

Legacies of an Urban Village: Kampung Baru History, Architectural Features & Heritage

The Last Unique and Historic Enclave in the Middle of the Concrete Jungle

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Executive Summary

It is there, yet most KLites seem not to care. Care about what is happening to Kampung Baru or what will become of the village or whether it will exist at all one day in future.

This Paper was initially researched as requested following meetings at the KL Tourism Action Council (KLTAAC/MTPKL) as well as at Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) in mid-2008, which brought together many parties to discuss the needs for balanced development, heritage conservation and tourism enhancement for Kuala Lumpur, with a focus on unique places in the city such as Kampung Baru.

While KL has grown fairly well by leaps and bounds since Independence in 1957 and is one of Asia's most livable and developed cities, it faces stiff competition in achieving its own goals to continue rising as a major city with balanced, sustainable development for both physical and cultural attraction and to achieve recognition as a world-class city.

Today educated people all over the world have realised that local heritage and culture are very important aspects of human and urban development. Cities around the world are criticised for becoming the same-looking concrete jungles with energy-guzzling and densely packed high-rises, apart from just a few landmarks that differentiate some cities.

In city after city in Asia, old established local neighbourhoods are being demolished to make way for so-called development that in the end displaces local people while making the city an even more crowded and hot canyons of ugly concrete boxes.

Tourists are now looking for unique and *authentic* aspects of a city's local heritage and native culture, places and things which clearly differentiate it from other places.

Kampung Baru, as KL city centre's last remaining low-density and historic neighbourhood with several gems of traditional timber architecture, also needs to be looked at for its local lifestyle, heritage or historic conservation and tourism sharing.

This Paper, written by a locally-born Architect, outlines the history of Kampung Baru and why it is important to understand its qualities for KL's future as well as some suggested guidelines on the last page.

Quote:

A city without visible heritage is like a man without personal memory. Nadge

KAMPUNG BARU – Historic Enclave in the Middle of Kuala Lumpur

A. Najib Ariffin, Adapted from *Architectural Heritage – Kuala Lumpur Pre-Merdeka* (Book published by PAM – Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia, 2007), Expanded after discussions with local elder Kampung Baru Masjid officials in 2009

Background

By the early 1890s, Kuala Lumpur had a population of some 20,000 with a large number being new Chinese immigrants as well as Malay villagers and about 150 Europeans. In response to fears that the rapid influx of outsiders was reducing agricultural land for the town, an existing agricultural area was permanently set aside for Malay farmers. The Malay Agricultural Settlement, formalised by the British in 1899, was called Kampung Baru - literally “New Village” - to distinguish it from the other older Malay villages surrounding the city.

Unique History / Over a Century of Development

Kampung Baru 1891, Formalised 1899/1900

By the 1880s there were already recorded at least seven traditional *kampungs* in the vicinity in question, besides other unrecorded clusters of traditional house groups of mostly Malay farmers in the area between the Klang river and the Gombak river and beyond. The uniting or amalgamation of the *kampungs* took place progressively. For example Kampung Masjid became a de facto village core in 1880 and was joined by Kampung Periok in 1890 while Kampung Hujung Pasir came into *Ikatan Perkampungan* in about 1900, and so on as organised by the local villagers themselves. As the word of the villages’ prosperity grew, more and more people came to the area, initially farm folk from Ulu Selangor, Kajang and also Malay traders from Klang.

Kampung Baru as we know it today was officially promulgated around 1899/1900, in which an area originally of about 223 acres between the Klang River and Batu Road (Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) was reserved as the Malay Agricultural Settlement. This came about when the British also observed that as more and more Chinese, Indian and European immigrants and expatriates were flooding KL, the Malays were pushed out, which diminished the necessary cultivation and supply of agricultural products that the growing city needed, and which by and large had been traditionally provided by the Malay farmers.

However, the establishment of the M.A.S. was said to also result from the ‘expressed desire of the Resident General and the British Resident of Selangor “to educate the children of Malays to (1) take part in the administration and (2) to enable them to reap some of the advantages of the present prosperity”. The Resident said that he hoped the scheme would result in filling the growing clerical services with Malay workers.’

In order to carry out the above intentions, allotments of land were approved to Malay persons with certain conditions such as having to plant crops and so on. Also, schools and amenities including roads and even irrigation water wheels were built in the area.

The “Settlement” as the British called it, somewhat a misnomer as much of it was already made up of established kampungs, would be controlled by a Board of Management, consisting of British as well as Malay members including a representative of the Sultan of Selangor. The Board is authorised within the gazetted Rules to approve Malay lot applicants according to agreed terms, to set expenditure and carry out development and maintenance as well as administrative tasks. The land in fact had earlier already been marked by the coming and going of Malay farmers as noted by the acknowledgement of an old Malay cemetery in the area.

