George Town: The discreet charm of rejuvenated heritage

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Abstract

UNESCO World Heritage listing is coveted as both an honour and a tourism brand. The accolade is something of a mixed blessing, however, as increased tourism creates an environment in which heritage sites are changed to meet the demands of tourism. In George Town, development – both above and below the radar – has had a detrimental impact on the very heritage values which won the site World Heritage listing in the first place. Development pressures have come in a variety of guises. Buildings have been illegally converted into swiftlet farms or budget hotels. Though a Special Area Plan was drawn up for the site, it remains ungazetted, so management of the site remains an issue. Gentrification has pushed long-time residents out of the city centre, and this too has had a detrimental impact on George Town’s intangible heritage. Historic Urban Landscape and other strategies need to be put in place to protect the heritage, both tangible and intangible, that won George Town its World Heritage listing in the first place.

Introduction

For some countries – and Malaysia is one of them – UNESCO World Heritage listing is more than a coveted honour, it is a tourism brand. Ironically, escalating tourism brings irreversible change to the place as entrepreneurs adapt the place to tourists. While such changes might have happened more gradually in the past, they are now accelerated by the phenomena of budget travel and the general mobility of capital around Asia. Two Malaysian cities, George Town and Melaka (Malacca), were jointly listed by UNESCO as the ‘Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca’ in 2008. In George Town, Penang, the movement towards nomination was initiated in 1998 by a non-profit organisation, The Penang Heritage Trust, as a strategy to protect the historic city centre. With the imminent repeal of rent control in the year 2000 (Khoo & Gwynn 1999), the Penang Heritage Trust managed to raise awareness by getting George Town inscribed on the World Monuments Watch list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites. The idea of nomination to the World Heritage tentative list was taken up by the Penang State Government and subsequently by Federal Government, which had earlier initiated this move for Melaka on mainland Malaysia. The measures and mechanisms for heritage management and protection are not fully established but are still evolving in response to the existing situation and threats.

The Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca are listed for three Outstanding Universal Values which correspond to Criteria ii, iii, and iv of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention; namely, exhibiting the interchange of human values and influences, providing exceptional testimony to cultural traditions and being an outstanding example of townscape and architecture. The Outstanding Universal Values (OUVs) that need to be protected are demonstrated in the layered evidence of historical diversity, the living
community and their intangible heritage, and built heritage, particularly, the shophouse and
townhouse architecture. The outstanding degree of cultural diversity is a quality that infuses all
the three OUVs.

This paper mainly focuses on George Town, a port located in the north of the Straits of Malacca
and the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean. To provide a brief historical background, Penang Island
was part of the kingdom of Kedah, and became a trading post under the East India Company in
1786. Its capital, George Town, very quickly became a cosmopolitan port town, home to many
migrant and diaspora communities. The colonial administration allowed religious liberties and
even legal pluralism before the imposition of English law after thirty years. People maintained
relationships with their home countries, so instead of migration think of circulatory patterns,
instead of cultural diffusion think cultural exchange. The municipal committee practiced a
growing degree of local democracy until George Town was declared a city by royal charter in
1957, the same year that Malaya gained independence.

Religious pluralism, exemplified by the ‘Street of Harmony’ – a street where mosque, church
and temple are located within a short walk of each other – is a unique quality of both George
Town and Melaka, and this quality apparently caught the imagination of the World Heritage
Committee and gained its approval. However, heritage management in a multicultural social
context presents particular conceptual and communication challenges (Khoo 2012). Among
the various segments of Penang’s citizenship, cultural differences in terms of the use of space
and relationship to the built environment might translate into different expectations and
aspirations for the continuity of built fabric and intangible heritage (Jenkins 2009).

