

THE OLD SHOPHOUSES AS PART OF MALAYSIAN URBAN HERITAGE: THE CURRENT DILEMMA

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This study concerns with the poor condition of the old shophouses in the old town centres of Malaysia. The main issue to be highlighted is the lack of awareness regarding the significance of the old shophouses as one of the main contribution to our urban heritage, among both the higher authorities and the users. Some of the old shophouses have been subjected to either changes or neglect that damage the essence of the old shophouses.

Morphological studies on the growth of town centres indicate that the old shophouses form the major built component. The old shophouses as found in the old town centres today is unique to this region only. Even though part of the built form can be traced back to Southern China and European countries, the corridor or five-foot-way (kaki lima) added after 1880s, gives its unique character. Realising its heritage value, some emphasis have been given to the conservation of the old shophouses. The threats, apart from the natural causes include the lack of legislation to protect heritage buildings, economic interest to replace heritage buildings with new ones, lack of funds, conflict of interests and lack of understanding with regards to the values of heritage buildings between the different categories of public.

This paper will present findings of the exploratory survey on the threats and mistreatments of the old shophouses, emphasizing the need for better awareness of the old shophouses as the historic evidence of the formation of urban heritage in the country. The stakeholders' perceptions towards the value of the heritage buildings in several city centres in Malaysia, are also investigated to determine its influence on the way in which the shophouses are being treated by their users.

Keywords: old shophouses, urban heritage, threats, heritage value

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1.0 Introduction

The biggest single threat to our heritage at present is our modern culture of disposability where our throw-away society is marginalising the past (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2004). Despite increasing governmental and public concern, in the absence of effective legal protection, Malaysian cultural heritage continues to disappear at an alarming rate.

In Malaysia, consciousness with regards to urban conservation is still a new phenomenon. In Kuala Lumpur, for instance, a growing concern among people arose due to the destruction of the urban environment and the threat to some of the city's familiar and historical landmarks with the consequent alteration of the city's character. The first public outcry was raised in 1983 (Chen Voon Fee 1989).

Despite some efforts by conservation enthusiasts, demolition and unsympathetic changes to the original buildings still continue. In 2003, the President of the Heritage of Malaysian Trust had remarked that the oldest buildings in Malacca and Penang are under threat. Although these historic cities are seeking listing from UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, this destruction is fast spreading to other towns throughout the country (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2003).

One of the buildings types under threat is the old shophouses in the old town centres (Fig. 1). Even though the old towns are gazetted under heritage zones, site studies along the streets of various old towns in Malaysia particularly in Kuala Terengganu, Alor Setar, Kota Bharu and Batu Pahat clarified that a lot of the old shophouses were in dilapidated state. Since the old shophouses are privately owned, it is suspected that the roots of the problems regarding the conservation of the old shophouses are also directly related to the users, particularly the owners or the tenants.



Fig.1: A row of old shophouses

A review of literature and urban design studies of several towns in Malaysia conducted by the Urban Design Unit, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, suggests that the old parts of the town centers have stronger identity compared to the newer additions of the town center. (Shuhana et als. 1998). A Ph.D study by Shuhana (1997) on resident's perception of Kuantan, a major town and state capital of Pahang, Malaysia, found that elements associated with identity of the town center fall into three broad categories, that is physical structures, urban spaces and landscape features. These are the elements that are distinctive and used by a majority of Kuantan town residents to describe their town center. From the study it was evident that physical structures, especially buildings, play an important role in helping residents to identify the town center. Since the old shophouses form one of the major components of the old town centers, therefore they fall into this category. However, the old shophouses are still diminishing.

This paper is going to discuss the significance of the old shophouses as part of our urban heritage. It will then highlight the existing scenario and the problems faced relating to the survival of the old shophouses. It will then conclude by looking at the current issues that relate to the importance of the old shophouses as a role model for urban planning.

2.0 Significance of the old shophouses

2.1 Definition

According to the Oxford English dictionary (1989) the term 'shop-house' is defined as '...in S.E. Asia, a shop opening onto the pavement and also used as the residence of the proprietor.' The term was never used even in the local building by laws since 19th century such as the Municipal Ordinance (1887). Alternative terms were used instead. For instance, the nineteenth century writers used 'long rows of queer little Malay and Chinese cottages', or 'compartments... single pigeon holes alongside the streets'. Francis Light used the term 'shop and house... as belonging to Chee Ean Chinaman' in Penang in 1793. The term 'shophouse' has become common usage since 1950s.

2.2 History

The stories relating to the history and origin of the old shophouses evoked several opinions to the curious minds of the historians. Places of reference where the built form originated include Fukien (South China), Batavia (Indonesia), Calcutta and Madras (India). However, that only refers to the building type that combines shop and dwelling in a single unit without involving the five-foot-ways.

Emrick (1976) argues that the idea of the old shophouses could have originated from the various types of old shophouse design in Batavia, Calcutta and Madras. Sir Stamford Raffles was the one who probably brought the idea to Singapore. As an agent of the East India Company, Raffles traveled widely in India and South East Asia and observed the development of colonial cities and their planning and organization. However, the regular façade and 'five-foot-ways, was owed to him. It was Raffles' instructions in 1822 to the Town Planning Committee of Singapore that resulted in the emergence of the prototype.

