

A Pilot Program of Historic Urban Conservation in Armenian Street of George Town, Penang -Preservation of Identity of Place and Community-

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1. Research Background

Conservation in the historic inner city of George Town, Penang, Malaysia in the past decades has largely focused in preventing the loss of heritage buildings and maintaining the authenticity of historic buildings. Meanwhile, population decrease continued to occur in the inner city of George Town even after it was declared a World Heritage Site in 2008 due to the drastic increase in property prices. The rapid loss of the original community may inevitably lead to a loss of identity of place in the historic city. In 2010, the first program of community engagement in conservation “Restoration to Meet People’s Needs” (hereinafter, pilot program) was introduced to the tenants of ten shophouses in the historic Armenian Street in the World Heritage Site area. Tenants were said to be living in insecurity for fears of eviction as the yearly tenancy agreement was changed to a monthly one. Their plight came to be known by heritage conservationists when the owner (a Chinese temple) applied for funds to restore the ten shophouses. The objective of the pilot program was to find a win-win solution for both tenants and owner.

2. Research Purpose & Methodology

This research has three main purposes: 1) to record and study the working processes of the pilot program for future possible application to other sites, 2) to analyze the feedback of stakeholders and identify the key issues and effects of the program, and 3) to examine the benefits of preserving community in a historic urban area, particularly on identity of place. This is studied based on E. Relph (1976)’s writings on the three elements that composes the identity of place; physical settings, community activities and meaning of place. In this research, a social approach was applied and semi-structured interviews were held with the stakeholders of involved in the pilot program; the (participating and non-participating) tenants, owner representative, and the facilitators, Also, interviews were conducted with residents in neighboring areas of Armenian Street to understand the current situation of the street and its distinctive characteristics.

3. Findings and Conclusion

The pilot program contributed to the conservation of not only the tangible heritage (shophouses) but also the intangible heritage (community) as well. I learned that tenants contribute to the identity or intangible qualities of Armenian Street, through their daily activities, use of space and history of living. The place in turn provides the community with a sense of belonging; as a home, a place for earning livelihood, and the ancestral home for extended family members to return to during cultural celebrations etc. Also, through the engagement of tenants and owner, the program contributed to the preservation of identity of place. Tenant-owner cooperation for their common interests gives both stakeholders a sense of responsibility and appreciation for the shophouse. The stakeholders are generally positive about the prospects of the pilot program, although there are several issues that need to be clarified in the future. This thesis concludes that preserving the community through community engagement is constructive towards historic urban conservation, particularly when the said community has a long living history in the place and has a strong attachment to the place.