

Paper No.16: The Malaysian Experience

THE CONSERVATION OF KOTA DUYUNG: A REVIEW¹

by

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Abstract

This paper reviews the Kota Duyung conservation project and it is hoped that the experience gathered in its process is beneficial to others as well. Kota Duyung has been the nickname of the house of Dato' Biji Sura for a very long time. The house is located at Pulau Duyung Kecil, part of the greater island of Duyung, rested by the Terengganu riverside. The objective of the project is to conserve the building according to the most appropriate conservation approach. As most part of the building was ruinous in which it was too little left for Kota Duyung to be of any significant physically the project adopted an approach that might be consider controversial by some. For the future survival of Kota Duyung the method that this project engaged in was a combination of several conservation approaches.

Introduction

This paper aims to review the conservation of the most historic building in Pulau Duyung that was initiated in mid-1995. The building, popularly known as Kota Duyung, was largely a ruinous structure. It was left in a state of disrepair and total neglect. Time is the essence as the longer Kota Duyung is left abandoned the more it will be wiped away from the memory of present generation. Kota Duyung was successfully preserved, restored, and reconstructed as authentic as possible to its glorious period of 1920s. History that was once buried is now raised up to its deserving dignity.

¹ This paper is based on the works established in the Kota Duyung conservation project. Biro Inovasi dan Perundingan of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia was the project consultant. The project was financed by Museum dan Antiquity Department, the JKR Head Office, Kuala Lumpur as project advisor, and supervised by JKR Terengganu. The State Musuem was the appointed guardian who is responsible for the future use, safeguarding and maintaining the building.

² The author was the Project Manager cum Project Architect of the Kota Duyung Conservation project.

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Brief history of Kota Duyung

Duyung is a name given to the island, it is said that the name originated from the story about the presence of mermaid along the coast of the island. Most important is that its glory was due to the presence of a local born and well known religious scholar known as Tok Sheikh Duyung. Dato' Biji Sura, the grandchild of Tok Sheikh Duyung, one of the top Syarie jurist in the state, was born and raised here in Pulau Duyung. A person of his stature has prolonged the glory inherited from his grandfather. Kota Duyung, as simply known to the locals as 'kota', means 'an area or compound surrounded by a raised perimeter wall'.

In the event of the death of Dato' Biji Sura the house was divided between several members of his family, wives and children, according to whatever mutual agreement as well as the practice been subjected to the law of inheritance accorded in Islam. Those who have been granted a portion of the house moved elsewhere and build a new house out of the original part of Kota Duyung that they have brought with them. The apportionment of inherited property clearly contributed in disintegrating Kota Duyung.

In a state of physical disintegration Kota Duyung was quick to fall into state of disrepair and neglect. The fate of Kota Duyung was brought to the attention of this author when it was at its highest peak of abandonment. The glory of Kota Duyung which once housed a prominent local personality who had his root to a religious family background seems to have buried together with the ruined.

So, why conserve Kota Duyung? This is a question that should be addressed to the people of Kota Duyung. Kota Duyung has been the icon of Pulau Duyung to which the villagers are always ready and

proud to tell anybody about it. It is them who know the value and meaning of Kota Duyung. It is an honor to this author to have been invited to participate in fulfilling their long awaited aspiration. This will hopefully end the 'agony' of the people of Pulau Duyung.

Conservation Approaches

Perhaps it is not the question of 'why' that should be asked as it is obvious to the author as well to many others who participated in this project. The most inviting and important question is 'how' to conserve? Or, 'what' is the most appropriate conservation approach for Kota Duyung? This question raised the whole issue about ethic and philosophy of conservation, in which any decision would never be wholly satisfactory to all and could easily be subjected to a debate. As Kota Duyung was mainly a ruined it is therefore crucial to understand the idea and concept of ruin, both culturally and intellectually. This should help to build up understanding about approach to ruinous historic fabric.

