

Modern look is a defaced facade



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The unique architecture with embossed words on the wall of this century-old shophouse in Kajang town is covered by billboards. — Photos: LOW LAY PHON/The Star

MANY shophouses in older townships of Selangor are already 100 years old, but the authorities appear oblivious to their high heritage value.

These buildings are in various stages of decay as both the public and private sectors focused on modernisation in the country's most developed state.

The poor condition of these buildings also highlights the fact that the authorities are neglecting the historical significance of Selangor's early townships, most of which were built at the turn of the 19th

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Decaying built heritage

Heritage activist Lee Kim Sin said the state has about 100 early townships with an estimated 5,000 shophouses, but there are little efforts in place to safeguard them.

“Most of the shophouses in and around Jalan Besar, Kajang, were built in 1917. In fact, according to written records, Kajang’s first batch of shophouses were built in 1896, probably those in Jalan Tengah, Jalan Tukang and Jalan Mendaling based on the characteristics described.



Some of the shophouses in Pekin Ampang have kept the nostalgia.

“Buildings of 100 years old should be classified as heritage, but the state government has not gazetted or registered any of these invaluable shophouses,” he said.

The shophouses in Kajang town are either badly weathered or marred by quick renovations and tasteless extensions.

Lee said the conservation of these buildings, even though they were private properties, had to be shouldered by the government because the owners would not have the knowledge and resources to do it.

“These old buildings need a lot of repair. If the government leaves it to the individual owners, who are not aware of the importance of conservation, they may just deface them.

“Also, these old structures may not be suitable for present day use, therefore owners like to demolish or even rebuild them for commercial returns,” said Lee who founded the Kajang Heritage Centre in 2000 to preserve and promote the town’s historical wonders.

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Shophouses in Pekan Ampang suffer the same fate. About 20 units were demolished for a highway project but the other two rows of shophouses that still stand have largely disregarded the original architecture.



Old exhibits and antiques can be seen at the Kajang Heritage Centre.

Maintaining a century old building has its toll on the owners, conceded Chinese physician Yap Meng Fatt, 65, whose family home is a shophouse built in 1913 in Pekan Ampang.

“I am getting old and I cannot afford the maintenance of this old building damaged by termite.

“Furthermore, business has been bad since the surrounding residents started moving out as modern development intensifies.

“If I do not sell it, my children may sell it a few years later,” he said.

He was further discouraged by the failed venture of a neighbour, who restored his shophouse for a homestay, and had to rent the unit to a restaurant operator due to poor business.

History may be lost forever

Lee said much of Kajang’s history dating back to 1850s had been lost – Reko, the oldest settlement traced here, had “the best shops and houses of the time” according to the first British High Commissioner of Malaya Sir Frank Swettenham, but none of that can be seen now.

Kajang’s Bukit Arang and Sungai Chua were developed next but almost all traces of the two townships’ 150 years of history are lost. The oldest testaments of Kajang’s tin mining roots n

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The rear of the post office in Kajang still keeps its old design.

“In the nearby Beranang, there are 10 shophouses built with mud in the Hakka tradition and only a handful of them are left in the whole country. The government needs to act quick,” he added.

Lee said he raised the issue of gazetting shophouses at one state assembly sitting when he was the Kajang assemblyman, but it failed to push the authorities to act.

Community organiser of the Save Pekan Ampang campaign Sarah Amer stressed on the precious historical and cultural significance of Pekan Ampang.

“People appreciate the authenticity of this small township, the fact that it’s just a stone’s throw from the city centre makes it even more appealing,” she said.

However, her group did not get the co-operation from the authorities and other parties when they ran the campaign to save the shophouses in 2015.

“The response from various parties to our efforts in saving the township was demoralising,” she said, adding that heritage talks and photo walks were organised to create better awareness.

“Although we managed to pique the interests of tourists and outsiders towards its historical significance, our appeal to the many government agencies fell on deaf ears, while the residents and traders will ultimately go for what’s financially beneficial,” she said.

Recognising treasure

So far, conservation efforts in these townships are done mostly by the common folk and activ

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The shophouses in Pekan Ampang, many of which have reached 100 years old, makes them eligible as heritage, are either in bad weathered conditions or defaced with convenient renovations.

She compared the charm of Pekan Ampang to that of George Town and Melaka, lamenting that the state government did not tap on the potential.

“The government should harness such unique attraction and turn the area into something worth frequenting by Malaysians and foreign tourists.

“We have lost so many historical buildings and replacing them with something soul-less in the name of development, I hope the government realises this before it is too late,” she added.

Lee, on the other hand, highlights the poor condition of buildings in the state’s other old townships, including Rasa, Kelompang and Batu Arang.

He urged the government to consider providing funding, incentives or tax rebates for owners to carry out restoration.

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Local authorities should be alert about the buildings' sensitivity and prevent possible damage, such as placing billboards over the frontage of the shophouses or erecting a sculpture that does not echo the history.

"Khazanah Nasional should also look at old townships in Selangor and those in suburban areas, not just the ones in Penang and Melaka," he said.



Yap concedes that it is difficult and costly for shophouse owners to carry out repair and restorations. His family home is a shophouse built in 1913 in Pekan Ampang.

He also urged the government to provide more support to local conservation groups, who in their own ways, try to save the townships.

He thanked the state government for the RM10,000 allocation last year to conduct mapping for Kajang. They started another project to document the architectural heritage of Kajang which needed RM40,000, but received only RM15,000.

Selangor Culture, Tourism, Malay Customs and Heritage committee chairman Datuk Abdul Rashid Asari said the state government was trying its best to find funding for the preservation of shophouses and heritage buildings in early townships.

"So far we have carried out preservation works on historical buildings in Kuala Kubu Baru. Klang will be next. The cost is quite heavy.

"I'll look into the matter and will take action accordingly," he said.

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