

Headline	Ahmad Sarji: Houses with historical value need urgent attention		
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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.