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# The need and significance of traditional shop lot pavements in the context of town conservation in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

The conservation of towns is a growing field in Malaysia. In the context of cultural heritage, the exceptional conservation practice in this country has enabled Malacca and Georgetown to be chosen as two of UNESCO's world heritage town. The conservation of towns emerges from the awareness that cultural heritage possesses eminent uniqueness which must be conserved in order to safeguard it from extinction. In the context of Malaysia, the traditional shop lots are the remaining cultural heritage from the past, for the present and future. The variety of shapes and architectures of the shop lots makes them unique and should be preserved for the future generation. Therefore, the efforts to conserve a city or town usually concern the conservation of traditional shop lots. Nevertheless, the conservation efforts usually put more emphasis on facade that an equally unique element is overlooked. The element is the walkways of the shop lots. This article aims to discuss the need and significance of traditional shop lot walkways as one of the elements in the conservation of towns. The need for shop lot walkways has an apparent motive in term of a town's image or in the epistemology perspective of the town conservation field itself.

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### Introduction

The purpose of town conservation is to generate a balance between modern development and past legacy or inheritance. The emergence of this idea is triggered by the consciousness towards the gradual destruction of area and historic buildings particularly those that are situated in several world areas due to advancement, modernization and development factors. The first effort that meets the idea of town conservation is the effort to save the Abu Simbel Temple, which was the legacy of the ancient Egypt Civilization, in 1959 by UNESCO (United Nation Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation).

In a 1972 convention, UNESCO has acknowledged a strategy that combines the efforts of countries all around the world to conserve and protect the world's cultural heritage and natural environment. One of the objectives of the convention is to encourage identification, protection as well as conservation of cultural heritage and natural environment which have superiority to human (Yazid, 2010). As a result of, the idea of town conservation has developed around the world, as well as in Malaysia.

Malaysia is rich with a variety of heritage including architectural heritage. Architectural heritage comprise of various entities depending on the party who built them. One of the cultural heritages in Malaysia is the traditional shop lot, with its shape and architectural diversity, which make the shop lots unique. For that reason, it is commonly acknowledged that the efforts in town conservation usually involve traditional shop lots. Nevertheless, one of the elements of traditional shop lots that is always overlooked is the walkway. Strolling along rows of traditional shop lots particularly in old towns in Malaysia, one would definitely come across walkways with unique patterns and styles which are distinctive and attractive. However, whether realizing or not, these walkways are facing extinction due to modernization.

This article aims to discuss the issue of walkways as one of the elements in the conservation of towns. The need for shop lots' walkways is encouraged by numerous factors and the apprehension of losing them is not the merely the writer's imagination. Based on a number of field works, the uniqueness of these walkways will be highlighted and several examples of their destruction will be clarified in this article.

### The Concept of Town Conservation

In truth, the definition of town conservation is vague. In general, however, Yazid (2010) defines town conservation as a process of restoring, safeguard (tending and preserving the original features) as well as protecting any existing elements (particularly historical and heritage elements) or shaping an area, which is regarded as a city or town. This includes the conservation of buildings, cultures, area, roads/alleys, landscape, the natural environment and other elements so that they their original shapes or structures are in good and perfect conditions.

The scope of town conservation is wide and the Department of City's and Village Planner (2002) has divided the concept of town conservation into a number of minor categories namely:

1. *Conservation and preservation of buildings*: includes safeguarding, restoration, maintenance and others in order to ensure that a building lasts and maintain its original structures.
2. *The conservation of facade*: includes the works of beautifying the pavements of buildings as well as taking into account the element of colours and disturbance to the façade of a building (such as advertisement board, the replacement of certain elements in the façade part of a building such as door and windows built with inappropriate materials).
3. *'In-fill' Development*- The *'In-fill' Development* refers to development carried out in areas in-between historic buildings. In such case, consideration should be given to a number of elements that are able to spoil the image of a historic building

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caused by the development such as sky-lines, construction materials, the prolongation of the original structures and others. A Ghafar Ahmad (2000) categorizes town conservation into three (3), namely:

**Building preservation:** includes the works to preserve buildings, façade restoration, building control and others.

**Area conservation:** includes the activity of upgrading the historical value, architecture and cultures of cities, maintaining the structures of cities, controlling new developments and several other activities.

**Culture conservation:** One of the activities is sustaining distinctive and unique culture such as traditional customs, dances and others.

In the context of this article, town conservation refers to buildings conservation in general, and specifically to conservation of areas. The general term and specific refers to the main discussion subject that is the walkways of traditional shop lots. One the one hand, if the walkway is seen as a separate element of only a house, then it will involve the perspective of building conservation. On the other hand, if the walkway is seen from a wider perspective such as a row of shop lots, which leads to the uniqueness and visual of any areas (not only the buildings), then the town conservation will be seen from the perspective of an area.

