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Timber of tradition

By Shukor Rahman

THE Penang Heritage Centre hopes to foster an awareness of and love for local history and heritage, including an appreciation for historical buildings, architectural traditions and workmanship. SHUKOR RAHMAN writes.

MODERNISATION is taking its toll on the traditional Malay house, which is fast becoming a rarity in Malaysia.

The traditional kampung, says Penang Heritage Centre (PHC) manager Rozaini Hassan, has been transformed by prosperity, more mobility and modern facilities. With greater wealth as well as the industrialisation and urbanisation of Malaysian society, traditional Malay kampung life is changing.

"Houses of concrete and semi-concrete are now more common in an environment that timber used to dominate," she says. "Many owners of traditional houses prefer more modern homes, often adding modern features to traditional buildings."

Increasingly, the kampung boasts modern-style houses or semi-modern Malay-style houses, leaving only a handful of traditional Malay homes still standing. Rural folk, says Rozaini, may view the traditional wooden house as a firetrap, and associate it with poverty, low living standards and backwardness.

But the traditional Malay house with its unique architecture has always fascinated foreign tourists. Recent decades have seen increased interest worldwide in traditional structures.

"Traditional buildings are very important," says Rozaini. "A young country, in its quest for a national identity, must realise that this develops with an understanding of a shared history and shared cultural traits."

And these are visible in traditional buildings.

"Traditional structures also symbolise a culture's continuity," she adds. "They therefore contribute to a nation's stability."

Rozaini hopes the traditional kampung project, recently initiated by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at Lembah Keriang and Paya Pahlawan in Kubang Pasu, will be emulated by traditional kampung throughout the country.

The fledgling PHC is also to play a role in promoting the State's heritage over the next few years. Penang exco member Syed Amerruddin Syed Ahmad, who is also chairman of the State Housing, Culture, Arts and Heritage Committee, says the State Government plans to expand PHC in terms of allocation and staff.

"This will enable PHC to play a more meaningful and significant role in heritage conservation."

PHC was established in 1995 and placed under the State Economic Planning Unit. Among its objectives is to instil an awareness of and love for local history and heritage, including an appreciation for historical buildings, architectural traditions and workmanship.

PHC, says Rozaini, must also guide and persuade developers, property owners and heritage lovers to restore, conserve and realise the economic potential of heritage buildings.

"We will help develop heritage expertise with courses, professional advice, historical, cultural and architectural research."

To engender a knowledge of the value of heritage, PHC will organise workshops and expert training in building restoration for masons,

contractors, government officers and students.

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