It is interesting to note that even then the British recognized, as in Rule 8 of the FMS Government Gazette No. 480 on the M.A.S, that ‘Malay’ means “a person belonging to any Malayan Race who habitually speaks the Malay language or any Malayan language, professes the Muslim religion and practices Malay customs....” This practically recognised not just the Peninsular Malay but included other related natives from around the Malay Archipelago. Eventually Javanese (especially around 1906 into Kampung Paya), Mendailing, Minang and other persons of Malay Stock arrived and intermarried or assimilated with local Malay residents in Kampung Baru.

From a farming village of only 12 recognised Klang river east bank landholdings just before 1900, in 1929 individual allotments were more properly planned by the authorities and by May 1935, 750 lots were given ownership recognition.

By and large, the Settlement served its agricultural purpose for a time although padi planting in itself proved to be unsuccessful in the longer term, as the area was too prone to flooding. This was where it is architecturally proven that the Malay tradition of building houses on stilts was a simple yet ingenious solution that kept the residents minimally affected no matter how any nearby river behaved.

Over time however, the growth of population pressures and transportation improvements whereby agriculture was no longer needed to be practiced in the city, resulted in the Settlement outgrowing its agricultural aspect, but retained its low-density character.

Today Kampung Baru remains a unique enclave of still generally low rise structures with a strong Malay flavour of vibrant yet unhurried life. Much controversy continues on its future direction, with those arguing for and trying to profit from wholesale redevelopment at odds with those who desire a more careful and sensitive intervention only where necessary, and enhancing its local tourism appeal.

In the meantime, both locals and tourists quietly ply Kampung Baru for its last available ambience of Malaysian village life in central KL, for its home cuisine family restaurants and the last few remaining traditional wooden houses in the city’s shadows, literally those of the world’s tallest Twin Towers just across the river.

If preserved and maintained in a sensitive way, Kampung Baru’s heritage village ambience adds to Kuala Lumpur’s charm as a “Truly Asia” city of many cultures, old and new.

Note on **Masjid Jamek Kampung Baru**

Initially founded in the late 1800s (date uncertain), the first mosque was known to be built of natural traditional materials including *nibong* columns. That was replaced by a timber structure as the congregation grew but by the 1950s a bigger mosque was needed and donations were raised to have a new building before Merdeka in 1957. It was agreed that every household in Kampung Baru would contribute 60 Ringgit, a substantial figure in those days payable in installments if needed, which was duly collected by 1955. That was still not enough and the Selangor State Government stepped in to add a substantial amount. Happily, more money was collected through other donations as well. In 1956 YTM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj laid the new mosque's foundation, which was completed at a cost of 214,000 Ringgit.

Interestingly at each daily prayer time, about 500 people would pray here - probably the most in any KL mosque for normal prayers. Its convenient location with a large Malay-Muslim population is certainly the main reason. Even foreign Muslim tourists like to make their way here for the surrounding community and heritage ambience. It is surrounded by family-run eateries offering a wide array of authentic family recipe Malay foods, not to mention the mosque's own famous Ramadhan 'bubur lambuk'.

The design of the mosque can be described as modern simplified Mughal with practical Malay elements especially in parts of the roofing and internal details. A notable feature is the exquisite mosaics in flowery vivid blues and other colours adorning the entrance gateway ('pintu gerbang') and the signage.

The mosque complex occupies 6,472 m³ and can accommodate up to 10,000 people. Apart from air-conditioned prayer halls, the mosque has meeting rooms, guest rooms, library and kitchen. It also has a kindergarten called Tadika Islam Masjid Jamek Kg Baru.

During the Ramadhan fasting month, the mosque gets very busy. Aside from the cooking and free distribution of its famed 'bubur lambuk' (literally 'mass porridge' in Malay), the mosque organises breaking of fast daily. There are Al-Quran recitation classes and giving of aid to orphans and the poor. Even Imams from the venerable Masjidil Haram grand mosque in Makkah (Mecca in Saudi Arabia) are flown in to lead the Tarawikh prayers, which are held after Isyak prayers every night during Ramadhan.

