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Too much to lose

Badan Warisan Malaysia believes old buildings reflect the national identity and as such must be conserved at all cost for the future. >2&3

Preserving our heritage

Badan Warisan facing uphill task to save old buildings

By **YIP YOKE TENG**

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Photos by **LOW LAY PHON**

THE case of Rumah Kutai (translated literally as old house) in Kuala Kangsar that was neglected after massive restoration reflects the tough task taken up by Badan Warisan Malaysia in championing heritage conservation.

One would think that urban development is the main threat to old buildings but the bigger enemy is actually the lack of awareness.

Owners of these buildings do not appreciate them, developers want to knock them down for the prime land they sit on while authorities that do not value the historical significance distance themselves.

As a result, hundreds of old buildings that house the soul of a nation are vanishing over time due to decay and demolition.

Badan Warisan Malaysia president Tun Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid said if a local authority in England were the controlling power here, they would take the task upon themselves to save the buildings whether it was public or private property.

Such ignorance has been "killing" the built heritage in our country, where rotting old structures are a common sight, or simply replaced with skyscrapers. "Knowing the value is crucial in understanding the preservation and conservation of heritage.

"For example, I will treasure a Qing Dynasty vase but someone else may just give it away as they are unaware of its value.

"I put a value to all these, I see Stadium Merdeka as more valuable than my life because it was there

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that Tunku (Abdul Rahman Putra) proclaimed independence. It should be taken as a sacred place and I would attribute any attempt to destroy Merdeka Stadium as a sacrilegious act," he said, recalling an attempt in the past to demolish the stadium.

"It has to start with awareness and then appreciation," he added.

Formed in 1983 as a non-governmental organisation, Badan Warisan has been the voice in heritage conservation of old buildings undertaking many restoration projects, among them Rumah Bomoh in Changkat Jering, Gedung Raja Abdullah in Klang, Istana Tengku Long in Terengganu, Masjid Merbok Pengkalan Kakap in Kedah, a shophouse in Malacca and recently, the restoration of Merdeka Stadium.

Heritage trails, school outreach programmes and hands-on activities for educators are some of the interesting ways to engage the community to the cause.

Badan Warisan believes that the old buildings reflect the national identity and hence must be conserved for the future.

Ahmad Sarji named some of the country's intangible treasures —

timber houses that showcase traditional architectural prowess, palatial brick buildings brought in by the Dutch, Portuguese and British that reflect an era of administration, railway buildings in Moorish architecture designed by colonial architects, old shophouses

Help in heritage conservation, public urged

with *kaki lima* (five-foot way) that have painted the unique urban streetscape where trades thrived and ties fostered, as well as places of worship manifesting the people's beliefs.

"Without the past, there's no present and no future. Each of these buildings tells a story," he said.

He described the act of leaving these structures in dilapidated condition as "wilful disregard for history", and demolishing old buildings for space when the country had three quarters of land available for development a "fanatical obsession".

He said it would take a concerted effort involving all segments of the society for heritage conservation to be effective. And first of all, there should be an awareness movement.

"There's no movement but only sporadic voices, like mine, on heritage conservation.

"A strong political will is vital," he said, lauding the National Heritage Act 2005 and

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the government's move to enhance the study of history in school through which the love for cultural heritage could be inculcated among the young.

National Heritage Act 2005 replaced the Treasure Trove Act (Akta Harta Karun) 1957 and Relics and Antiquities Act (Akta Benda Purba) in 1976. The Act allows for the appointment of a Heritage Commissioner, the establishment of the National Heritage Council, the establishment of the National Heritage Fund and the National Heritage List.

The Kuala Lumpur City Hall's (DBKL) website shows that 53 buildings in Kuala Lumpur had been listed under the Relics and Antiquities Act 1976, 18 of them gazetted as National Heritage in 2007 and 2009 while 51 others have been proposed for gazette-ment.

However, he felt that more needed to be done to make the Act's content and intent known to the public.

He said local authorities played a pivotal role in heritage conservation especially by earmarking conservation areas in their local plans, adding that state and federal governments can also promote heritage conservation with tax rebates, assessment reductions or other incentives.

