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On Armenian Street

What a Shophouse Taught Me about Being Malaysian

Soon-Tzu Speechley

If the New society when it comes [...] should find the world cut off from all tradition [...] many lives will be barren of a manly pleasure which the world can ill afford to lose even for a short time. I ask you, therefore, to accept what follows as a contribution toward the revolt against utilitarianism, toward the attempt at catching-up the slender thread of tradition before it be too late.

– **William Morris**, ‘*Gothic Architecture*’ (1893)

For a little over a year, I had the pleasure and privilege of calling the Sun Yat-Sen Museum at 120 Armenian Street, George Town ‘home’. I had come up from Kuala Lumpur to take a job at a local publishing house, and my boss – heritage doyenne Khoo Salma Nasution – generously offered me a room in the house she had lovingly renovated and transformed into a museum. It

was an overcast January afternoon when I moved in, carting my bags up the old spiral staircase. Looking back on those fifteen months in Penang, I feel like my time in George Town was a lesson in Malaysian history, and a first-hand glimpse into how our ancestors lived.

The house itself has an impressive history. It is, of course, associated with the Chinese nationalist Dr Sun Yat-Sen. It was here that Dr Sun and his supporters planned the Huanghuagang Uprising, an important prelude to the Chinese Revolution of 1911 which toppled the Qing Emperor. *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, the world's oldest Chinese newspaper, also began at this address. We tend to think of globalisation as a contemporary phenomenon, but a place like 120 Armenian Street reminds us how even a century ago, our nation was deeply interconnected with the wider world. The shape of twentieth-century China was sketched out below my bedroom.

Since then, the house has drawn a colourful cast of characters. One of my favourite writers, Booker Prize-winner Peter Carey, once spent the night in the front room; I soon found myself living with the 'pale mornings, white sheets and slowly turning fans above the vagueness of mosquito nets' described in one of his stories. The house continues to attract all manner of people, and while I lived there my housemates included novelists and linguists, anthropologists and architects, all of us sharing this historic space.

Built around 1880, 120 Armenian Street is a fine example of the so-called Straits Eclectic shophouse, a Malayan building style that fused Chinese forms with Western ornament, incorporating climate adaptations from the Indian sub-continent and Malay Archipelago. Behind the pastel blue façade, with its cut-porcelain friezes, the house offers a remarkably well-preserved interior

which, in the words of Peter Carey (again), is ‘an example of the architectural wealth that this little island is still hiding up its wide Chinese sleeves.’ Stepping through the gilt doors, visitors are greeted with a series of carved screens, an air well flanked by colourful geometric floor tiles, and an elaborate spiral staircase. The house is a statement of mercantile wealth, and testament to Penang’s former eminence as an entrepôt.

Upstairs, the back room overlooking the air well was ‘mine.’ For the duration of my time in Penang, I slept under a mosquito net draped over an antique metal bed – a living arrangement I had only previously encountered in the pages of Kipling and Orwell. Indeed, my room was essentially like the one described in the latter’s *Burmese Days*: ‘no furniture except the big four-poster bed, with its furled mosquito net like a canopy, and a wicker table and chair and a small mirror; also some rough bookshelves, containing several hundred books, all mildewed by many rainy seasons.’ Admittedly, I had slightly fewer books.

From January 2014 to May 2015, George Town was my adopted kampung. I walked all over town, relishing the luxury of being a pedestrian – a luxury few people from Kuala Lumpur enjoy. When travelling further afield, I cycled. On weekends, I climbed Penang Hill, looking out over the city from one of its many peaks. Day by day, I learnt my way around the island, becoming intimately familiar with its erratic network of old streets with their riotous traffic, the sweaty climbs of its hills and the contours of its muddy coast. Like everyone who lives on the island, I soon had my favourite hawkers and kopitiams. In a city that prides itself on its food, such allegiances run as deep as support for a football club, and are just as contentious.

