

# A history lesson in Malacca

The Star - 5/12/2006

## Heed the past and listen to the voice of the people

HISTORY has strange ways of teaching its lessons. Sometimes, one learns only after running smack into long lost walls.

That seems to be the case of Malacca's 110m-tall revolving tower project, the latest state venture to draw more visitors to the historic city.

Kumpulan Melaka Sdn Bhd, a wholly owned firm of the state went ahead with piling work for the RM21mil tower in the heart of the old quarter in October, ignoring the pleas of outraged conservationists, both local and foreign.

The critics were not opposed to the tower as a tourist project, nor its design, which happens to be the *kris*, currently in mode as the symbolic political weapon.

Instead, they pleaded for the lofty concrete and steel structure to be erected elsewhere, perhaps on reclaimed land nearby, instead of being so close to the Stadhuys, the quaint Malacca River mouth and the old buildings on and around St Paul's Hill.

They could not understand why Malacca, which prides itself on promoting the state's



COMMENT

By M. Veera Pandiyar

rich history, could not see the project as an affront to the very notion of conservation and preservation.

Perbadanan Muzium Melaka or the Malacca Museums Corporation (Perzim) must also share the blame for failing in its role as custodian of the state's antiquities and relics.

Surely, its officers are familiar with Malacca's elementary history and the rich archaeological wealth that it holds, especially around St Paul's Hill where the mighty A' Famosa (The Famous in Portuguese) fortress built in 1512 once stood.

(The British East India Company's Capt William Farquhar blasted it down in 1807 for fear it might fall into enemy hands. Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore who happened to be in Malacca recuperating from an illness, managed to save the only remaining part of the fortress, the Porta de San-

tiago, from demolition.)

In the mid-1980s, the state planned to restore stretches of the 20m high ramparts, the bastions and gateways of the *Fortaleza de Malaca* with the help of Portugal's Gulbankian Foundation but there was no follow through.

The vestiges of Malacca's

past, however, have a bizarre way of turning up when least expected. Three years ago when work on the Dataran Pahlawan commercial complex began, workers discovered the collapsed *Bahuarte* (bastion of *Santiago*, one of the fortress' five original watchtowers.

The find came at a time when

Malacca was eyeing Unesco's World Heritage listing, prompting Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam to immediately approve an allocation of RM4.5mil for excavation and conservation work.

In reality, however, little was done to locate the remnants of the hidden walls, the four other

missing bastions - *San Pedro*, *San Domingo*, *Madre de Dios*, and *de las Virgenes* - and the three more added by the Dutch era later, one of which is believed to be the *Middelsburgh*, uncovered at the tower construction site two weeks ago.

Incidentally, Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister, who officiated at the ground-breaking ceremony for the tower, has now made an about-turn and recommended to the Cabinet that the site be preserved and the tower project be moved elsewhere.

The setting up of a joint committee between Perzim and the ministry's heritage department to focus on excavation and reconstruction, is yet another step in the right direction.

Malaysians and frequent foreign visitors who regard places like Malacca as unique architectural and historical troves are indeed relieved that work on the tower has since stopped.

But it would certainly not be enough for the decision makers to just shift the revolving tower project away to another convenient spot.

They must also learn to look beyond the surface before proposing projects to lure more tourists. They might find more undiscovered treasures buried below the colourful streets and ancient buildings.