Building regulations in the 1880's dictated that all buildings should be erected of durable materials such as brick and tiles, with a five foot covered passageway in front. The covered passageway is still referred to as the 'five-foot-way', even though later regulations prescribed verandah ways of seven and a half feet. Ken Yeang (1998) described that in the year 1887 there were 518 brick buildings in Kuala Lumpur, changing the appearance of the town from a dirty ramshackle timber townscape into one of brick buildings with red clay tiled roofs and verandah ways, with wider lanes

to prevent fires from spreading to neighboring blocks of buildings. The width of these old shophouses is usually between thirteen and twenty feet, and the depth at least two or three times the width. Wooden shutters either plain or louveres were used for the windows on the upper floor. Yeang (1992) suggests that the regulations of 1880's, combined with design principles imported from the west, initiated the advent of the typical two storey old shophouse.

The term 'old shophouses' in this paper is defined as the premises built before 1948 (the year as indicated by the Control of Rent Act 1966) and have gone through physical changes transforming to what is known as 'old shophouses' today. Within the time frame, the premise at one stage consisted of the shop at the ground floor and the accommodation on the upper level. The present usage of the building could have changed, but the basic building form is still conforming to what is accepted as the shophouse form.

The significance of the old shophouses to the urban heritage can be attributed to two factors namely: contribution to the urban form and its aesthetic aspects.

2.3 Contribution to urban form and townscape

Towns which have developed in stages over the years constitute a unique open museum of diverse architectural forms. Even if the styles of the buildings are the same, they are not assembled on the same street in the same sequence: they both embody the skill of their individual designers and makers, and the decisions and the idiosyncrasies of successive town authorities. (Shankland 1975 in Appleyard 1979).

The typical two storey shophouse, with the ground floor for trading and the first floor for residential use is still a standard feature in the centers of Malaysian towns and cities (Yeang 1992). These buildings are important for the understanding of the city's social environment, and significant period of the city's growth. They are the oldest extant urban dwelling in the country. Yet, a lack of recognition and protection for this building type has led to its rapid demise and the loss of an important part of Malacca's built heritage (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2003-04).

The design of the old shophouses in the old town centres today is unique to this region only, particularly Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Even though part of the built form can be traced back to southern China and European countries, the corridor or five-foot-way (*kaki lima*) added after 1880s, gives its unique character. It must be clarified that buildings used as shop on the ground floor and accommodation on the upper floor can also be found in other parts of the world, such as England. However, there is no five-foot way.

The early masonry old shophouses built in the 19th century were usually around 6-7 meters wide and 30 meters deep, sometimes extending to 60 meters. The narrow frontage, particularly in Malacca, was due to the paying of tax according to the width of the façade facing the street during the Dutch period (Too, in Chen, ed. 1998). The plans of the old shophouses are basically divided into several segments that include the courtyard. The number of courtyards relates to the length of the old shophouses, whereby the longer it is the more number of courtyards available. The early old shophouses commonly served as shop, residence, stable and animal yard all at the same time (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2003-04).

Gurstein (1984) states that Malaysia has not had a long history of urban settlements, being a predominantly rural and *kampong* (village)-based society. The large urban settlements such as Malacca and Penang were established as strategic trade routes, or as Kuala Lumpur, Taiping and Ipoh, as centers of tin-mining activity. Morphological studies on the growth of the town centres in Malaysia indicate that the early components of the major old towns in Malaysia include the old shophouses, market and places of worship. This is evident from the studies of the typology of

urban form of the old town centres in Malaysia by Shuhana et als. (1992). In Kuala Lumpur for instance, the early urban morphology mainly consist of old shophouses standing closely side by side along the Gombak and Klang Rivers with narrow streets constructed without a proper schema. Although the buildings and the general appearance have changed, the alignments around a rectangle are a relic of the earlier days (Gullicks 1994). Map of Kuala Lumpur in 1895 shows the early urban morphology which is centered nearby the rivers (Fig. 2).

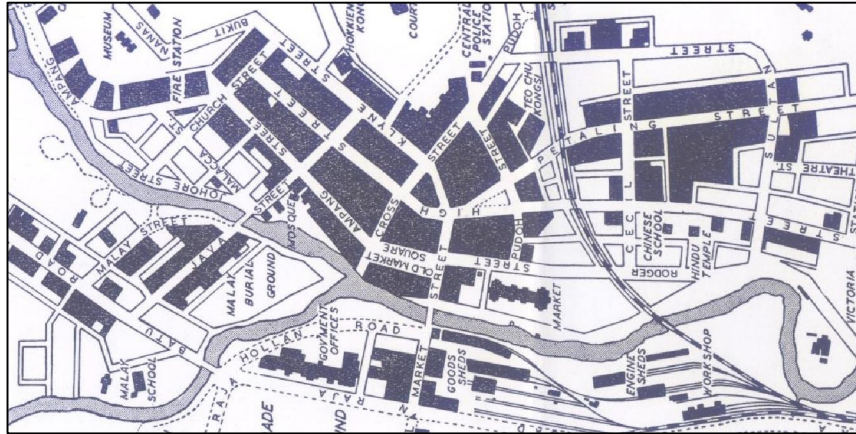


Fig.2: Kuala Lumpur in 1895

The other place that signifies the importance of the old shophouses in the early growth of town is Malacca. These old shophouses are integral to the evolution of the city’s streetscapes and show very clearly the urban conditions which started to emerge in Malacca when more permanent materials such as brick and clay roof tiles replaced the earlier timber and thatch structures. These buildings also demonstrate the comprehensive building and planning regulations imposed during Dutch rule, which dictated the form and materials permitted for construction, such as building lines, foundations, party walls, fenestrations and the sizes of bricks and tiles conformed to standards which were strictly controlled (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2003-04).

