Conservation Issues of Syed Alatas Mansion

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Building conservation is an increasingly important concept in today’s fast-developing era. The word “conservation” alone refers to the guardianship of buildings from being lost, wasted, damaged or destroyed. However, conservation generates multiple issues in its work making it difficult and unfavourable. This paper explores the issues faced in Malaysia’s first conservation project of the Syed Alatas Mansion. The case study of the Syed Alatas Mansion is conducted via an interview session with the Assistant Manager and reference to documentary sources. The research has identified three categories of major issues in the conservation of the Syed Alatas Mansion i.e. technical, organisational and economic issues that has been described in detail. This research has put forward some recommendations to remedy the described situation.

1.0 Introduction

The Syed Alatas Mansion, located on Armenian Street, Penang was proposed as a case study in order to exemplify conservation issues faced in real projects that have taken place and demonstrate best practice conservation techniques. It was intended that the knowledge gained could serve to expand the expertise of the local building industry and encourage further conservation projects. The realities of cultural heritage as a form of cultural identity are never more apparent than during the process of conservation projects. Thus, in order to depict the kinds of issues involved in conservation projects as per said in the literature and reinstated by the feedbacks from questionnaire survey, a case study is examined. The case study demonstrates how these issues come into play in the real industrial scenario. For those without experience in seeing beyond the dereliction and problems decay, to the possibilities conservation can offer, the only time in the course of a project when the attention is caught and the inexperienced observers can begin to imagine a building’s potential is when the project is almost complete. It is at this stage when identity tussles are active. During this process, many issues are faced which significantly affects the performance of the conservation project. These issues are assembled and analysed.

2.0 Historic Background

The late nineteenth century Anglo-Indian had been acquired by the MPPP for road-widening land, after World War Two. By 1993, nothing had subsequently taken place whilst the building remained a store and dormitory for the Chettiar bottle recyclers for almost fifty years. Used for shelter and security, the original fabric was virtually intact, although in need of repair.

The “tenants” were easily persuaded to leave, joining the remaining Indian recycling community, which occupied many of the premises adjacent to the Mansion. At that time in 1993, rent-controlled accommodation was available in this area. However, cultural tourism, represented by the soon-to-be-gentrified Mansion was thought to need a more sanitised environment and the Chettis are now threatened with relocation away from the “tourist gaze” (Khoo and Jenkins, 2002; 215).

In 1993, the MPPP took possession of the building for the Syed Alatas Mansion Heritage Development Project. After many delays, the restoration took place funded by the Federal, state and MPPP governments. A Penang architect, in consultation with the French team of architects and craftsmen supervised a local contractor who had expressed an interest in conservation practice.

The enthusiasm created by the project was endorsed by the Prime Minister then, who, during his visit on the 20th of December 1993, signed the plaster rose installed on the gable of the Porte cochere. The then Honorary Secretary of the Penang Heritage Trust, who was appointed project manager for the site, saw the project as the beginning of a new trend in heritage development.

In 1999, the “French” restoration of the mansion won the Badan Warisan Malaysia’s award for The Most Excellent Project in recognition of its conservation quality and potential in encouraging other conservation projects.
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3.0 Method of Analysis

An interview was arranged for with Pusat Warisan Pulau Pinang on 28th March at the Pusat Warisan Pulau Pinang office, Georgetown, in which the Assistant Manager agreed to be the interviewed. The interview was scheduled at 10am and lasted 30 minutes only. Questions asked were based on the questionnaire, focusing on problem issues that surfaced during the conservation of the Syed Alatas Mansion. Responses from the interviewee were recorded to form data input. This data was then analysed and compared with documentary sources found. These two information sources combined to form a full report.

4.0 Analysis of Issues

4.1 Technical issues

During the conservation project progression, more than 75 people from both government and private sectors were trained as the building became a centre for restoration courses for the first time in Malaysia. Unfortunately, there was an intense shortage of labour in the building industry at the time and so conservation works were employed by unskilled labourers from Bangladesh and Indonesia, who took their newfound skills back with them when their work permits ran out. As a result, Penang’s aim to gain a pool of newly skilled resident artisans was not realised (Jenkins, 2004).

During the interview session with the Assistant Manager of the Pusat Warisan Pulau Pinang, he explained that it was difficult to conduct works because the labours were mostly very inexperienced and required constant monitoring and strict supervision. This slowed the project, which eventually gained more costs as some errors were found that needed rectification. There were also many arguments regarding the course of works and management of the building during this stage. Project stakeholders held several meetings to discuss the flow of work and decide on critical activities as well as plan the building’s use.

4.2 Economic issues

The project was expected to produce a snowballing effect by encouraging the demand for heritage development (Khoo Su Nin, 1994). The “snowball” melted before it could gather speed and the restored building was once again left vacant. Finally, in 1996, two years after completion, the building was leased to the state government for the establishment of the Penang Heritage Centre with funding from the Prime Minister’s Department. It also became the first office for AR&T Heritage Consultancy. Training workshops and attempts to enliven the premises with a cafe were thwarted by constant flooding.

Also, occasional lectures were held by a passing conservation expert but there was little to see and little to learn from other than the building itself. The business of the building simply could not generate enough cash flow to justify the very high level of investment required for the costly conservation and renovation works. Defining priorities of the building between its historic nature and business generation is important to measure the building’s redevelopment pressure (Jenkins, 2004).