The concept of ruin in conservation

A ruined historic monument is understood as a structure that has lost most part of its building aesthetic to the extent that the understanding of its architecture is disrupted and incomprehensible. Usually its historical value partake the significance of physical evidence than the aesthetic of the fabric. Splendor of history makes the ruin to become an important landmark despite itself being a dead monument.

One could easily embark into the idea that the Kota Duyung project being a conservation effort dealing with a ruinous structure. The pleasure of ruin is very much a western idea of romanticism towards past glory, a concept that is totally strange from the Malay cultural perspective. The villagers seem not be alarmed about the physical disappearance of Kota Duyung as history of the place is firmly embedded in their collective memory. As no precedent could be traced in Malay building tradition as regards to preserving the ruin this section gives a brief study of several approaches in protecting ruinous structure.

According to Brandi (1963; quoted in Price, 1996) a 'ruin' is a number of fragments that have lost all trace of their original function and aesthetic qualities. A ruin cannot be restored, because it is impossible to recover its lost unity; however, it might be possible to ensure, through maintenance, its status quo. He further elaborated,

'...the preservation of a work of art that is reduced to a state of ruin depends to a great extent on the historical significance that is assigned to it...When dealing with ruins, restoration can only be a consolidation and preservation of the status quo.'

Generally, there are 5 types of approaches in preserving ruinous historic structure:

i. 'Subject' overriding the 'object'

In a sincere attempt to protect a historic object or artifact it is somehow unavoidable that the new structure becomes the subject in focused, in some cases even to the extent that overriding the prominence of the historic object. (Fig. 1)

ii. An 'incomplete structure' not a ruined

This is probably the result of an over-enthusiasm on the part of the parties involved in the conservation effort resulting in an over-consolidated ruin. Rather than looks like a natural ruin it has made the fabric or structure to become a beautified ruin or sometime even gives an impression of an incomplete building. The danger here is that its historic ambience and setting might be lost entirely. (Fig. 2)

iii. Natural ruin

A ruinous building can sometime become intimately integrated into nature thus forming a landscape of 'natural ruin'. It means that the ruin is so ingrained with nature to the extent that its significance as a ruin has been overtaken by the natural setting that is often picturesque or romantic. (Fig. 3)

iv. Time is the mightiest sculptor

Passing and living through the test of time, weather and other environmental conditions, a building is expected to have taken and give way to the forces of nature as it should. A damage caused by battering weather could be seen as a testimony of history that gives patina to the fabric. The same damage can also be understood as an unwanted element appearing on the structure causing structural instability as well as interrupting the intended architectural composition. So, a philosophical question as well as an ethical one

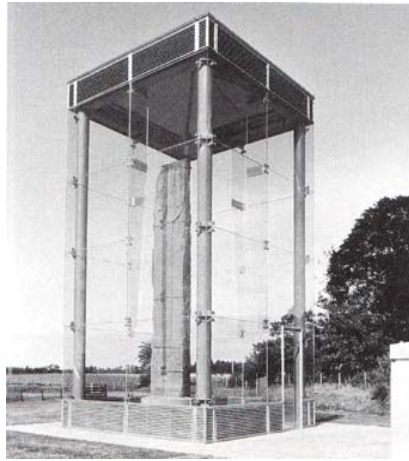


Fig. 1

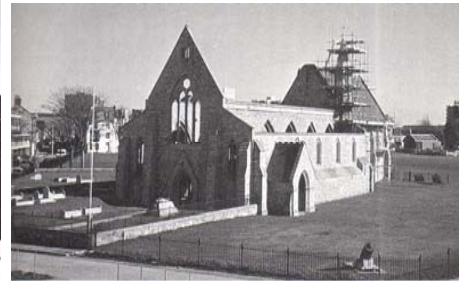


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

raised here is that how much loss is tolerable and acceptable? (Fig. 4)

v. Pretentious intervention

Overly sympathetic intervention in an historic structure can sometime be seen as being too conscious about the need to differentiate between the existing fabric and the new structure. Of course it is highly recommended that any attempt as conserving historic fabric has to differentiate the old and new, between the existing and additional elements, in the most appropriate ways. An exaggeration of this attempt would only heighten the tension between the old and new rather than harmoniously marrying the two together. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5

