Georgetown as a Heritage City: The Voices of the Residents

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Abstract

Efforts to conserve George Town's urban heritage began in the early 1970s. The State Government of Penang has submitted a joint application with Melaka to be listed on the UNESCO World Heritage City List in 2005. UNESCO has deferred a final decision on the listing until recently, it was announced that at the end of August 2007, a third evaluation will be conducted by a UNESCO expert to determine if the application will be successful. The Government has spent much money and effort in trying to preserve and conserve the inner city of Georgetown. However, does this effort concur with the aspiration of the residents? Have the residents been consulted and their preference seek before the decision is made to conserve the city?

Efforts by the Government alone are not sufficient to ensure successful implementation of any planning policies. It needs the co-operation and participation of the business and residential community. As such, it is important to find out what are the preferences of the people that are living in the very area to be conserved. The knowledge of this preference will enable the policy makers to determine the direction to be headed and the best course of action to achieve that.

To the best of our knowledge, no such survey has been conducted. In light of this and as part of a research on conservation in Georgetown under the research grant from NAPREC, a survey was conducted to discover the preference and perspective of the residents in Georgetown pertaining to conservation of Georgetown as a heritage city. A sample size of 400 residents living in the inner city was interviewed and a response rate of 67% was achieved. This paper will discuss the findings from the survey and proposes the directions to be considered for the future of Georgetown.

Keywords: Heritage, Perspective, Preference, Residents, George Town

Introduction

George Town is the capital city of Penang dating back to 1786. Early George Town (the inner city of George Town) consists of streets in grid system, bounded by Light Street, Beach Street, Pitt Street and Chulia Street. The size of the town naturally expanded since then. To date, there are eight administration districts, which are George Town 1 to George Town 8, where George Town 1 is the inner city of George Town. George Town 1 is also the core area of the proposed conservation zone by Penang Government to the UNESCO World Heritage List for its unique heritage character and the well-known historical pre-war buildings which were built before World War II.

One of the significant heritage characters of George Town is reflected in the predominant pre-war buildings, especially the two storey shophouses that are found in the inner city of George Town. Records show that there are about 10,000 pre-war buildings in George Town. The history of these heritage buildings dates back to between late eighteen century and early nineteenth century. Of the 10,000 pre-war buildings in George Town during 1990 to 1993, almost 10% were from 1850s, around 30% from 1850 to 1900 and the 60% were from 1900 to 1930 (Khoo, 1994). Architectural styles of the different pre-war buildings built in different years are shown in Figure 1 below.

	Early Shophouse Style	**1800 -1850s**	1 – 2 Storey Terrace Shophouse
	Early Transitional Style	**1840 -1900s**	2 – 3 Storey Terrace Shophouse
	Straits Eclectic Style	**1890- 1940s**	2 – 3 Storey Terrace Shophouse/ House
	Art- Deco Style	**1930 -1950s**	Terrace Shophouse/ House/ Commercial
	Modern Style	**Post War (1950-1970)**	Terrace Shophouse/ House/ Commercial

Figure 1: Pre-war buildings by architectural styles and year built
Source: Adapted and modified from Building Style from AR&T Heritage Consultancy Sdn. Bhd.& Kota Kita, Issue 1, 2004, pp.7.
Photo taken by Tan Sook Fern, Tan Chee Juan & Nai Chun Wei

The abolishment of Rent Control Act in 2000, the designation of conservation zones and the rapid developing economic activities have changed the townscape and living sphere of inner city George Town. Due to rapid development in the suburban areas of Penang, many residents of George Town have moved out and this has turned the once vibrant city into a declining state with many abandoned and dilapidated buildings. The previous zoning of conservation areas has also contributed to the many dilapidated buildings as the owners are not interested to maintain them due to the lack of tenants after the abolishment of the Rent Control Act. Recently, there is a new and resized designated conservation zone proposed to be inscribed into the World Heritage List. The proposal and implementation of such conservation policies are always decided by the local authority. What about the preference of the residents? Would the residents prefer modern urbanscape or heritage city? To the best of our knowledge, no such

survey has been done to find out the preferences of the residents in the inner city of George Town and yet the planning process has proceeded. The findings presented in this paper are from a survey conducted as the final part of the research on conservation as a strategy for urban revitalisation on a grant by NAPREC.

