

## Adaptive Reuse of Several Historical Buildings in Kuala Lumpur as Museums

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### ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a country rich with historical buildings, most of which are part of the national heritage. However, many of such buildings that are located across the country have been ignored in recent years. Realizing the importance and potential of such buildings towards the country's growth, these buildings have been renovated and adapted to be reused again for a wide range of functions, particularly in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur. Generally, most of these restored historic buildings have been converted into museums, business premises, offices, restaurants, residential houses or even for public use. This paper aims to identify and focus on a few of the historical buildings in Kuala Lumpur which have been adapted to be converted into museums. Apart from being a source of reference and learning, the uniqueness of the Museum architecture serves as a symbol of the historical identity of Kuala Lumpur that could draw the attention of tourists. Furthermore, this paper aims to elevate the importance of historical buildings in developing the country's potential in tourism through the promotion of heritage tourism.

**Key words:** Historical buildings, Kuala Lumpur, adaptive reuse, museum & heritage tourism.

### INTRODUCTION

As a former country of imperialist colonies, Malaysia has a number of historical remains which can be obviously seen through the town's physical structures. One of the historical towns is Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur, which means 'Muddy Confluence' in English, was formed in the 19th century from the intersection of the two mineral rich rivers, Sungai Gombak and Sungai Klang. Located at this "golden triangle", the formation of Kuala Lumpur (KL) begins with the mining industry. The magnificent era of the mining industry in Kuala Lumpur has changed this muddy mining village into a prosperous capital in the region at that time. The rapid growth of this mining city has also transformed Kuala Lumpur to become the capital of the newly formed 'Federated Malay States' in 1896.<sup>1</sup> The long period of time has left behind historical legacies which can still be witnessed from the historical

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<sup>1</sup> The quick development of this new capital has attracted people from various cultures and it quickly became a melting pot of Asian cultures. Special areas were erected in the city, and in every area a different culture group lived. <http://www.wonderfulmalaysia.com/kuala-lumpur-history.htm> [20 July 2014]. Further history of Kuala Lumpur also can be found at <http://www.visitkl.gov.my>.

buildings that still remain. The strong potential of commerce and socio economy has transformed Kuala Lumpur to an extremely developed city. Up to the present time, Kuala Lumpur is renowned as one of the most vibrant and prosperous cosmopolitan cities in Asia. However, some of the historic sites around Kuala Lumpur where these historical buildings are located are seen to experience neglect, are unoccupied and require unprecedented revitalization in order to complement and blend with the modernized buildings constructed around it as part of the country's move towards modernization. The neglect of such buildings has literally brought disadvantages to the country's development. Besides helping in defining the past history, it is one of the tangible heritages that could also contribute to sustainable urban landscape, community and environmental development, and has the potential to offer smart growth of the country's economy.

### **What is adaptive reuse?**

Adaptive reuse can be defined as conserving a heritage building by changing the physical components of the building with the least amount of impact to the building. By rejuvenating the historical building, it is hoped that the past memory could be retained and retold while at the same time revitalizing its vicinity. Normally, the popular conversions of historical building are into museums, art studios, offices, cafés, residential units and retail stores. At the same time, by adapting and reusing these historical buildings, it could also help them to be preserved for longer period of time and to revive them through conservation. In order to retain their appearance, conservation has to take into account concepts such as adaptive reuse of historical buildings. Austin (1988) in Cantell (2005) describes adaptive reuse as a process by which structurally sound older buildings are developed for economically viable new uses. Meanwhile Rani and Aziz (n.d.) define adaptive reuse as one of the methods for conserving heritage building by changing the physical components of the building with the least impact to the building. In other words, adaptive reuse can simply be described as modifying a building for use other than its original use.<sup>2</sup> It is also a method of expanding or modifying the building's structure and may involve changing parts of the building in requirements of the proposed use while maintaining the significant features at the same time. Even though adaptive reuse work may implicate some changes in the building's structure and may affect the authenticity of the building, such building can still be used rather than being left unoccupied or abandoned, particularly when there are many instances of historical buildings being abandoned and in a state of neglect without being utilized in Malaysia.

