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NATIONAL HERITAGE

GEM THAT'S CARCOSA SERI NEGARA

GOVERNMENT-owned national crown jewel Carcosa Seri Negara (CSN) is at the crossroads of ignominy and superstardom — glamorous yet understated, sanctified yet neglected, but, gifted with historical and natural splendour and the mother of prime real estate locations, it is now coveted like a king's lost treasure.

Underscoring its sacred antiquity primarily as the citadel of independence, CSN is where the British High Commissioner's official residence was based (1896-1987), the Constitution of Malaya was drafted (1955-1957), where the nine rulers signed the Merdeka Agreement (1957), and where the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong used as his official guest palace (1957-1960).

This grand abode is now being prepped for a makeover to become the sanctuary for culture, the arts, heritage and peace promotion. Working on its hallowed presence, a US\$500 million (RM2 billion) proposed project to turn CSN into an Asian Peace, Arts and Cultural-Heritage (APAC) Park has been distilled, using private funding initiative.

CSN tenant/caretaker, social enterprise Asian Heritage Museum Sdn Bhd (AHM), has proposed APAC Park with the aim to increase average spending per pax by US\$100 of the estimated 13 million tourists to Kuala Lumpur annually, generating

US\$1.3 billion to the economy. It also aims to bump up tourist arrivals to 23 million by Year 5.

APAC Park will be disabled and environmentally-friendly and has the fullest respect for heritage and nature. Nestled on a 12.14ha piece of land, the park will have a world-class and innovative Asian Museum and Peace Convention Centre, and an inclusive platform for artistes, artists and cultural heritage players to showcase performances, works and products.

CSN's "green zone" would be a small "Jurassic Park", essentially a special biological garden of exotic animals and plants.

A unique solar-panelled tempered glass sky matrix, connecting CSN to KL Sentral, Parliament, National Monument, Lake Gardens and Merdeka Square, will morph the zone into a commercially sustainable global culture-tourism hotspot.

However, CSN has also attracted the eye of business entities. A normal property developer may even promise to protect CSN's heritage and character by offering an art gallery there, but this may be more a smokescreen for property development.

Using the entire site for an art gallery or a boutique hotel would not generate the critical mass and income needed from an economic standpoint. Selling priceless CSN land to a developer would only generate a one-time income for the government.

APAC Park, however, would



Carcosa Seri Negara is being prepped for a makeover to become the sanctuary for culture, arts, heritage and peace promotion. FILE PIC

provide government with sustainable annual lease payments and generate huge recurring tourism incomes for the economy while employing more people than a property development can.

If CSN is ordinary land, property development is not a problem, but this eminent bastion is a heritage site perched on a strategic hilltop next to Parliament, besides being one of few remaining green lungs in the capital.

AHM — with a proven track record of using CSN to promote public interest since taking over in April 2017 — is best positioned to do justice there via APAC Park.

Registered under the National

Heritage Act 2005, the two colonial mansions and adjacent buildings have been untenable and left to rot.

Repairs and restoration could cost about RM20 million, but since government funds are unavailable, AHM, at its own cost, has done basic repairs on the two buildings' ground floors and have the entire site cleaned, secured, maintained and operated for the public to visit.

AHM, in collaboration with five government agencies, supported by the corporate sector, NGOs and the media, organised the thriving and non-profit (free entrance) Jalan Merdeka exhibition that charted the struggle of the people for independence in 1957.

Launched by the ruler of Negri Sembilan on Aug 31, 2017, Jalan Merdeka was highly praised by the sultan of Perak, besides being well received by visitors.

Companies and individuals have booked CSN for one-off events and functions (not AHM's core business) to help promote the citadel while defraying the high maintenance, security and operating costs.

AHM should be given a long-term lease at CSN to undertake APAC Park for the sake of the economy, conservation of heritage and nature, and to promote Kuala Lumpur as a city of peace and cultural diversity.

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