

Bok House's fate a dire warning for other buildings

NST-17/12/2006

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KUALA LUMPUR: More historical buildings will be reduced to rubble if the National Heritage Act is not amended, historians and conservationists warned.

At risk are structures of less than a century old, which are not covered by the laws. The experts were referring to the demolition of the 77-year-old Bok House in Jalan Ampang built by tycoon Chua Cheng Bok.

Former Universiti Malaya History Department head Professor Datuk Khoo Kay Kim said the government should look into the Act again before the nation loses more buildings that are part of Malaysian culture and heritage.

Bok House was a stone's throw away from the Petronas Twin Towers and sat on prime land that fetched more than RM1,000 a square foot.

Khoo said most of such buildings were on valuable land and owners were free to sell their properties at high prices.

"The market is very much money-driven. People fail to see the value of buildings in terms of arts and heritage," he said.

"If nothing is done, most of the old buildings will be replaced with contemporary-style or high-rise buildings," he added.

Conservationist architect Lim Take Bane said heritage buildings are tourist attractions.

"High-rise buildings can be found everywhere. Tourists do not just want to see high-rise buildings. They are more in-

terested in learning about the country's history through its buildings," he said.

Lim said it was a joy to awe tourists with the impressive Petronas Twin Towers and still be able to show them how Malaysians lived half a century ago.

"If these buildings are not protected, we will not have a history to tell."

According to legend, the opulent house was meant to impress the father of a young

woman that Chua wanted to marry.

Chua started in business mending bicycles and carriages, and went on to establish the Cycle & Carriage company, which for decades was the sole distributor of Mercedes Benz vehicles in the region.

During the Japanese occupation, Bok House was occupied by Yokohama Specie Bank. After the war, it became a boarding house for British

Royal Air Force women.

Lim is also disappointed with the Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry for not doing enough to stop the destruction of the mansion.

"The ministry should have bought over the house and turned it into a heritage landmark."

Lim said Bok House could be considered a national heritage due to its grand architecture and history.

Badan Warisan Malaysia

said in a statement that it had high hopes for the protection of historical buildings when the Heritage Act was gazetted in 2005.

"We had nominated Bok House as a national heritage on the basis of its architectural, social and historical values.

"The demolition of Bok House, despite our persistent attempts, sadly demonstrates our failure in getting our appeal recognised and endorsed by the government," it said.