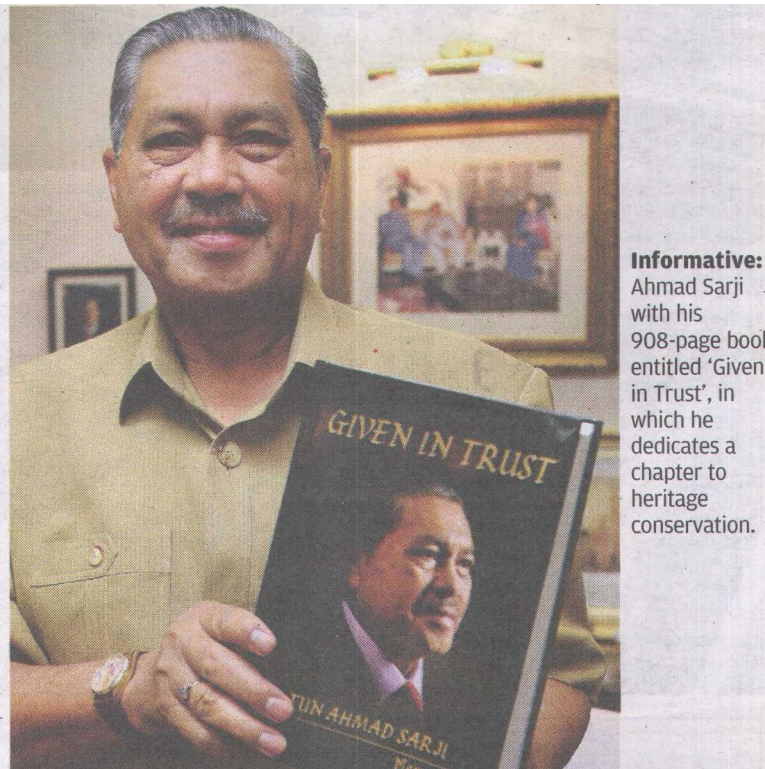
Transfer of development rights whereby owners are given the rights to develop an alternative site in exchange of their heritage properties was also proposed.

He said the media, experts, universities, associations and the public should involve themselves passionately when it came to preserving our heritage.

Ahmad Sarji said schools and institutions could sow the seed by forming heritage societies while architecture courses must include heritage architecture to instill the right mind-set.

"It is a long process to be done systematically with a multi-pronged approach," he said.

**PRESERVE OUR
HERITAGE**



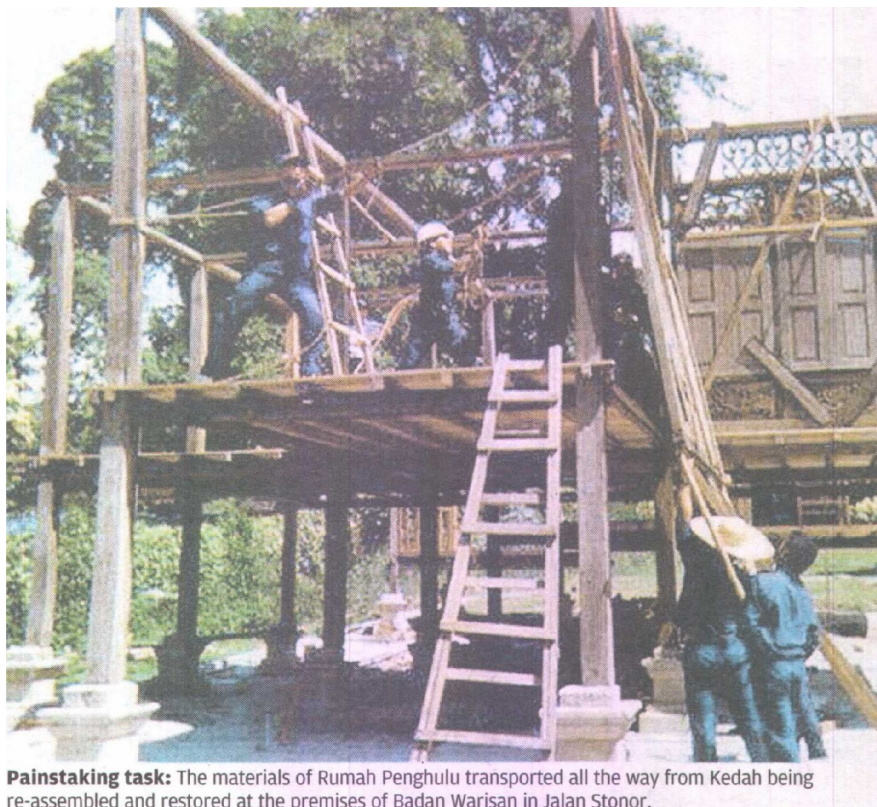
Informative:
Ahmad Sarji with his 908-page book entitled 'Given in Trust', in which he dedicates a chapter to heritage conservation.

