

# Implementation issues on heritage shophouses facade in Kota Bharu, Kelantan

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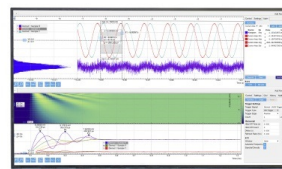
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# Implementation Issues on Heritage Shophouses Facade in Kota Bharu, Kelantan

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**Abstract.** This study examines the contributing factors behind the continuing trend of non-compliance with heritage facade guidelines by the owners/occupants of heritage shophouses in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. The exterior facade of a heritage building, the crucial element in retaining and safeguarding the features of local and traditional cityscape, includes their associated signage and advertising. A case study on rows of heritage shophouses in Jalan Temenggung became part of a design task to better understand problems encountered in implementing the legislative heritage guidelines entailed for the signages. This exercise, which included site investigation, observation and data collection such as photographic evidence of the selected cases of the shophouses, was carried out by the second-year architecture students from University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) in September 2019. Analysis of results compares between the existing row of heritage shophouses and a re-creation of shophouse facades by the students in compliance with the heritage guidelines provided by the local authority, Majlis Perbandaran Kota Bharu (MPKB). Discussion curtails on details of mismatched events between existing legislation and guidance against what was observed and applied by current owners. The outcome of this study shares beneficial information to a range of stakeholders which includes the shophouses owners, the local authority, as well as other the heritage conservation practitioners and scholars interested in Kota Bharu, Kelantan.

## INTRODUCTION

Preservation of the heritage façades in the architecture of the past is part of an important ongoing effort to tell the story of the cultural influence of a place and city. In the case of the multi-racial Malaysian identity, the facades of buildings, particularly the colonial shophouses, are essential pieces to the unique history in each of the municipalities which they were built in. In Malacca and Penang, many of these heritage shophouses still represent the symbolic value of a building structure which shows both the connection and transitional relationship between the interior areas of the shops (what happens during colonial times) and to its exterior environments (the city or township they were in when they were built). In the royal city of Kota Bharu, however, with the changing trends of urbanisation, what remains of the heritage shophouses the city heritage is often neglected by its owners and then pushed into further oblivion with new additions of modern high-rise buildings, billboard and other competitive overwhelming signages around them. Although there is existing guidance to protect and preserve these heritage facades by the local authorities of Kota Bharu, the application and enforcement of these remain shared with only with the new owners of the buildings who can afford to do so.

Understanding that ownership for a heritage building comes with its large share of legal responsibility more than the profitable, preventing unlawful works is, therefore, remains a vital part of heritage protection. As it is a shared responsibility, both owners and local authorities must know the bounds of their involvement in regards to conservation, preservation and the safeguarding of the property. However, there are several items that are less clear to understand: what regulations or guidelines that currently exist, how does it assist the new owners, and whether the owners and occupants of the existing buildings are informed, know and understand the rules and regulations of heritage preservations, and if not, should it not be enforced?

To answer these queries, this paper investigates the cause and effect for these heritage facade designs in the age of its new generation owners and new urban development laws. Following the holistic approach of this research design, the objective of this paper is to identify the issues that hinder the implementation of the existing signage guidelines provided by the local authority. The scope of this exercise is adjusted to suit an introduction project for the participating second-year students. The focus of this paper remains on the implementation issues of heritage guidelines.

## **Selection of Case Study Areas**

The row of shophouses was identified along Jalan Temenggung as one of the main affected areas of significant uncontrollable sizing and placement of signage, which have undermined the heritage shophouses façades creating insufficient characters on its façades. The hypothesis of this exercise is expected to also uncover any problems and issues encountered by the heritage shophouses owners for implementation. This study aims to contribute to this growing area of heritage research with a design exercise by experimenting on the applicability of existing signage guidelines provided by Majlis Perbandaran Kota Bharu (MPKB) for the facades of shophouses along Jalan Temenggung, Kota Bharu.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Kelantan Heritage Shophouse**

In the nineteenth hundreds, the old Kota Bharu town was among the early townships that emerged after the intervention between the British - Siam (Anglo-Siamese Agreement) which resulted in the transfer of Kelantan to British over the coup led by Robert Duff in 1902. The influx of Chinese miners into many of the early settlements in Malaya influenced the boost of a multi-racial population and cultural shift which started a new building typology in the town centres identified as the 'shophouse' [1]. This combination of home and shop can be found nearly in many parts of the colonial towns of Southeast Asian coast, according to the literature. Yet studies show that while most of the shophouses in colonial Malaysia had started around this the same era, the shophouses in Kota Bharu was estimated to only begin during the 1930s (the start of Art Deco style) which can be identified by the simpler detail of their facade designs.