Proposed alternatives to conservation of Kota Duyung

It is always appropriate and desirable to keep as much of the historic fabric as this would ensure its cultural significance remains intact. Thus it is appropriate to emphasize the importance of doing 'as little as

possible' here. However, no significant incident or event has taken place in the house of Dato' Biji Sura. Treaty was neither signed nor did any other historical event of importance take place. The fact that Dato' Biji Sura rose to prominence as *hakim*, or jurist of Syarie court of justice, and that the significant of Islamic values adapted as manifested in the elevated well and other physical evidences warrant serious deliberation on 'what' and 'why' we conserve the building. At the beginning of the project we proposed and debated four alternative solutions:

1) **Alternative A:**

The approach is to preserve the existing structures (the Rumah Bujang and part of the walls) intact as a historic fabric, no more and no less than what it is found. (Fig. 6)

This is considered as an ideal solution which allows the least intervention to the structure. However, in the case of Kota Duyung, the existing ruinous fabrics are perhaps too insignificant in scale to be preserved as they are. Coupled also with the fact that no important event or incident took place here thus making the building weak in its

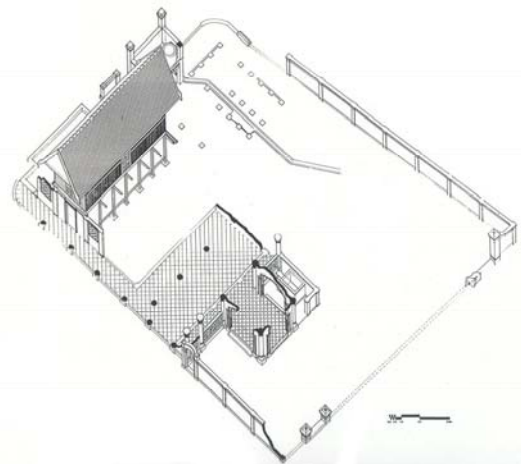


Fig. 6

2) **Alternative B:**

The idea is to preserve the existing structures (the Rumah Bujang and part of the walls) and to reconstruct new structures as authentic as possible to the glorious period of 1920, including landscape within the house compound. (Fig. 7)

This alternative offers a more realistic solution than Alternative A allowing the flexibility in the choice of periods to be preserved or restored whilst appropriate improvement in the architectural composition can be made accordingly to respond to new functions. However a good program must first structured if this alternative is to succeed, otherwise the building might just be neglected within a few years.

3) **Alternative C:**

Alternative C proposed to preserve the existing structures (the Rumah Bujang and part of the walls) intact as a historic fabric but to reconstruct the whole complex (other parts of

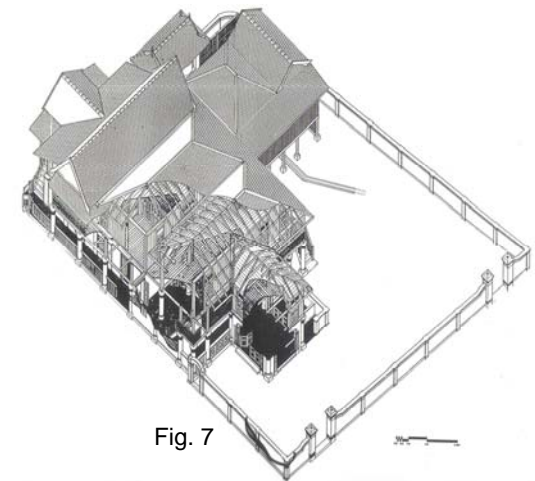


Fig. 7

the house complex and its entire perimeter walls) on an adjacent site.