I fell in love with the city. George Town is a World Heritage

Site, and with good reason. Few places in the world can boast streetscapes like it; the city is an architectural melting pot. Mosques, churches and temples share the same street address, testimony to the many cultures that have washed up on Penang's shores. Malays, Chinese, Indians and Europeans are all represented in the island's buildings, as are Eurasians, Thais, Burmese, the Jewish diaspora, and Armenians. Dig a little deeper, and things get even more interesting. The Indian mosque was built by a German architect from Malacca. Mock-European castles designed for Chinese towkays line the 'Millionaire's Row' of Northam Road. Up in the 'highlands' of Penang Hill, a Scottish architect built himself a home that incorporated traditional Malay features alongside carved thistles and gothic arches. Malaysian multiculturalism is built into the very fabric of the city; its architecture defies the simplistic, essentialising ethnic categories of our modern bureaucracy. This is muhibbah in bricks and mortar – and wood, attap, granite and terracotta too.

I grew up in a rather different environment. My childhood was typical of the KL bourgeoisie; I lived with my mum and dad in a 70s house in Bukit Damansara. My parents, great lovers of modernist design, furnished the place with chairs and tables by mid-century masters such as Mies van der Rohe and Verner Panton. While aware of history through books and family lore, the past was not just a foreign country, but a distant one at that.

Like most people in the Klang Valley, much of my time was spent indoors. If I wasn't at home, at school or in a mall, I was in the back seat of a car somewhere between these places. I lived in an air-conditioned bubble. Life was modern, clean and comfortable.

In the 1990s, Kuala Lumpur was expanding – upwards, outwards, on top of itself. My childhood years were marked

by the steady growth of the Petronas Twin Towers, a process I followed with an almost religious awe. I was a child obsessed with skyscrapers, and not one but two were taking shape in my own backyard. Rising out of the muddy confluence for which the city was named, our buildings began to colonise the sky. We chronicled the suburban expansion of the city when we visited friends as they moved out to new townships and far-flung suburbs – Cyberjaya, Putrajaya, and Kota Kemuning. With the tallest skyscrapers and the biggest malls, Kuala Lumpur was a superlative city. We were barrelling into the future as the biggest and the best.

There were less happy changes too. I saw the lush green jungle beside my school in Mont Kiara give way to a forest of towers. Jungle treks were now prefaced with long bus rides. The smell of the rainforest gave way to car fumes and dust. Through my school years, my hometown was a construction site; to be a KLite in the 90s was to live not just in a concrete jungle but a thicket of cranes.

Like many middle-class Malaysians, I moved abroad for university. In Melbourne, I read History and Asian Studies. The geographical distance gave me an opportunity to approach the story of my region with a certain detachment. Classmates from all over the world gave me new points of view. And then there was the city. Melbourne was experiencing its own construction boom, and it was in Melbourne that my childhood love of architecture developed into a passion for urban heritage. While there, I was introduced to the power of heritage activism; I signed petitions and attended protests with people who wanted to save much-loved buildings. I met people who cared deeply about their city and were unafraid to voice their vision for their home. I was inspired.

When I returned to Malaysia, I knew I wanted to get involved with our heritage. So when the opportunity to move to George Town presented itself, I packed my bags and headed north.

In my nine-to-five, I edited books on Malaysian history. Indeed, I learnt more about Malaysian history during my short stint in Penang than I did at university. Khoo Salma's work on the Chulia's Kapitan Kling Mosque made me keenly aware of how this community's history and identity were written into the streets of George Town. Editing Dr Jon Lim's book on the Penang house gave me an appreciation of the various colonial architects who had worked in Penang, and the ways in which they had deftly juggled European traditions, oriental tastes, and the dictates of the tropical climate to create something truly special. While working on Chin Yoon Khen's book, *Traditional Trades of Penang*, I was introduced to the numerous artisans keeping centuries-old traditions alive. Through Ruth Iversen Rollitt's biography of her father B.M. Iversen, I learnt of the great contributions the Danish architect had made to Malayan architecture. With each book, it felt like we were weaving disparate strands into a larger tapestry. Each one of these writers worked with a passion for bringing the fine grain of our Malaysian story to light. I came to see how the over-simplifying national narratives we're fed do little justice to our history.

I will always be grateful for what I learnt from these writers. Through this work, I also came to better appreciate the nuances of my own patchwork family, with its mix of English, Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Swiss names.

Outside of work, I volunteered with the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT). At PHT, history was a much more hands-on

process. Penang is rapidly changing, and sometimes development sets itself on a collision course with heritage. One of my first big tasks at PHT was to write a petition. The 'Save Soonstead' campaign was an attempt to prevent the partial demolition of the famous mansion on Northam Road for the construction of a high-rise hotel. Built in 1911 by the Scottish architect James Stark for the sugar planter Heah Swee Lee, the elegant Edwardian mansion is a monument to Penang's architectural golden age. Having worked with Dr Jon Lim on a history of the island's domestic architecture, it seemed crucial that this house – which ended up on the cover of his book – be saved.