At the present time there are many advantages to the concept of adaptive reuse as stated below:

- Environmental sustainability- Least amount of land explored for development;

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<sup>2</sup> This was defined by Buildings Department, Hong Kong in Practice Guidebook on Compliance with Building Safety and Health Requirements under the Buildings Ordinance for Adaptive Re-use of and Alteration and Addition Works to Heritage Buildings, 2012. <http://www.bd.gov.hk/english/documents/guideline/heritage.pdf> [20 July 2014]

- Social - Enriching the community by generating additional and beneficial activities in the surrounding area such as employment opportunities when these historical buildings are occupied and being used for example as offices, museums or restaurants.
- Economic benefits - Cost saving in that rather than starting a new construction, the original building is reused, encouraging more investment<sup>3</sup> since these original buildings are more resistant as they were built using high quality and enduring materials;
- Technology and innovation - Conserving energy use by repurposing existing structures, energy, utilities and materials, eco-friendly concept applied;
- Heritage preservation - Reuse retains historic resources and the community's character.

However, there are several standards of operation or policies in conducting an adaptive reuse project to ensure minimum impact on the building's heritage values. As Australia is well known in heritage preservation and has many successful heritage preservation projects including adaptive reuse project, we may take their approach as a guide in conducting an adaptive reuse project such as<sup>4</sup>:

- discouraging "façadism"—that is, gutting the building and retaining its façade;
- requiring new work to be recognizable as contemporary, rather than a poor imitation of the original historic style of the building, and;
- seeking a new use for the building that is compatible with its original use.

### **Some of the historical buildings in Kuala Lumpur which are reused as Museums**

Five museums around Kuala Lumpur were chosen as a study subject for this paper, namely, National Museum of Malaysia, The Tun Abdul Razak Memorial,

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<sup>3</sup> A study for the NSW Heritage Council on the relationship between heritage and economy found that adaptive re-use schemes have created commercially viable investment assets for the owners (Heritage NSW Newsletter. 2002. *Does Heritage Make Good Economic Sense?*, NSW Heritage Office, Autumn: 6–7).  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/3845f27a-ad2c-4d40-8827-18c643c7adcd/files/adaptive-reuse.pdf> [15 July 2014]

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/3845f27a-ad2c-4d40-8827-18c643c7adcd/files/adaptive-reuse.pdf> [15 July 2014]

Telekom Museum, National Textile Museum and the Royal Museum (Istana Negara Lama).

### NATIONAL MUSEUM

The history of the existence and construction of the National Museum (NM) has gone through a very long historical process in line with the historical development of museums in Malaysia. The inception of the idea was sparked by the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia during a time when Malaysia was known as Malaya. Tunku Abdul Rahman said that after gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia should have a national museum which displays the historical treasures, culture and nature of the country to showcase the country's own identity. He recommended that a new building should be built to replace the temporary building of the museum. Furthermore, the temporary building was only capable of displaying the museum's collection of materials on a small scale only. Thus, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, presented the project of building the NM on September 16, 1958. An architect from Singapore named Ho Kok Hoe then designed a few examples of buildings based on the architecture of the palace of the Malay Rulers and the artistic elements of the Local Malay community. He took about six months to produce a traditional Malay architectural design before work began on its construction.

At the same time, the UNESCO in Paris was also helping by sending a museum expert and architect named Lothar P. Witterburg who was once the head of exhibition at the Natural History Museum in New York at the time. After Tuanku selected the design of the building which is still intact as can be seen today, a company named Yew Lee was appointed to be in charge of the construction of the National Museum building on 2 January 1962. This building measures 124 square feet, 362 feet long and 60 feet wide. The building was built at a cost of 1.5 million (Ringgit Malaysia) and is located on an area of 14.7 hectares.

The work of preparing the building and getting the exhibition ready was running concurrently with so many people crowding the area including investigators, workers and highly skilled craftsmen in various fields. Apart from Zainal Abidin bin Nik, Nik Wan Salleh Wan Su Othman and Shaharuddin Tahir were also involved in drawing the decoration on the inside and outside of the building, as well as the carving on the large door in front of the building, the carving on the ceilings of the central hall and the ceremonial hall. Other artists who also contributed a great deal to prepare the permanent exhibitions are Waveney Jenkins, Abdul Wahab Mohd Tahir (museum painter) Hossein Enas, Raja Teh Zaiton, Shahrom YUB, Brian Peacock and Ismail Bakti. Waveney Jenkins produced the murals of Hang Tuah based on the advice of Dato' Paduka Maharaja Lela Nik Mustapha Fadhil, taking samples of the faces of two soldiers from the Royal Malay Regiment's first batallion. Meanwhile, Raaja Teh Zaiton successfully prepared the wedding dais of the Perak royalty with the help of Puan Teh Fatimah from Ipoh who is also an expert on Perak royal attire. NM was finally fully ready and was launched on 31st of August 1963. While

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construction work was being carried out, the work on the preparation of the exhibits was also carried out continuously. The new museum has resulted in the federal capital to have the first building of which the eastern influence in its design is clearly visible apart from the mosque architecture and it is the first capital city to have a huge building to be built of which its artistic design is clearly visible.