The layout of the old shophouses contributes to the uniqueness of the urban centers within this region. Yeang (1987) considers the traditional old shophouse as an important urban archetype in the early Malaysian town. He argues that a linear arrangement of old shophouses of specified widths, linked by the five-foot-way, a covered passageway, was introduced “for the sake of regularity”. He suggests that an understanding of its spatial morphology can provide ideas for contemporary use in the making the Asian city identifiable angles and land subdivided into lots and public spaces.

The arrangement pattern of the building and the streets of the old towns give various experiences in terms of visual quality and urban form (Shuhana 2002). There are many unique spaces that were created from the positioning of the buildings along the streets of the old towns. Some of the old shophouses were unified by the use of horizontal cornices, stringcourses, colonnades and arcades. These accentuated the overall rhythm of the grouping (Yeang 1992).

Shuhana and Bashri (2003) consider the five-foot-way as helping to create a continuity and sense of unity to an urban ensemble. It is responsive to the hot humid climate and the drenching rain. The human scale of the five-foot-way together with the horizontal or vertical uniformity creates an urban composition that is unique and readily recognizable thus assisting in creating a clear sense of place.

Apart from the physical form of the old shophouses, the related activities also contribute to the urban quality. The combination of both residential and retail use provided by the shophouses create a lively and vibrant urban setting that typified a living city. The display of the merchandise in the five-foot-way, for instance, increases the degree of transparency for the old shophouses, as one is able to witness the activities of the indoor from the outdoors (Shuhana and Bashri 2003). This is more so in the case of restaurants where the sittings and the food preparation are done in this area or on the street itself. The aroma of the food, the sound they produced and the sense of colours filled the spaces and enrich the sensory effect of the townscape.

2.4 Aesthetic aspects

According to Lynch (1972) it is common for historic towns and old buildings to be valued simply for their aesthetic value, or because they are old and therefore have a 'scarcity value'. In terms of quality, Tiesdell et al. (1996 in Timothy and Boyd 2003) argues that historic buildings and areas have picturesque qualities. They are redolent of a period of genuine craftsmanship and individuality that has been lost in a period of modern industrialized building products and systems of construction.

The same arguments apply to the old shophouses in the old town centres of Malaysia. The old shophouses are the physical evidence of the evolution of architecture in the country. In Malacca, for instance, the period of building houses some of which converted to shophouses, shophouses range from 1641- 1795 during the Dutch period (1641-1824) until after the independence (1957). According to Gurstein (1984), the early old shophouses were purely utilitarian adaptations to the tropical climate. However, by the early 1900s, European, Chinese and Malay motifs were intricately executed on the facades, creating the illusion of a 'false front' to the simple structure.

The old shophouses have a variety of facades of different styles which form a colourful edge to the streets. As such the old shophouses architectural style ranges from Dutch style to British Neo Classical to modernist style. Chen (1989) clarifies that the decorative styles, which emerged on the facades of Malaysian old shophouses, varied from Neogothic, Baroque and Classical to Palladian. This range of styles can be found in a single street (Fig. 3).

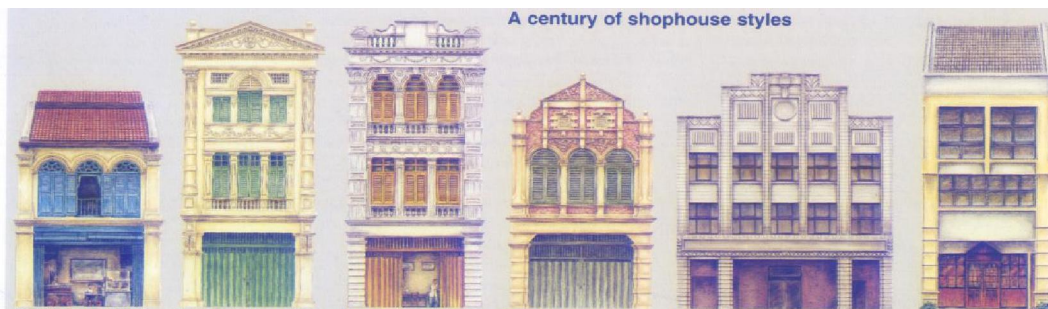


Fig. 3: Facades

Anthony Too (in Chen 1998) contends that the decorative styles that typified the facades of Malaysian old shophouses were built from memory or based on copybooks of styles found in parts of southern China, where European revivalist influence played a major role. The nouveau riche in both the emerging Malaysian towns and the treaty ports of southern China (among them Canton, Amoy, Foochow-Fu, Ningpo and Shanghai which had come under British jurisdiction in 1842) were attracted to stylistic interpretations of European architecture.