Through press releases, social media, and emails, we got in touch with people both near and far. In a few short weeks, the petition garnered 4,000 signatures, and was covered extensively in the local press. Comments came in from local residents, Penangites living abroad, and even former UNESCO staff. The developers eventually agreed to modify their plans and keep the building intact. To me, the petition demonstrated how much Malaysians care about their heritage, and how vital it is for planners and developers alike to respect the wishes of the community. It also showed how young people such as myself, with previous experience working in advertising and social media, could play a role in protecting our history and heritage. But we have to speak up.

Our built environment is just one facet of heritage, however, and our intangible cultural heritage – our traditions, culture, and ways of life – can be harder to defend. As in many cities the world over, gentrification has become a concern in George Town. The repeal of rent control, followed by a boom in tourism, means evictions happen with depressing regularity. Many long-

time residents are being pushed out by rising rents. People are losing their homes. Despite a series of press conferences, attempts at lobbying, and articles to raise awareness about the issue, evictions continue. While the city's historic streetscapes are largely protected by its heritage listing, our intangible cultural heritage is in a more precarious position.

In my short time in George Town, I saw numerous traditional artisans lose their homes. After 80 years at their Pitt Street address, the Har sisters – the city's last makers of votive paper flowers – were evicted in mid-2015. This had been their family home for almost a century, and when we met in the shady front room of the house, the sisters told me of how their father had brought his ancient trade here from China, and how during the war their mother took shelter in the longkang behind the house, cowering in the dark because she was too afraid to light oil lamps. But real estate has little time for such family stories. The venerable Mr Ong of Liangtraco on Chulia Street is another victim of the city's gentrification; the nonagenarian's shop provided generations of George Towners with all manner of household chemicals. He was evicted to make way for a boutique hotel. In fifteen months, I saw makers of rattan furniture and mahjong tiles disappear from the streets of George Town. Each eviction underscored just how delicate our heritage can be. In the case of Kampung Siam, an entire traditional enclave is being swept away for development. Once again, the site is destined to become a hotel.

The sad irony of these evictions is that in many cases, those being evicted are the very people who helped win George Town's World Heritage Listing. The city was listed by UNESCO not for its architecture alone, but for its living traditions – traditions which are now at risk of being extinguished forever.

Evictions are more than a change of address. In George Town, each eviction represents a family history lost, a neighbourhood community scattered, and a way of life erased. Heritage activism has an important role to play here, if only in recording these stories, and raising awareness about what we stand to lose. Writing about these evictions helped buy some of these people extra time, and I am proud to have played a role, however small, in that. But it isn't enough. We need to think seriously about what we want from our heritage, and from our cities.

While tourism has revitalised this once sleepy port town, bringing new vitality and much-needed income, George Town now runs the very real risk of losing its soul. When we 'let the market decide', we end up with cities that value consumer spaces over homes. When local residents are being kicked out for espresso bars and boutique hotels, we must ask ourselves: who are our cities for?

In the 1960s, the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre put forward the idea of the 'right to the city', which he described as a demand for 'the right to urban life, transformed, renewed'. As our cities are overtaken by prevailing neoliberal philosophies, which seek to commercialise every aspect of urban life, perhaps it is time for us to once again assert our right to the city – and the rights of those whose cities are being stolen from them. Young Malaysians have a role to play in this. We must speak up about our heritage, not just out of some abstract Asian respect for our elders, but because in protecting our heritage, we give voice to our vision for the future. If we see something of value in our traditions and history, we must speak up. Our apathy comes at the cost of our unique cultural identity – and our unique brand of urban life.