This alternative offers the advantage of preserving the old but responding to the new because the protected Rumah Bujang (Fig. 8) and other ruinous parts of the place become truly an historical fabric whereas the reconstructed building on a new site. It would allow for greater flexibility in functional response and an appropriately broader architectural improvement could be made to cater for new needs since the building should also function as a museum.

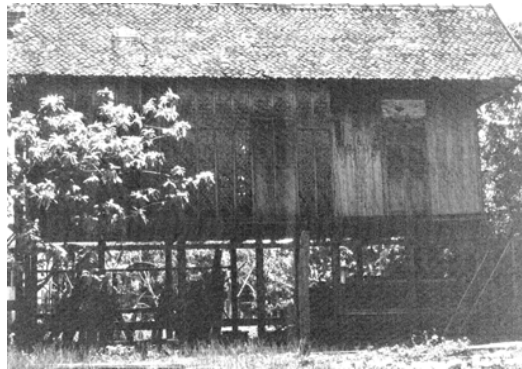


Fig. 8

4) **Alternative D:**

The idea here is to preserve the existing structures (Rumah Bujang and part of the walls) but to transplant significant Terengganu house types such as Rumah Tiang 12 or Rumah Bujang Barat here thus forming a new complex entirely to house the proposed new functions.

The disadvantage of this approach is that it will jeopardize the original context of the house. Perhaps a more sympathetic approach is to preserve the existing structure and build the new building on a neutral site that would not upset the setting of Kota Duyung surrounding.

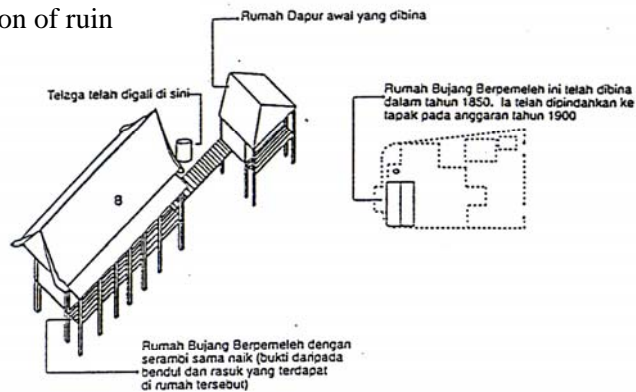
After a long deliberation of all possible alternatives it was decided that Alternative B is the most appropriate and viable. This alternative was further deliberated and a clearer and more precise objective was formulated:

Kota duyung shall be reconstructed as authentically as possible to its glorious period of 1920, keeping the notion that Rumah Bujang shall be preserved as much as possible whereas all the existing remains shall be restored and the new structure shall be reconstructed as faithfully as possible according to the findings of the historical and architectural research.

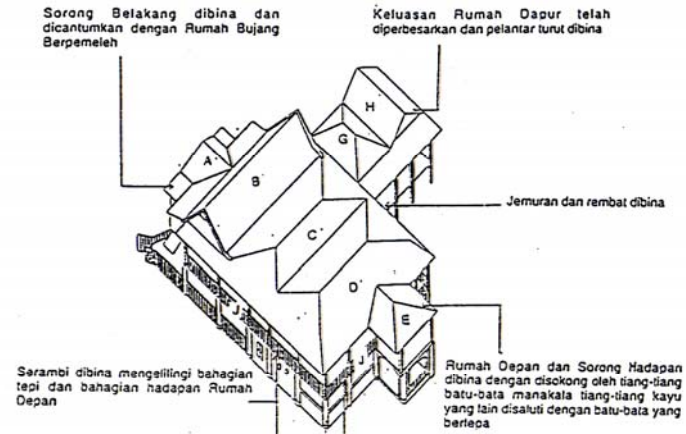
Thus it is reasonable to state that levels of conservation of ruined structure can range from 'doing the least' to the 'most destructive intervention' as in the order listed below:

- 'Abandonment', 'leave it as is', 'beautiful ruin'
- Stabilization, arrest decay
- Over-protection; 'Subject' overriding the 'object'
- Over-consolidate
- 'incomplete structure', beautified ruin, not a ruined
- Sensitive/sympathetic intervention

