

PROMOTING LOCAL COMMUNITY INTEGRATION IN WORLD HERITAGE SITE PLANNING: GEORGE TOWN, PENANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

George Town, Penang, is a Malaysian city founded 200 years ago as a result of trade and cultural interactions between the East and West. The fabric of this city reflects the influences of migration among Asian, European, and Arabic countries. This led to the emergence of a multicultural identity represented by both tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage. UNESCO declared George Town a World Heritage Site on July 7, 2008, in recognition of the city's rich cultural heritage (SERI, 2009).

Although the UNESCO World Heritage status has been critical to restoring and preserving the tangible (i.e. architectural) heritage of the city, it has also had unintended consequences for the residents of George Town. This research discusses the economic, social, and architectural challenges that George Town residents have faced since the city achieved Heritage Site status, and considers how the UNESCO designation might help preserve local heritage and improve economic development while also improving livability for local people in the heritage area. It begins by describing George Town's heritage and the ways that UNESCO World Heritage Site guidelines affect livability in the site's core and buffer zones. Through surveys, the study found that a rise in rents due to increased foreign investment and the high cost of materials and labor for architectural preservation have caused residents to move away from the heritage area, leading to security concerns. A lack of transparency between local government and citizens, as well as a lack of local awareness of George Town's cultural heritage, exacerbate these challenges. Recommendations include improving public participation in the planning for the heritage area to better address livability concerns, raising awareness of cultural heritage, and providing opportunities for residents to influence decision-making in the early stages of planning. The creation of an administrative committee to coordinate heritage area planning among all stakeholders is also recommended.

Introduction

George Town, the capital city of Penang State in northern Malaysia, was established in 1786 as a British port town on the Strait of Malacca. With more than 200 years of urban history, George Town possesses a rich collection of historic vernacular, administrative, and religious buildings (ICOMOS, 2008). Initially built by the British East Indian Company for European trading settlers, the city's architecture was later influenced by British colonists and migrants from various parts of the India-China trading route (Ming & Mui, 2008). Penang developed into a multicultural, multiracial, multi-religious, and multilingual society, whose population includes people of ethnic Malay (15 percent), Chinese (56 percent), and Indian (17 percent) descent (Think City, 2013). Penang's "tangible" heritage is preserved in shop houses, bungalows, residential blocks, buildings of commerce and trade, administrative buildings, places of worship, and Chinese jetties (Harun & Ismail, 2011).

"Heritage" is a comprehensive concept that consists of cultural, natural, historical, architectural, archaeological, and geological components (Gunlu, Yagci, & Pirnar, 2009). The UNESCO designation aims to protect cultural values, while at the same time harnessing wider heritage benefits (UNESCO, 2005). Since George Town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, it has become one of the most popular destinations for cultural tourism in Malaysia. The resulting benefits include economic growth, an increase in preservation and conservation work in the heritage area, and assured protection of Penang's cultural history.

UNESCO heritage designation in cities throughout the world typically involves delineating *core zones*, which protect the most highly valued cultural assets, and *buffer zones*, which allow controlled development that supports preservation of the core (Bandarin, Sophia, & Others, 2007). For both core and buffer zones, there are guidelines that control renovation, preservation, and conservation. The UNESCO designation guidelines are much more rigid in the core zone, however, than in the buffer zone (Dian & Abdullah, 2013). For example, no building or structure can be demolished in the core zone, and total reconstruction is strictly prohibited (Ertan & Egercioglu, 2015). Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings is recommended if the physical building is preserved.

As noted, the UNESCO guidelines within the buffer zone are much more flexible than those in the core zone (Abdullah, 2008). For example, new construction—such as high-rise hotels and administrative buildings—can take place in the buffer zone (Think City, 2013). This distinction between core and buffer zones helps ensure preservation of a core area, while enabling growth in the buffer area to accommodate the increase in tourism. (Harun & Ismail, 2011).