Back home at 120, I had happier lessons in heritage. Here, I reconnected with a way of life that is particularly Malaysian. Living in a shophouse made me considerably more aware of our climate, and the subtle variations of heat and rain that make up the year. Initially, I thought living without air-conditioning would be hellish, but I soon discovered just how clever the builders of yore had been in devising ways to keep homes cool. Opening the shutters guaranteed through-breezes that made even the hottest days bearable. In the arid weeks that followed the Lunar New Year, clothes left out on the back terrace dried unbelievably quickly, aided by heat reflected off the terracotta tiles. The mid-year haze from Sumatra coincided with the Hungry Ghost Festival and smoke with a more local origin – wafting in from the paper offerings burnt on the streets. People stayed indoors after dark, heeding old superstitions. Then came the rains; our clothes racks moved indoors and we closed our shutters. Ramadan saw the living reclaim the night with brightly coloured stalls in a daily party that culminated at sunset. In George Town, I learned to mark the year in festivals – Muslim, Taoist, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian. The earth's natural cycles interlocked with the spiritual rhythms of lunar and solar calendars. I learnt to look at time in new – or rather, old – ways.

The house at 120 provided simple pleasures I had never imagined. I fell asleep to the sound of rain on the air well's granite steps, and never quite got over the strange thrill of having weather indoors. I woke with the call to prayer coming in from the Acheen Street Mosque, echoed by the deeper-voiced muezzin of the Kapitan Kling Mosque a little further away, and was grateful for the short-lived chill of the early morning air on the terrace.

The subtle wisdom of past builders is something I miss now, living in a modern apartment that bakes in the afternoon sun.

Funnily enough, in moving away from my hometown, I came to better understand the way my ancestors had lived. My mother grew up in shophouses – first in Chow Kit, and later on Jalan Bangsar. Her parents lived in shophouses too, as did their parents before them. They would have had the same easy intimacy with our seasons that I discovered in George Town. I was the first in my family to enjoy an air-conditioned childhood; I am beginning to wonder if I am actually poorer for it.

My time in Penang taught me that we can never take our heritage for granted. Even grand monuments can fall to the wrecking ball. Entire kampungs – and communities – can be swept away in the name of development. For many of us, our daily lives are disconnected from the way our ancestors lived. Things change, of course, and the rapid urbanisation of the twenty-first century means we cannot preserve our cities in aspic. Nor should we. Heritage is not static: it is about understanding the past, asking ourselves what it is we value, and managing the changes we experience. We have made great gains through technology, but in our quest to develop, we should be wary of losing sight of where we came from.

We have much to learn from our heritage – both tangible and intangible. Our ancestors knew how to live with our tropical weather. As climate change becomes a bigger concern, we may be forced to do without modern luxuries we now take for granted; perhaps we should learn from our old ways of building, and work with nature instead of against it.

Our architectural heritage also tells a story of multiculturalism. This heritage is evidence not merely of

tolerance, but of genuine respect, acceptance and exchange. In this respect, we have much to learn from the past too. There is little by way of 'pure' Malay, Chinese, Indian or European architecture in a city like George Town. Our buildings are as diverse and hybrid as we are. Our cities are the work of many communities building together and living together; what they achieved is nothing short of remarkable. The history of our nation – and of its many peoples – is written in our urban fabric. And it is beautiful. It would be a pity if the subtlety, texture and syncretism we inherited from our forebears were erased wholesale for an impersonal, globalised landscape of steel and glass.

The twenty-first century is going to be urban. Already, the majority of the world's population lives in cities, and the trend towards urbanisation is set to continue for the foreseeable future. This will put greater pressure on our cities, and we will be forced to make difficult decisions about how we use increasingly limited space and resources. Developmental pressures and rising real-estate values all threaten our heritage. So too does a lack of appreciation. It is true that not everything old is worth keeping, but our future cities should include space for our past achievements if for no other reason than this: some of our best urban spaces are old ones.

As the pace of development quickens, we must be vigilant about guarding the things we value. Why should we value our heritage? Our built heritage offers us beauty, yes, but also meaning – a chance to understand how we got here. Old buildings are spaces where we can interpret our history and better understand our past. Intangible cultural heritage is also tied up with identity, and often represents a person's livelihood

and way of life as well. So as we seek to address the challenges of this urban century, heritage – both tangible and intangible – should be seen as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

A city is a collaborative process, and as our cities grow, we must all make decisions about what is worth holding on to. Fewer and fewer of us will live in shophouses, certainly, but we should remain open to the lessons our ancestors have to teach us; they knew a thing or two about building houses – and communities too. Our old buildings can be a source of inspiration. Our traditions can be the foundation upon which we build for the future. Our urban heritage can be an opportunity to unite as Malaysians, rooting our collective identity as we defend the places we call ‘home’ – together.