The building is located on top of a site with acreage of 3.5 square acres while the total area is 14.7 acres. NM is covered with carvings (corresponding to the breadth of tread) of 362 feet long, 60 feet wide and 124 feet high which forms the central portion of the building up to the roof area.



The National Museum  
Source: Zuraidah Hassan 2012

### **Tun Abdul Razak Memorial**

Tun Abdul Razak Memorial was developed, designed and strengthened through moments of history that began with the declaration of independence. Tun Abdul Razak Memorial is a building which was the official residence of Tun Abdul Razak, and it was originally known as *Bangunan Sri Taman*. The building was later turned into a museum to commemorate his service and was officiated by Tun Mahathir bin Mohamad on May 6, 1982. The Memorial was built to commemorate the late Tun Abdul Razak as a leader, warrior and statesman of our homeland and the Father of Development. The building of his residence is located in the center of the complex. This building was home to the late Tun Abdul Razak between 1956 to 1970 when he was the chief minister and later the second prime minister of Malaysia. Most of the discussions, decisions and actions that affected and determined the country's history were carried out in this house. The Memorial is still home to personal artifacts and documents related to the late Tun Abdul Razak which is still preserved in its original form as when he inhabited this residency.



**Tun Abd Razak Memorial**  
Source: [www.arkib.gov.my](http://www.arkib.gov.my)

### **Telekom Museum**

Telekom Museum, which was formerly known as the Provincial Building of Selangor (Selangor Region), was built in 1928. This building was built based on Greek architecture. The purpose of its construction was as a place for manual telephone exchange of the central battery type. The building was equipped with separate underground cables and floor layout to suit the telecommunication equipment at that time. The design of its construction is the best example for telephone exchange building in Malaya at that time.

Year to year, several amendments and additions were made to the original building's structure. A significant addition to this building is a four storey office building which was built by the Public Works Department (PWD) in 1958 that connects the two ends, making the available service court or area into an indoor air well.

With the establishment of the National Telecommunications Museum, this historic building is maintained in its original form and became one of the historic buildings in Kuala Lumpur.



TELEKOM Museum  
Source: Internet

### National Textile Museum

The National Textile Museum or *Muzium Tekstil Negara* is located in the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. It is situated at JKR 26, Lot 50 Seksyen 70, Jalan Sultan Hishamudin. The museum is located in an old building that is previously occupied and used by various organizations before it ends up as a museum. The architecture of this building is based on Moghul-Islam orientation. The museum has streaks of red and white as a result of the red bricks and white plaster which are punctuated alternately, characterizing the adaptation of the Moghul-Islam style of architecture. The entrance-way facing the Jalan Sultan Hishammuddin consists of two rectangular oval shaped poles that stretch out from the walls of the dome-roofed. There are two octagonal-shaped towers on the side of the building. In each tower there is a concrete dome surrounded by smaller domes. In 2008, space was added to the glass lobby of the building and used as the main entrance to the museum.

The National Textile Museum was designed by an English architect, A.B. Hubback and its construction was coupled with the Sultan Abdul Samad building in 1896. This building was used as the State Railway Headquarters for the Federated Malay States in 1905. In 1917, the building was submitted to the NSW government and made of Selangor Public Works department. This building was subsequently occupied by the Selangor Water Works Department, the Central Bank and the Bank of Agriculture respectively from 1959 to 1980 before being handed over to the Urban Development Authority Holdings Berhad (UDA) in 1981. In 1986, this building was leased by the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation as a showcase for art and craft and turned into the Textile Museum. From 2001 until 2004, it functioned as the High Court (Appellate and Special Powers) and the Gallery of Justice before permission was granted for the construction of the National Textile Museum in October 2007 as a follow-up approval from the Cabinet on July 13, 2005 under the

Memorandum of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage No. 527/2468/2005 based on the proposal for the establishment of the National Textile Museum.