The UNESCO heritage area within the city covers 260 hectares and is bordered by the straits of Malacca to the northeast; Love Lane, Gat Lebu Melayu to the northwest; and Jalan Dr Lim Chwee Leong to the southwest corner (Figure 1) (Sirat, Tan, & Subramaniam, 2010). George Town's core zone is defined by its high concentration of significant cultural sites and buildings. The core zone is approximately 109 hectares (42 percent) of the

UNESCO heritage area, and contains nearly 1,900 historic buildings. The buffer zone is approximately 150 hectares (58 percent) of the heritage area, and is meant to serve as a buffer against development immediately around the heritage area (GTWHI, 2016).

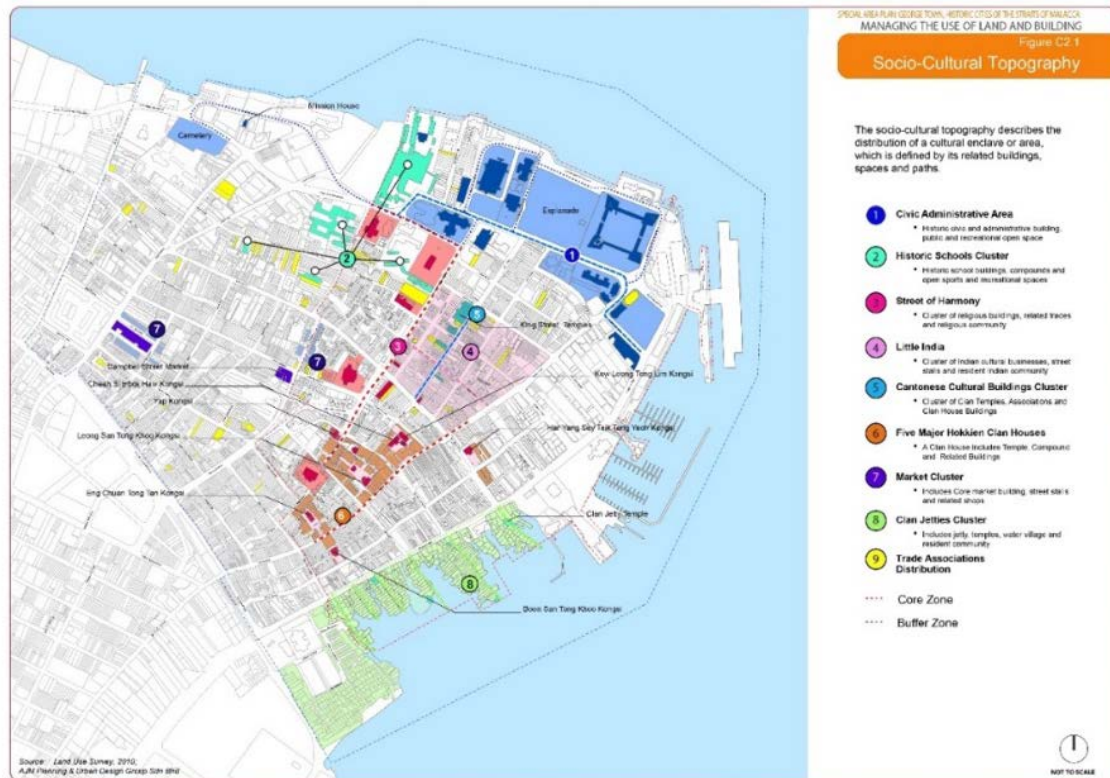


Figure 1. Main cultural areas within the George Town World Heritage Site¹

Despite the positive impacts that UNESCO designation can bring, it can also inadvertently create challenges in terms of livability. In George Town, increased tourism has brought a higher cost of living and lower paying jobs, resulting in unaffordability for local people (SERI, 2009), and making it more challenging for them to stay and work in the heritage area (Harun & Ismail, 2011). Local residents are pushed farther away from the city center and replaced with investors and workers from outside of Malaysia (UNESCO-NORWAY, 2001). This leads to a decrease in ethnic diversity and a gradual decline of traditional skills and craftsmanship (Ming & Mui, 2008). To address the challenges that have arisen since the declaration, the government has tried to foster organizations that simultaneously work on these problems and organize the work inside the heritage area.