The rows of old shophouses are very rich in contrasts. Heights, widths, forms, colours and materials of the facades, the patterns and subdivision of windows are some of the different entities (Fig. 4). There is therefore a maximum of information and a minimum of redundancy, which can

be expressed as: 'lively, varied, interesting' etc. as argued by Prak (1977). But it remains a coherent street façade, through continuity (all buildings are aligned) and proximity (no room between two adjoining buildings). This is unlike the façade of the Rotterdam Concert Hall, which although 'rich' in material (marble), but 'poor' in forms. The façade has a very great redundancy and low information content, because of its rows of equal subdivisions and the simple rectangular overall shape. Prak described it with such adjectives as: 'dull, monotonous, boring, uninteresting', etc. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 4: Old shophouses showing richness in contrast



Fig.5: Rotterdam Concert Hall with monotonous facade

3.0 Related problems to the Old shophouses

The old shophouses are under threats of extinction. Problems that relate to the destruction of the old shophouses include the lack in legislation, lack of control within the local governments, modernisation i.e. economic interest to replace the old shophouses with new buildings, lack of funds, conflict of interests and lack of awareness in regards to the values of heritage buildings between the different categories of public. Apart from those aspects mentioned, the fact that the old shophouses are privately owned also plays a major role to their destruction.

3.1 Natural causes

Jokilehto (1999) posits that the built heritage is subject to various types of deterioration, including weathering, ageing process, consumption by use and natural disaster. The degree of wear depends on the type of structure and material of the building; consequently, repair traditions may differ in different cultures and geographical regions. Similarly, the shophouses are also subjected to the problems.

The destruction by Mother Nature may crumble ancient buildings which are left neglected. A good example is that of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, one of the world's most impressive ancient temple complexes. The complex was ignored and neglected for many years due to the civil wars during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. As a result, nature has wreaked havoc on the temple structures resulting in broken stones and crumbling walls, much of the complex having been overgrown by forest (Wager 1995 in Timothy and Boyd 2003).

Of the causes of decay in an historic building, the most uniform and universal is gravity, followed by the actions of man and then by diverse climatic and environmental effect - botanical, biological chemical and entomological. Human causes nowadays probably produce the greatest damage (Feilden 1982).

The other environmental pressure is pollution, which in most cases is not directly caused by tourism, but rather by heavy industry, high volume of traffic, and inadequate waste disposal system.

The monument Taj Mahal, for example, is deteriorated by the chemicals and other pollutants released into the air by the factories and other elements of heavy industry. Similarly, the old shophouses are also subjected pollution. The problems of decay and pollution relating to the old shophouse are particularly evident in the neglected and unoccupied premises (Fig. 6).



Fig.6: A dilapidated old shophouse

3.2 Modernisation

Economic disparities and the challenges of basic survival in many developing countries lead to situations whereby development pressure resulted in the losing of traditional buildings. This is not uncommon in developed world in the past either. For example, in Great Britain, 1,000 Georgian buildings were demolished in Bath between 1950 and 1973, of which 350 were listed (Eckstein 1993 in Timothy and Boyd 2002).

Traditional buildings may also change in character due to modifications by the owners. For example, in an effort to modernise for tourism, many small business owners in Nepal have changed the original architecture of their homes, and businesses, including features inharmonious with traditional designs (Shackley, 1996 in Timothy and Boyd 2002). Jokilehto (1999) argues that buildings can also be modified due to changes in function, or due to changes in taste or fashion.

Economic factor is another reason for modernisation. Sometimes the cost of maintaining historic sites is so high that governments see heritage buildings as an unaffordable luxury, so buildings are torn down in favour of new construction that will generate more economic benefits (Wayhono, 1995).

According to Shuhana (2002), the old shophouses in the old town are also subjected to be demolished due to various reasons such as traffic congestion, building by-laws requirements and river conditions. Traffic congestion and poor circulation in the old towns are due to the street design and layout that were not geared for the modern traffic. This resulted in the road widening policy, which was responsible for the destruction of the original building line and destroying the continuity of façade design. The design and construction of buildings in the old town centers were also not adapted to fit into modern by-law requirements in terms of fire escape, services and sanitation. These factors have often been used to justify demolition of these buildings.

An on-going project, Kuala Terengganu ring road is an example of the destruction of many old shophouses most of which belong to the Malays due to road widening policy (Newspaper, 2004). The 3.5km road project from Chabang Tiga to the junction of Kedai Binjai costs the local government RM32mil to ease the traffic (Newspaper: Star, 25 May 2005).

An example of massive development that may destroy the essence of the shophouses was recognized in China Town, Kuala Terengganu. Even though the area is recognized by UNESCO as one of the endangered heritage site in the world (Jenkins 1993), the area is planning to be redeveloped by the local authority. The reclamation plan will destroy its essence as an historical port (Sahabat Warisan Malaysia and Heritage of Malaysia Trust 1992).

As argued by Appleyard (1979) the new structures and changes in our cities are viewed as political acts while the symbolism of the older monuments and quarters has undergone subtle but significant change since they were built. As their origin recedes into history they become politically desymbolized and become cultural symbols of a common heritage. Likewise, the new developments in this country also closely related to political agendas.

One of dilemmas of modern life is that physical comfort, cheaper products, and security are in fact bought at the cost of depersonalization. The old exemplifies the human scale, individuality, care and craftsmanship, richness and diversity that are lacking in the modern plastic, machine-made city with its repetitive components and large-scale projects (Appleyard 1979).

