

Adaptive Reuse of Penang Shophouses in George Town, Malaysia: an Overview

Yi Xing Chow

Polytechnic University of Milan

Abstract

This study examines the adaptive reuse of Penang Straits Shophouses in George Town, Malaysia as a critical lens for understanding the intersections of heritage, identity, and postcolonial urban (re)development in Malaysia. It positions the practice of adaptive reuse in a broad overview encompassing the historical and socio-political context of British colonial governance, post-independence multicultural nation-building, as well as the ongoing ethnopolitical (r)evolutions changing Malaysia's heritage discourse. Drawing on existing literature and site observations, the study outlines how colonial policies of ethnic segregation and inherited legislative frameworks have shaped the fragmented perceptions of built heritage and delayed the emergence of a societal-wide consensus on the relationship between national heritage and identities. While the present 2005 National Heritage Act and the 2016 George Town Special Area Plan provide formal conservation structures in the historical center, heritage management remains largely top-down, limiting community participation and public agency. Furthermore, architectural education and professional practice in Malaysia continue to prioritize modernization narratives over cultural continuity, resulting in adaptive reuse projects often motivated only by tourism and gentrification.

The study concludes that meaningful adaptive reuse must transcend mere architectural restoration to engage built heritage as a collective, societal and cultural construct. Integrating postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, such as Bhabha's spatial practices and Fritz and Krasny's critical care into local practices can help reframe adaptive reuse as a contemporary design policy and tool for heritage conservation. Through this approach, George Town's shophouses can evolve beyond the preconceived notion of colonial artifacts into instruments for reconstructing shared memory and fostering an integral, multicultural urban identity in postcolonial Malaysia.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Heritage Conservation, Ethnopolitics

Introduction

This study is made to provide a brief overview on the adaptive reuse of colonial-era Straits Shophouses in Malaysia. It specifically refers to the old Penang Straits Shophouses of George Town, a historical city founded in the 18th century British-Colonial Era which is presently designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The study aims to foreground both existing shortcomings and potentials of exercising adaptive reuse in shophouses as a way for promoting heritage conservation in the storied Malaysian urban fabrics.

Referencing existing literature on this discourse and supplemented with a previous site visit

in George Town, this paper touches upon the Malaysian context of heritage adaptive reuse from a multifaceted perspective between postcolonialism and local identities, referencing sociopolitical, legislative, economic and civic aspects, in relation to the conservation of old shophouses. It is an exercise for developing a greater awareness on these architecture-adjacent topics to help promote better, more comprehensive understanding of the contexts to effectively practice heritage adaptive reuse; By connecting George Town's and Malaysia's architectural design to their underrepresented anthropological background, the references, findings and analysis of this study will encourage further investigations, academic interest and discourse, thus contributing to a wider adoption of heritage adaptive reuse practices in George Town, Malaysia, and in similar postcolonial cities in the region.



Fig. 1. A shophouse in George Town, Penang, modified into a touristic bar (author, 2023)

Straits Shophouses in George Town

The history of Southeast Asia is deeply intertwined with colonialism and its consequences. In the case of George Town, it was first founded by Sir Francis Light of the East Indian Company (EIC) in 1786, representing the colonial ambitions of the British Empire. The colonial outpost was founded on the northeastern tip of Penang Island, which was a largely uninhabited island under the rule of the Kedah Sultanate.

While it was initially established as a naval stronghold for anchoring British influence at the Strait of Malacca, the historical maritime trade route of the region, its strategic location as a stopover point for traders, merchants, and the promise of security under by the British Navy and EIC incentivised the rapid growth of the settlement, sprawling outwards from the garrisons of Fort Cornwallis into the rows of streets and avenues that still exist to this day (Khoo 2007).

Characteristic of the British colonies of the region, the development of George Town was mainly driven by immigrants flocking to the colony in search for opportunities and livelihoods. Consisting mainly of the Chinese diaspora merchant and laborer classes within the South China Sea Sinosphere, together with other migrant communities of Indian, Arabian and Eurasian origins, they brought the culture and capital into the lived-in streets of George Town, culminating in a multicultural population that have been traditionally

inhabiting the city's old shophouses.

A shophouse refers to a typological commercial-cum-residential, tenement style urban building that is historically found in the Southeast Asian region (Tan 2015). They are constructed in rows along a street with at least two floors – shop at the ground floor, housing at the upper floors, built with a narrow-width frontage to limit colonial-era frontage taxes, but with a building depth that can stretch for tens of meters backwards. Shophouses of longer depth may also consist of multiple roofed buildings perforated by small air-well courtyards for ventilation and natural lighting.

Among the several variants of shophouses, the ones in Malaysia and Singapore belong to the typological Straits Shophouses, uniquely defined by their adaptive and eclectic facade styles, and the mandated presence of five-foot-ways – a sheltered, pedestrian arcade footway created by setting back the ground floor building entrance from the street frontage. Presently, thousands of these historical shophouses still exist in George Town, albeit in varying degrees of care and use. Nonetheless, their built legacies and embodied, rich cultural heritage are the reason for their designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008.

Recognizing the Consequences of Colonialism

The literature review made for this essay indicates a changing societal zeitgeist departing from Malaysia's colonial past, albeit colonial influences and consequences remain deeply intertwined with the nation's identity-building and developmental trajectory. This section explores the changing governance, ethnopolitical, and legislative perceptions in ethnopolitics underlining the relevant anthropological context influencing heritage adaptive reuse practices in George Town. Thus, this essay argues the need for all architects, conservators and researchers studying George Town to be cognizant of these backgrounds. Departing from the Western conception of a Eurocentric colonization, the British colonies in Southeast Asia differ greatly in their demographic composition compared to their American counterparts. This is contrast exemplified in the communities of George Town's and their urban architecture; While settlements in the New World were mostly established by European pioneers and settlers, George Town's historical population is mostly made up of Chinese immigrants, mixed with the assimilated native Malays, as well as other minor Indian, Arabic and Eurasian communities. This demographic rift between the colonists and the population is reflected in the city's historical layout, where the British, European elites would live in spacious Bungalows on the northern coastline and hills, while the others would mostly inhabit densely packed streets in their shophouses, separated along ethnic and religious lines. Accompanying this colonial hierarchy divide is the "divide and rule" governance policy, devised by the British administration strategy for segregating their colonial subjects along cultural, religious and ethnic lines to discourage unity and social uprising in their colonies. Complementing this policy, they utilized the *Kapitan System* – elected community leaders as liaisons representing the interests and communication channels between the administration and the population (Keo 2025). This divisive approach to governance would eventually form the societal backbone of post-independence Malaysia; despite being a meritocratic and democratic country, its representative political parties and governing coalition were historically divided along ethno-religious lines. Furthermore, despite having inherited a rich multicultural society, cultural pluralism is rife within the country's societal discourse, which discouraged active inter-cultural discourse while preferring instead passive tolerance.

Towards Postcolonial Paradigm Shifts

Consequent to these colonial implements in British Malaya, post-independence Malaysia inherited a handicapped endeavor in building a collective national identity, and difficulties in advancing the recognition and care for its multicultural built heritage. These limitations stem from a shared cautious attitude on multiculturalism which hindered societal discussions on the question of cultural heritage and built identities. This dilemma is well described in the essay of Pierpaolo De Giosa's article "Heritage-Lah! A Legacy of a Few Wor(l)ds in Peninsular Malaysia" (2020). He elaborated on how the local terminologies surrounding the notions of identity and heritage coexist in parallel in their respective ethnic contexts, with minimal cross-cultural interactions between one another.

This cultural pluralism thus becomes a great barrier for developing a shared, societal consensus on national heritage, due to the confusion and juxtaposition between divided recognitions and understandings of the ethnocultural elements in the country's heritage and identity. In other words, such pluralism and subsequent divergent only exist because of fellow Malaysians' strong sense of ethnic identities overwriting the convergence into the conceptual "Malaysian race", which divergent nature is ironically a defining cultural characteristic that they are known to be proud of, and incentivized to uphold their respective cultural distinctions.

De Giosa also described how the country's legislative framework and development on heritage care is hindered by having inherited archaic colonial heritage laws, which also contributed to the societal inertia against heritage conservation incentives. Fundamentally, while Malaysia inherited its British-based laws and governance from its colonial rulers, it also perpetuated the colonial-era perception that heritage buildings and objects are "treasure troves" and "artifacts" far removed from everyday lives, and must be exhibited and isolated in museums. This mentality has thus historically discouraged any concerted efforts of heritage care from an informal, public and grassroots approach, as in the case of George Town, the public had simultaneously not recognized their old shophouses as heritage buildings, and had not considered doing so.

This perspective continued until the eventual recognition by UNESCO, and the gazetting of a modernized 2005 National Heritage Act, but yet, the specific national legislation for recognizing and governing urban scale heritage conservation of George Town's historical center is still non-existent, with only the local municipality's 2016 George Town Special Area Plan (SAP) as a stopgap for upholding the historical center's urban heritage integrity against unregulated modifications, illegal demolitions and profit-driven redevelopments (Jasme, Othuman Mydin and Md Sani 2014)

However, paradigm shifts in the societal perceptions of a common identity and awareness for heritage care has been observed in the present Malaysian societal zeitgeist. Nurul Azreen Azlan's PhD dissertation titled "Seditious Spaces: Protest in Post-Colonial Malaysia" describes these through the younger generations' recent democratic practices of publicly demonstrating and protesting the incumbent ideals of ethno- religious political institutions (2018). The shifts culminated in the historical first loss of Malaysia's ethnopolitical ruling coalition since its independence, and under a more ideologically driven, progressive new government, societal outlook on a more contemporary, collective approach towards heritage recognition and care is on the rise.