#### Town Conservation Practice in Malaysia

Town conservation in Malaysia began with the activity of conserving buildings in the 1960s specifically through the efforts of the authority of the Museum Department (presently known as the Museum Department of Malaysia). During that time, the conservation activities are more on digging and re-construction works of a number of temples in the area of Lembah Bujang, Kedah. Town conservation works were also carried out in several towns in the Peninsular of Malaysia like the Johor Lama Fort in Johor and the Dutch Fort in Pangkor Island (Yazid 2003).

The year 1976 is regarded as the starting point in the spreading of the conservation idea to the public. The idea of conservation was put forward by the Architect Magazine which was the formal magazine of the Malaysian Architect Organization (PAM) (Chen 2001). As a result of the forwarded idea by PAM, a proposal was prepared for “Kuala Lumpur Conservation Zone” which covered the surrounding area of Dataran Merdeka. The idea emphasized on conservation apart from other related aspects like legislation, public participation and others. As a direct result of the proposed conservation idea, historic buildings in the surrounding area of Dataran Merdeka were successfully conserved and preserved with the cooperation of various parties. The idea of town conservation was accepted and used by Local Authority Councils (PBT) in a number of old towns that were rich with buildings and areas with historical values. The Penang Municipal Council, The Taiping Municipal Council and the Malacca City Council are some of the earliest PBT that accepted the idea of town conservation through the setting up of certain units, the construction of planning and controlling plan and putting the conservation efforts as the primary effort in the development plan.

The listing of Malacca and Georgetown in Penang into the world’s heritage is the highest acknowledgement in the town conservation efforts in Malaysia. Presently, the idea of town conservation is gaining acceptance and reputation in most towns as seen through the manifestation of policy concerning conservation in development plan (particularly in local

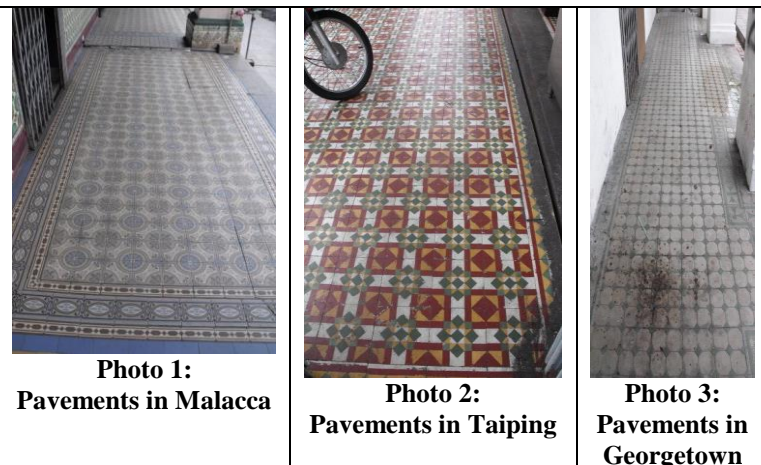
planning). The proposal and effort in the conservation efforts that will be carried out in cities like Ipoh and Taiping in Perak, Kota Bharu in Kelantan and other towns are plan through the local development plan. This is an encouraging development as such efforts will aid in preserving the existing heritage as well as reinforcing the town conservation efforts.

#### The significance of pavements for the purpose of conservation

In discussions about town conservation, the main issue that needs clarification would be, is the effort needs to be performed? High financial provision as well as arduous work scope cause some parties to decline the idea. For that reason, various views and standpoints to reject the ideas have arisen.

Some agree that conservation is an insignificant and wasteful field of work (Dobby 1978). Some are of the opinion that it is much easier to put up new buildings than conserving and preserving old buildings (Larkham 1966).

Even though there are some truths in these views, according to Yazid (2010), town conservation is not burdensome. It is because it has certain significances. Moreover, the conservation steps do not aim to obstruct or hinder current development projects. In the context of this article, the uniqueness and distinctive patterns as well as its rareness (not found in all cities and shop lots) accentuate the individuality of the traditional shop lot pavements (Photo 1, 2 and 3: Pavements with unique patterns).



**Photo 1:**  
Pavements in Malacca

**Photo 2:**  
Pavements in Taiping

**Photo 3:**  
Pavements in Georgetown

In general, the conservation of towns will provide numerous advantages. One of the many advantages of town conservation to an area, the site and buildings with notable heritage value, in undergoing the conservation process are as follow:

#### Image and identity

Conservation leads to identity perpetuation (Saw Swee Kim 1990 dan Mohd Kameel 1998). This is because heritage in actuality reflects the image and identity of an area or an ethnic group. Identity can be defined as an exceptionality that exists in an image or impression of a place which is able to distinguish it from other place (Syed Zainol 1995).