3.3 Legislation

There is an increasing concern for the conservation of the historic core and areas of architectural significance in the major towns and cities globally (Shuhana 1997). In Malaysia, for instance, several local scholars did some studies to impose the importance of the urban conservation. However, there is no such thing as conservation act in Malaysia. Several acts and enactments are being used on the conservation of buildings, monuments and landscape per se. According to Ghafar (1998), urban conservation was a relatively new phenomenon in Malaysia. None or little provision was made on the important aspects of urban conservation.

The weakness in the conservation of the old shophouses lies in the fact that the old shophouses are not specifically noted under the present acts and enactments. Being within the old town centres, the old shophouses are subjected to the acts and enactments related to urban conservation in Malaysia. The old shophouses are not really categorized within the Antiquities Act 1976 which specifies that the buildings concerned are the monuments of at least a hundred years old. Majority of the old shophouses are less than a hundred years old.

All pre-war rented properties came under the Control of Rent Act (1966). Khoo Su Nin (1994) considers this act as the reason to the widespread survival of old shophouses ensembles in Georgetown. The act also ensured this building type to be in the original condition but some has become dilapidated. However, Chen (1989) argued that due to the act, the low rental of buildings built before 31 January 1948 deter their owners from up-keeping and maintaining the buildings let alone restore them. The act also prevented the eviction of the tenants without compensation as well as demolishing for development. This legislation was later reviewed and the outcome was the Control of Rent (Repeal) Act 1997 (Act 572). The Act was introduced to help the owners to raise the rent to help them in maintaining the old shophouses.

Apart from the national legislation, there are also several legislations or enactments imposed by the local authorities. In Malacca for instance, the Malacca Enactment no.6 of 1988 make provisions for

the preservation, conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage and matters incidental thereto. However, the effectiveness of current local legislation regarding the old shophouses is questionable. The old shophouses are normally found in the old towns of Malaysia which are geared as conservation areas by the local government. There are cases regarding the lack of control within the local governments. A good example is regarding the conservation area in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. A whole area of old shophouses within the conservation area was dragged down in the year 2001 to make way for new buildings (Fig. 7). In this case the state council disregards the local authority resentment in allowing the owner of the land to pull down the old buildings. The old shophouses which exemplified the early growth of town by the river edge were turned to rubbles.



Fig. 7: Destruction of old shophouses



Fig. 8: Uncontrolled development in the old town centre

A move is being made to strengthen the conservation of the heritage buildings, including the old shophouses. A draft for heritage conservation bill 1998 was forwarded by the Ministry Of Housing And Local Government to the Parliament of Malaysia but it was rejected. A separate attempt was made to include conservation bill of heritage buildings in town and country planning act 1976 (172 act) in 2003 (interview with the Head of Conservation Unit, Malacca City Council 2003). The legislation (which took the form of an Amendment to the Town & Country Planning Act, 1976 received its first reading in Parliament on 6 November 2003, before the dissolution of Parliament. Had it been passed, it would have given state governments and local authorities the ability to control development within historic areas. In March 2004 the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage was created. The Minister, YB Dato' Seri Utama Rais Yatim, has proposed a stand-alone Heritage Bill, which would address both tangible and intangible heritage and which will supersede the proposed 2003 Amendment to the Town & Country Planning Act (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2004).

The streets within the old town centres, once dominated by rows of the old shophouses, have also lost their strength. A lot of the rows are already broken by either new buildings or old buildings with modified facades that are not sympathetic to the old buildings in area (Fig. 8). Apart from the height control, there is no proper guideline regarding the design of the façade, within the conservation area. In England for example, there are several guidelines in this aspect. One of them is a booklet entitled *Conservation in Essex No.5: Shopfronts* (Essex County Council 1981), which intend to encourage a more appropriate shopfronts for the conservation area. The guideline includes information regarding materials and design for the facades to blend with the old buildings within the area. The other similar guideline is *Shopfronts in Conservation Areas* by Hove Borough Council, Planning Department (1990). The policies are aimed at halting the loss of traditional

shopfronts and ensuring that new shopfronts are well designed with respect for the architecture and character of an area, to retain and enhance the quality and vitality of the street scene.

One aspect of the guidelines is the discouragement of forecourt displays. The reason is that it can give the street a cluttered appearance and also causes obstruction, particularly for the disabled or partially blind. This situation however, considered as an interesting addition to the old shophouses in Malaysia as mentioned earlier in 2.1.

3.4 Gentrification

For the old town, the activities within the buildings and the area contribute to its character and ambience. Thus, a change of the social fabric of the old town centre does have an impact on the whole character of the place. The lifestyle and activities of the original communities that contribute to the sense of place of the historic quarters are displaced by a group of people who have a different lifestyle and activities (Shuhana 2002). A local example is that of Jalan Bandar, Kuala Terengganu whereby the original population has left the place and many of the dwelling units on the upper floors of the old shophouses are being used as stores. This reduces the liveliness of this earliest and most historically significant street in Kuala Terengganu.