Survey Method

In order to understand and to compare the residents' preference and awareness on urban heritage, residents from three administrative districts namely, George Town 1, George Town 2 and George Town 3 were selected. According to MPPP Design Guidelines for Inner City of George Town 1987, George Town 1, and a part of George Town 3 were designated as conservation area[1] while George Town 2 was located outside the conservation area. The objectives of the survey are to obtain the understanding/awareness of George Town's residents regarding the urban conservation that has been carried out in inner city of George Town.

The survey is conducted using structured interview method. This method is adopted to mitigate the problem of non-response due to illiteracy in English as most of the residents in the survey area are either elderly or educated in Chinese medium school. In addition to the structured questions, photographs are used extensively to ensure that the research perspective of heritage is conveyed accurately to the respondents. Simple random sampling is used to obtain our samples. The samples are derived from the sampling frame compiled from the Assessment List 2005 that we obtained from the local authority. It contains the complete addresses of all the properties in the study area. The target respondents were the heads of households or their representatives who are staying in George Town (residents) at the time of survey. All respondents must be above 18 years old and with income. In order to cover most of the residents in study area, the research team decided to select residents from four types of buildings, namely house, shop, shophouses and apartment/ flat. Office and warehouse are excluded from the survey. At the confidence level of 95%, a sample size of 400 was determined for this survey.

A pilot test was conducted to find out whether the questionnaire is adequate. Ten properties are selected randomly from the sample's list. The pilot test found that most of the respondents are able to understand and answer the questions, which is the survey main concern. Finally, the test shows that it would be feasible to obtain the information on site. To ensure a higher response rate, two follow-up exercises was carried out. For the respondents who are initially reluctant to cooperate, the interviewers would try to persuade the respondent to complete the questionnaires. Sometimes, an alternative interviewer maybe sent to try to gain the respondent's cooperation. Night sessions were also arranged to reach the respondents who work elsewhere during the day.

Preferences and Awareness Of Urban Heritage In George Town

The response rate obtained was 67.3 % (269 from 400). This response rate is considered satisfactory because the focus of the survey is only to gain insight into the residents' preferences on George Town and is not to generalise the findings for a larger population. The following six reasons are the cause for unsuccessful interviews with the selected samples.

i.   Refusal (6.0%)
ii.   Residents not at home (4.0%)
iii. Properties under construction (1.8%)
iv.   Properties have been demolished (1.5%)
v.   Vacant unit (17.3%)
vi.   Building undergone conversion (2.3%)

Respondents' Background

The respondents consisted of three main groups, i.e. the property owners (118), tenants (116) and workers (35) for commercial units, e.g. shophouse. Both the owners and tenants are

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[1] The conservation area consists of the core area and buffer zone.

equally represented in the sample. Majority of the respondents are in the 41-50 age group with the average age of 43 years (Figure). The respondents' educational background varied greatly with the majority having attained secondary school education (Figure).
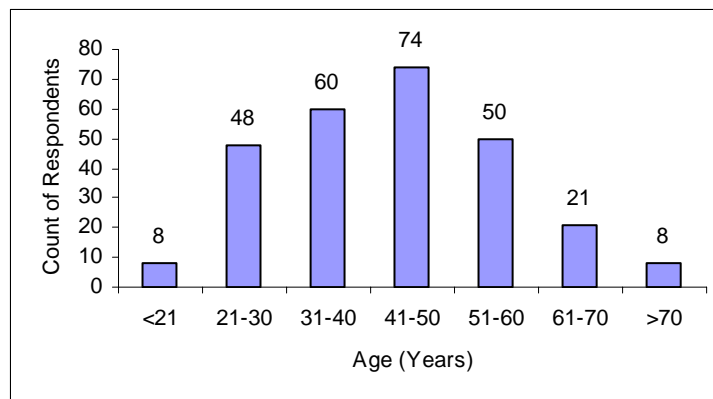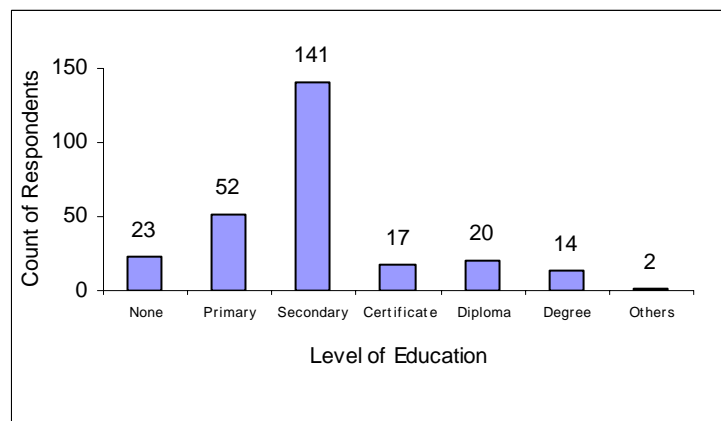
Figure 2. Age distribution for respondents

