

Demolishing Pudu Jail: Erasing our history

By Badan Warisan Malaysia

June 22, 2010

BADAN Warisan Malaysia has for the past several years been advocating against the demolition of **Pudu Jail**. We have been led to understand that a small concession has been made to preserve a small section of the wall flanking the main gate, although we do not have any details about this particular plan. This token concession makes a mockery of heritage preservation.

We wonder if a few years down the road, this may also be demolished to make way for further development. Or will it, like the remnants of the old railway arches on Lebuhraya Pasar Besar, be left standing, ignored, with no explanation of its origins or why it is even there, and to suffer the same travesty of being garishly painted, as it passes out of the local community's memories?

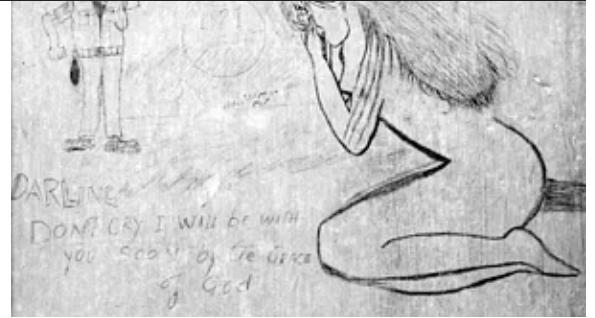
The excuse that heritage enclaves or properties have to provide the same economic viability viz-a-viz new development in adjacent areas is surely passé. Everywhere else in the world, communities are striving to retain their heritage structures as physical, tangible evidence of their history and identity.

Would this decision to demolish have been made were the building to have been the **Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad**? Both these buildings were built at the same time, and the design credited to the same engineer, **C E Spooner**. And yet one is retained, despite having had extensive changes made to its interior, while the other has largely retained its original form. If the decision to retain or demolish one or the other was based on which has the higher levels of authenticity, Pudu Jail would come out on top. Unfortunately, Pudu Jail does not have the wow factor. It does not have the wholesome appeal, being a building with a brutal and insalubrious story. But is this not a legitimate part of Kuala Lumpur's story?

building, and that it is not something which, as a nation, we are proud of.

It would be useful to know what criteria a building or site needs to possess before our government will consider it a heritage building. In the case of Pudu Jail, is it not heritage just because it is a jail, with all its negative connotations?

Surely jails are a part of the tangible evidence of our penal history which is part of our justice system. I think that we should also not forget that in its over 100-year history, it was not only a prison where convicts were incarcerated. It was also where, during the Japanese occupation, service officers from many different nations who had fought to defend our shores were also imprisoned. Is this a part of our nation's history which we are also not proud of?



From the walls of Pudu Jail (pic courtesy of K Azril Ismail)

Traffic congestion

Sadly, the custodians of our nation's heritage have not seen fit to respond to the many different voices which have spoken up against Pudu Jail's demolition. The only official comments have been ones justifying the need for road expansion to alleviate traffic congestion.

But traffic congestion is not something which those of us who live and work in Kuala Lumpur are unfamiliar with. Would these same authorities be so quick to agree to demolish the old Railway Station so that we can widen Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin and help ease traffic? Or the [Central Market](#) building? It would be very surprising if the city's traffic woes just disappeared with the widening of Jalan Pudu or Jalan Hang Jebat.

Badan Warisan Malaysia has highlighted Pudu Jail's plight in various correspondences with the authorities and via letters to the press for the past decade. We have also formally advocated against its proposed demolition, along with many, many other properties in Kuala Lumpur via our commentary and recommendations for the [KL Structure Plan](#) and more recently, the [Draft KL Local Plan](#).

While it may be too late to save Pudu Jail, Badan Warisan hopes that the awareness raised by this will strengthen the public's resolve to be conscious of how fragile our heritage is and to speak up for its protection, conservation and preservation.