The Control of Rent (Repeal) Act 1997 (Act 572) gave negative repercussions to some. The president of Heritage of Malaysia Trust, Tan Sri Dato' Seri (Dr) Ahmad Sarji (2003: 1), considers the act has placed the oldest buildings in Malacca and Penang under threat. With the increase in rent, many of the old tenants being unable to pay, had to move out. Lim (2004) contends that Penang old town center is badly hit by the repeal act, resulting in many old shophouses left vacant and the shifting of major retail centers to other areas. In Malacca the repeal has had a detrimental effect especially on the artisans and tradesmen who had been operating in the old town. Some have either ceased operating or shifted elsewhere out of the area (Malacca City Council 2002)

3.5 Funds

Maintaining historic sites in whatever form is an expensive task, and a lack of adequate financial resources for heritage conservation is one of the most profound difficulties facing heritage managers in most of the world (Henson 1989; Isar 1986 in Timothy and Boyd 2003). As a result of inadequate funding and lack of effective training, much of the maintenance work done to heritage properties in many parts of the world is purely cosmetic. Heritage resources commonly fall into various states of disrepair or are repaired poorly by inexperienced and untrained personnel (Chance 1994; Jones and Bromley 1996 in Timothy and Boyd 2003).

Both Malacca and Penang have requested for the nomination of world heritage site. Although it is considered a privilege for a heritage site to be nominated to the List of World Heritage Site, UNESCO does not provide financial resource to the sites. The actual financing in conservation works falls to the respective countries. For sites in the less developed world monies are too often diverted to other priority projects that are less relevant (Timothy and Boyd 2003)

In Malaysia, there is basically no funding available in maintaining the privately owned old properties, except for a few noted buildings. The old shophouses for instance, depends directly on the owners for maintenance. Lacking in fund could be one of the reasons why many of the old shophouses are left in dilapidated state, particularly unoccupied lots. As an example, the State Government of Malacca has not enough funds to restore and preserve old buildings. To restore them, money is needed to acquire the buildings from the owners. Therefore, the Chief Minister urged the owners of these buildings to do their part as the buildings were an important architectural heritage of the state (Newspaper: NST 22 March 2005).

Several local governments normally help to beautify the facade of the old shophouses only. In China town, Kuala Terengganu, for instance, the residents are given paints before any major celebrations (interview with the Director of Urban Planning Department, KT City Council 2003). The upgrading projects in the old town centres of Malacca and Johor Bahru involved only the facades of the old shophouses. No funding help is given for the interiors.

3.6 Ownership and conflict of interest

One of the set-backs in protecting the building includes the fact that the old shophouses are privately owned properties. As noted by Jokilehto (2002), concern regarding the conservation of privately owned properties and historic settlement comes after the establishment of administrations with responsibilities for the care of public buildings. The late concern also means the inevitable loss of some of the old privately owned properties that have heritage values.

The multi-ownership of the old shophouses also indicates that the buildings are subjected to the fancies of the individual owners. The old shophouses lie within the old town centres which are gazetted as conservation areas. The ownership of the buildings is somehow changed when a building is classified as a conservation building. As observed by Victor Hugo, 'the use of a monument is the owner's but the beauty belongs to us all' (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1989). The owners thus have to restrict their 'use' if it is conflicting with such 'beauty'.

A good example of the conflict of interest between the owner and the state government is the pulling down of three old shophouses within the conservation area in Malacca in December 2002. Although the case hit the national headlines, after 3 years, the case is still pending. Whatever the outcome, the old shophouses are already gone.

Lack of appreciation of the old shophouses may also be due to the change of ownership from local residents to the foreigners. In Malacca, for instance, some of the old shophouses were already sold to the foreigners, particularly from Singapore and Taiwan (interview with the Head of Conservation Unit, Malacca City Council 2003). The three old shophouses that were pulled down, in actual fact belong to a foreigner. The change in ownership causes the absence of place attachment i.e. the sense of belonging to the place by the residents. Place attachment is the most frequently used term that relates closely to the concept of familiarity because it deals with human bonding or sense of belonging to the physical environment (Williams et al. 1992; Low & Altman 1992; Prohansky et al, 1983; Tuan 1980 in Timothy and Boyd 2003). Cooper (1992 in Timothy and Boyd 2003) notes that many individuals' most powerful memories revolve around places such as the house where they grew up, the secret places of childhood and adolescence, the neighborhood where they established their first home, etc.

3.7 Attitudes and perception

Attitude towards old buildings is another factor that challenges their existence (Timothy and Boyd 2003). Very often, community members, developers and government leaders view the protection of ancient monuments and historic buildings as an obstruction to modern development, and opinions are usually divided regarding the priority of each (Rhgei and Nelson 1994; Sadek 1990). Residents of developing countries commonly associate preservation with backwardness (Timothy 1999a), which often results in a lack of desire to conserve. Preservation in this context is often viewed as stagnation or worse, the opposite of progress (Rodgers 1982; Myles 1989). With modernisation comes the attitude that traditional equals unfashionable (Shackley 1996). As a

result, villagers pride themselves on progress, not preservation, because progress is nearly always measured in economic terms (James 1995)

There is also a difference in the public perceptions in different categories of the world (Timothy & Boyd 2003). In many Third World countries the idea of heritage conservation is relatively new. Comparatively, few people appreciate the need for it (Cohen 1978; Henson 1989; Myles 1989). It is often the case that appreciation for conservation increases only with the promise of economic benefits (Cohen 1978; Soemarwoto 1992). According to Norton (1989), this is because people's primary concern is survival. Therefore, it is difficult to raise enthusiasm for heritage conservation among them, comparative to their basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education. According to Lowenthal (1996), in most of the developed world, people have a tendency to grow more interested in their personal heritage as they aged. In developing regions, however, the elderly have little interest in preserving the past. Instead it is the younger generations who are interested in conserving their heritage. According to Burton (1993) in South-East Asia, preservation is essentially the passion of the affluent young; their elders have little sentimental attachment to buildings that remind them of their humble beginnings. These arguments, however, need to be proven whether they relate to the old shophouses as well.