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Priceless entity:
Merdeka Stadium during its restoration in 2007.



Painstaking task: The materials of Rumah Penghulu transported all the way from Kedah being re-assembled and restored at the premises of Badan Warisan in Jalan Stonor.

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Ahmad Sarji: Houses with historical value need urgent attention

THE Rumah Kutai in Kuala Kangsar painstakingly restored by Badan Warisan in 1994 is now a painful sight for those who know its immense value.

Built more than 120 years ago, the timber house located near the Perak River had survived three major floods and is believed to be the only remaining house of its type in the area.

It was identified by the Perak Museum as an important structure and lauded as a landmark in the state.

Against all odds, Badan Warisan restored the structure to its original glory despite its limited financial resources, with the late conservation architect Chen Voon Fee who was also Badan Warisan's founding member leading the team.

The project also received a Juror's Award in the Malaysian Institute of Architects (PAM) Architectural Awards 1995 in the Conservation and Adaptive Re-Use Building Category.

The house was handed back to the family but without a clear-cut consensus among the relatives as to who should maintain it. The house has since been neglected and now on the verge of collapse.

The shrunken road setback as a result of road-widening work made the condition even more difficult for preservation. The current legislation that categorises the modest timber houses as only temporary structure and hence with no Certificate of Fitness did not help with creating a better awareness either.

The diminishing skilled craftsmen has made the matter worse.

Badan Warisan Malaysia president Tun Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid said the Rumah Kutai was the jewel in the crown.

"It is a legacy of the craftsmanship of the Malay builder. If a priceless heritage like this can be in such a state of deterioration, people will be cynical about us and the authority," he said.

Ahmad Sarji speaks with emotions when it comes to old buildings and traditional Malay timber houses

are dear to his heart.

The Rumah Penghulu in Kedah was another traditional timber house dating back to the 1920s, cruelly ravaged by time. It was fortunate enough to be saved in time and transported to the safe zone in Badan Warisan's premises in Jalan Stonor, Kuala Lumpur, in 1996. The project involving Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Forest Research Institute Malaysia and Universiti Malaya took more than a year.

Bomoh House in Changkat Jering was another significant restoration project and luckily the owners took good care since then and Badan Warisan's effort did not go down the drain.

Several other traditional timber buildings in Kelantan and Terengganu were also restored in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

"Very few Kutai houses remain and of these, many have been abandoned, or have been changed and therefore have lost some degree of authenticity.

"Surveys conducted in the late 1970s and early 2000s show the number of Kutai houses in the Kuala Kangsar and surrounding districts fell from about 100 to around 40," he said, adding that Badan Warisan was ready to offer its expertise to save the houses again but needed funding.

With roads replacing rivers as the major mode of transportation, numerous Malay timber houses along the river banks are left abandoned and have become termite-infested, including those of prominent people as their children migrated to the cities.

With regards to this, Ahmad Sarji called for an immediate compilation of a directory of all existing Malay timber houses that have historical, architectural or other values, with each of the structures to be recorded and categorised so that different stages of repair or restoration can be carried out to save them.

He appealed to corporations for sponsorship while Badan Warisan's strong network of experts would take up the task, like how the organisation delivered the *Warisan Nusa*, a comprehensive book on urban heritage, with funds from Shell Malaysia.

"This has to be done quickly before the weather poses more damage to these houses and development takes place," he said.

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Standing proud: The meticulously restored 120-year-old Rumah Kutai when it was handed back to the owners.



In bad shape: The current condition of Rumah Kutai, Kuala Kangsar which was painstakingly restored by Badan Warisan in 1994.