In terms of its form and identity, scholars [2-4] have argued the way Kota Bharu city centre has experienced a unique transformation of its image since its colonial days. Due to its high percentage of Malay, Muslim population still predominantly living in traditional villages, both studies show that in Kelantan, the slow but gradual changes in the dynamics of its public realm and its overall urban form remains rooted in the issues about maintaining its architectural style and landscape as an image of an 'Islamic City' in Southeast Asia.

The topic of local identity and the ideal image of 'Islamic' aesthetics is an ongoing issue debated among politicians, scholars and built environment specialists. Harun et al. [2] credits this due to its shift towards the branding of Islamic City status awarded in 2005. Especially since the way some cultural heritage practices and artefacts of Kelantan such as the Mak Yung dance choreography and the shadow puppets (Wayang Kulit) clashes with some the Islamic values, this notion for heritage recognition gets further complicated in the processes needed in classifications of buildings and how people use them. The consensus is that much of the issues on the local image are socially significant to the local community, therefore it is the subject for the local elected authorities to enforce or ignore.

### **The realisation of Heritage Importance**

The challenges for the preservation of traditional buildings and heritage facades of shophouses in Malaysia differ from city to city, state to state as per highlighted by Harun et al. [2]. While Malaysian national conservation laws of the country outline the general principles and strategies for prolonging the life of a specific building typology, scholars

have reported how the urgency for the implementation and level of strict enforcement of these laws are highly dependent on each regional authorities of the local governments and stakeholders.

An analysis from the yearly reports from Town Planning Department of Kota Baru [5] suggested how priorities of the municipal council of Kota Bharu focuses work mainly towards the concept of religious spaces and identified buildings built especially for the Muslim community. Several of the indigenous Kelantan Malay vernacular architecture examples such as the Palace of the Great Hall and the Kampung Laut Mosque are carefully preserved, but not all of the building typologies in the city are given the same attention, value or effort. Further, both traditional buildings have attracted attention as the most important timber structures for the study of traditional Malay vernacular architecture. However, for many of the shophouse heritage buildings, this lack of recognition threatens its continued existence.

There have been many changes in Kelantan to establish an Islamic way of life and introduce Islamic laws. Although some issues were quite controversial as reported by Mohd Nasir [4], for the purpose of promoting an Islamic law, much of the laws have been implemented, nonetheless. However, it has been reported that the local government only started to recognise the value and importance of building conservation due to the efforts of preserving the heritage areas done by the other states (and through possibilities of a specific heritage property evaluation process [6]

For any work designed for conservation purposes, to have an accurate outcome depends on the correct selection of techniques. It is not merely 'putting the principles into practice' as some approaches are inapplicable in conserving the building type [7]. The result of late preservation efforts turned awry as the phenomenon of uncontrolled design on the signages placed on the shophouses façades. This created a series of dissonance in the forms of these shophouses which disrupts the urban setting and its ambience. Lack of maintenance and safeguarding of facade by the shop house owners is identified as one of the causes of the inadequate and inappropriate aesthetic images of the heritage shophouse. In their current state, the signages placed on the facades of these shophouses altered the functional purpose of a shopfront and has also distracted the ambience of the heritage site of old town Kota Bharu.

## **The literature on Shophouses in Kota Bharu**

The old city of Kota Bharu has origins suggested by historians to have started in the early nineteenth century. However, the state of its maintenance and restoration efforts for the remaining heritage buildings is relatively still in its early days. It can be stated that the publications on Kota Bharu's shophouses in Kelantan previous research in this topic mostly focused on other townships of colonial Malaya such as Penang and Malacca. One of the earliest publications that mentioned Kelantan's shophouses was written by Wan Ismail and Shamsuddin [8] entitled 'The Old Shophouses As Part Of Malaysian Urban Heritage: The Current Dilemma'. The study highlighted the importance of the architectural evolution in Kelantan not exempted and the preservation of any unique historical value should be done. Meanwhile, Raja Shaminan [9] mentioned early shophouses typologies which emerged predominantly during the Dutch era mainly in areas of coastal colonial towns such as Melaka, with a brief mention of the Kelantan shophouses. The paper also explained how the continuity of design between the old and new units had been largely ignored, making the new buildings to stand alone and alienated in their environment.

