Tan Sri Dato' Dr Mubin Sheppard: 
Pioneer in the Conservation of Historical Buildings 
in Malaysia, 1950–1994

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Conservation and preservation of historical buildings in Malaysia has been one of the broadest approaches to sustaining the man-made built environment, but ironically there has been very little effort to understand its development. Studies have been done in a piecemeal manner: either written from a technical viewpoint or from other perspectives. They have not engaged in the retrospective of the social effort to conserve historical buildings. Hence, there is an urgent need to proceed with this interesting but neglected field, to synchronize conservation with an understanding of the cultural past and to thereby build the intellectual foundation needed to sustain the future of architectural heritage in Malaysia. Some claim that conservation is simply a phenomenon which started in the mid-1970s. However, efforts were made by the collective contributions of organizations and individuals before World War II. This paper describes the significant contribution of Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard to pioneer such efforts in Malaysia from 1950 till 1994.

Introduction: Architectural Conservation Scenario

Malaysia is one of the fastest growing countries in Southeast Asia. It was formed in 1963 by a coalition of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak after Malaya gained independence in 1957. Malaysia’s geographical location has always opened it to ideas and influences from both East and West, resulting in an architectural mosaic of great diversity, artistry, sophistication and cross-cultural influences.¹ Many researchers have pointed out that the history of architectural conservation is a relatively new field in Malaysia and is not comprehensively understood.² Amer Hamzah stated that it is only in the last three decades that a conscious appreciation of the subject has developed.³ Earlier studies were either done in a piecemeal manner or were limited in scope, mainly from a technical point of view or from managerial perspectives without concentrating on the development of conservation efforts in detail and their impact. When the pace of building accelerated in Malaysia in the 1970s, many historic buildings were demolished, especially in urban areas.⁴

Chen Voon Fee claimed that building conservation in Malaysia started when the earliest call for a national building conservation movement appeared in a

1 Chen (1998).
3 Amer Hamzah (2000).
4 Chen (1998).