The statements above may similarly relate to the attitudes and the perception of the users, particularly the residents and the visitors to the old shophouses. The lack of funding help and the fact that the land price in town is high posed the questions of whether it is economical to keep the old buildings or to replace them with new buildings. As mentioned above, the basic needs for survival could be of a greater concern to the owners as compared to enthusiasm for heritage conservation.

The other major threat is the possibility that the users, particularly the owners, may not perceive the old shophouses as part of the national heritage. Drury (1995) states that there is no universal acceptance of the cultural heritage value of buildings apart from public buildings, particularly houses. Therefore, there is a possibility that the users, especially the owners, may consider them merely as utilitarian buildings. Perhaps, this is part of the reason for the demolishing of the old shophouses. An on-going research is being conducted to clarify this matter.

3.8 Upgrading and conservation

Based on Pearce (1997) and Pearson and Sullivan (1995 in Timothy and Boyd 2003) the procedure for heritage conservation process involves a sequence of stages. This includes identification of the heritage place or object, research and inventory, policy setting, restoration, management and interpretation. This procedure can be taken as a template to be adapted to suit individual circumstances.

According to Jokilehto (1999), conservation in the specialised sense has two aspects: first the control of the environment to minimise the decay of artefacts and material; and, second, their treatment to arrest decay and to stabilise them where possible against further deterioration. Restoration is the process undertaken when conservation treatment is thought to be insufficient, to the extent of reinstating (restoring) an object without falsification or altering it, to a condition in which it can be exhibited.

Realising the heritage value of the old shophouses, some emphasis have been given to the conservation of this building type. However, from the exploratory survey, it was found that the efforts in conserving the old shophouses are still not effective. Some works can simply be called upgrading projects and do not qualified to be called conservation simply because the projects did

not undergo the processes as mentioned earlier. Insensitive development both by private sectors and by the local governments can be damaging to the old shophouses.

There are several problems encountered in conserving the old buildings. The problems include the lack of craftsmanship and shortage of original materials. For the conservation of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple and Puri Hotel in Malacca for instance, the artists and artisans had to be brought from China simply because the lack of skill locally. This involves costs that presumably not affordable by most owners of the old shophouses. Secondly, the building materials used in the old shophouses are very rare and not in the production line today (Yongtanit 1997). Such materials are, for instance, baked clay roof tiles, French window with panelled louvred shutters and timber roof structure of the consequence of the development of mass production that causes homogenous building types.

As emphasized earlier in 2.3, the beauty of the shophouses lies partly in their existence as a group and their setting. The upgrading project to enhance the area along Petaling Street, Kuala Lumpur, by providing cover in-between the old shophouses, enable the shoppers to shop well protected from the weather. However, the old shophouses are also 'well-hidden' from the shoppers due to the permanent stalls built right in-front of them. The permanent stalls also block the the free flow wind to naturally cool the old shophouses. Apart from that, the essence of shopping in an open area is lost. In the past, the area fronting the rows of the shophouses was full of impermanent stalls with different colours. The shoppers hit by the sun, walk through multi-coloured umbrella like stalls to choose the desired merchandise (Fig.9). Although the stalls look untidy, the haphazardness may be more interesting than the stereotyped similar coloured stalls arranged in definitive rows (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9: Open market in front of the old shophouses with temporary stalls



Fig.10: Covered area in front of the old shophouses with permanent stalls

The other aspect is regarding authenticity. According to Mattinen (1997 in Jokilehto 2002) authenticity can best be experienced as the atmosphere originally built into the building, that is, a certain kind of unchanging characteristic of the building. An attempt to achieve authenticity is the evident in the upgrading project of the old shophouses along Laksamana street, Malacca. In terms of colour, the choice is to go back to the grey colour as during the Dutch period (Fig. 13b). Some may argue that the area is already well-known as the Red Square and the choice of colour may make the row of buildings to be out of place. The other example regarding the choice of colour is the upgrading project in Johor Bahru old town. The addition of landscaping and painting of the old shophouses have definitely enhanced the area. However, the choice of strong multi-colours is quite disturbing (Fig.11). The house of Toh Ah Boon at the Tan Hiok Nee Street built in 1870s for instance, has turned purple (Fig. 12).



Fig.11: The use of strong multi-colours on the old shophouses



Fig. 12: The house of Toh Ah Boon that has turned purple

The plan of the old shophouses normally zoned with the public zone at the front and the private zone at the back and the upper floor (Wan Hashimah 1994). The upgrading project of the old shophouses along Laksamana Street, Malacca, changed this typology with the introduction of the river walk (Fig. 13). Now both ends of the ground floor of the old shophouses are public zones. The earlier proposal to have a balcony and terrace for the old shophouses, as exemplified by some local old shophouses along Malacca river, was discarded to model the approach in rehabilitation with examples from overseas, particularly San Antonio in Texas, USA.



Figure 13a: Shophouses along Laksamana Street, Malacca. View from the street



b: View from the river after upgrading

A different approach in adaptive re-use is the hollowed out of the old shophouses to retain only the front facades (Fig 14). In this case the essence of the old shophouses is no longer exists. Although this project won Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM), the spreading of this approach can also means the extermination of the old shophouses.