Later, Mohd Nasir [4] mentioned urban development of Kota Bharu town for new approaches to landscape planning. Faudzi [10] studied architectural interventions and effects on shophouses facades in Kota Bharu, Kelantan in her master thesis. Then, Mohamad [11] examined the improved method for heritage property valuation, mainly assessing on Kota Bharu's shophouses in her Doctoral thesis. Mohamad [6] again mentioned in her paper concerning economics sustainability and heritage property valuation for Kota Bharu's shophouses.

This study proceeds on the most recent research by Faudzi [12], which had previously focused on the factors influencing the architectural interventions on shophouses facades in Kota Bharu. In Malaysia, what is evident in much of the publication trends on heritage shophouses is that most of the research focuses on the typologies, its ongoing dilemma between the past and current, angle of its sustainability, its heritage property valuation and its facade intervention. There is still minimal mention of how the facades implementation according to legislative guidelines being encountered by the shophouses owners. This paper intends to fulfil some of the gaps in the area mentioned earlier.

## **The Need for Implementation of Heritage Guidelines**

While the patterns of urban design in cities and town centres often have an impact on its heritage properties, a big part of *how* the changes that occur in the level and type of architectural intervention, remains significantly on the needs

and demands of the society it serves. As a result, in the case of Kota Bharu old township, the pattern of its urban landscape, public domains and what remains of its heritage property has been transformed to adapt to its political, social, and economic developments. The identity of Kota Bharu changes with the different ruling laws of its local political parties, as well its need to catch up to the digital information age of internet and social media frenzy

Critical heritage studies, however, have argued how preservation is really about embracing the present, not the past. While the urban changes have affected the ambience of surrounding many of heritage sites through building façade and its original image, the way these features inadvertently alter the existing planning of its streets and the activities in it allows a certain level of control. Harrison [13] insisted that heritage is something that gets “constantly chosen, recreated and renegotiated in the present ” (p. 165). Hicran [14] further supported this theory by further explaining how the existing physical setting cannot fulfil the urban requirements of changing society where change becomes a necessity and seems to conflict with the preservation as the demand by the community grows.

What is commonly understood in the context of conservation of heritage buildings is that the facade of the building-for all typology; a monument, historic building, old shophouse or any other form: play a central role in attracting the social and commercial value of the space. Without proper care and continued maintenance, much of its social and commercial value will be lost. Karya [15] noted in his façade studies how other townships such as Kangar, Perlis that had ignored this interest in heritage conservation have met with unfortunate fate due to changes in the town’s modern development and adoption of new lifestyles. For Kota Bharu to move forward in their urban development in the future, this paper intends to identify the issues and areas of concern, before proceeding to renew the spotlight on their heritage areas.

One of the known facts is that the construction of new buildings within a well-established historic area (an area or districts which already contains a significant number of historic buildings) often poses many challenging design problems. The demands of new construction and building programs often make it difficult for a new building to fit in with the current urban fabric [16]. The quality of views and vistas of existing heritage buildings have been taken for granted by their poor safeguarding and maintenance.

It has been suggested that the lack of efforts by the government in the promotion and education of the public on the value of the heritage buildings to the new generations is one of the factors contributing to the poor awareness of the society [17]. The effectiveness in enforcing current local legislation in implementing the signage guideline regarding the old shophouses is questionable.

## **METHODS OF RESEARCH**

This study was carried out as part of the second-year Design Studio 3 where students were tasked to work in pairs and given twenty heritage shophouses units to choose from within the allocation in the demarcated heritage area of the old town of Kota Bharu. Briefings for the range of qualitative methods and approaches employed for the data collection and analysis of this study were given during the first week of classroom lectures. This included information on how to study the signage guidelines provided by the local authority and what to be observed, noted during the site visit of the selected case study. Site visits, visual observations, photographic evidence, and where possible, interviews with current shophouse owners and selected employed signage-makers are among methods allowed the students to explore the kind data collection methods best for design research. A duration of two weeks was given for the students to complete the task; data collection and design learning outcomes.

