Perception of Pre-War Shophouse Owners towards the Conservation of Pre-War Shophouses in George Town, Penang

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Abstract: Pre-war shophouses make up most of George Town’s built environment and are both home and work place for most of the residents living there. An understanding of the residents’ perception towards the conservation of pre-war shophouses is needed in order to produce a set of conservation guidelines which is practical and comprehensible to the general public. Therefore, this paper aims to evaluate the perception of pre-war shophouse owners towards the conservation of pre-war shophouses based on existing conservation guidelines in George Town, Penang. Firstly, literature related to the conservation of shophouses in George Town was critically reviewed. A structured survey was then carried out by interviewing owners and tenants of pre-war shophouses along Campbell Street, George Town Penang. The survey evaluated the perceptions of pre-war shophouse owners towards the conservation of pre-war shophouses and also their awareness towards existing conservation guidelines. The survey showed positive reaction by owners and tenants of pre-war shophouses towards the conservation movement and to the conservation of their shophouses. The survey also brought up a few problems faced by these owners and tenants of pre-war shophouses after the inscription of George Town as UNESCO World Heritage Site. Now that the conservation of heritage buildings is gaining momentum, an examination of the problems and needs of the owners of pre-war shophouses can lead to the creation of a comprehensive guideline or manual to aid them in the conservation of their heritage pre-war shophouses.

Key words: Heritage shophouse, conservation, perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

George Town, Penang has long established herself as a trading post between the East and West since the 17th century. The influx of traders from all around the world gave birth to a townscape unlike any other in the world. An eclectic mixture of European classical style, with Islamic, Malay, Indian, Chinese and later Art Deco motives can be seen in the architecture of buildings in most parts of George Town (Mohamed et al., 2001). This unique townscape resulted in George Town being listed as one of UNESCO’s World Heritage Site in 2008. Cherished for its cultural heritage value, most heritage buildings, especially the heritage shophouses of George Town still houses many traditional trades inherited from ancestors many generations ago. These heritage shophouses not only provide a venue for these traditional trades to thrive but are also homes for many local families.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site listing brought many changes to the cultural and physical landscape of George Town. Among them are the introduction of local conservation guidelines and town planning based on a set of conservation principles. In a situation where the subject of heritage conservation is a fresh idea to local residents, this idea may be met with diverse responses. The changes in planning legislation not only affect the general physical planning of George Town but also the owners of more than 5000 heritage shophouses in the heritage city. Conservation policies cannot be carried out effectively by any single body or party but needs the cooperation of the government, NGOs and the general public. Therefore, the perception and opinion of heritage building owners towards the conservation of their buildings must be understood in order to carry out effective conservation efforts. If owners are reluctant or against the idea of conservation, then any conservation effort by a certain body alone would not warrant the status of Heritage City of George Town.

Taking into consideration this fact, the conservation effort in George Town should adopt a bottom-up process, where conservation works should begin with the public and the people closest to heritage buildings, such as the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses. In George Town where mosst buildings are heritage shophouses, the participation of their owners and tenants in conservation works has become the backbone for all conservation efforts in George Town. Before government and non-governmental bodies come up with heritage conservation guidelines which everyone within the conservation zones have to adhere to, it is crucial that the perception and attitude of owners and tenants be understood so that the conservation guidelines can properly satisfy their problems and needs in any conservation works to their shophouses. Being the majority stakeholder of heritage buildings in George Town, it is only fair that the opinion and perception of these owners and tenants of heritage shophouses be heard and taken into consideration in any further conservation planning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Inscription of George Town as UNESCO World Heritage Site

From tangible heritage buildings to intangible traditional trades, Georgetown has managed to retain its heritage and form a culture of her own, leading to her inscription as a joint UNESCO World Heritage Site, together with Malacca, in 2008. The Outstanding Universal Values of Georgetown as a World Heritage Site was justified in the Nomination Dossier and are embedded in criteria (ii), (ii) and (iv) of the Operational Guidelines.