Figure 3. Respondent's education level

Residential Preference

From the survey, it is found that 71% of the respondents prefer to live in modern housing. Only 29% indicated that they prefer to live in pre-war houses. However, when asked about the preferred cityscape, there is an almost equal split between the respondents where 52% prefer modern vertical city while another 45% prefer the historical townscape. The rest (3%) of the respondents prefer to stay in rural area.

With regards to the interest of the residents in conservation, we found that more than half of the respondents are more likely to choose modern structures rather than historical buildings. On the other hand, there is also a sizeable percentage that is receptive to the idea of living in a heritage city. This indicates that some residents are contented with the historical ambience of George Town. Nevertheless, it tells that if given a choice, more than half of the residents in the inner city would have chosen modern buildings rather than the old structures. This suggests that appreciation of the heritage building may not translate as a preference to live in a heritage city.

Awareness on Conservation

Apart from the preference and interest on urban heritage, are the residents of inner city of George Town aware of any conservation programmes or movement in George Town? The first question on awareness is on the importance to protect historic buildings that exceed at least 50

years in George Town. 71% of the respondents indicated that historical buildings should be protected while 13% said otherwise. The remaining 16% indicated that they have no opinion on the subject (Figure 4).
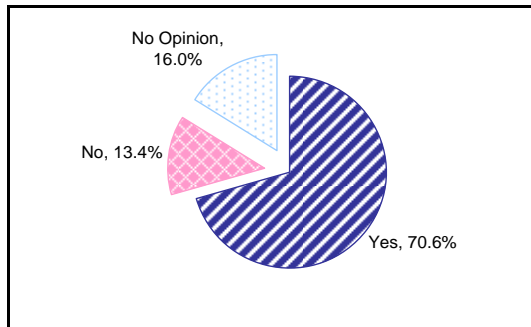

Figure 4. Opinion about the importance of protecting historical buildings

Further analysis was done to find out the influence of education on the respondents appreciation of historical buildings. The results showed that those having the highest awareness for protecting historical buildings are those with the highest level of education. Amongst the university degree holders, almost 93% consider urban heritage as important. This may be due to the fact that the better educated group is more exposed to the literature related to urban heritage and have a better understanding on the importance of conservation. However, looking at the overall education level of our respondents, not many of these degree holders actually lived in the conservation area.
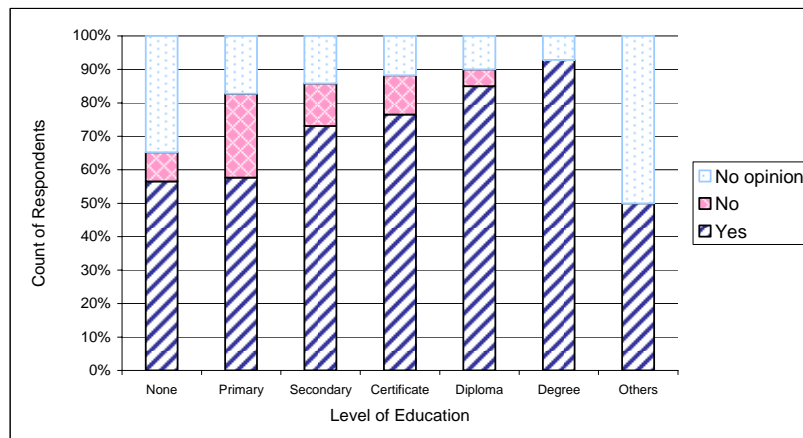

Figure 0. The influence of education on the importance to protect historical buildings

Figure 0 shows the appreciation of historical building rising progressively with higher level of education. This suggests that education may be the key to a successful conservation effort. Having said that, the survey also shows that amongst those without education, there is still quite a high percentage (57%) of respondents who appreciate or support the conservation of historical buildings. Interestingly, those who indicate a preference to stay in an historical town are mostly with a lower level of education or no education. This could be due to the reason that respondents with a lower level of education are mostly the elderly group which have been residing in the inner city of George Town for most of their life and are used to the 'heritage' environment.