The National Heritage Department implemented the National Heritage Act of 2005 and devotes
much of its resources to the protection of nationally listed heritage buildings. It also coordinates
heritage planning for both George Town and Melaka World Heritage Sites. The Penang State
Government, through the State Planning Committee, is responsible for planning policies and
has drafted a State Heritage Bill which was passed in 2011 but has yet to be implemented. The
state exerts a direct influence on the local government, to the extent of dictating development
policies, densities and plot ratios. The local government, that is, the Municipal Council of
Penang Island (MPPP), has relatively little autonomy as municipal councillors are appointed
by the state rather than elected. Furthermore, the municipal councillors are largely selected
from the ranks of the state ruling party. The MPPP has set up an internal heritage department
and has instated a Technical Review Committee to provide heritage evaluation as part of the
development approval process. Since 2008, Penang has performed well economically despite
its status as an opposition state. Although there is a great degree of cooperation between
the National Heritage Department and the Penang authorities, state–federal politics has also
sometimes resulted in muddled interventions.

At the local level, there are several organisations promoting heritage protection and
revitalization. For a long time, the Penang Heritage Trust, established in 1986, was the only
civic-cultural heritage organisation seeking to broaden the field of heritage conservation. The
Trust had an inclusive vision:

... George Town, with its vibrant voluntary sector, has nurtured a heritage discourse in
which the people, the buildings, and the space they have created, are deemed to be
targets for conservation. (Cheng, Li & Ma 2014: 618-19)

The Trust was joined by other groups, notably, an arts education group with innovation
programmes. Since 2008, a number of other organisations have appeared. George Town
World Heritage Incorporated, set up by the Penang State Government as a non-statutory body
for managing, monitoring and promoting the World Heritage Site, is now the lead organisation
interfacing between the local government and the various stakeholders. Think City, a federal
corporation’s subsidiary, administers the George Town Grants Programme.
Above and Below the Radar

The initial threat to the integrity of the site came from a carry-over of earlier planning approvals. In November 2008, five months after the UNESCO inscription, the World Heritage Centre was alerted to four high-rise hotel development projects in George Town – two within the core zone and two in its buffer zone – which would breach the 18m height limit stipulated in the heritage guidelines. In April 2009, a joint World Heritage Centre-ICOMOS mission arrived in Penang with a mandate to clarify the process that had led to the approval of the four projects in question, to assess their impact on the outstanding universal value of the site and to strengthen the conservation and management system at the site. After intense consultation and negotiations with the state and local governments, and the affected stakeholders, both developers in the buffer zone agreed to reduce their buildings heights while the two developers in the core zone agreed to comply with the height limit. All parties reached a compromise which was apparently satisfactory to the UNESCO-ICOMOS joint commission. The state government promised to tighten the approval process. (A. Ghafar Ahmad 2010)

It is worthwhile here to think of two types of threats to the site. There are threats ‘above the radar’ and threats ‘below the radar’. The proposed four high-rises were ‘above the radar’ and caught the attention of international heritage authorities. More commonly, OUVs can be undermined by incremental changes, which are ‘below the radar’. Likewise, Melaka may be experiencing threats to the integrity of its heritage site, but without a strong civil society to voice those issues, their problems remain – at least as far as UNESCO is concerned – largely ‘below the radar’.