Results from the collected fieldwork observation are then analysed to measure against the effectiveness of existing design guidelines. All analysis of the comparison between the case study and student’s work was carried out by the leading researchers for this project. Their visual observations notes between the existing signage on shophouse facade and signage guideline provided by the local authority. Students then presented the applications of their observation with drawings and physical models for a newly devised proposal of a revitalised facade design of the selected shophouse.

### **Case Study: Jalan Temenggung**

The case study location is off Jalan Temenggung, as shown in Fig. 1 the red dots indicate two rows of shophouses where the chosen twenty shophouses are placed. This location is taken from Kota Bharu Municipal Council (MPKB).



FIGURE 1. Map showing the row of the case study shophouses at Jalan Temenggung as indicated [5].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the literature provided by the local authority of Kota Bharu (MPKB), the development of the heritage guidelines have been gazetted since February 2011. Yet observation and findings from this study have suggested how the implementation of heritage conservation guidelines has not been put into much practice. This section describes three key areas of identified issues in their role for heritage guideline fulfilment and continuous compliance (Figs. 2-4).



FIGURE 2. Image indicating the existing heritage building facade before revitalising on Row 1.



FIGURE 3. Image showing the student's proposal for heritage building signages after revitalized.

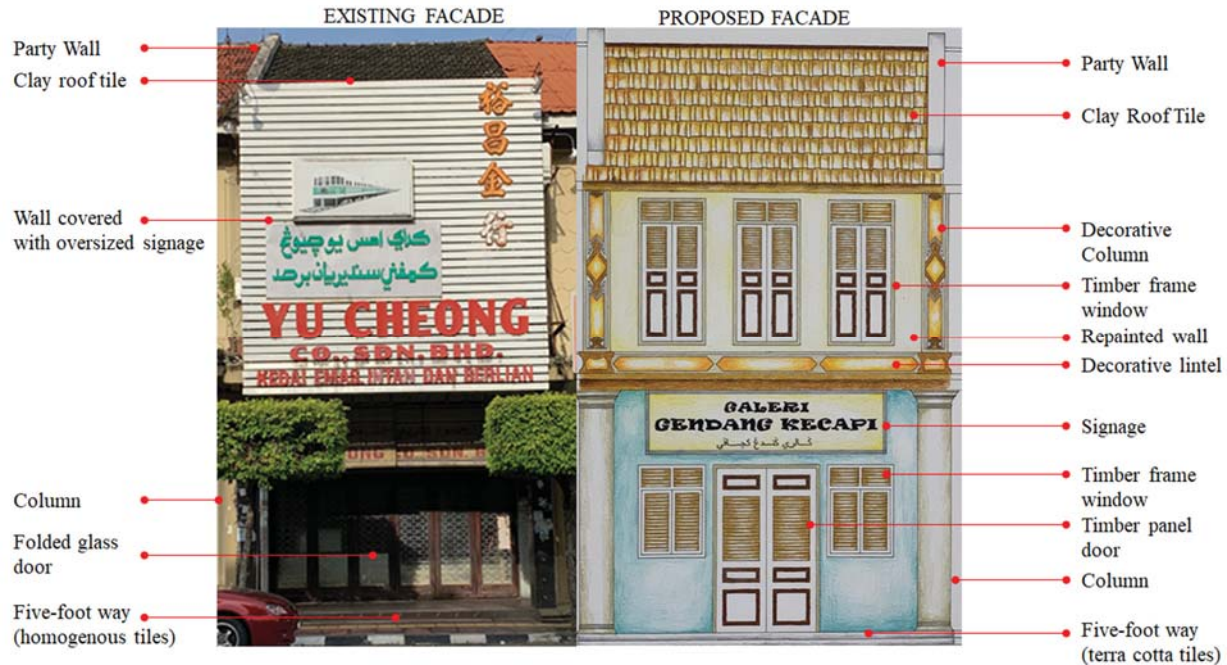


FIGURE 4. Image shows one of the selected shophouse unit existing (left) and proposed (right) facade after revitalisation

### Lack of Heritage Awareness

The entirety of Jalan Temenggung is located in Kota Bharu's heritage zone, with most of its row of buildings imbued with a long history and their shop front facades considered rich in architectural aesthetics value. Other than the academics of building heritage practitioners or historians, it would seem unlikely that many among the owners of the buildings are truly aware of the ways to manage a listed heritage building.

