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One heritage structure of great significance has been overlooked

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OF late, our national dailies have given a lot of space to opinions expressed by prominent persons regarding the blatant disregard by developers of the the environment and buildings of heritage value.

On the environmental front, what must have incensed every right-minded citizen of the country is surely the report which resulted from the Prime Minister's chance observation from his helicopter of the vast area of rainforest that had been turned into "desert" in Hulu Klang.

One wonders whether, as destruction on a massive scale would invariably have taken place by the time the Press gets hold of the news, remedial steps by the authorities would be possible at all after the developers had achieved their fait accompli of sorts.

The importance of buildings of heritage value has often been highlighted by such luminaries as Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, Datuk Sri Sanusi Junid and Datuk Lee Lam Thye.

Existing laws and regulations have helped preserve structures such as the Central Market in Kuala Lumpur, the Anti-Corruption Agency's building at Jalan Sulaiman, the former Majestic Hotel at Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin and the Industrial Court at Jalan Belanda.

But it is extremely sad that one particular structure, the heritage value of which would surely exceed all these and other historical buildings put together, is outside the ambit of current laws from destruction and has been totally ignored and left to the mercy of developers.

That structure is the Stadium Merdeka - that very historical place where my uncle, our first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, declared our nation's independence from Great Britain on the morning of Aug 31, 1957.

Excuses for the destruction of the stadium are many and impressive. You can say the stadium forms part of the city's land-scarce golden triangle and developers should not be deprived of exploiting every available inch of it. Development of the area will enhance the beauty and value of the city as a whole.

With other more modern sports stadiums built or in the course of being built away from the hurly-burly and traffic jams of Kuala Lumpur, Stadium Merdeka has indeed outlived its purpose.

In this modern day and age, the stadium seems an anachronism which should give way to mega-developments, with perhaps a bronze tablet embossed with the words: "Here once stood Stadium Merdeka where our nation's independence was proclaimed by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra on 31.8.1957."

It is rather ironic that the various laws for the preservation of historical buildings (legally, those built a hundred years or more ago) in the country have only been used as authority for the protection of buildings built by our colonial masters.

According to a report attributed to Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh, the preservation of historical buildings less than a century old, which are unprotected under existing antiquity regulations, is the subject matter of a proposed new legislation tentatively called the Conservation of Heritage Buildings Act.

Stadium Merdeka may be a pile of bricks by the time the proposed Conservation Act comes into being. If legal authority is indeed required to save the stadium, resort can be had under the following provisions of

the Antiquities Act 1976:

\* Section 2 (1): "... historical site" means a site which has been declared in accordance with the provisions of section 15 to be a historical site...";

\* Section 15(1): The Minister may by order declare... any site to be a historical site and may determine the limits of such... site".

But is a legal reason really necessary to preserve Stadium Merdeka? The Italian Government and its Japanese counterpart sought no legal authority to respectively preserve the Colosseum in Rome or the Atomic Bomb Dome at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.

By the same token, no legal authority need actually be sought to preserve the stadium. Our nation was born there and that should be reason enough.

In fairness to those who reportedly may lose billions of ringgit should the proposed development on the stadium land be abandoned, an alternative site can be given to them in exchange, unless of course a gift to the nation of their rights over the stadium by these kind developers can be envisaged.

Even in this day and age, Stadium Merdeka is not without utility. Soccer matches, sports championships and parades have been, and continue to be, held there. So have public entertainment shows.

Of all the buildings my uncle had helped build during his tenure in office, none was dearer to him than Stadium Merdeka for it was there that the proudest moment of his life took place.

On the occasion of his 80th birthday on Feb 8, 1983, I presented him with a painting of his Proclamation of Independence. I had commissioned it through a local well-known artist.

It was then that my uncle confided to me in writing of his deep affection for the Stadium: "Stadium Merdeka is here for all to see in Kuala Lumpur." He said this in reply to my question as to why he had decided to present my gift to him to the Museum Pelamin in Alor Star, instead of the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur.

I really do not know to whom I should address this appeal to save the stadium from destruction.

The Federal Government's new administrative centre, costing almost RM21 billion, has been named "Putrajaya" in my uncle's honour.

And hardly two weeks ago the Prime Minister announced another signal honour for my late uncle. Universiti Pertanian Malaysia has now been renamed University Putra Malaysia.

For a man whose strained relationship with my uncle during the declining years of the latter's life was public knowledge, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's action to posthumously honour the Tunku borders on more than magnanimity - it is clearly an act of statesmanship of the highest order, one which even his most bitter political foe cannot but admire.

Come Aug 31 this year, when Malaysia celebrates its 40th anniversary of her independence, it is my fervent hope that Stadium Merdeka remains intact as it has always been since the first shouts of Merdeka heralded the birth of our nation, for us to admire and cherish forever.

Kuala Lumpur

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