The Islamic exhibition held in the mansion is unfitting for the building design that allows maximum ventilation as opposed to the simpler typical concrete museum made up of plain walls and no windows. By covering the building with a plastic roof caused distress to the building fabric as well as the exhibition panels. The conversion of the Syed Alatas Mansion from the Penang Heritage Centre to the Islamic Museum displays a perfect real example of a building that is functionally obsolete and fails to provide usable space. Although the building was carefully restored, its intended reuse after restoration as an exhibition centre did not suit its design function.

In the interview, it was explained that the problem with the Syed Alatas Mansion was that the heritage building was not understood in terms of its physical material form and meaning before new ideas i.e. modern climate control system and exhibition were introduced. Had this been
considered beforehand, sustainability and adaptive reuse of the mansion would have been effective, as proposed by most researchers in their theoretical literature. This indicated a misguided decision which resulted in complications upon the building’s new adopted use. The initial idea seemed workable, but due to unforeseen state of affairs, the building failed to serve its intended purpose. This displayed an economic issue as efforts to generate business were misguided and unwise.

4.3 Organisational issues

Ill thought out and inappropriate modifications can be witnessed in the introduction of a vignette of a wharf scene and a construction of a “Barkath” Sundry store on the first floor of the Syed Alatas Mansion where the original open terracotta-tiled balcony area and timber landing remained. This is the result of poor decision-making and planning within the responsible organisation. Although the intention of these ideas had hoped to enliven the mansion with more activity, these constructions rather contributed to the destruction of the mansion as much historic fabric was lost in the process.

Furthermore, as the building was used as an exhibition, a plastic roof was also installed to protect the exhibits in some areas, and the 100 year old terracotta tiles were painted blue to represent the sea. Apparently, this caused the area to become overly hot which damaged the building fabric from sweat and paint. Additionally, much of the vignette exhibits were destroyed by rats and were found in a foul, neglected condition. In March 2007, air-conditioning was installed to the mansion — the pipe work connecting the internal blowers to the exterior condensers was affixed outside of the building to minimise disturbance to the exhibits during its installation. However, this destroyed the lines of the original walls although initiatives were taken to minimise the effect. Clearly, this is against the first principle of conservation which is minimum intervention (Said, 2010).

From a perspective, it can be concluded that by introducing a sundry store and installing air-conditioning to the mansion, the conservation project was considerably unsuccessful in strict technical terms because the building had failed to uphold its original historic nature as outlined in the Heritage Building Act. This clearly indicates the organisation’s failure to work out right decisions in setting priorities and the more efficient types of interventions. Owing to that, the problem addresses an organisational issue — poor decision-making. In the case of the Syed Alatas Mansion, although finance was not a problem since all funds were supported by the government, the availability of relevant expertise in handling the conservation project were still lacking, leaving the physical sustainability of the mansion in question.

4.4 Summary of Analysis

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<th>Technical</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Organisational</th>
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<td><strong>Issue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Introduction of wharf scene and barkath sundry</td>
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<td>1. Intense shortage of labour in the building industry</td>
<td>1. Could not generate enough cash flow to justify level of investment</td>
<td>2. Installation of plastic roof and terracotta tiles painted blue</td>
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<td>2. Unskilled labourers from Bangladesh and Indonesia</td>
<td>2. Unsuitable conversion of the mansion to Islamic Museum</td>
<td>3. Air-conditioning installed</td>
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<td><strong>Consequence</strong></td>
<td>Technical problems slowed the project, which eventually gained more costs as some errors found were found that needed rectification.</td>
<td>Efforts to generate economic caused complications upon the building’s new adopted use.</td>
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5.0 Conclusion

The conservation and reuse of the Syed Alatas Mansion addressed three types of issues in the historic building conservation discipline, namely technical, economic and organisational issues.

The first issue addressed is a technical type where there is a shortage of labour and skills to do the job. This cultivated other problems to surface as the careless works gave impression to the final result of the building. It is realized that both political and economic support was essential to kick start and sustain a conservation project concept. The conservation work process itself demanded huge financial support, and the maintenance and reuse of the building also needed much financial attention to sustain the life of the building. The amount of funds needed depends on how much the building needs to adapt to its new activity. However, more than that was the need to make the right decisions regarding priority setting and the more efficient types of interventions.

As demonstrated by the Syed Alatas Mansion, poor decision-making results in ill thought out and inappropriate repairs being carried out which attracts further deterioration to the building in subsequent years. Also, the new adaptive use of the building must suit the building’s physical needs and not damage it in effect. It is important that conservation knowledge be applied before deciding new introductions to the existing building that would require some modifications or additions. Ownership and use of the building must be agreed as well as a cultural connection to the place so that the physical needs of the building are not ignored and the historic fabric is rightly safeguarded. The Syed Alatas Mansion project failed to adhere to this, leading to the destruction of the mansion’s historic fabric from the ineffective operation of an exhibition, installation of air-conditioning and construction of a sundry store.

6.0 Recommendation

It is more fitting that the mansion be sustained as a “living exhibition” in its own right which would be physically less demanding on the historic fabric, and at the same time demonstrating the way of life of the original building. According to the Gwynn Jenkins (2008), conservationists and adaptive reuse enthusiasts were frustrated with the situation but were apprehensive to speak to the local state government or municipal council of heritage buildings for fear that their concerns would be misunderstood and possible subjected to the leader’s confrontational tactics. Although an old historic building becomes functionally obsolete, there are still fresh ideas that can be implemented to reuse the building, provided that it is closely monitored by conservationists so as to not sacrifice too much historic fabric in the process. Therefore, promoting re-use and conservation awareness about sustaining historic buildings are found to be the most strategic incentive for best practice in historic building conservation. □

References