Malaysian institutions involved in UNESCO heritage area development

Since 2008, UNESCO has encouraged Malaysia to enact laws that protect heritage as part of its global efforts to ensure that all countries have heritage protection at all levels of government. These efforts helped form

Malaysia's current system of heritage conservation, which is governed by the 2005 National Heritage Act (NHA), 1976 Town and Country Planning Acts (TCPA), 1974 Environmental Impact Assessment Act (EIA), 1976 Street Drainage and Building Act, and 1984 Uniform Building By-laws (Dian & Abdullah, 2013) (Appendix 1). Malaysia's emphasis on heritage preservation at the national level was a central reason for UNESCO's eventual designation of George Town as a World Heritage Site. After George Town received World Heritage Site (WHS) status in 2008, the Malaysian government worked with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (WHC) to prepare two main plans: the Conservation Management Plan (CMP) and the Special Area Plan (SAP) (ICOMOS, 2008). The CMP follows the international requirements of the WHC for conservation management plans, while the SAP gives more detailed guidelines on implementation and management of the heritage area. The SAP has been updated twice since 2008: in 2013 and again in 2016.

There are two primary organizations involved in planning for the George Town heritage area. George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), established in 2008, is the local planning authority that develops the SAP in coordination with the WHC and provides technical advice for preservation work (Said & Goodey, 2013). Think City, a subsidiary of Khazanah (Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund), provides small grants for specific restoration projects. It also conducts baseline population and land use change studies within the heritage area (MacDonald, Stuart, 2011).

All preservation and conservation work inside the heritage area must follow official channels for approval. Proposals must be submitted that follow SAP technical guidelines, including plans, elevations, sections, and visual materials that match the requirements of the relevant SAP report for heritage impact and assessment (GTWHI, 2016). Preparing these plans and documents requires hiring professionals who understand and address the specific requirements of the SAP. Before any repair work can be done, approval must be obtained from the Municipal Council of Penang Island (*Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang*, or MBPP), Department of Heritage Conservation. Applicants must go through two phases of approval: an initial pre-consultation, and a second official submission if the pre-consultation was successful (Harun & Ismail, 2011). During each of these two phases, the applicant must go through several different offices, including the MBPP Planning department, the MBPP Department of Heritage Conservation, and the GTWHI Technical Office. For most local residents, these two phases and their attendant procedures tend to make repair work and maintenance time consuming and expensive. Appendix 2 shows the steps of the repair approval process.

Methods

This research seeks to understand how UNESCO designation can help preserve local heritage and stimulate economic growth while also meeting the needs of local residents. Data was gathered from studies conducted by local authorities such as Think City, which published their final baseline study on population and land use change in 2013, after UNESCO designation took effect, and the 2016 SAP published by GTWHI. Interviews with different

governmental, nongovernmental, and local people were conducted between October and November of 2016, to identify the problems that residents feel are most pressing within the core and buffer areas. At the same time, a 13-question English survey was completed by 45 residents of George Town. Respondents comprised a range of ages, ethnicities (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), and occupations (69 percent shop house workers, 11 percent shop house owners, 20 percent residents working from their homes). Participants were selected to represent different races, genders, and ages.

Questionnaire objectives and limitations

The aim of the questionnaire was to elaborate upon several issues affecting community life that were mentioned in Think City and GTWHI studies. Residents were asked to identify issues related to building maintenance, security, affordability, and livability. Six yes-or-no questions were followed by three open-ended questions that asked respondents to describe challenges and problems in their own words. The final three questions were good/bad ratings intended to reveal the most pressing challenges for locals inside George Town (Appendix 4).

Among the determinants that affected completion of the questionnaire was language differences with the local community, as well as the willingness of the population to respond to the questions related to government performance, and the impact of governmental plans on local residents' and stockholders' life and work.

Findings and discussion

Results of the questionnaire and interviews show that people feel livability issues in the core and buffer zones are not adequately addressed. Four challenges appear to be most pressing to residents: cost of living and affordability; security concerns; government transparency; and lack of awareness about cultural heritage.