The National Textile Museum is a 2 ½-storey building with an area of 3259 m<sup>2</sup> of land and floor area of about 3145.3 m<sup>2</sup>. It was gazetted on 13 October 1983 as a historical building under the Government Gazette PU (A) 423, Order of Old Monuments and Sites of Historical Land (No. 3), Ancient Artifacts Act 1976. Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture through the Department of Museums Malaysia conducted the project 'Conservation Work Item Proposal, Filling Exhibition and Interior Design for the National Textile Museum of Kuala Lumpur' from August 2007 until it was completed in June 2009. The museum was opened to the public on January 9, 2010.<sup>5</sup>

The National Textile Museum is mainly divided into four exhibition galleries. They are *Pohon Budi* (Tree of Life) Gallery, *Pelangi* (Rainbow) Gallery, *Teluk Beratai* (Interlocking Bays) Gallery and finally the *Ratna Sari* (Special Collection of Jewelry) Gallery. The museum is opened daily from 9.00am to 6.00pm except during the two main Muslim celebrations of Hari Raya Puasa (Eid-ul-Fitr) and Hari Raya Haji (Eid-ul-Haj) and also on public holidays. The admission fee is only RM1.00.<sup>6</sup>



The National Textile Museum  
(Source: [www.dewanbudaya.usm.my](http://www.dewanbudaya.usm.my))



The National Textile Museum in 1905  
(Source: [www.muziumtekstilnegara.gov.my](http://www.muziumtekstilnegara.gov.my))

### Royal Museum (Istana Negara Lama)

The Royal Museum (Istana Negara Lama) was constructed since 1928. Originally this building was a residence mansion of a tin tycoon, Mr. Chan Wing. The double storey residence is located at Jalan Istana, Kuala Lumpur and its width is 11.34 hectares. Incorporated with Palladian style architecture, it was a luxurious and the largest mansion residence in Malaya at that time.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.muziumtekstilnegara.gov.my/main/content/sejarah\\_131/?menuid=63](http://www.muziumtekstilnegara.gov.my/main/content/sejarah_131/?menuid=63) [20 July 2014]

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.muziumtekstilnegara.gov.my/main/content/sejarah\\_131/?menuid=63](http://www.muziumtekstilnegara.gov.my/main/content/sejarah_131/?menuid=63) [20 July 2014]



During Japanese occupation in Malaya, this building was looted by the Japanese army and used as a Japanese army officer mess. Subsequently, it was occupied as a British Administrative Military Office of the Royal Air Force for a while after World War II ended. Later in 1950, this building was made as a temporary palace for the Sultan of Selangor, AlMarhum Sultan Sir Hisamuddin Alam Shah Ibni Al Marhum Sultan Alaiddin Sulaiman Shah until its lease term ended in February 1957. This building was finally bought by the Federal Government to be turned into Istana Negara, the official residence of the King and Queen of Malaysia, His Majesty *Seri Paduka Baginda Yang di-Pertuan Agong* and Her Majesty *Seri Paduka Baginda Raja Permaisuri Agong* until 2011 when the construction of a new palace was completed in Jalan Duta. The Royal Museum was modified several times and experienced extensive renovations and extensions around the 1980s including an addition of the *Balairung Seri Utama* which was used for official ceremonies.

The complex of the Royal Museum (Istana Negara Lama) consists of two blocks of buildings namely *Galeri Balairung Seri* and *Galeri Istana*. The museum is opened daily from 9.00am to 5.00pm and closed on *Hari Raya Puasa* and *Hari Raya Haji* and also public holidays.<sup>7</sup>



The Royal Museum (Istana Negara Lama),  
Kuala Lumpur  
(Source:www.kosmo.com.my)



The Royal Museum (Istana Negara  
Lama), Kuala Lumpur in 1945  
(Source:www.mstar.com.my)

## CONCLUSION

Adaptive reuse can be considered as the best way to preserve our heritage structures. It plays a major role in conserving our tangible heritage and is beneficial in many sectors. Besides helping in extending a building's lifespan, adaptive reuse also contributes in facilitating the retention of the inherent characteristics or identity

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<sup>7</sup> The admission fee may vary for certain category. Further info of the Royal Museum (Istana Negara Lama) can be obtained at <http://www.jmm.gov.my/en/muzium-diraja> [20 July 2014].

of the city and promoting heritage tourism indirectly. However, application of adaptive reuse should be done in appropriate and proper way so that the current needs could be served well. At the same time, adaptive reuse also makes good sense as a way of creating awareness in protecting the local heritage among the citizens. It indirectly develops a sense of community and makes the area to often be appreciated as an occupant-friendly environment. Finally, adaptive reuse is also useful in contributing new knowledge in the related subject and has the potential to become a global topic in line with the concern over issues and problems of neglect on the stability, sustainability and preservation of the environment.

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