Another aspect that is being probed in this survey is the residents' willingness to pay more for historical building. The question is based on the assumption that people are willing to pay higher for a product that is important to them. Would the respondents who recognised the importance of urban heritage be willing to pay more for it? In the survey, the respondents were asked whether they are willing to pay more for a historical building if they are buying one in George Town. The results showed that 40% of the respondents indicate that they would be willing to pay more for historical buildings, 45% say that they would not pay more, and 15% have no

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opinion. Again we found that respondents are split almost equally in the opposing direction pertaining to paying extra for historical building.

To obtain a better understanding of the above, cross-tabulation was conducted between willingness to pay more for heritage properties and the opinion on importance of protecting the historic buildings. It is clear that more than half of those who support the importance in protecting historical buildings are willing to pay more for heritage properties.

This survey also found that, although the majority of respondents prefer to stay in a modern environment, more than half of them feel that George Town should be conserved (57%) while about 37% think that George Town should be redeveloped. There is a small percentage (2%) of the respondents that think there should be a mix of both conservation and redevelopment in George Town. About 5% of the respondents have no opinion on this matter. Compared with the earlier questions, this question managed to draw out a small majority in favour of conservation as shown in Figure 6.
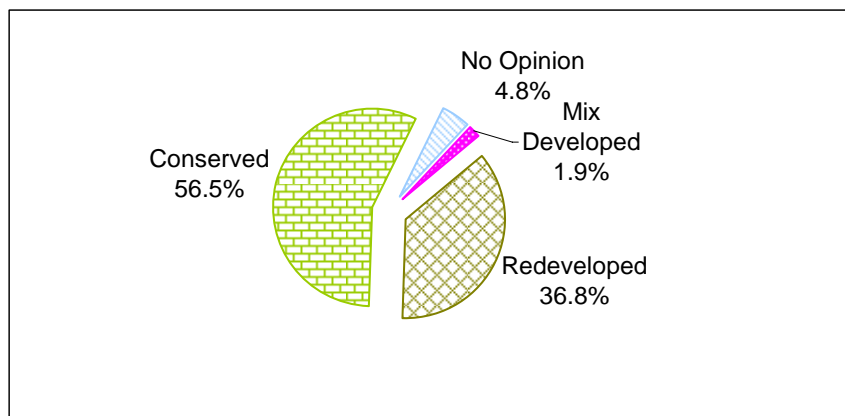

Figure 6. Opinion on whether George Town should or should not be developed.

Interestingly, an even greater percentage of respondents (68%) think that George Town should be designated as a conservation zone. Only 17% do not agree to have George Town as a conservation zone while another 16% of the respondents showed no opinion. Although the earlier percentage shows only a small majority in wanting George Town to be conserved but the follow-up response showed that the residents are not adverse to George Town being designated as a conservation zone. The support for the conservation zone could be due to ignorance on the implication of being a conservation zone or the residents still cherished their "good old" George Town. It is also possible that the residents equate status quo in their residential environment as conservation although this may not be true. Conservation is much more than just keeping things as they were.

Potential Groups with Interest in Urban Heritage

The preferences and awareness for urban heritage from the respondents are also found to be different based on their various backgrounds. For example, in the earlier section, we found that the higher the level of education, the higher the appreciation for urban heritage. See Figure 0. Looking at other factors such as age, we found that older respondents (above 40 years old) are more likely to prefer to reside in heritage buildings and historical city while younger people (below 40 years old) prefer to stay in modern housing.

In addition, preference for heritage buildings is also found to be different based on their current type of abode. A comparison is made on the opinion of the respondents between those who stay in a house or shophouse (landed property) and those who stay in a flat. Although overall respondents prefer a modern George Town but higher number of respondents (56%) who live in landed property such as house and shophouse showed more interest and appreciation in heritage buildings compared to the respondents in high-rise buildings (21%).