Quoted from the Dossier is Criterion (iv), which states:

“The Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca: Melaka and George Town” reflect the coming together of cultural elements from elsewhere in the Malay Archipelago and from India and China with those of Europe to create a unique architecture, culture and townscape without parallel anywhere in the East and South East Asia. In particular, a range and exceptional architecture of shophouses and townhouses.”

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One of the major effects which the listing of George Town as a World Heritage Site brought about was the division of George Town into two conservation zones: a heritage Core Zone and Buffer Zone in order to better manage the conservation efforts and planning management of the city. The core conservation zone stretches 109.38 hectares, while the buffer zone surrounds the core zone and has an area of 150.04 hectares. George Town has more than 12,000 old buildings comprising shop and terrace houses, churches, mosques, bungalows, villas, government offices and monuments (Mohamed et al., 2001) within its core and buffer conservation zones.

The significant heritage character of George Town is reflected in the predominant pre-war buildings, especially the two storey shophouses that are found in the inner city of George Town (Lim et al., 2008). According to Lee et al., there are more than 5000 units of old shophouses with heritage value in George Town itself. This shows that a huge portion of buildings in George Town are pre-war shophouses and these rows of shophouses are the ones which create the townscape of the city. Rows of pre-war shophouses line the streets of George Town creating a sense of continuity which connects different areas of the city and act as a link between other heritage buildings to create an integrated townscape.

2.2 Problems of Conservation in George Town

The topic of conservation is a relatively new one to George Town, albeit one which is gaining more followers and general recognition by the day. The path along the road to conservation is a difficult one, as decades without emphasis on the protection of heritage buildings have brought about problems which will affect the effort of conservation in George Town. Firstly is the problem of negligence. While large scale urban development continues to threaten pre-war buildings, other heritage buildings are simply deteriorating due to age, neglect and high cost of maintenance (Kamal et al., 2008). The application of Control of Rent Act 1966 gave no incentive to owners of heritage shophouses to maintain their buildings causing many pre-war shophouses in George Town to suffer from various defects which may lead to more serious structural decay after the Act’s repeal in 1997.

Other than that, Ahmad (1994) states, the present legislation is insufficient and unsuitable in protecting historic buildings from being demolished and destroyed. This problem of inadequacy in addressing the various aspects of urban conservation in an integrated manner is highlighted by the destruction of the historic Metropole Hotel (1900) in George Town in 1993 (Mohamed et al., 2001). Despite having various laws which are in place, heritage buildings are still threatened by demolitions and illegal extensions (Mohamed et al., 2001a). Even with proper laws and legislation, the serious enforcement of these legislations is crucial in conservation. At these beginning stages of conservation movement, the understanding on conservation practice is vague or unclear (Harun, 2011). In the situation where there are inadequate legislation to bind or guide the practices of conservation, work which may harm a heritage building’s authenticity and the loss of their true value may occur.

The lack of good quality original material in conservation projects is also a main problem in the conservation industry (Harun, 2011). Original materials are important in preserving the authenticity of the character of a heritage building. Many traditional materials used back in the days have now ceased production and thus supply is limited. Not only is there a challenge to acquire the original materials, contractors need to have expertise in the interpretation of the needs of the project, whether the new material is compatible with the original and the new material must be tested for similar strength, texture, scale and form (Harun, 2011).

The lack of technical knowledge in repairing and maintaining historic buildings has also been highlighted by Ahmad (1994). The lack of laborers and technical experts in conservation methods and techniques is a major problem because almost all conservation projects involve both repair and maintenance stages requiring an understanding of and analysis of building defect diagnoses (Harun, 2011). Distrusting the works of contractors, many heritage shophouse owners took matters into their own hands and may take on repair works themselves. Untrained in the repair of heritage buildings, these owners may do more harm to their shophouses instead of repairing the damaged.