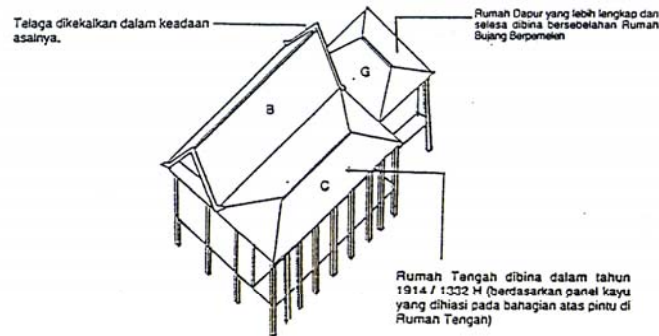
- Pretentious intervention
- Insensible intervention
- Destruction of ruin



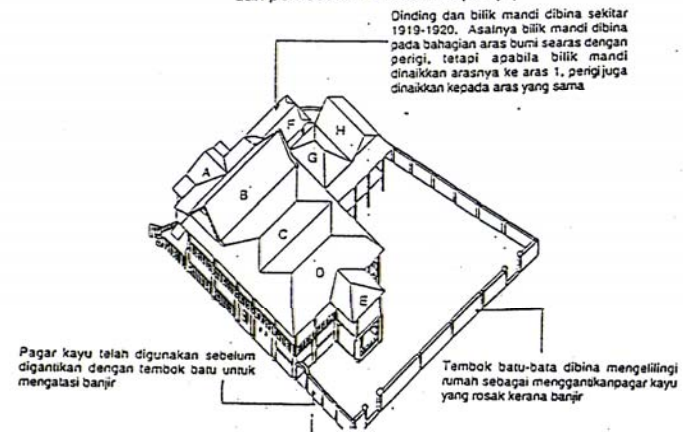
Gambarajah 1a: Peringkat 1: Pembinaan Rumah Bujang Berpemeleh (B)



Gambarajah 1c: Peringkat 3: Pembinaan Rumah Depan (D), Serambi (J), Sorong Hadapan (E), Sorong Belakang (A), dan pembesaran Rumah Dapur (H)



Gambarajah 1b: Peringkat 2: Pembinaan Semula Rumah Dapur (G) dan Pembinaan Rumah Tengah (C)



Gambarajah 1d: Peringkat 4: Pembinaan Bilik Mandi (F) dan Tembok Batu-bata

Fig. 9 – The chronology of Kota Duyung physical development

In the west, there is a conservation approach called abandonment that is leaving the place as it is in the truest sense of the words, allowing nature to take its course and shape the future of the place. If decay occurred it is to be seen as part of landscape and the process of history. Nothing is more damaging than to allow human intervention to a ruined structure. Human strange reaction to decay in a spectacle of ruined buildings and the usual conservation approach to this kind of place is called pleurist (Macaulay, 1953). Whereas to the anti-restoration it is best to leave it alone,



Fig. 10 – Floor beam projected out from Rumah Bujang indicates its connection with other parts of the house.

On the contrary, in the case of Kota Duyung it was not that difficult to hear the weep from the ruinous structure, ‘please, save me from this abandonment’. In fact the people of Pulau Duyung mourning the ruination of Kota Duyung but could not do anything to it. Culturally, they have not experienced anything like this – preserving the remains

‘it is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture (Ruskin, 1880).

Ruskin (1880) cautioned the society that,

...we have no right whatever to touch [the buildings of past times]. They are not ours.

of a dilapidated and ruined old building. Emotionally, they know very well that something needs to be done to this invaluable heritage. Intellectually, they are not prepared for this. Helps from the professionals are inevitable.

The concept of preserving ruined structure as it is found cannot be applied in Kota Duyung. The presence of a ruinous fabric within a tight labyrinth of village settlement is undesirable. No love and affection can be traced among villagers to the ruined fabric unless Kota Duyung is given back its glorious whole.