Thus, considering the current socio-political trajectory, this study predicts an increase in relevance and discourse heritage and national identities in the Malaysian public, which outcomes will also be indicated in the increasing awareness, fundings and practice of effective heritage adaptive reuse of shophouses starting in George Town, Penang. Therefore, further architectural studies on the heritage conservation efforts in this case study could be an opportunity for introducing more modern conservationist theories and concepts into the local context, such as the postcolonial spatial practices by Bhabha (2003), critical care by Fritz and Krasny (2019), and decolonial studies (Bharte and Mishra 2023).

Understanding Malaysian Heritage Adaptive Reuse

Despite the promising outlook on the future of adaptive reuse practices in Malaysian heritage shophouses, several underlying criticalities still exist to thwart its effective undertaking. In the book “Malaysian Architecture: Crisis Within”, Mohd Rasdi detailed the critical lack of academic and pedagogical discourses on the national architectural identities in the country’s education of Malaysian architects (2005). This criticality in architectural education would continue to handicap local architects and academics endeavors at studying and practicing



Fig. 2. A row of shophouse in George Town, Penang, with a coffee shop, a residential, and an office on the ground floor (author, 2023)

adaptive reuse with heritage buildings such as the shophouses in George Town. This didactical pivoting from the raising the pragmatic, modernizing Malaysian architect towards one who recognizes the cultural values of heritage conservation in adaptive reuse can prove to be difficult, considering Malaysia’s societal consensus on architectural development is historically aligned with its progressive developmental ideals of modernizing and “catching up to the West” (Ling and Lean 1984; Jomo and Hui 2013).

Furthermore, in searching for cases of adaptive reuse in George Town, this study has noted that the majority of such projects are centered around the touristic economy; the practice of heritage adaptive reuse in the city is mainly for modifying old shophouses into boutique hotels and tourism-centric businesses (Md Sani and Abas 2014; Jasme, Othuman Mydin and Md Sani 2014; Firzan et.al. 2022). These projects demonstrate a worrying trend of gentrification in the historical center, which is already culminating in the historical local communities being priced out of their neighborhoods, to be replaced by only a transient, foreign tourist population which do not serve to conserve local intangible heritage practices (Lee, Barker and Lam 2016). The author’s past in-situ observations and site studies from

2023 also support the findings of these literature references.

Amid the present risk of commodification of local heritage culture in George Town, the silver lining in its present practices of architectural adaptive reuse is that these projects within the World Heritage Site are compliant and appropriate following pre-established conservation guidelines and care by the municipal and relevant agencies (Jasme, Othuman Mydin and Md Sani 2014). This is a healthy indication that the gazetted 2016 SAP and the 2005 National Heritage Act are being observed on an architectural scale. Nonetheless, this study argues that more grassroots awareness on practicing heritage care beyond touristic incentives is needed for the continued conservation of both intangible and built heritage in George Town. Currently, the responsibility for raising such public awareness is led by local organizations such as George Town World Heritage Incorporated, Think City, and the Malaysian branch of the Aga Khan Foundation.

Implications and Conclusion

The adaptive reuse of George Town's Straits Shophouses illustrates the continued tug-of-war between Malaysia's postcolonial identity, multicultural heritage, and modern urban development. Beyond the practices of architectural heritage conservation, adaptive reuse represents an evolving cultural process that redefines how inherited colonial legacies are interpreted and integrated into present urban life, shifting across the times from unawareness, non-recognition, toleration and the present adoption.

Thus, this study calls for the practice of Malaysian heritage conservation to depart from the archaic top-down, compliance-based frameworks to move towards inclusive and participatory approaches. It argues that such policies should not only regulate architectural interventions, but also enable local, communal participation in defining their heritage identities and values. Encouraging civic awareness and grassroots engagement is therefore essential for sustaining both the tangible and intangible dimensions of George Town's cultural landscape, thereby justifying the crucial need to comprehend the underlying anthropological contexts as elaborated in this study.

Meanwhile, educational reform should also be central to the issue of promoting heritage care in architectural practices; The teaching of architecture in Malaysia should expand its scope beyond formalist and developmental paradigms to include critical perspectives on cultural continuity, memory, and postcolonial discourse. This would cultivate new, young architects equipped to interpret heritage as a living condition rather than a fixed aesthetic category.

In conclusion, adaptive reuse in George Town must be understood as a form of cultural agency, as an opportunity to reconcile historical fragmentation and generate new meanings within the inherited urban fabric. When grounded in reflexive, decolonial, and community-oriented frameworks, the Malaysian Strait Shophouse can transcend its colonial origins to become a locus for reconstructing collective identity and shaping a more self-aware Malaysian urban future.

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