2.3 Importance of heritage shophouse conservation

Heritage shophouses of George Town possess significant townscape value, where the building’s setting and its contribution to the local scene where it forms an element in a group and shares particular architectural forms or details with other buildings nearby. The heritage shophouses, with their narrow frontages and arched five-foot-ways create an endless unity and harmony with their adjacent buildings to form a townscape which is unique to George Town.

Other than that, it is important to conserve these heritage shophouses as not only they represent the physical image of this historic city, they are also where material trade and cultural exchanges take place. Since centuries ago, they provided both workplace and homeplace to local residents and have the ability to continue to house modern lives and work for future generations (Fels, 2002). These shophouses also carry a very personal meaning to the local people whose lives revolves around these precious buildings.

Prior to the nomination of George Town as a world heritage site, a building inventory survey had been done in George Town. In that survey report, all buildings in the conservation core and buffer zones were listed according to their category of significance. A Category I building would comprise of monuments of exceptional interests or buildings registered as national heritage under the National Heritage Act (Badan Warisan Malaysia (BWM), 2008). All pre-war shophouses within the Core and Buffer zones of the world heritage site fall into Category II buildings, which are defined as buildings of special interest that warrant every effort being made to preserve them.

The shophouse culture of Penang is more than just buildings; conserving that culture involves going beyond traditional building preservation (Fels, 2002). Being internationally recognized as a world heritage site also mean an international accountability thus the outstanding universal value, the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity at the time of the declaration must be maintained and enhanced in future otherwise if there is any threat detected, it can be added to the list of world heritage sites in danger and further the deleted from the world heritage site (Mohd-Isa et al, 2011). With the legal protection of these shophouses in the operational guidelines and also the importance of conserving the shophouse culture, it is acknowledged that pre-war shophouses in George Town contributes to the townscape of the city and is worthy of protection and conservation.

2.4 Importance of the perception of owners and tenants of heritage shophouses

The heritage conservation phenomenon is a growing one within the Malaysian community. This is evident when George Town and Malacca were listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site as a result of mutual effort by many parties. However, the World Heritage Listing would only be unappreciated if the owners or tenants of heritage buildings are unable to regard and interpret this status in a positive manner. As a main player in the heritage conservation field, the perception and attitude of owners and tenants of heritage buildings must be understood in order to design a conservation
plan which caters to the needs of these owners and tenants. In the case of George Town where majority of the heritage buildings are privately owned pre-war shophouses, the role of owners and tenants of these heritage shophouses in the conservation of their buildings is immense. Without the cooperation of the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses in conservation efforts, any conservation plans or projects initiated by the government will not yield positive results. In order for the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses to accept any conservation planning or projects, firstly the concept of heritage conservation have to be understood by them. After obtaining knowledge about heritage conservation and viewing heritage conservation in a positive way, only then will owners and tenants of heritage shophouse owners play their part in conserving our heritage city.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses the quantitative method for data collection and analysis, where structured interviews were conducted with respondents. This method incorporates data in numerical format to provide a clear and general overview of the perception of heritage shophouse owners towards conservation.

3.1 Questionnaire Design

A structured questionnaire was used in collecting the primary data in this paper. The questionnaire consists of three sections with both open and closed ended questions. However, to fulfill the requirements for this paper, only two sections will be discussed. The first section measures the attitude of the respondents towards heritage conservation in general, while the second part explores the respondent’s problems and issues during the process of conservation of their shophouses. The respondents give their opinion of each question using a given numerical scale.

3.2 Questionnaire Distribution

The structured interviews were conducted with heritage shophouse owners and tenants along Campbell Street, George Town. Due to financial, manpower and physical constraints, the respondents for this survey only amounted 20 individuals.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Owners’ and tenants’ perception towards conservation

The perception towards conservation of owners and tenants of heritage shophouses in George Town was measured using a five point Likert scale. Their opinions ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. Figure 1 shows the level of opinion of heritage shophouse owners and tenants on the conservation of heritage buildings.

