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## Malaysia tears down iconic mural wall at prison



Bulldozer demolishes a section of the wall of Pudu Prison in downtown Kuala Lumpur, Monday, June 21, 2010. A controversial plan to tear down part of a 115-year-old jail for commercial development in the Malaysian capital has drawn fierce criticism from heritage enthusiasts. During World War II Japanese occupation forces used the jail to hold Allied prisoners-of-war, many of whom were tortured and executed there. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian) ( / AP)

BY JULIA ZAPPEI, ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

JUNE 21, 2010 9:44 PM PT



Passer-by walk next to wall of historic Pudu Prison in downtown Kuala Lumpur, on Monday June 21, 2010. The 394-meter-long wall of Pudu Prison fronting will be demolished after having served its purpose for the past 100 years. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian) ( / AP)



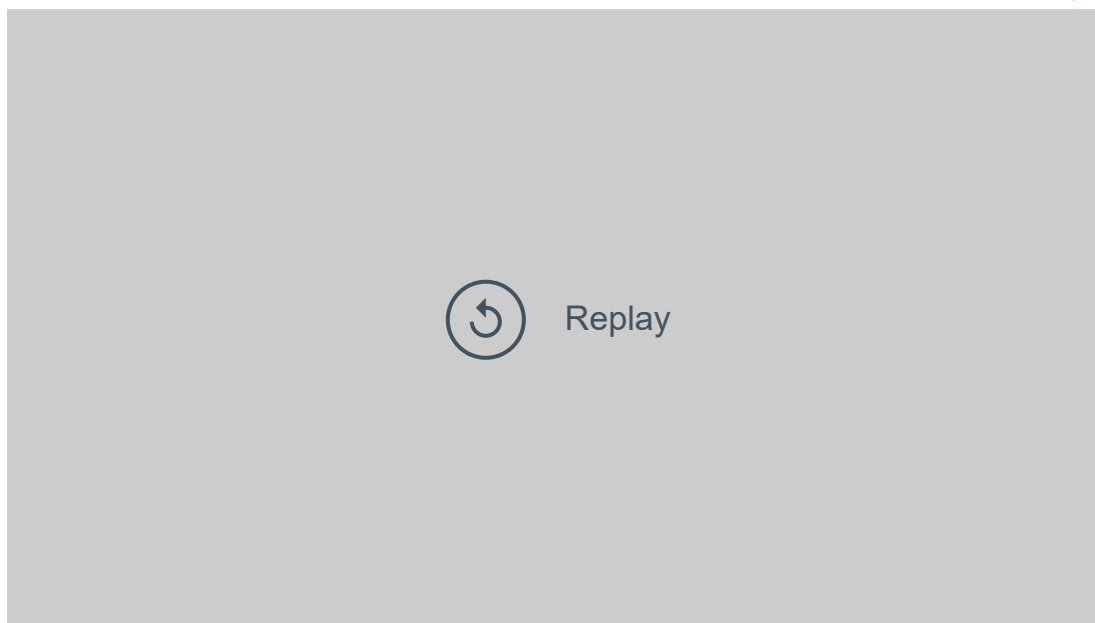
Malaysian stand on a demolished wall of Pudu Prison in downtown Kuala Lumpur, on Monday June 21, 2010. A controversial plan to tear down part of a 115-year-old jail for commercial development in the Malaysian capital has drawn fierce criticism from heritage enthusiasts. During World War II Japanese occupation forces used the jail to hold Allied prisoners-of-war, many of whom were tortured and executed there. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian) ( / AP)



The 394-meter-long wall of Pudu Prison which is being demolished in downtown Kuala Lumpur, on Monday June 21, 2010. A controversial plan to tear down part of a 115-year-old jail for commercial development in the Malaysian capital

has drawn fierce criticism from heritage enthusiasts. During World War II Japanese occupation forces used the jail to hold Allied prisoners-of-war, many of whom were tortured and executed there. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian) ( / AP)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Bulldozers tore down a boundary wall famed for murals mostly painted by anonymous convicts at a 115-year-old Malaysian prison that once held World War II Allied soldiers.

Hundreds of onlookers watched as excavators broke through the eastern wall of Pudu Jail on Monday night, leaving many heritage lovers aghast at the loss of an iconic structure for commercial development.

Authorities last year began tearing down structures inside the sprawling complex on the edge of Kuala Lumpur's most famous shopping area Bukit Bintang. But that was done away from public gaze and did not attract as much attention as the demolition of the mural wall.

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Pudu Jail is notorious for housing Allied prisoners during the Japanese invasion of the Malaya peninsula. After World War II, the prison housed common criminals and some were executed there. Many prisoners with artistic flair were deployed to paint murals depicting scenes of nature on the outside of the wall, creating a wraparound work of art around the jail.

Despite fading because of age and the elements, the murals remained a tourist attraction for many years.

“Sadly, the custodians of our nation’s heritage have not seen fit to respond to the many different voices which have spoken up against the demolition of Pudu Jail,” The Heritage of Malaysia Trust said in a statement on its website.

It said despite having “a brutal and insalubrious story,” the jail was part Malaysia’s penal history.

The government refused to turn the prison into a museum, saying the land is sorely needed to make an underpass to ease congestion and to build apartments, hotels and offices over the next 10 years.

“It is not something we are proud of, even though it is an old jail,” Deputy Finance Minister Awang Adek told Parliament on Monday.

The 83 million-ringgit (\$25 million) underpass is expected to be completed by late 2012, said a city hall official, who declined to be named, citing protocol. Construction of the commercial buildings will begin early next year, Awang said.

The jail - with a capacity for some 2,000 prisoners - was shut down in 1996 because of overcrowding and the inmates were moved to a more modern prison on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. After a brief stint as a museum, Pudu became a temporary holding place for detainees awaiting trial.

In 1986, two Australians were hanged in Pudu after being convicted of drug trafficking, becoming the first Westerners executed under Malaysia's tough anti-drug laws.

Conservationists have frequently accused Malaysian authorities of favoring commerce over heritage. In 2006, activists mourned the demolition of a stately downtown Kuala Lumpur mansion, known as Bok House, built in 1929 with a mix of Chinese, Malay and Western architectural forms.

The Malay Mail newspaper quoted Kuala Lumpur Mayor Ahmad Fuad Ismail as saying the City Hall asked the contractors to leave the main entrance to Pudu jail intact for "its historical significance."

But The Heritage of Malaysia Trust dismissed it as a futile gesture, saying conservation of just a small part of the jail will make a "mockery of heritage."

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