The *bubur lambuk* here deserves special mention due to the near-international fame it has earned. This tradition of a rice porridge with meats and aromatic herbs, was begun in the 1950s. Each day, after Asar prayers, this hot dish is distributed to the queues outside the mosque. Each person is given one packet, regardless of race, religion or socio-economic standing. While some other mosques also offer bubur or other foods come fasting month, Masjid Kampung Baru's bubur lambuk is renown both for the established taste made by a team of cooks and the heritage of this particular mosque. In Ramadhan / October 2005, Masjid Jamek Kampung Baru made it into the Malaysia Book of Records by cooking 120 large pots of bubur lambuk, the largest amount of bubur ever made in the history of Malaysia. Kampung folk including 10 chefs and 130 assistant cooks were involved, with bubur packets distributed to 30,000 people. The whole Kampung was overjoyed that a dish it calls its own Bubur Lambuk Masjid Kampung Baru achieved such an accolade.

Kampung Baru – The Last Traditional Timber Houses in the Capital – A brief selection of houses to be acknowledged for posterity

Adapted from the book “Architectural Heritage – Kuala Lumpur”

(By A. Najib Ariffin, Published by PAM – Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia, 2007)

Address: 30, Jalan Hamzah (Lot 116) – OLDEST KNOWN HOUSE

Year originally built or occupied: Occupied 1901, Built 1919

One of the earliest settlers occupied this lot within a year or two of Kampung Baru's establishment. Original owner's name is Hashim B. Mohd Kahaya and current owner's name(s) include Che Som Bt Siam, Halijah Ahmad and eight or nine other relatives.

The family is of Melaka ancestry; hence the wooden house is of the usual Melaka 'bumbung panjang' type. The Melaka style was prominent among Malay houses. This one has the typical 'tebar layar' ('unfurled sail') - like a gable-end flap - for roof ventilation, and as its name suggests symbolically recalls the time that the Malay people were consummate seafarers. The front 'serambi' (verandah) has a row of breezy full-length windows.

The house is now in danger of collapsing and needs urgent help to be preserved.

Address: 11A, Jalan Dato' Abdul Razak (Lot 1057)

Year originally built: 1921 (Officially recorded 23rd April 1922)

The original owner, Ahmad bin Hj Mohamed known affectionately as Master Mat in the 1950s to 1970s, was formerly an English language teacher at Batu Road English School (now along Jalan Raja Laut). He was well regarded among local people who cite his strong character as a disciplinarian.

The current owner, who is his daughter Zaharah Binti Ahmad, is 82 years old at time of writing and still lives in the house with her family.

This style of Malay house, while retaining the elements of a 'Limas' roof form, rests on stone pillars with balustrade staircase. This modified type is sometimes referred to as Malay-Palladian, although this is a bit of a misnomer as apart from the moulded stone pillars, all else is vernacular Malay complete with local-style wood panel carvings.

Another old timber house in front of it has unfortunately got burnt up but the skeletal structure that remains is sometimes still photographed by passing tourists, together with this house.

Address: 163, Jalan Raja Muda Abdul Aziz (Lot 292 B)

Year originally built: An earlier timber house was built and recorded on 5th March 1906. The present house replaced it in 1951.

Prominent and picture-perfect from the main road with the Petronas Twin Towers in the background, this 'Limas' style house has roof gable and eave carvings known as 'Papan Cantik' (lit. 'Pretty Boards'). At its front, the prominent 'Anjung' is fronted by breezy full-length windows.

In typical Malay fashion, the compound is planted with coconut trees, flowery shrubs and even herbal plants. Across the road in front of this house once stood the official residence of the Selangor Menteri Besar, Dato' Harun Bin Hj Idris, before Kuala Lumpur was ceded from Selangor as a Federal Territory.

The original owners were Ahmed Ghazali Bin Hashim & Lembut Bin Abdul Manap. Current owner's names include Yahaya Ahmad Ghazali and four others.

The current occupants have commendably said that they are willing to host visits for heritage visitors and tourists on a mutually beneficial commercial arrangement.

Address: 11, Jalan Raja Muda Musa (Lot 384)

Year originally built: First house was built 24th October 1913 and demolished. Present house was built 3rd October 1949

This handsome house was at one time owned by a Malay teacher attached to the Police Training Depot. The house was rebuilt after World War II at a cost of \$5,000. It is one of the bigger of the traditional Malay houses in Kampung Baru, complete with a 'Limas Potong Perak' plan on a 'modernised' stone pillared ground floor.

The original owners were Sawiah Bt. Khajimah & Mohd Amin Bin Hamid, and current owner's name is Abdul Rahim Bin Mohd Amin

Due to its location, it is one of the most popularly photographed by passing tourists who love the juxtaposition of old and new with the modern skyscrapers and KL Tower in the background.

Address: 81, Jalan Raja Abdullah

Year originally built: Before 1955

An unusual combination marks this rather simple house: a Melaka-style 'tangga batu' stone staircase directly fronts an austere 'Anjung' in a 'Potong Perak' plan structure. While the house is typically raised, but to a less-than-full-person height, the space underneath is walled in.