A long battle was fought by the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) and other NGOs to have swiftlet farming operations removed from the World Heritage Site of George Town and Malacca. Swiftlet farming is the term used to describe the business of harvesting edible bird’s nest, made of bird saliva, for sale. The industry can be highly lucrative due to rising demand for this delicacy in China. Swifts naturally roost in caves and have been known to roost in houses, but swift farmers have artificially enticed swifts to colonise human habitats, even entire streets and townships, where the intensity of this activity is producing conflicts in urban centres for reasons of health, nuisance and other public concerns arising from noise and swift faeces pollution, as well as being detrimental to heritage buildings and neighbourhood liveability. While UNESCO has stated that swiftlet farming has to be removed from World Heritage site, harvesting this Chinese delicacy is a highly lucrative business that survives, indeed thrives due to the existence of a legal grey area between the jurisdictions of wildlife, veterinary science, agriculture, local government and public health. Led by a lawyer, the influential swift-farmers managed to confuse the public, the government, and even BBC and UNESCO officials, by appropriating progressive language and claiming to be ‘preserving’ heritage buildings and misleading the public by claiming its collection to be a traditional business, neglecting to mention...
that swift nests were originally collected from caves not shophouses. International heritage authorities have remained oblivious and silent about the blight of urban swift farming which is destroying heritage towns all over Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, after much lobbying, guidelines were finally passed banning this activity in urban areas but implementation is slow. The government placed a moratorium on the industry as of December 2013, but six months later, a researcher Creighton Connolly (2014) reported 42 active swiftlet houses in the core and buffer zones of the World Heritage Site. He noted that this marked a significant reduction in the number of swiftlet houses that had existed during the last assessment in 2011, but was still not quite ‘zero’ as the State had announced.

The heritage guidelines for new development which specifies 18m ‘up to the eaves’ height limit within the core zone, though reasonably applied to the waterfront area, are too high when built next to ordinary shophouses. The quality of design is another major issue. A conservation management plan for the World Heritage Site, in the form of a Special Area Plan provided under the Town and Country Planning Act (Act 172), has been prepared by a private consultant and accepted by the state authority, but remains a draft until it is gazetted. The George Town WHS has a total of 4,665 Category I and Category II buildings, in both core and buffer zones, listed on the heritage register. Of these, over 70 buildings (mostly religious), are listed as Category 1, which means they are of higher cultural significance and thus merit a higher degree of protection. The local government has set up a Technical Review Panel to vet heritage-related planning and building submissions. Members from several professional bodies are appointed to the panel, but only a few possess proven heritage expertise.

What Tourists Want

The use of heritage buildings to take advantage of anticipated visitor demand has a visible impact on the World Heritage Site. There are currently 122 licensed hotels and 168 unlicensed hotels in the Penang Island municipality, most of the unlicensed accommodation having sprung up in and around the World Heritage site in the last three years. The majority of these involve the conversion of shophouses or shophouse
ensembles, by ‘heritage entrepreneurs’ who think they know what tourists want.

The best hotel conversions bring some conservation gains. For example, one old hotel was restored using slaked lime and conducted an archaeological dig on the grounds. Another involved a conversion of a three-storey building while retaining the original tenant, the oldest Chinese medical hall in Southeast Asia, on part of the premises. Old materials have been optimally reused and, in contrast to other hotel conversions which took the simple way out by replacing their timber floors with concrete, the entrepreneurs behind this ‘heritage inn’ struggled through daunting bureaucracy to meet the fire department’s guidelines and retain its wooden floors by using fire-retardant paint.

A few others, though tasteful and legally done, may have introduced problematic interpretations which ignore their cultural significance in the makeover. Some choices may indeed be deemed acceptable compromises in the overall scheme of things. But these renovations are then taken as a benchmark and often inspire other conversions elsewhere that may not be accompanied by conservation gains, but instead compromise the authenticity of the building and conveniently adopt deceptive techniques to impress the visitor. In such cases, the final results can be confusing, gaudy, even grotesque.

The majority of hotel conversions, however, are illegal and destructive to original fabric and architectural integrity. Drastic adaptations and reinterpretations are often presented as restorations, and one even won a tourism prize. Even heritage consultants have often been fooled by the ‘innovations’ as they are not familiar with local typologies and cultural specificities. Due to weak heritage management, many inappropriate development approvals still slip through the heritage protection net. Illegal renovations are carried on almost every day. When issued a stop work order, builders hurry up to finish the work, working around the clock, on weekends and even on public holidays. The tendency to strip the building instead of preserving historical evidence and the use of inappropriate materials – modern cement, modern paints, concrete floors to replace wooden floors, easy-to-lay modern tiles in place of terracotta tiles with traditional profiles – are additional causes of concern. The imperative of modern makeovers is a clean new look at fastest speed and lowest costs.
Governments love to encourage tourism and are loathe to impose restrictions on private investors. Tourism can spur economic growth, give new lease of life to old buildings, provide jobs and encourage cultural entrepreneurship. But for many local residents who do not profit from tourism, the changes to the neighbourhood can have an alienating effect. In his book on Venice, John Berendt (2005: 85) explained the local Venetians’ plight:

Soon masks were a favourite tourist icon. But with the appearance of each new mask shop, there always seemed to be one fewer greengrocer, one fewer bakery, one fewer butcher’s shop, to the consternation of Venetians, who found themselves having to walk twice as far to buy a tomato or a loaf of bread. Mask shops became a detested symbol of the city’s capitulation to tourism at the expense of its liveability.

Of late, tourism has been further spurred as a result of a public art scheme which started with wire sculptures illustrating street names and paintings by a Lithuanian artist. Encouraged by queues of tourists who pose in front of street art and take ‘selfies’, street art has proliferated around the George Town World Heritage Site and beyond. Although cultural revitalisation has attracted youth, cultural entrepreneurs and creative people, they may also have unintended consequences. In a section of Armenian Street, where a street market has heightened tourism, old businesses and residential tenants are moving out, as new activities may be incompatible with the old. Residential tenants, already so difficult to retain in the inner city, are under ever more pressure from increased rentals, noise pollution and congestion, to move out.

In many Asian living cities which are listed as World Heritage sites, the prospects of a tourism boom tends to trigger a hike in property prices, due to disparities between local land values and the purchasing ability of the regional or global elite. The original owners tend to sell out at an early stage to tourist industry investors and property speculators. New buyers, in order to make their investments ‘work’, push out low-income residents and are eager to convert their heritage properties into income-generating assets. This creates increased development pressure on the World Heritage Site and speeds up social change at the street level. Penangites who have lived overseas and come back annually have been ‘amazed’ to see new hotels, cafes, restaurants and souvenir shops have opened. They are taken in by the charm of new venues which have been renovated to their taste. At first they are pleasantly surprised at the revitalisation. Then gradually they realise that the old familiar faces and places are gone forever. The late great André Alexander’s study of historic cities in Asia (2006: 4) warns of the potential impacts of tourism in the age of mobile global capital.

A great deal of destruction of heritage is carried on in the name of conservation, rejuvenation and tourism development. The old city is being ‘rejuvenated’ and primed for affluent suburbanites, domestic tourists and foreign tourists, who prefer to see and experience gentrified heritage. Property speculation, over-development, traffic congestion and inflation are making Penang less liveable for the locals. Rising rents, insecurity of tenure and outright evictions continue to drive the old inhabitants out of the historic centre.

**A Hole in the Soul of the City?**

We should be more concerned about the numbers of residents in the WHS than the number of tourists visiting it. A census conducted in 2010 showed that the site has barely more than 10,000 inhabitants – possibly the lowest figure in 200 years. The latest census taken this year is expected to show a further decline.
In the last two years George Town World Heritage Incorporated has commissioned intangible cultural heritage (ICH) surveys. The results of this cultural mapping in 2012 shows residents with artisan skills (840 cases), as well as residents with artistic and cultural skills (231 cases), and residents as well as non-residents who are practicing traditional trades and occupations (1243 cases). The Intangible Cultural Heritage Domain of ‘traditional trades and occupations’ is not listed in UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage but the Convention allows for local communities to develop their own definitions and they have come up with an original definition for this domain.

In 2013, the mapping of traditional cultural-religious festivals found more than 200 cultural-religious organisations, institutions and sites, related to the Chinese religion, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. The majority of sites relate to the first group, Chinese religion, a fusion of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Almost 200 of those sites have a combined total of more than 500 major and minor festivals. This shows that the WHS is extremely rich in intangible cultural heritage, which is not kept in museums and galleries but is practiced and constantly renewed by the urban community as part of its religious-cultural life.