In general, the perception of owners and tenants towards conservation is positive, with more than half of the respondents chose “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” when asked about their opinion on conserving the heritage buildings in George Town. There were 25% of respondents who “Strongly Agree” and 30% of respondents who “Agree” to the heritage conservation policy of George Town. According to them, the physical heritage of George Town should be conserved as it is and not be demolished to make way for new developments. This positive feedback might be due to the government and many non-government organisations’ effort in promoting heritage conservation awareness to the general public, especially to owners and tenants of heritage shophouses in George Town. Other than that, there were 25% of respondents who are neutral when it comes to the topic of conservation. As the concept of conservation is still in its beginning stages in George Town, some owners and tenants find the concept new and uncertain. Although they understand the importance and benefits of heritage conservation, the concept of conservation may be still to raw to be accepted by them fully. However, there are still 10% each of respondents who “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” on the concept of heritage conservation in George Town. According to them, the conservation policies in George Town give rise to many issues such as traffic congestion and safety issues in the old city of George Town. As compared to heritage conservation, they believe that modern infrastructure and development will solve some major problems in George Town.

Overall, there is positive feedback, according to the perception of owners and tenants of shophouses, to conserve the heritage city of George Town. However, some major issues have to be addressed during the planning stages of the heritage city in order to sustain the demands of the residents and public who frequent this area. As the city of George Town is not only an economical hub but a residential one, the growing population of the city reveals weaknesses in the infrastructure planning of the city. High density in the heritage city causes massive traffic congestions during peak hours and holiday seasons. The segregation of traffic is also poor causing inconveniences for pedestrians and motorists. With various activities held in the heritage city, aimed at tourism, the safety of the general public must be improved. In order to fully convince the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses to accept heritage conservation as a method of urban planning in George Town, steps must first be taken to show them that besides being an economical hub, George Town can also be a living city they can call home.
4.2 Owners’ and tenants’ reason for conservation

The main reason to conserve heritage buildings according to owners and tenants of heritage shophouses is represented in Figure 2. The respondents chose which factor is most important as motivation to conserve heritage buildings. Each factor is represented in percentages in the pie chart below.

Interestingly, 30% of respondents chose ‘Cultural Heritage Value’ as the main reason for conserving heritage buildings in George Town. Based on this, it seems that owners and tenants of heritage shophouses have comprehensive understanding of heritage conservation in Penang. It is because of this “Cultural Heritage Value” which made George Town a listed UNESCO World Heritage Site. To these owners and tenants who spend most of their time and lifetimes being surrounded by heritage shophouses, the results show that the cultural heritage value which heritage shophouses bring is more important to them compared to their historical or physical value. Secondly, 25% of respondents chose “Protecting the World Heritage Status” as the main reason to conserve heritage buildings in George Town. Living in close proximity with these heritage shophouses have made owners and tenants of heritage shophouses realise the uniqueness of the rows of shophouses in creating a townscape unlike any other in the world. Only 15% of respondents chose “Tourism” as a reason to conserve heritage buildings. The low percentage of respondents may be caused by the location of the survey which was conducted in the business district of George Town, where most businesses thrive on the local market and not tourists. Lastly, only 10% of respondents chose “Evidence of History and Past Events” as a reason for conservation in George Town. This is because most heritage buildings in George Town are heritage shophouses which have little or no historical value. Instead, respondents who chose “Evidence of History and Past Events” have a more personal memory or happening regarding their heritage shophouses which have become the main reason for them to conserve their heritage shophouses.

Everyone has a different reason to protect and conserve heritage buildings. This also applies to the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses. However, through this survey, it has been revealed that the main reasons for the owners and tenants to conserve heritage buildings were for their cultural heritage value, to protect the World Heritage status and for the shophouses’ townscape value. Through these three main reasons, it can be said that the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses understand the significance of being listed as one of UNESCO’s World Heritage Site and also the importance of the preservation of their shophouses in maintaining the townscape value of George Town. In this sense, it can be said that the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses are looking at a bigger picture rather than their own personal interests when it comes to heritage conservation.