We are also aware that any intervention to Kota Duyung historic fabric has the tendency to falsify its history. However, we took the stand on the basis that the threat of losing the place entirely is far greater than the risk of distortion of historical facts. As long as a faithful and cautious approach is taken this conservation effort should be able to protect itself from side stepping from its purpose

Establishing the architecture of Kota Duyung

Since not many people who have witnessed the glorious period of 1920 it’s immediately posed to us the task of establishing the architecture of Kota Duyung of that period. We have taken an investigative approach in the effort to re-establish the characteristics of Kota Duyung. Evidences needed for the task can be divided into 4 types (Fig. 11): physical (e.g., elements on site, building parts found elsewhere), pictorial (e.g., family and classmate photos), oral (interviews with related elders and neighbors), and theoretical (a deduction from local Terengganu architecture would be sought in the absence of any of the first three evidences). Figures 12 and 13 explain division of spaces on

floor plans of Kota Duyung. Some images of its architectural and constructional details are presented Figures 14 and 15.

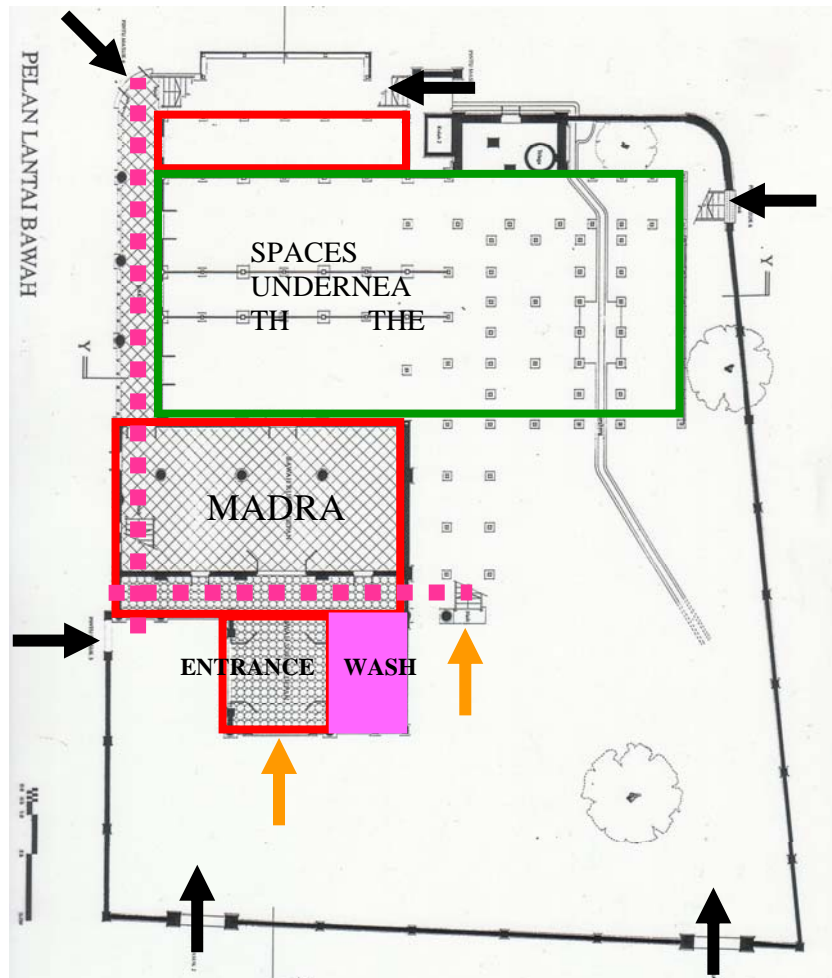


Fig. 12 – House plan at ground level. The house has 5 entrances with different hierarchy of usage on each of them.