The designation of special interest in heritage, whether given to a building, site or area's gives it protection under law or policy, that even a minimal intervention to the facades can alter the value and heritage status of the building. However, when queried, it was found that many of the shophouses owners were either not given enough information by the local authority about what guidelines to follow, or were fully unaware there were rules and regulations for its maintenance needs. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies by Raja-Shahminan [9] confirms this ongoing unawareness of the general public about what it means to preserve heritage-status buildings.

### Communication Issues

At present, any existing heritage guidelines have not been well promoted or distributed to the public knowledge. Findings have illustrated that among the factors which contributed to the non-compliance of heritage guidelines was also the lack of *good* and *effective* communication between both parties involved; namely the current shophouse owners and the local Town Planning authorities. Problems that have been highlighted in this study included how the local Town Planning authorities fall short in advocating any surveys, campaigns or meetings to assess the status of these heritage shophouses and their owners.

Although a heritage status is not automatic and is of volunteer basis, it is still under the responsibility of the local council and authorities to supply information, maintain the upkeep and safeguard the value of the heritage treasures and artefacts. Instead, what happens largely in Kota Bharu is that only a handful of shophouse owners with the initiative to ask for assistance are given the information needed. What should be noted also as the vast majority of the historic shophouse buildings are known to be of private ownership and are maintained at a personal cost despite how shophouses owners are located in heritage zone, this information service and assistance appears to be taken for granted and functioned per paid basis.

An example of good communication to have is for the local Town Planning authorities to keep a mandatory file of all the historical resources and details for each of the buildings and to invite experts in the field to explain its

characteristics and representation to all new owners, and the public if possible. This combination of communication provides all sides shared responsibility for the conceptual premise to be a potential gateway for experts, non-governmental bodies (NGO) and specialists of heritage management to share their knowledge with respective building owners.

### **Local Authority Enforcement and Vague Legislation**

Results also strongly suggest that any non-compliance of existing guidelines has not been enforced by the local authority as there has been no record to show any fine imposed to owners who do not comply with the instructions on the guidelines. The owners may perceive that the works do not affect the character of the building or that their alteration can be justifiable on the basis of practicality, cost or grounds. However, if the local authority disputes this but agrees that there is some scope for doubt then they can apply for a type of legal injunction. Breach of an injunction would then be unarguable and can be made a criminal offence as a way to safeguard these historical treasures.

Observation and report findings also revealed how there was also no indication for efforts of the local authorities in offering an exemption or discounts on the tax rates that could highly promote the application of the heritage compliance rules. What is not so surprising to discover during this study is how the appeal by activists and conservationists in pushing the enforcement of these guidelines with the local Town Planning authority would be entertained when it can serve a financial gain on their end. Although this fiscal motivation can be beneficial, it is doubtful whether the profit collected from services and enforcement of guidelines will be channelled towards further heritage conservation awareness.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The overarching objective of this study is to identify the effectiveness of existing signage guidelines used for heritage shophouses in Kota Bharu, Kelantan and to uncover issues that hinder the implementation of the existing signage guidelines provided by the local authority. The results of this study succeeded to indicate how minimal efforts have been put into the perseverance of its old town. To conclude this study, we suggest several ways towards implementing more appropriate signages/heritage guidelines on its local heritage shophouse facades.

These include:

- Devising strategies to educate and inform the public about the value of preserving the vernacular identity in the face of powerful external drivers such as modern development and ignorance of the past.
- Effective communication resulting in poor implementation of heritage guidelines must be improved to prevent idleness from local authorities and shophouse owners in persevering the Malaysian East Coast heritage
- The design guidelines on heritage buildings, as well as the policy of urban development, should be reviewed and regularly updated to suit the progressive changes needed by the local community.

All in all, the widespread processes of globalisation in urban development upon the making of the city of Kota Bharu needs a balanced approach to ensure Kelantan retains the pieces of its historical heritage.

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