It is commonly known that the pavements are paths for pedestrians. However, at the same time, pavements also contribute to the creation of ‘a city’s image’ element in an area. According to Lynch (1960), one of the elements contributing to the establishment of a city’s image in an area is the ‘*path*’. Then, the issue on the role of pavements in the creation of a city’s image is raised. As stated by Lynch (1960), ‘*path*’ is an element in the creation of a city’s image. It is undeniable that a pavement is considered as a ‘*path*’ in the space of a city. Nonetheless, the



more interesting fact is that the existing pavements, particularly in traditional shop lots, possess appealing patterns and designs. For that reason, pavements with these attractive patterns and designs, indirectly contribute to the establishment of a city's image of an area (Yazid 2010). This identity can be considered as a symbol of an area, place or an ethnic group. As an example, in mentioning Malacca, one would recall a historical city laden with numerous buildings built in various architectural designs. Buildings like the A Famosa, Stadhuis, and the row of shop lots in Jonker Street@Jalan Hang Jebat, worship houses in Lorong Harmoni and the Kampung Hulu Mosque have managed to accentuate the image and identity of Malacca as a state rich in historical heritage.

For an ethnic group or a society, the same scenario transpires. For the Malays, the traditional Limas house roof is an identity of traditional Malay society and for the Chinese, the Clan House. Even though they do not imply any significance to the other ethnics, in truth, they reflect the uniqueness of identity (in the context of architecture) of an ethnic.

#### Past Masterpiece

Historical heritage particularly buildings usually have more specialities in the architectural aspect that they need to be conserved and preserved (A Ghafar 2000). More often than not, these unique architectural designs are seldom found in other places and at times they create a *sense of place* to a place (Saw 1990). One such architectural design is the traditional Malay houses, which were built with unique and distinctive carvings and decorations. Some such houses were even built without the use of nails. Moreover, every so often, these traditional houses reflect the cultural assimilation among regional countries like Indonesia and Thailand. This is also one of the architectural uniqueness that is not found in modern buildings. The same thing applies to the rows of traditional shop lots in Malacca, Taiping and Ipoh in Perak, Georgetown in Penang, and Kuala Lumpur. The uniqueness of architectures in the designs and old patterns not found in the modern pavements of the existing shop lots of today is an exceptionality that does not exist in other components of a city's image. As it is non-existent in all shop lots and cities, thus the need for conservation is fundamental in ensuring its continued existence in the fast developing era and in the years to come.

#### Tourism

As distinctive and unique masterpiece of the past, the traditional shop lot pavements will be able to become attractions for local and foreign tourists. This is clearly stated by earlier writers like Dobby (1978), Larkham (1996), A Ghafar Ahmad (2000) serta Yazid (2007 dan 2010). Even though it is admitted that pavement is only a small element of a building but its significance as one of the tourists' attractions is undeniable. A shop lot may possess a unique architecture and style but the absence of a pavement with distinctive patterns and colours, will definitely add merit to the building's exceptionality. Furthermore, such merit does not exist in all shop lots. Therefore, for any damages, conservation is vital as the uniqueness of these pavements is also a fascination to the tourists.

#### The forgotten traditional shop lot pavements

The literature findings ascertain that almost all research related to the conservation of buildings and traditional shop lots do not reflect on the pavements of historical buildings where as pavement is also one of the components in the building design. In fact, the pavement is one of the elements that will inspire the

first impression of the tourists towards a building façade as the position of the pavement in the front of a building and the main pathway of pedestrians passing or going into the building. In the aspects of visual and image, the façade of an old building that retains its traditional design will be awkward if the pavement is restructured into a modern outlook. The modernization, enhanced by globalisation, has caused the gradual destruction of most shop lots. The destruction also affects the pavements of these traditional shop lots (particularly those with unique and fascinating patterns).

The finding of the research carried out for the purpose of this article indicates three main patterns that dominate the pavements of traditional shop lots, which are the geometrical pattern (Photo 4), floral pattern (Photo 5) and the combination of geometrical and floral patterns (Photo 6).