A second cross-tabulation was also conducted between the respondents in different location in George Town for each criterion. The result showed another group of respondents that has interest in urban heritage which is the respondents who live in the conservation zone. Table 1 showed that the interest in historical buildings by respondents in non-conservation zone (Part of GT 3) is lower than those in the conservation zone.

Table 1. Different Preferences on Urban Heritage by Location

Preferences for Urban Heritage	GT 1	GT 2	GT 3*	GT 3
Pre-war Houses/ Shophouses	31.5%	8.33%	55.90%	19.50%
Historic Town	46.70%	29.20%	61.80%	41.40%
Conserved George Town	56.50%	50.00%	61.80%	56.30%

Note: GT 1= Core of Conservation Zone, GT 2= Conservation Buffer Zone, GT 3= Part of Conservation Core Zone, GT 3 = Outside Conservation Zone*

In addition, for the residents who live in the conservation zone, they showed a higher preference for the existing heritage features rather than future modern structures in George Town. The survey also found that in the Conservation Core Areas of GT 1 and GT 3*, preferences for historical and conventional elements in the future recorded a higher percentage than on modern elements. More respondents from the Conservation Buffer Zone in GT 2 seem to prefer modern development. As for the non conservation area GT 3, it is obvious that the respondents prefer modern features in the development of George Town in future. Looking at the overall picture, the survey shows that respondents who lived in the Conservation Zones have higher preferences and awareness towards urban heritage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Having listened to the residents regarding their views on conservation, the survey found that although conservation is supported by the residents for their city, they also state that they wanted a modern city. The survey indicated that the residents of George Town are split in the middle pertaining to the decision whether to conserve the city or not to conserve. This may explain the lukewarm participation in the conservation effort implemented by the local authority thus far. On the other hand, we can still find many historical buildings and streets in their original state in the inner city of George Town. These historical buildings could have been maintained by the 50% of the residents that support conservation or were just a state of status quo in their living abode. Although it seems that half of the battle is won, the local authority has a difficult time convincing the other 50% of the residents to conserve. This is the group that wanted a modern city with a "Manhattan" skyline. As such, the local authority has attempted a compromise in the proposal of downsizing the conservation zone to only the inner city while allowing the rest of the city to be redeveloped. Looking at the survey findings, this action seems to be a good move as it took into account the opposing preference of the two major groups of residents.

Upon closer scrutiny, the survey findings also present a contradicting situation where the respondents state that they would prefer to live in modern housing and yet at the same time wanting to conserve the heritage building in the city. As it is not possible to have both, the residents would have to make up their mind on which path to choose. They cannot have their pie and eat it at the same time. Nevertheless, one suggestion to overcome this dilemma is to conserve the city area and promote the use of the conserved building as business premises while the people in George Town lived in modern housing at the outskirt of the conservation areas. This model of turning conservation area into business district has seen success in revitalizing a declining city(Fisher, 2005) because the businesses would provide the demand for the use of the buildings, although for a different function.

In ensuring a higher success in the conservation effort, the local authority should also target the right people to promote conservation. In this aspect, the survey managed to uncover the potential groups of people that are pro-conservation. It is found that respondents with higher level of education are more appreciative and predisposed towards conservation. Long time residents and those living in the conservation area are also seen to be supportive of the conservation effort. As such, conserving historical building would appeal to them and this group of people would be the ones that could create demand for such buildings. The survey also found that respondents that appreciate historical buildings are more willing to pay extra for such building. This should be an incentive for investors to invest in heritage buildings as people are willing to pay a premium to own it.

In conclusion, the preference of the residents in this city is clear as the majority of the respondents have answered again and again that they prefer modern housing and yet wanted George Town to be conserved. Therefore, George Town should be conserved as a heritage city but for the conservation effort to be a success, the function of the conservation area should be commercial instead of residential.

This research report constitutes a small part of the main research project from NAPREC, entitled 'Urban Conservation as a Real Estate Strategy for Revitalising Inner City of George Town'. All the findings of this research will be used as a base for further investigation and expansion of the main project in the near future.

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