

Defending buildings of independence

Every Malaysian should be concerned about the future of our heritage buildings, especially the ones that witnessed pivotal historical moments in our country's formation.

TWO years ago I had the pleasure of witnessing the launch of the Jalan Merdeka Exhibition at Carcosa and Seri Negara. Together with a team of curators and researchers, we had unearthed many fascinating facts about the history of the two buildings that were directly relevant to Malaya's experience of colonialism and the journey towards independence.

Getting to that point was quite serendipitous.

Back in 2013 I was invited to view a collection of artefacts, complete with documents from the High Court and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage to confirm their validity. Some were remarkable in their international provenance, such as a bell cast in Spain destined for California that ended up in a shipwreck near the Philippines.

The company which held these artefacts intended to leverage on Malaysia's own racial diversity to establish a museum to showcase the rich history of international trade and cultural exchange that spawned heritages that continue to exist

today. In our polarising world, I agreed to support this project that would highlight the fruits of peace, especially contrasted against the destruction of war.

After further research on the artefacts' authenticity and scouting for a suitable venue, in 2017 the company was offered the tenancy of Carcosa Seri Negara (actually two distinct buildings and their grounds), synonymous with a luxury hotel of which many KLites have fond memories. Having been derelict for some years, I advised that Badan Warisan Malaysia should inspect the buildings' condition.

The buildings were indeed in a terrible state, with millions of ringgit estimated for proper restoration and conservation. Best practice would have this conducted by the landlord, but it was instead agreed that no rent would be payable for the time being. Rather, any costs to make any part of the buildings usable had to be borne by the company, of course in compliance with heritage and fire regulations.

For reasons best left to the man-

agement to answer, the proposed museum project did not blossom within the desired timeframe. However, the mansions of Carcosa and Seri Negara provided a treasure trove of discoveries, and it baffled me why their stories remained hidden for so long. I was gobsmacked, for example, to discover that the room where I launched my first book in 2011 was where the Rulers signed the Federation of Malaya Agreement 1957 that enabled Tunku Abdul Rahman's Proclamation of Independence three weeks later.

With the 60th anniversary of Merdeka occurring in 2017, I was therefore keen to organise something that would commemorate the road to independence, using the buildings themselves as centre pieces.

Launched by the Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan, attended by the British High Commissioner and Japanese Ambassador (whose governments played substantial historical roles at the site), and supported by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture with several government

agencies, prominent corporate sponsors and even soldiers, the Jalan Merdeka Exhibition was widely covered and reviewed across the media. The exhibition was visited by the Sultan of Perak, former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Badawi, members of the diplomatic corps and scores of schoolchildren.

Before, during and afterwards, various other events were held at the site, with the approval of the relevant authorities. This included the filming of *Crazy Rich Asians*, a major conference by a Harvard College project, and screenings of old films, traditional games and concerts that evoked the Merdeka era. More recently, an emotionally charged reunion of the staff of Istana Tetamu (as Seri Negara was known when it hosted the Shah of Iran, US President Lyndon Johnson and other visiting heads of state) was held, rekindling more memories.

The recent suggestion that any of these activities were somehow improper is utterly bizarre, and creates an unsavoury impression.

Although I am no longer an advisor to the company, I understand they have effectively been removed from Carcosa and Seri Negara. However, every Malaysian should be concerned about the future of our heritage buildings, far too many of which have already been demolished. Particular attention should be paid to these buildings which witnessed such pivotal historical moments in our country's formation.

Indeed, I was hoping to visit that special room before commemorating Merdeka tomorrow, but the whole site has been sealed off, with its fate unknown.

We have already seen how political motivations have fuelled greater divisions in our society of late. It would be calamitous if our heritage sites are subject to the same pressures with no regard to their value to our national story.

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