4.3 Owners’ and tenants’ concern towards the restoration of their heritage shophouse

The concern of owners and tenants of heritage shophouses towards the restoration of their heritage shophouses is crucial in determining their enthusiasm in the conservation of their own shophouses. As the responsibility to conserve the privately owned shophouses fall onto the owners and tenants, it is important that they have the will and desire to protect their shophouses from any harm. In the survey, owners and tenants choose from a 5 point Likert scale ranging from “Extremely Concerned” to “Not Concerned at all”.

Firstly, according to 30% of respondents who are concerned about the restoration of their shophouses, they are enthusiastic in any conservation works on their shophouses. However, minor concerns when it comes to restoration or repair works of their shophouses such as high costs and restrictions in legislations which makes conservation works difficult for them to follow through. Meanwhile, 20% of respondents are “Extremely Concerned” for the restoration of their shophouses. They expressed that they are willing to maintain and restore their shophouses in accordance with any local conservation guidelines. Another 20% of respondents expressed neutrality for their concern of restoration of their shophouses. There are some respondents who do not see their heritage shophouse as an asset of high value. To them, their shophouse is merely a place for business in the day and a house at night. There are also 15% of respondents who are “Not Concerned” and another 15% who are “Not Concerned at all” regarding any conservation works on their shophouses. These respondents think that conservation works such as a restoration will not bring any major impact onto them or to their businesses and community. Therefore, they are reluctant and hesitant in undertaking any conservation works for their shophouses. Many shophouse owners and tenants believe that a restoration will increase their shophouses’ heritage value. However many businesses on Campbell Street where this survey took place do not depend on the heritage aspect to thrive. For the owners and tenants
4.4 Problems encountered by owners and tenants in any conservation works

The conservation of heritage buildings encompasses various degree of intervention. Preservation, restoration, repair, rehabilitation, replication, relocation and maintenance can all be categorised as conservation works with varying degrees of intervention. Figure 4 shows the main problems, represented in percentages, encountered by owners and tenants of heritage shophouses during the process of any conservation works, such as basic maintenance practices to major restoration works.

![Figure 4: Problems faced by owners and tenants during conservation works, Source: Author.](image)

According to the survey, 35% of respondents chose “High Costs” as the main problem when it comes to any conservation works. Many heritage shophouse owners and tenants are reluctant in seeking professional help and consultancy when it comes to repair or restoration works for fear of the high costs charged. As a result, many owners and tenants would find temporary solutions to defects in their shophouses or delay repairs to a later time. Meanwhile, 30% of respondents recorded the “Restrictions of legislation and guidelines” as one of main problems during conservation works. When interviewed, many owners and tenants expressed their wish to have restoration works done to their shophouses. However, the restrictions of local legislation and guidelines regarding the conservation of heritage buildings create limitations to alterations which can be done to the shophouses. Owners and tenants also expressed there are inconsistencies in legislations among the different governmental departments when it comes to approving building plans resulting in a long time for building approval. There are 15% of respondents who chose the “Lack of Quality Materials” as a main problem when it comes to conservation works. Although most owners and tenants are enthusiastic in using traditional materials for the repair and restoration works of their shophouses, the difficulty of finding such materials leave little choice for owners and tenants but to use alternative modern materials which may harm the authenticity of their heritage shophouses. Other than that, 10% of respondents chose “Lack of Skilled Labour” and another 10% chose the “Long time of repairs” as problems regarding the conservation works of their shophouses.

The many problems faced by owners and tenants when undergoing conservation works to their shophouses are a deterrent for future conservation works. High costs of repair and the distrust of contractors forced some shophouse owners to use their own methods for the repair of their building. These methods may sometimes bring more harm than good if done without proper knowledge of traditional materials and skills.