In Malaysia, cultural identity has political dimensions. We are grateful that World Heritage listing has conferred international acknowledgement of the value of Penang’s cultural diversity, built heritage and social history. It is a boon for the site’s communities that cultural identities can be affirmed and places protected. However, it is obvious that the fundamentals are not in place for long-term heritage preservation. Economic returns do not necessarily translate into benefits to the inhabitant of the site. The site may well become relatively successful as a tourism destination.
but this success is largely enjoyed by bigger local players and national or international investors. The inner city inhabitants tend to be displaced or relegated to subordinate roles in the service industry. But if they cease to maintain the urban traditions and intangible heritage, then we would have lost the ‘testimony’ of cultural traditions, the very ‘soul of the city’.

In several ‘living cities’ which have received UNESCO listing, a major weakness of heritage management and monitoring is the lack of understanding of intangible cultural heritage values and the lack of any real built-in protection for this. As there were no prior inventories, no current monitoring, and no specific guidelines for intangible heritage, there is nothing to say when the rules have been broken, or when intangible heritage has been compromised, diminished or even destroyed.

In George Town, many of the inhabitants are tenants rather than property owners. The inhabitants are the living community who perpetuate the urban traditions, religious festivals and hand down intangible cultural heritage from generation to generation; their role as stakeholders should be recognised in tangible ways. Well-intentioned guidelines and incentives to spur revitalisation, as well as trendy place-making projects, may actually work against this vulnerable group by encouraging renovations with results which are aesthetically pleasing to the affluent, but incrementally undermine the site’s integrity and authenticity. It is this ‘discreet charm’ of rejuvenated heritage targeted at the bourgeoisie cultural tourist that may mask serious problems with the site.

Rejuvenation from Within

UNESCO listing and the resultant tourism impacts have changed the character of the city in the space of a few years. The city is now full of new hotels and eateries, mostly unlicensed, which have nothing to do with George Town’s Outstanding Universal Values, while destroying the very things that made George Town special in the first place. Well, is there another way? Reforms for affordable housing, taking care of liveability and equitable mobility for locals, plugging the leaks in the local economy, long-term socio-cultural institution building for conservation and continuing education, and other community strengthening processes may help protect the OUVs, while minimising social fractures and displacements. They might even work to stimulate rejuvenation from within.

There is now a push for a Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach to be applied to historic cities in Asia. It is desirable to test this approach in historic cities of cultural diversity, where inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic differentiation further complicates power and wealth differentials. Without substantial longer-term public funding, the George Town WHS will certainly have to rely largely on private investment to restore its decaying fabric. The results could be much better if there was political will to impose some restrictions and to guide and channel this investment with a long-term view. The HUL approach talks about engagement with stakeholders, and can take this idea further by emphasising community empowerment and civic processes and putting in place a number of social indicators and feedback mechanisms from local heritage groups.

In concluding this paper, it is proposed that a ‘Historic Urban Landscape’ approach should be explored as a strategy to privilege the people who sustain the intangible heritage qualities of the WHS. While change is inevitable, people-centred policies are needed to balance powerful and predatory market forces. The imagined future is a place where citizens, or rather a collective of citizens, can between them play the roles of caretakers and custodians of heritage sites, practitioners and transmitters of urban traditions, keepers of knowledge and story-tellers to the future generations. In return for these responsibilities, they should also have rights – rights to dignity and housing security, opportunity to prosper economically, culturally and spiritually, and to be active participants in shaping the city’s future. For to imagine the future of a World Heritage city is also to imagine the meaning of its citizenship – the credibility of World Heritage status would certainly be in doubt if it means imminent displacement for the city’s most vulnerable citizens, turning their homes into the playground for tourists and the rich.
References