Badan Warisan Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur

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Comments

Hwa Shi-Hsia says

June 22, 2010 at 3:00 pm

I read something interesting on the BBC yesterday. While the testimony of ex-detainees shows that flagrant human rights abuses take place under the ISA, there have been no allegations of abuse in prisons found by the UN. This would seem to show that at least our prison system is relatively well-run compared to neighbouring countries, and indeed to many developing countries. While the existence and need for prisons is an overall negative thing, this is at least a small thing to be proud of that Pudu Jail symbolises.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/asia_pacific/10353830.stm

Lainie Yeoh says

June 22, 2010 at 3:02 pm

Trading our history for some dollars. Everyone involved in approving the demolition is disgusting.

kamal says

June 22, 2010 at 3:31 pm

We have been denied so many facets of our history that we now do not know who we are or where we are heading. It is sad because we do have a rich heritage. But it is slowly being erased, made a mockery and denied by 'us'. After all didn't 'we' vote these bunch of jokers into office? But then again, would a different set of people have made a different choice? Perhaps we have to take

Nick Chhan says

June 22, 2010 at 5:04 pm

Pudu Jail should be maintained as a symbol of solidarity amongst Malaysians who are proud of the old Malaya and its allies. Officials say it's not something that we should be proud of. On the contrary, the mistakes of the past should remind us to move forward in the right direction, for a better future.

anne says

June 22, 2010 at 6:11 pm

Disagree with the demolishing of Pudu Jail!!!! It had a world record – the longest mural painting on a wall in the world! I'm gonna miss it till I die!!

phang says

June 22, 2010 at 6:50 pm

From the Oriental Daily article, the various reasons given by the government includes:

The building needs to be at least 150 years old and it has no cultural value.

But here's the deal, a couple years back in Malacca, a government-ok-ed project (shopping mall with park) was under development and during the construction of the building's foundation, they found remnants of the Portuguese red wall.

That wall existed far longer than 150 years and the cultural value is a no-brainer.

So what did they do in the name of conserving history?

Ida Bakar says

June 22, 2010 at 7:18 pm

This is very sad. Is there to be nothing left of this national heritage? If this building complex of our 'brutal and insalubrious' recent past no longer served its purpose, surely the only form of redress is to turn it into an urban park where KL-ites can have some respite and where those who met their end there can be remembered.

farha says

June 22, 2010 at 7:28 pm

I saw a lot of potential in Pudu Jail. They could have made it into something like what Britain did to the Tower of London...refurbish it, charge entrance fees, invite a curator and a historian to work on it..hey, even have a dramatisation of hanging convicts. Sadly, Pudu Jail is no more.

And not too long ago, there were laments that the younger generation is apparently 'buta sejarah' (blind to history). It's not surprising, since our very own government doesn't see buildings like the Bok House and Pudu Jail as history-rich heritage worthy of preservation. I seriously hope that Badan Warisan Malaysia will preserve, in the light of overwhelming commercial dictates, to keep on highlighting the importance of heritage so that the younger generation will learn that there's more to old buildings than just chipped bricks and peeling paint.

Dheep says

June 23, 2010 at 2:51 am

I support this demolition.

The traffic there is super bad, the walls are demolished to free up the blockage during rush hour. It is a valid reason. Isn't the traffic something that has been a bane for KL-ites for a long time? They complain about that, but when a solution like this is proposed, they oppose it. How hypocritical.

The jail has no purpose. The government could have renovated to make it a tourist attraction but nothing was done; in the end it just lay there as a sore sight. So might as well just demolish it.

I am all for preserving history, but I don't blindly get angry ... rational thought must prevail; not all historical places deserve the same treatment. Some need to go as time passes especially if such places impinge on safety, comfort and the daily life of taxpaying citizens.

I thank you.

kiss says

June 24, 2010 at 12:26 pm

I don't blindly get angry either, likewise I'm not blind to the potential behind the prison, and definitely not blind to the fact that the road expansion project is only an excuse to pacify the people – greed for money is the real reason for this absurd thought-less decision.

No one says no to progress, but town planning should give a little more thought to the preservation of landmarks, iconic-record-holding structures, and historical architecture.

In Fremantle excellent town planning saw the original Fremantle Prison restored and preserved while progress carried on around it – Look it up! This goes to show, proper thought and concern minus greed could give us the best of both worlds.

No anger, just disappointment at the lack of leadership.