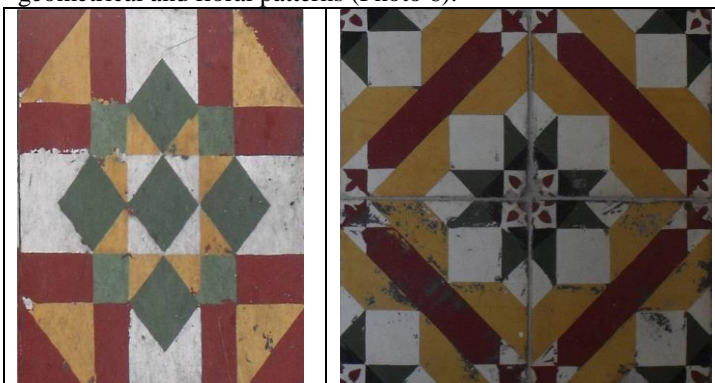


Photo 4: Pavement blocks with geometrical pattern



Photo 5: Pavement blocks with floral pattern



Photo 6: Pavement blocks with the combination of geometrical and floral patterns

The finding of fieldwork also indicates that most of these uniquely carved pavements are in bad conditions (broken/fading patterns and colours) and neglected without proper cares (Photo 7).



**Photo 7: Unattended, dirty, broken and fading pavements**

#### Issues and Problems

A pavement is a raised paved or asphalted path for pedestrians found in most existing shop lots and shop offices. In the Malaysian context, it is a roofed space in front of a shop lot. Generally, it functions as a path for pedestrians passing by the rows of shop lots and as shelter from the rain and sunrays. Some of the causes of damages in the pavements of traditional shop lots are as follow:

##### i) No legislative allocation

Legislation is the best approach to ensure the continued existence of cultural heritage (Yazid 2010). From the historical perspective, the conservation and preservation efforts of heritage in Malaysia (buildings, old forts and monuments) have been developing in line with the introduction of Ancient Property Act 1976 (Act 168). This act was practiced for 29 years in Malaysia and abolished in Mac 2005. It was replaced by the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645).

Analysis of the existing legislative allocation indicates that there is no specific law for the conservation of traditional shop lot pavements. The law is only allocated for a broader subject that is the conservation of historical buildings. For that reason, the pavements of traditional shop lots are facing destruction and neglect by the present-day society.

##### ii) The role of the authority

The local government is the most fundamental agent in the context of town conservation. In most areas, the local government provides numerous initiatives in order to encourage the conservation efforts to the public. In the context of this research, even though Malacca and Georgetown have been shortlisted as two of the 'World Heritage' cities, in the context of a more micro perspective, the local government should be more specific in preparing the directing principle or standard.

It should be acknowledged that there are various principles or standards in the conservation of heritage (buildings) such as the standard in the use of paints, signboards and others. However, the standard for the maintenance of pavements with attractive patterns is yet to be enacted. This a huge insufficiency that needs to be urgently dealt with so as to prevent the pavements of traditional shop lots from destruction as well as to ensure their continued existence.

##### iii) Financial allocation

Even though, it is asserted that the legislative allocation for the conservation of towns is improving, there are still a number of 'vacuum' especially when referring to pavements of traditional shop lots. In the development plan, there is no law affirming conservation as compulsory for these pavements. The existing law only commands the conservation of buildings or monuments in their original states. Perhaps, this is also one of the many reasons why the pavements become more neglected.

##### iv) Developmental threats

Developmental pressure is known to be a major factor that put a threat on the process of town conservation. This is due to the developmental needs, which more often than not sacrifice the old buildings considered as the country's heritage. In such situation, the demolition of buildings is not the main issue but the scenario of vacant traditional shop lots. The rapid development has led to the establishment of many new commercial areas. This is then followed by the emergence of mega shopping complexes. Furthermore, development has also created better, systematically planned and more equipped residential areas compared to obsolete residential heritage.

Because of this factor, some owners of the traditional shop lots have moved to the more perfect and modern residential areas. As a result, these shop lots are abandoned and gradually face deterioration. A bigger implication emerges if these shop lots also possess pavements with unique patterns. In time, these shop lots will collapse, become lost and forgotten. Sadly, so are the pavements.

##### v) The awareness of the occupants

There is no awareness, whether in the authority or the occupants of the traditional shop lots of the importance and significance of pavements (with traditional patterns) in the context of a city image development. In comparison to a building façade, the pavement is a minuscule component. However, it should not be overlooked. A shop lot with an attractive façade but do not retain its uniquely carved pavements, is as if it has lost its identity and grandeur.

The owners should become aware that the unique pavements are historical heritage, that could never be acquired in the present time, and that preserving them will make a shop lot more exquisite and simultaneously attract tourists and researchers in the town conservation field. Therefore, collaboration between the government and the owners of the shop lots is much needed in order to preserve the remaining pavements for the future generations.

#### Conclusion

The aim of this article is to reflect on the issue of pavement as one of the elements in the conservation of towns, a current scenario in Malaysia, and its significance in the conservation process. The discussion in this article clearly shows that the awareness and the efforts towards the conservation and the protection of the patterns and designs of traditional shop lot pavements are still lacking due to a number of factors. It is undeniable that the efforts to conserve the patterns and designs of the traditional shop lot pavements are challenging, but they need to be performed for the sake of the future generation.

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