A proper conservation work is exemplified by the work of Heritage of Malaysia Trust in conserving the house at No. 8, Heeren Street (Tun Tan Cheng Lock Street), Malacca (Fig. 15). This two-storey building is an example of a typical modest residential structure built during the Dutch occupation of Malacca (1641-1824).



Fig. 14: Adaptive re-use



Fig. 15: Conservation work

A lot of studies were done on the building before the actual restoration work began in 2001. The restoration work was done sensitively to retain as much as possible the original condition of the house. The new tile layers of the courtyard for instance were removed to expose the original layer. Some of the rotten timber pieces were replaced from the leftover from the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple restoration project. The timber replacements were cut carefully to resemble the original pieces. The building is currently used as a heritage preservation information centre (Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2004).

The change of function within the old premises is common. Some shophouses have been converted to shop and store, restaurants, etc. An example is the corner building in Jonker Street, Malacca which has undergone adaptive re-use to function as a restaurant (Fig. 16). The outcome is rather pleasing.



Fig. 16: A shophouse that has undergone adaptive re-use

There are reports that some of the old buildings, including the old shophouses are converted as the breeding ground of birds. This is damaging since birds droppings destroy the interior fabric components of the old buildings (Interview with the Executive Director, Heritage of Malaysia Trust 2003).

It should be understood that conservation is the action taken to prevent decay, embracing all acts that prolong the life of cultural and natural heritage. Approaches in conservation include three major aspects, that is, preservation, restoration and renovation. However, the current practice is focussing more on building conservation and preservation rather than the setting. Affecting the plight of the old shophouses whose main attribute is its group value and setting. It is common to find only certain shophouses in the row to be preserved whilst the rest were subjected to the hideous renovation works that totally destroy the aesthetic value of the row of old shophouses.

3.9 Heritage tourism

In places where tourism is dominated by heritage attractions, the economic impact can be very profound. As heritage tourism has grown, destinations have begun to realize the potential value it has for local and national economics in terms of job creation, increased tax bases, more regional income and stimulating local entrepreneurial activity. Very often, therefore, economics form the basis for conserving heritage. Several historic cities in Central and Eastern Europe have begun to realize the potential of developing urban-based heritage tourism as a means of economic development (Timothy and Boyd 2003).

However, too much emphasis on tourism can be damaging to the local residents of the heritage towns. The increase of traffic and tourists to heritage area as in the case of Malacca although good for the traders also disturbs the livelihood of the residents within the area (Malacca City Council report 2002).

Masses of tourists in historic communities and at heritage places create anxiety and discord among local residents (Timothy and Boyd 2003). In the case of Stratford-upon-Avon, England, a heritage town of only 23,000 residents attracts 2.5million tourists a year. A recent survey showed that although the tourism industry provides over 8,000 jobs, 40 percent of the local population felt there were too many tourists. 28 percent of the local population claimed that from their perspectives, the disadvantages of tourism outweighed the advantages (Drohan 1995). Nevertheless, as argues by Tiesdell et al. (1996), the economic justification of tourism often wins over the arguments of activists who fight against the tourist use of heritage.

4.0 Current Trends

The discussions to support the conservation of the old retail shops is enhanced by the study done by Tan Hai Hsin (2004), the managing director of Retail Group Malaysia and Henry Butcher Shopping Centre consultants Sdn. Bhd. According to him, the current trend is that the shoppers are returning back to retail shopping rather than the multi storey shopping centers. Despite the continuous modern trend of developing enclosed, air-conditioned shopping malls, high street retail remain vibrant in city centers. High street retailing remains an important part of retail structure in many countries such as Japan, United Kingdom, Taiwan and China.

Tan contends that a renewal trend is happening all around the world. In United States of America, more and more retail developments are focusing on open-air concept, human scale design and strong building character. In United Kingdom, government is giving more attention to the development of city centers and town centers.

Economically, high street retailing has proven viable in other countries and caters to retail businesses that complement large shopping malls in the cities and suburban areas. This is partly due to the fact that increasingly, the shoppers are demanding a better shopping experience. They are bored with the clean-cut and straight forward looking shopping malls which can be found everywhere in the world (Tan 2004).

The current practice for housing in Malaysia includes the shops. In Johore, for instance, it is required that 10% of the development should consist of shops (Planning Standard Manual, Urban and Rural Planning Department, Johore 2002). The shops, although are terraced and have the corridor like the old shophouses, lack the sensitivity of the old model. The ceiling above the corridor in the five-foot way for instance, is often too high to effectively protect the pedestrians from the weather, the reason for doing it in the first place.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the qualities that support the old shophouses as part of our heritage. It examines these qualities from two broad aspects, namely contribution to urban form and aesthetic aspects. It seeks to highlight the strength of the old shophouses and the impending factors that threaten the continuous presence of these heritages building Malaysian townscape.

The findings indicate that the practice of conserving the old shophouses is still not effective. A more effective measure in preserving the old shophouses needs to be undertaken. The findings of the exploratory survey prompt the author to discover the unseen causes in the erosion of the old shophouses. The main focus of this on-going research is concerned the perception of the users towards the heritage value of the old shophouses. Hopefully, the outcome would shed some light on the ineffectiveness of the conservation of the old shophouses, particularly in Malaysia.