住民参加による歴史都市保存プログラムの試み
ーペナン島ジョージタウン・アルメニアン通りの事例ー

A Pilot Program of Participatory Historic Urban Conservation
: Case from Armenian Street of George Town, Penang

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Conservation in the historic inner city of George Town of Penang, Malaysia in the past decades has focused in preventing the loss of heritage buildings. Meanwhile, population decrease continues to occur although the city was declared a World Heritage Site in 2008. The rapid loss of the city's old community may inevitably lead to a loss of identity of place in the city. This research aims to examine the link between community involvement and identity of place by studying the pilot program of community engagement in heritage building conservation at Armenian Street, George Town.

1. Research Introduction

1-1. Background

George Town is a 200 year old historic city of Penang, Malaysia with many of its heritage buildings still left standing. Listed as a World Heritage Site in 2008, conservation efforts in the historic inner city of George Town in the past decades have largely focused in preventing the loss of heritage buildings and maintaining the authenticity of historic buildings. The conservation policies adapted in George Town so far has been largely top-down practices, with stringent conservation rules employed. Subsequently, the local residents in the inner city find it hard to cope with the high costs and stress when restoring their properties within the World Heritage Site. Meanwhile, owners of heritage buildings raise the building rents after restoration and tenants who are unable to afford the rent hikes would be forced to move out. Thus, population decrease continues to occur in the inner city of George Town , with a decrease of 46% from 18,660 people in 2006 to 10,000 people in 2010 [1]. The rapid loss of the original community is feared to lead to a loss of identity of George Town as the locals know it.

The scope of this research is based on the pilot program on community engagement in Penang, "Restoration to meet People's Needs", involving 10 shophouses[(1)] at the historic Armenian Street. The program applies the concept of community architect of the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR)[(2)] and engages the community of tenants and building owner in conservation. Restoration works is still ongoing as of the time this paper is written. Prior to the program, tenants were said to be living in insecurity for fears of eviction after 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 Think City[(3)] to restore the buildings. The objective of the pilot program was to find a win-win solution for both tenants and owner while addressing the following issues in the inner city: 1) population decrease,

2) conservation of building heritage, 3) loss of identity of place.

1-2. Research Purpose

This research aims to identify how the pilot program works to address the three issues mentioned above by studying and analyzing the following: 1) the working processes of the pilot program, 2) key issues and effects of the program, feedback from stakeholders and 3) how community engagement in conservation activity contributes to preserving the identity of place. Identity of place 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. [2] These three elements are irreducible to one another yet closely interlinked with each other.

1-3. Research Methodology

In this research, a social approach was applied in a one-month-fieldwork where semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 stakeholders of involved in the pilot program; seven tenants, one owner representative, two facilitators (ACHR and Think City), and one conservation architect. Also, interviews were conducted with residents in neighboring areas of Armenian Street to understand the current situation of the street and its distinctive characteristics.

The following questions were asked to the stakeholders:

a) *to all tenants:* basic information on tenant profile, house; amount of rent paid, renovations on shophouse, neighbor; relationship with neighbor, neighborhood at present and past etc.

b) to *all stakeholders on pilot program:* their roles in this pilot program, opinion on the details and effects of the program, hopes and difficulties perceived etc.

2. Literature Review

Heritage conservation in the west which placed higher importance on

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authenticity of physical properties starkly contrast the emphasis on intangible qualities of the heritage in the east [3]. Various authors have written on the contribution of place or heritage to the identity of individuals living there, providing a sense of place underlying cultural, social and political values [4,5]. However, more research is needed on the roles of specific community to its place, linking heritage and its setting to the community, especially in community-based conservation projects.

3. Research Site- 10 Shophouses at Armenian Street

Armenian Street is significant for its street diversity. The 300m (approx.) long street is the base of many residential shophouses, a flea market, museums, mosques and temples, George Town World Heritage Office, as well as various new enterprises including art galleries, souvenir shops, cafes, hotels and restaurants.

The site is not new with conservation- authorities and conservationists have long recognized the potential of Armenian Street as a conservation site. It was chosen for a Conservation Pilot Study by the local municipal council in 1989 where it was reported that there is value in retaining residents and trades to allow continuance of traditional activities within authentic surroundings. [6]

The 10 shophouses at Armenian Street (see Figure 1& 2) comprises of nine residential units and one used as a public toilet for the temple. Out of these residences, eight are occupied by tenants and one by the temple caretaker. Five out of the eight tenant families have lived there for more than three generations, two of which have housed five generations of a family. Three households are relatively new; one has lived there for the past 16 years, the other two for less than 5 years. Only two shophouses still run business in their premises- an old barber shop and bicycle shop.
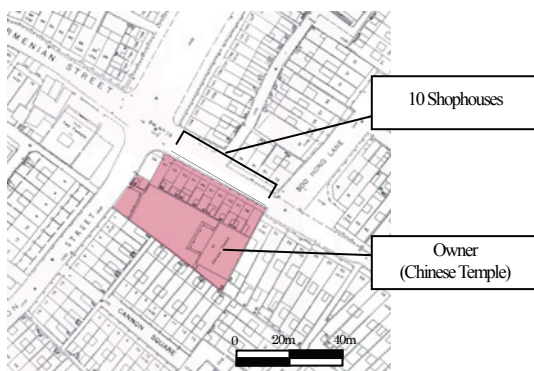

Fig 1. Research Site of 10 Shophouses in Armenian Street
(source: BK Ooi Architect)

Fig 2. Location site of the 10 shophouses at Armenian Street

4. Pilot Program

4-1. Introduction

The pilot program is distinguished from other conservation projects in which it employs active engagement with community. With the help of community architects (facilitator hereinafter), tenants were brought together to think of solutions, and this later became their source of confidence to convey their thoughts to the owner. The stakeholders in this pilot program included six participating shophouses, the owner (Chinese Temple), Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR), and Think City. Two facilitators were selected each by ACHR and Think City to help assist the tenants and owner, and proceed the pilot program.

In the pilot program, Think City would channel funds to the owner for the conservation of the building exterior, whereas ACHR would provide funds in terms of loan to the tenants, for the renovation of the interior. Thus, both owner and tenants will contribute to the funding of restoration work (see figure 3). Think City's criterion to the property owner was that the tenants who intend to stay were not evicted, whereas ACHR stated that the fund would only be extended when tenants received proper tenancy agreement. Tenants participating in the pilot program have been promised a ten-year tenancy agreement as this was calculated to be the optimum time they would need to repay the loan.
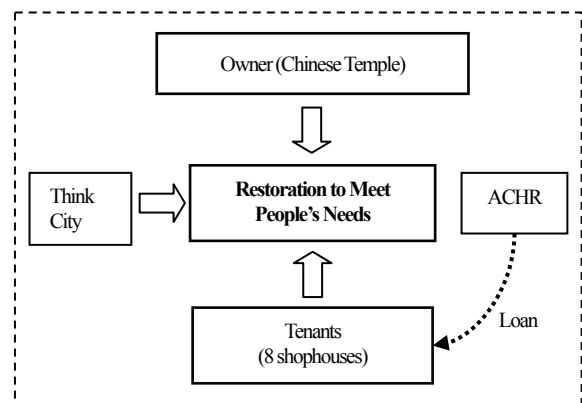

Fig 3. Roles of stakeholders in restoration of pilot program
(source: Adapted from ACHR facilitator)

An important characteristic of this program is that tenants' opinions regarding the areas of repair and the interior renovations desired are taken into consideration as well. With the conservation architect as a mediator, opinions of both the tenants and owner representative are actively integrated into the decision-making process with the professional opinion of the architect.

4-2. Difficulties faced in engaging tenants

The application of community engagement concept faced several difficulties. Based on interviews with the two facilitators, the following were among the difficulties faced when engaging tenants:

1) At start of the program: a) Tenants' initial lack of trust on pilot program, b) Tenants and owner's conflicting positions where both parties did not have good impression of each other.

2) During the course of the program: a) Tenants' thoughts on ownership

of shophouse and distrust on loan system where tenants did not believe in taking up loans to conserve buildings that do not belong to them, b) Lack of a strong concept of 'community' among tenants, c) Tenants' passive attitudes and over-reliance on facilitator.

4-3. Key Issues of Pilot Program

Through observation and one-on-one interviews during fieldwork, the following are identified as the key issues of the pilot program:

1) High dependency on facilitator

The tenants were seen to be highly dependent on the facilitators and there is a lack of initiative on the tenants' side, although this could be linked to the characteristics of the local people in George Town.

2) Lack of community leader

There is no obvious leader among the tenants due to the tenants' unwillingness to take responsibility. This might be an issue in the future; as a leader is necessary for community bonding, decision-making and action taking.

3) Low degree of desperateness

In comparison with other ACHR projects involving the urban poor in other regions, the degree of desperateness among tenants is not as high in this pilot program. Most tenants have resources to lean on in case of eviction.

4-4. Effects of Pilot Program

Through observation and interviews during fieldwork, the pilot program was observed to have resulted in the following effects among tenants and owner:

1) Closer relations amongst neighbors

A better understanding regarding the living conditions and lifestyles of their neighbors was obtained after tenants visited each other's houses for the first time during the mapping process for fund application.

2) Cooperation between tenant and owner

Tenants and owner could cooperate with each other for a solution of their joint concern- the shophouse; home for the tenants and property for the owner. The presence of third parties lent some weight to the tenants for the owner representatives to hear their cause. One tenant believed that without this project, they would have been evicted by the owner a long time ago.

3) Cooperative attitude of the tenants

The tenants, old and new, who had agreed to participate on this project were cooperative and made efforts for the activities after work, contributing what they could. One young tenant who is an interior designer, for example, helped create plans mapping the critical area for repair in the working process.

4) Resolving tension of conservation of housing heritage

The sources of tension in conservation of housing; heritage integrity of structure and the owners' wishes to make change [7] are resolved by protecting both the integrity of the structure as well as the owners' and tenants' wishes to make changes to the building, with the involvement of the community and conservation architect.

4-5. What makes the Pilot Program unique

First, this program, other than being the first which applies community engagement in conservation in Penang, is unique for various reasons. The following factors are recognized as part of the reasons that enabled the progress of this program:

1) Organization of owner (Chinese Temple)

The position of the owner as a benevolent organization further made up of four different cultural and religious Chinese organizations was one of the important factors. Immediate economic profit was not prioritized since the use of the rent was only for temple maintenance.

2) The presence of the original community

The presence of a large number (approx. 30%) of the older generation of tenants aged 50 and above still practicing their old ways, reflects the old ways of living in George Town. The two distinctive old shops- a barber and bicycle shop were invaluable tangible and intangible heritage to be preserved.

5. Armenian Street as a Place

The identity of Armenian Street is investigated through observation of the neighbourhood and interviews with tenants of the 10 shophouses involved in the pilot program. The findings are studied through the three elements of physical setting, community activities, and meaning of place [2]. The roles played by the community are vast and varied. Old tenants live the values and lifestyles of the past whereas new tenants bring in a breath of fresh air through their newer lifestyles and ideas.

Findings from observation and interview on the contribution of community to identity of place and vice-versa are summarized in figure 4. Community and each element of identity of place have a reciprocal relationship.
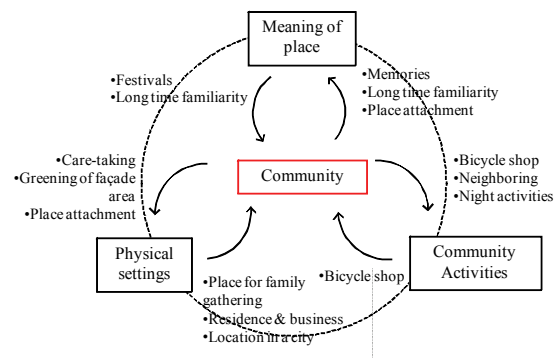

Fig 4. Community as the integral point in the three elements of identity of place

5-1. Physical Settings

Built in middle of the 19th century, the 10 shophouses are relatively smaller than other shophouses in George Town, with 3.7-3.9m in width and 10m in length. The 10 shophouses at Armenian Street is significant for its location at the crossroad between Pitt Street and Armenian Street. The following describes the contribution of community to physical

setting: *1. Care-taking of place:* Tenants who feel a strong sense of belonging to their houses tend to take a good care of their homes, investing sums of money for renovation which results in a more modern façade for these shophouses. *2. Greening of building façade:* The empty space at the facade of the shophouses is decorated with greenery. Various potted plants serve in beautification of the streetscape while providing a sense of a well lived-in area to the outsider.

The following describes the contribution of physical setting to community: *3. A place for family gathering:* The house, although not a property of tenants, has become the ancestral home where children and grandchildren return to during days of celebration. This is particularly observed in houses with elderly generations. 4. *Location in a city:* The location of Armenian Street in the middle of the city is a boon to the tenants. Most tenants work in nearby areas where they can travel to work or school by walking, cycling or motorcycles. Only few own motorcars.

5-2. Community Activities

It was observed that communities through their activities contributed to the identity of place in the following ways: *1. Neighboring relations:* The old and new tenants of different generations have a generally good neighboring relationship with each other, engaging in activities like greeting, chatting, borrowing, and playing. Old tenants know each other's lifestyles well and new tenants could get along with the old tenants and help each other when necessary. *2. Gathering place; the bicycle shop:* The bicycle shop is a gathering point for close neighbors and tourists alike due to the friendly and easygoing owner. High levels of trust are observed among old neighbors, where they sometimes help to man the shop when it was understaffed. *3. Activities at night:* The elder generation of tenants is still living the lifestyle of the past where they sit and chat with each other outside their houses at night. The activities of the residents make this stretch of Armenian street alive at night, a stark contrast compared to other quiet commercial streets of the city.

5-3. Meaning of Place

The meaning of place from the local community's experiences and perspectives that constitute the identity of place are as follows: *1. Long-time familiarity:* The elder generation in particular has strong feelings of attachment to the place. Through their old ways of living, the atmosphere of old George Town could be felt. *2. Memories:* Tenants of the same generation are connected through their memories of childhood of playing together in different areas of the city. *3. Festivals:* Festivals rich in the local culture and tradition, such as Chinese New Year and Hungry Ghost Festival revitalize the city, connecting the residents and visitors together, and create new memories of the city for the people.

6. Research Conclusion

The pilot program contributed to the issues of population decrease and conservation, ensuring the tenants were not evicted by owner for conservation purposes by engaging them in the conservation activity.

Subsequently, this promotes a more sustainable conservation of not only the tangible heritage (shophouses) but also the intangible heritage (community, identity of place). Tenant-owner cooperation for their common interests gives both stakeholders a sense of responsibility and appreciation for the shophouse. Also, through the engagement of tenants and owner, the program contributed to the preservation of identity of place. This paper has shown how tenants contribute to the identity or intangible qualities of Armenian Street, through their daily activities, use of space and history of living, and how the place in turn provides the community of tenants 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. All the stakeholders are generally positive about the prospects of the program, although there are several details that need to be clarified in the future. This paper thus concludes that involving the community in conservation activity of their heritage is constructive towards historic urban conservation, especially when the particular community has a long living history and a strong attachment to the place.

Notes:

(1) Shophouse: A two-or-three-storey building with a "five foot way" in front that provides an open arcade and sheltered walkway, where the first floor is usually used as a shop, and the second floor used as a residence. [8]

(2) ACHR is a regional network of grassroots community organizations, NGOs, professionals involved with the urban poor development processes in Asian cities.

(3) Think City is a special purpose vehicle set up under the federal government investment company to provide financial assistance for urban regeneration in the inner city of George Town.

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