The original and current owners are unknown as the house was locked at the time of research visit by this author.

Address: 24, Jalan Hamzah

Year originally built: Before 1953

The house design reflects a sometimes-called Malay-Colonial hybrid of a 'Limas Potong Perak' form with its prominent 'Anjung' fronting the 'Rumah Ibu' (main section) combined with stone pillars and in-fill walled ground floor. The staircase is an unassuming and somewhat steep affair.

The original and current owners are unknown as the house was locked at the time of research visit by this author.

Address: 15, Jalan Raja Uda

Year originally built: Before 1953

Built in the early 1950s, this Malay house typically shows the all-sides-pitched roofs of the 'limas bungkus' style. The house sits on stone or masonry concrete piers about waist high from the ground. The main structure is of timber columns and beams with a modern roof truss system. It is partially symmetrical. The walls are of timber plank siding with windows from the waist up made of timber grid with glass pane infill. The clay tile roof usually indicated the higher financial status of the owner.

Address: 21, Jalan Raja Uda

Year originally built: Before 1953

A curved staircase that winds down from the front 'Anjung' gives this house a difference. The current owner's name is Esah Bt. Abdullah

Note:

Malay houses are usually self-built, with the help of a timber craftsman for the main technical directions, plus help from odd-jobbers.

It represents simple but effective age-old wisdoms in architecture that are suitable for a tropical environment: raised on stilts for protection against floods and animals *and* to enhance ventilation, while the space underneath is still usable. Large pitched roofs of various forms with wide overhangs allow heat dispersal while protecting against heavy rain and intense sunshine.

While certain elements above are constant, quite a lot of detail variations are seen in the above houses around Kampung Baru.

An Urgent Call for Careful Conservation of Kampung Baru's Traditional Heritage Buildings and Neighbourhoods for *Local Identity Preservation, Balanced Urban Development* and *Tourism Benefits* for Local Residents, for KL City and for the Nation.

Guidelines for Kampung Baru Development and Conservation - Suggested but simple and effective points and proposals

Compiled from various discussions with Kampung Baru folk and local architects and tourism promoters as well as tourist guides and tourists throughout 2007-2009

1. **Any intervention should first benefit the existing long-time residents** and owners, and should be sensitive i.e. not displacive. For example, many wish to continue enjoying the village-like lifestyle in the area but with good normal urban facilities and maintenance, and not to be displaced from their own homes for an uncertain future development in a completely disrupted environment.
2. **Good maintenance is critical.** As long as roads are smooth and surroundings are clean, road system and parking monitored, streetlights all lit up at night, public buildings all functional, trees and landscape maintained, utility supplies uninterrupted, and flooding prevented, there is nothing much wrong with the area.
3. **Development does not mean concretising everything**, or demolishing and re-building everything, especially buildings of unique character or heritage value that enhances the city's sense of history, diversity and tourism attraction, but selective and sensitive intervention where necessary with well thought out planning. Creating another congested concrete jungle mass in the city is not necessarily a good solution for everyone except for certain 'greedy' people.
4. **Certain buildings and houses deserve to be conserved and maintained** precisely to preserve the city's sense of history and respect for heritage, local cultural diversity and tourism attraction. These houses need and deserve Government financial assistance for conservation and maintenance for these reasons. In return, bona fide visitors and tourists should be free to pass by, take photographs and with permission at agreed times or occasions to allow them to come in and appreciate the buildings and local culture, as already practiced.
5. **Tourism promotion for Kampung Baru's unique heritage, character and ambience should be further enhanced** as it is a one-of-a-kind neighbourhood in the city, and in fact unique in not just Asia but the world. Tourists should be encouraged to dine at Kampung Baru family-run restaurants and try local foods, patronise local outlets and services, stay at homestay programs and so on that will benefit the residents, create a further sense of identity and pride while letting tourists experience a real authentic Malaysian lifestyle.

No one is completely against development or new buildings, but tourism activity, for both domestic and foreign visitors, is acknowledged worldwide as a much more sustainable long-term economic development potential for local people rather than re-development and displacement.

Quote from Italian tourists on why they want to visit a place like Kampung Baru:

"Cerchiamo la vita locale, la patrimonialità, la storia, l'architettura caratteristica: - mostrateci questi, poi anche delle cose e cucine particolari..." We're looking for the local lifestyle, the heritage, the history, the characteristic architecture:- show us these, then also local products and cuisines... Kampung Baru already has these. Don't destroy the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs.