



Beyond Grandfather Stories: Kajang's Heritage Center

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As is the case with many postcolonial communities, many among our country are excited to rush towards 'modernity'. Unfortunately, we have been conditioned to assume that what is 'modern' cannot exist alongside that which is cultural or '*kampung*' — and so modern architecture in Malaysia is largely mechanical and industrial in appearance, devoid of any influence from our rich multicultural heritage.

It is this mindset; that one must move away from the old, the cultural and the traditional in order to move towards development and modernization; that has justified the reckless demolition of historical buildings and landmarks in cities like Kuala Lumpur (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/10/15/unchecked-development-demolishing-old-buildings-can-alter-citys-identity-fo/1228453>).

But people like Lee Kim Sing, who many fondly refer to as 'Cikgu Lee', is determined to work against this movement of unchecked development as smaller areas away from the capital slowly fall under pressure of 'modernization' too.



During our interview at Kajang's own Galeri Warisan or Heritage Center which he owns and maintains, Cikgu Lee recalls that Malaysia's chase for development almost drastically altered Kajang town's unique identity forever. When the plans for the MRT Sg Buloh – Kajang line were first proposed, it was suggested that the Kajang town square be demolished to make way for the MRT.

If the drafted plans became reality, the shop-houses that line Jalan Tengah, Jalan Tukang, and Jalan Mendaling would be gone. Also disappearing with them would be the history and legacy of Kajang town, which is believed to be even older than that of Kuala Lumpur (<https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/focus/2015/03/31/digging-up-on-a-bygone-era-students-and-volunteers-eager-to-preserve-kajangs-history-and-heritage/>) itself.

According to Cikgu Lee, the shop-houses under threat were the oldest in the town's existing records, possibly dating back to as early as 1895. Records by the British colonial government from 1884 state that before there were brick and stone shop-houses in Kajang's town square, there were first 60 wooden and atap shop-houses. Out of these 60, the Chinese owned 17, while 42 were owned by migrants from Sumatera, people of Mendaling and Minangkabau descent, and the one remaining shop-house had an Indian owner. Just think, these shop-houses are the remaining physical links to the roots of today's Kajang community and its people — and they were almost completely lost forever.

Luckily, Cikgu Lee, along with Kajang locals, historians and kampung villagers, successfully protested and proposed another alignment for the MRT, which now goes over the river instead of going through the town. By co-habiting the old and the new, economic activities in the old town square have since increased as shopkeepers are motivated to leverage on the small town nostalgic charm that visiting MRT riders seem to be drawn to. Today, Kajang's town square is more vibrant than ever.



According to Cikgu Lee, this is just one example of many interesting historical facts about Kajang that has been overshadowed by the 'Kajang Satay' fame. Kajang's Heritage Center aims to bring the town's hidden treasures to the centerfold.

Cikgu Lee oversees the collection of artefacts from Kajang shopkeepers who have moved out or closed businesses as well as the cultural mapping of the town for heritage walks. Previously, he even visited neighboring small towns in the Hulu Langat district to record their history and collect old documents to be preserved. The Kajang Heritage Center is the physical accumulation of all of his hard work. Stepping into the gallery space is like travelling back in time, and it is fascinating to discover what once stood in the place of what now is.





There are dusty utensils and ceramics that have been phased out of modern day usage, and tools for crafts no longer practiced. On the back wall is a collage of people stories labelled 'KenanganKu, KajangMu' which directly translates to a heartfelt 'My Memories, Your Kajang'.

Cikgu Lee says it is his passion to make Kajang a more "livable and lovable town" that fuels his dedicated study of the town's history. But beyond preserving heritage of the past, he and his team also work to build the community of today.





The Heritage Center conducts workshops and exhibitions (<https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/community/2015/03/20/getting-to-know-kajang-students-hold-cultural-mapping-exhibition-to-help-residents-learn-more-about/>) to instill awareness among Kajang's present generation to preserve the legacy of old crafts, and encourages senior shopkeepers to open their antiquated businesses on Sundays so that groups can stop by during heritage walks. Any funds collected from these kind of activities eventually go back to the community – to continue to preserve what is left of past eras and rehabilitate the town's historic infrastructure for the future generations to come.

Cikgu Lee talks in more detail about Kajang's historic legacy in the podcast below. Those interested in joining a heritage walk around Kajang town can email him at leekimsin@gmail.com.



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Galeri Warisan (Kajang Heritage Center) is located at:

44, Jalan Mendaling, Bandar Kajang, 43000 Kajang, Selangor



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Written by Amirah Qistina Binti Hazrin

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