Affordability is a top concern for local residents of George Town: 62 percent of survey respondents found that government investments and high-rise investments affect their work and housing affordability. Since George Town received WHS status in 2008, the types of jobs available and the price of rent have changed. Land values in the World Heritage area have increased, attracting foreign investors interested in tourist services, such as hotels and restaurants. The increased land value and rent for local residents made the option of selling their workplaces and houses more attractive than investing in preserving the buildings' architectural heritage. Therefore, many residents sold their land to foreign investors, who quickly converted them into tourist-centered businesses. Table 1 shows the increase in number of hotels and other types of accommodation for tourists (such as motels, apartment rentals, etc.) that replaced local businesses between 2009 and 2013. Similarly, many traditional local eating establishments were replaced with expensive restaurants geared towards foreigners and tourists. At the same time, given the high costs to locals of restoration and preservation due to the strict rules of UNESCO WHS status (and the lack of government-run grant

programs to help cover these costs), many workplaces and houses have been left vacant or abandoned, as shown in Table 1 (Think City, 2013).

Type of land use	No. of units, 2009	No. of units, 2013	Change in units, 2009–2013	Change in units, 2009–2013
Business	3,279	3,177	-102	-3.11%
Residence	2,533	2,302	-231	-9.12%
Hotel or other tourist accommodation	61	97	36	59%
Vacant	1,267	1478	211	16.7%

Table 1. Change in George Town heritage area land use, 2009–2013²

An increase in low-paying service jobs in the tourism industry in George Town since WHS was enacted—jobs often taken by foreign workers (Think City, 2013)—has made it difficult for locals to afford the increased cost of living. The total labor force in the WHS has stayed relatively constant at around 22,000 workers, but within that labor force, as shown in 2008 to 2013 Think City study, there are more migrant workers and more laborer/general workers from other countries and regions (particularly Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Nepal Pakistan, Thailand, Vietnam, Europe, and Australia) (Think City, 2013). The increase in foreign investment and competition in the tourism sectors, and the resulting decrease in affordability, have shaken local business owners' confidence. More than 20 percent of local businesses are unsure whether they will stay in George Town over the next five years (Think City, 2013).

George Town's World Heritage status has also impacted material and labor affordability, which makes preservation work like house renovation and maintenance more difficult. When repairing or replacing structural elements, for example, UNESCO guidelines require that the features of the buildings must be retained and original materials must be used for any maintenance. The costs that these requirements impose are high, in part because using the original building techniques requires hiring experts from other parts of Malaysia (Shevren LAI, 2015). Sixty-five percent of respondents answered that maintenance in the heritage area was bad and unaffordable due to the expensive cost of preservation work, and that maintenance for tourist accommodations and tourism services was better than in their own houses and workplaces.

The approval process for technical preservation work is also time-consuming and expensive. Professional developers have the capacity and resources to follow this complicated process, but local residents' applications are sometimes delayed when they submit incomplete proposals (Irvin, 2004). The high cost of restoration has led many residents to either neglect

maintenance or sell their homes to investors (often from China and Singapore) who can afford the expensive materials and techniques, which also affects their contribution to the management plans (Dian & Abdullah, 2013).

In addition to economic problems, dilapidated and vacant premises impact the perceived safety of the heritage area. Over half of respondents indicated some security concerns about the overall heritage area, while 20 percent rated security in the heritage area as bad. Further discussion with residents showed that security concerns at night and in the buffer zone were especially troubling. Most residents are concerned about their safety walking in the heritage area after 7:30 p.m., when many businesses in the buffer zone close and movement on the streets decreases. Most places in George Town empty out by 8 p.m., when people—primarily older people—leave their jobs to return to homes outside the heritage area, where the cost of living is more affordable.³

As noted, another pressing problem is a general lack of transparency in interactions between the government and its citizens. Most residents are frustrated by governmental actions regarding George Town; in fact, only 30 percent of survey respondents reported being satisfied with those actions. Follow-up questions made it clear that people were generally not aware of current or future economic plans for George Town. Furthermore, most people were very cautious about discussing their personal evaluation of the government. The overall lack of communication channels to integrate citizen feedback into governmental development plans is particularly problematic. One example is the permit process for building repair and maintenance: again, that process is very costly and time-consuming, and yet residents don't have a mechanism to voice their objections or suggestions (MacDonald, Stuart, 2011).

