-storey hotel and coffee shop shows the hybrid influence of Western architectural elements and Chinese motifs and decorations, reflecting Taiping's cosmopolitan nature.

Categorised as a Straits-eclectic shop house, it is defined by its combination of Eastern and Western elements that can be seen in its ceramic artwork and elaborate plaster renderings. The facade is characterised as Italianate (also termed Neo Renaissance), illustrated by characteristics such as a balustraded balcony, cornice structures, pedimented windows and doors, and glazed windows.

Columns and walls throughout the hotel's interior were decorated with beautiful Art Nouveau tiles produced in Europe (as shown on *StarMag's* cover) and featuring themes of birds and

flowers such as peacocks, parrots, quails, roses, water lilies and sunflowers. – Information from *Returning Taiping*.