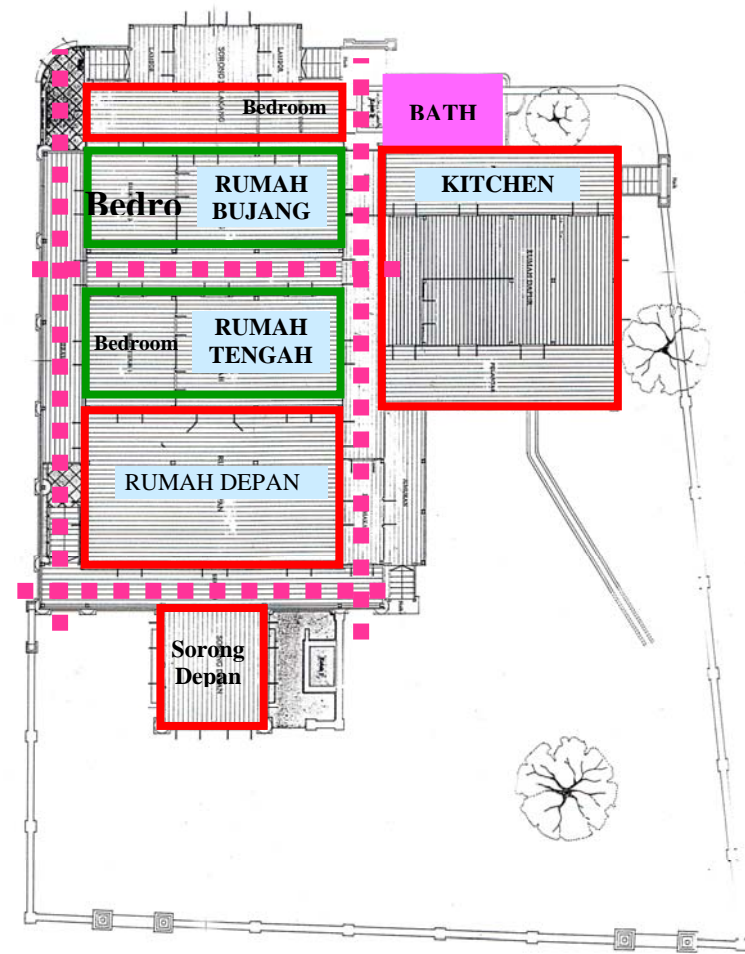


Fig. 13 - House plan at upper level. Rooms or spaces are separated and surrounded with circulation spaces.



Fig. 14 - Fragment of cornices (top left), original brick used in Kota Duyung compared to the modern red brick (top right), cut bricks arranged to form round shape for the pillar (centre left), examining the fitness of foldable wooden gate (pintu pagar) to its original location (centre right), dug-out wooden gutter (bottom left), the complete set of the foldable wooden gate (bottom right).



Fig. 15 - Condition of Kota Duyung before it was restored: the elevated indoor well (top left), physical traces of surface drainage (top right), part of the wall and Rumah Bujang overgrown with ivy (centre left), the round pillar with its characteristic capital (centre right), pool to store water placed at house front for ablution and washing feet (bottom left), half-hearted attempt to braced part of collapsing wall (bottom right).

Documenting the Process

Immediately after the completion of the research, the finding about Kota Duyung architectural history obtained recognition from the Terengganu Society of Historian. The 1920 images and characteristics of Kota Duyung architecture was based on the architecture investigated and concluded in the report. The authenticity of the architecture was measured using a specially designed method of evaluation. (Fig. 16)

The process of conserving the building was in itself a part of the history Kota Duyung. Thus it was vital that the process be documented thoroughly. Figures 17 and 18 indicate the technique used in recording each element of the building where in each of them was coded and explained about its terminology or purpose, existing condition, and suggested action to be taken. No single element was left out. The building was painstakingly disassembled and examined piece by piece. All these were documented in a report to form part of the contract document to which contractor must abide to it. Figures 19 and 20 are examples of the drawing accompanying and to be read together with the report. A 1:20 scale model was specially prepared to be used as communication tool during interview with the elders (an earlier sketch model was also used), as guidance to the contractor and other consultants, and finally as 3-dimensional record of the building (Fig. 21). Figure 22 presents images of the preserved and restored Kota Duyung.