4.5 Influence of a homeowners’ conservation manual on owners and tenants of heritage shophouses

In George Town where hundreds of rows of privately owned shophouses form the townscape of the city, the responsibility to conserve these buildings fall into the hands of the owners and tenants themselves. Often, these owners and tenants lack the necessary skills and knowledge for the proper conservation and care of their buildings. Therefore, a homeowners manual have been suggested to aid decisions on the care and conservation of these heritage shophouses. The opinion of owners and tenants regarding this homeowners manual have to firstly be determined in order to predict its success in influencing owners and tenants decision on the conservation of their shophouses. In this survey, respondents’ opinion on how much a homeowners manual would influence their decision regarding conservation works of their shophouses are represented in Figure 5 using the Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Influence” to “No Influence at all”.

![Figure 5: Level of influence of a homeowners’ manual on owners and tenants of heritage shophouses, Source: Author.](image)

Firstly, 40% of respondents chose “Influence” when asked if a conservation manual would influence their decisions regarding conservation works on their shophouses. According to them, a homeowners’ manual will become their guide when undertaking conservation works but the owners and tenants would like the manual to be flexible in order to take into consideration their own personal opinions as well. Meanwhile, the lowest percentage of respondents, which make up 10% of respondents, chose that a homeowners’ manual will “Strongly Influence” their decisions regarding conservation works. This low percentage is due to the fact that owners and tenants of these heritage shophouses would like to have more freedom when it comes to works regarding their shophouses and that a manual or guideline will limit the alterations allowed for their shophouses. The survey also shows 20% of respondents are “Neutral” towards this matter, stating that a manual will have its pros and cons. Other than that, 15% of respondents stated “No Influence” and another 15% chose “No Influence at all” when asked if a homeowners manual would influence their decisions regarding conservation works of their shophouses. The reluctance for a homeowners’ manual might be due to impressions that a conservation manual would not supply much help, and would rather hand over the important decision making to conservation professionals.
As the response for a homeowners’ conservation manual is encouraging, creating one which can cater to all the different backgrounds of owners and tenants of shophouses can be a challenge. Firstly, the rate of literacy among owners and tenants has to be determined in order to produce a manual which is comprehensible to owners and tenants of all literacy rates. Secondly, many owners and tenants in this area are not from the construction industry, let alone exposed to terms related to the construction of heritage buildings. Thirdly, even with a homeowners’ manual, it cannot be guaranteed that each and every owner or tenant of heritage shophouses will refer to it.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the owners and tenants of heritage shophouses in George Town have a positive perception and attitude towards the conservation of their shophouses. They are well aware of conservation activities surrounding them and also take pride in George Town’s World Heritage Site status. The owners and tenants of heritage shophouses have now come to accept the changes in planning legislation which the inscription as World Heritage Site brought upon. Although many problems may arise from conservation works to their shophouses, they are concerned and enthusiastic in taking part in these conservation works. However, owners and tenants of these heritage shophouses are willing to adhere to all planning and building legislation, they would still like to have more freedom of control regarding the restoration and appearance of their shophouses. Based on this survey, it is encouraging that the efforts put into conservation movement in George Town is fruitful in creating awareness of the importance of conservation in this heritage city. Subsequent efforts to further strengthen the legislation and enforcement of conservation works should be undertaken to make conservation not only something professionals can undertake but also owners, tenants and public can take part in on a personal level.

The heritage city of George Town is divided into a number of unofficial business zones. There are zones that cater to the tourism market while others thrive on local residents. Campbell Street, where this survey took place falls into a business district for local residents, with two wet markets within walking distance. The reliance of the business on within this zone on the heritage factor is very low. Therefore, perception on conservation by the owners and tenants in this area might differ from zones where heritage is a selling factor. In order to understand the overall perception and attitude of owners and tenants on the conservation movement, the survey could be expanded to include shophouses in other type of business zones in George Town.

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References