Jennifer says

June 24, 2010 at 4:17 pm

Hi kiss,

I agreed with you. While studying in Perth, I have visited Fremantle Prison twice with different groups on friends. All of us truly enjoyed learning the history behind the prison and stories of some famous prisoners. Although Fremantle is not a city and therefore

sk says

June 23, 2010 at 3:00 am

GONE. what's next?! Everything's slowly and systematically being wiped out. We must strive to save whatever is left before nothing is left but pictures. These days I take my camera everywhere I go for fear that it would be the last time I see a building/mounument/hill, patch of green. Travelled to Ipoh lately? Noticed how much of the hillside is disappearing? By the time my kids come along, those monoliths that shield Ipoh will be but a bump in the landscape.

garuur156 says

June 23, 2010 at 8:48 am

Another historical landmark is demolished under the name of development. Can a historically uprooted Kuala Lumpur advance better in the future?

kamal says

June 23, 2010 at 4:37 pm

Dheep:

The answer to KL's traffic woes in my opinion is a better public transport system and reducing the number of cars accessing KL. We should have been thinking of this at least twenty years ago. Building more roads, in my opinion, is like putting on a band aid-this is a temporary measure. More over, we don't have many exit/entry roads-all the widening will just add more to the pile-up at these bottle necks. So we rush to avoid the jam outside of Pudu but get caught in some other jam just a few kilometres away.

taxis that will go anywhere. But public transportation services alone is meaningless if the public has no way to access them. So for a start, as far as possible buses should go to all housing estates. There are still many areas not serviced by buses.

Secondly, the rail services should provide ample parking lots at reasonable parking rates that are accessible and safe. The rail services should also try to identify more stations in the Klang Valley area. Especially ones that are closer to residential areas. For example, why doesn't the LRT service Bandar Utama, Damansara Perdana, Sri Damansara, Damansara Heights, Sri Hartamas, Putramas, etc.? Big gaps like these should be addressed.

Tearing down heritage sites on the basis of reducing traffic congestion seems a little too hasty. And I would like to say not only are we destroying an old building – one that has stood as a landmark in KL almost from the beginning of KL. Certain buildings like these are kept as markers of KL. Things change but we do want to keep some things to retain familiarity.

But more importantly, when we say we don't think it is worth a heritage site, we are denying the history of the place – of those who were interned there, the period and conditions, but also of those who serve the system. Prisons carry many scars but they were also the work place for many thousands who serve as wardens. We should respect their occupation and the role it plays in our society (and to educate the public on the changing nature of prisons – from one that was brutal with the primary aim to inflict punishment to a more human system that attempts to reform the individual). The penal system is not just laws and [physical] structures but is made up of the people who participate in keeping it operational.

At times like this, we can pay tribute to them for their sacrifice and service. And then, there is the whole lot of allied soldiers as well as non-combatants who were interned there, they should not be forgotten for their sacrifice and service. There is a lot we can learn from Pudu Jail and I fear we have denied ourselves the full lessons of humanity cultivated over a century.

m.k. says

June 23, 2010 at 4:56 pm

Demolition is "necessary" because big bucks involved! Full-stop.

June 24, 2010 at 6:53 pm

Hahahaha... I am scared to go to the "wannabe" mall later.... Scared if the 'hantu' from Pudu Jail is still roaming around.

K. Azril Ismail says

June 27, 2010 at 11:30 am

Damnatio memoriae (Latin for "damnation of memory", in the sense of removed from the remembrance) was a form of dishonor which could be passed by the Roman Senate upon traitors or others who brought discredit to the Roman Empire (well, in this case... we aren't much of an Empire yet... but good at "acting" like one).

The sense of the expression and of the sanction is to cancel every trace of the person from the life of Rome, as if he had never existed, in order to preserve the honour of the Urbs; in a town that stressed the social appearance and respectability (and the pride of being a civis romanus) as a fundamental requirement of the citizen, it was perhaps the severest punishment.

Banished from our existence? We never had any colonial masters before? We only exist post-Merdeka? Useless buildings treated like a burden, which always reminds me of some busy adults who think their current parents are of "no value" or burden.

Hmm, OK, your call then. Sorry, it's their call, to make our history.

Lyndis says

October 5, 2013 at 1:57 pm

They are demolishing one of the coolest places in KL for some damned uh-hem-cough-cough-cough DOLLARS?

First you fix a lil' part of the prison, showcase some real prison stuff, hire couple of guides, and VOILA! More money---