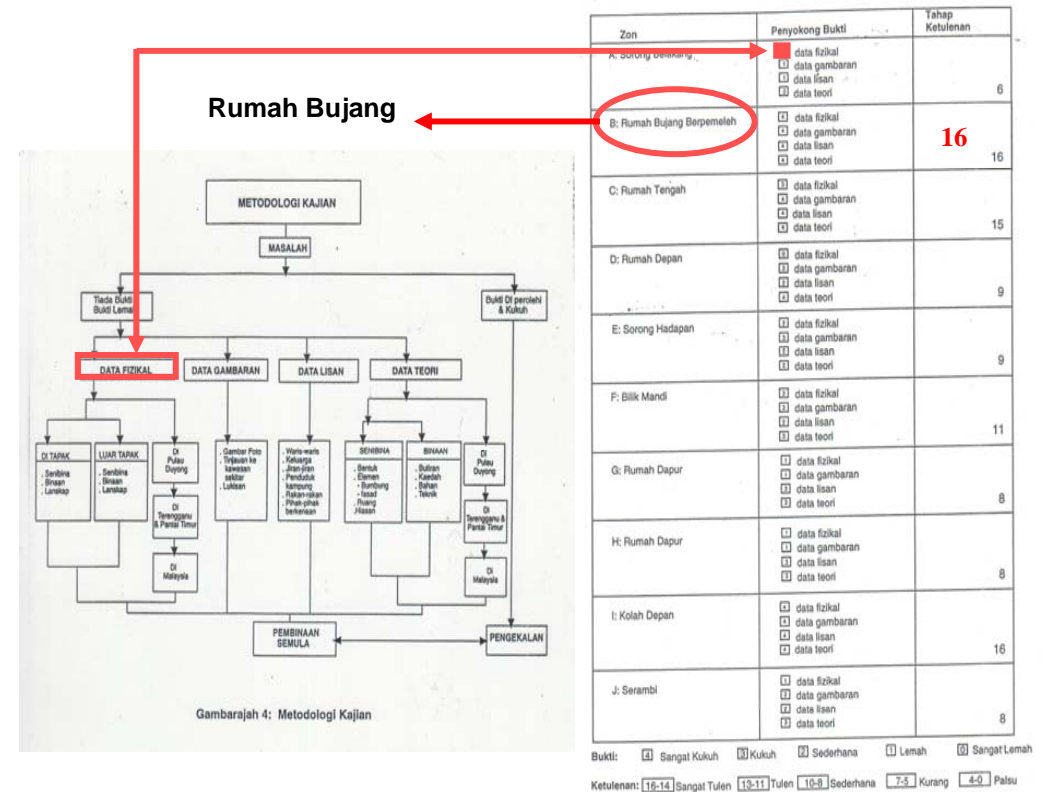


Fig. 16 – Method of evaluating authenticity (right) related to flow

Conclusion

The conservation of Kota Duyung presented in this paper adopted a mixture of approaches available and as stipulated in most Charters which includes preservation, restoration, reconstruction, and adaptive reuse, of which the ultimate aim was to revive the history and historical features of Kota Duyung that are beneficial to cultural and social well being of the people of Kota Duyung and of course significant historically to the State of Terengganu. Perhaps Kota Duyung project should be best understood as the people aspiration for the protection of their cultural heritage. The role of professionals is to help their dream comes true.

Since the project was completed Kota Duyung has become one of the tourist attractions in Pulau Duyung alongside its famous boat building industry. Not matter how difficult it was to preserve and restore the building it would be even more difficult and challenging for the State Museum, as the appointed guardian, to ensure continuous protection to this historic place. It is in their hands that we hoped Kota Duyung's history of neglect would not be repeated.

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