Based on interviews and questionnaire results, a lack of awareness of George Town's cultural heritage is also evident. When asking people about the significance of George Town, why UNESCO designation was promoted for George Town as a heritage site, and the challenges and benefits associated with heritage designation, little appreciation was shown for the history and cultural value of George Town. Without such awareness, local people are less likely to defend their rights to keep their houses and economic activities inside George Town, or to integrate their needs and opinions on implementation of development plans. Similarly, opportunities for tourists to engage in cultural exchange and gain an appreciation for George Town must be in place. If there are no local people who know and appreciate the heritage of George Town, and who can share the heritage with tourists, there will be little heritage left to protect.

Recommendations

Engage the public in heritage site planning

To address the challenges of affordability, security, transparency, and cultural awareness, more effective public participation is needed in George Town.

Public participation is not only about engaging people in the implementation of policies that affect their way of life, but also about influencing the decision-making and design phases of planning (Boyte, 1996). This will not be easy to accomplish. In Malaysia, public participation has tended to be used as a political strategy prior to elections, rather than a genuine development strategy (Ming & Mui, 2008). In George Town, the public has generally been informed of plans after they have been created.

In addition, acts that govern Malaysia's heritage sites, like the TCPA and NHA, do not have provisions that obligate authorities to publish details of the planning application (Sirat, Tan, & Subramaniam, 2010). Though Section 21 of the TCPA requires that the public be informed of existing planning applications, it doesn't include public involvement in the process of development planning itself (Abdullah, 2008). The SAP is made available for the public to review and make recommendations when it is completed, but not during the *design* of the document, when such input would presumably have more impact (GTWHI, 2016). In addition, neither the CMP nor SAP addresses issues of community livability in any of its phases for the planning process.

Promote greater affordability, security, governmental transparency, and cultural awareness

For effective public participation to occur, the public must first be provided with adequate information to understand heritage conservation issues and the planning process, and then be given the chance to participate effectively (Dian & Abdullah, 2013). A second key component to effective public participation in heritage development plans is cooperation among a range of government authorities and civil society organizations throughout the planning process. (Hay-Edie, Murusuri, & Moure C, 2011).

George Town should implement strategies to improve livability by making housing and building materials more affordable, and by training craftsmen in traditional maintenance and repair. These strategies will help to retain residents in the heritage areas, and also encourage those who have moved away to return to the city center.

To improve livability for residents, government—in cooperation with civil society—should create incentives to attract business owners to lease currently vacant buildings. One strategy for the adaptive reuse of these buildings is to turn them into small studio spaces, small shops, or markets for selling local foods and crafts. These small-scale businesses would make living and working in George Town more affordable, and could help attract young people back to George Town to sustain its vitality and vibrancy. Such actions, if successful, could help offset the high cost of living in the city.

The government can also help preserve local ownership by subsidizing the rents of shops, and implementing policies that retain ownership for locals. Currently, there are no laws or regulations to prevent foreign investors from buying shops or other types of property in George Town's heritage area (Penang Institute, 2016). Rent and land-price grants should be available and accessible for local stakeholders.

For both investors and local developers, restriction of land grants should be combined with the research required for restoration, conservation

work, or any other requirements. This system should be simultaneously reviewed and approved by state authorities and by local residents, and should guarantee that locals can remain in their own premises. GTWHI and Think City could provide these materials themselves, or provide funds for the subsidies.

In addition to financial assistance, the government can help to preserve the value of historic buildings by engaging residents in the renovation, preservation, and conservation process. Training a new generation of local craftspeople and integrating them with the authorities that manage heritage area planning would improve participatory land-use plans. GTWHI has already gone down this path, having started technical capacity building programs in 2010 to train local craftspeople in the original methods used in conservation work. These programs can be further expanded into long- and short-term crafts education programs with certifications authorized by GTWHI. Once these programs are well established, creating a directory of these trained craftsmen would make it easy for residents to hire them, rather than hiring an outside expert.

As notes, strategies for deepening residents' investment in and opportunities for public participation also include raising awareness of cultural heritage, and implementing structures that give people chances to shape development. Raising awareness will strengthen the knowledge, abilities, skills, and behavior of people with direct responsibility for heritage conservation and management, and will promote site advantages to attract back former residents (GHF, 2009). When people value and appreciate their heritage, they will defend that heritage and their rights to protect their own history. They will be more motivated to become involved in plans that concern their history, like developing cultural heritage performance events and participating in cultural markets and cultural schools.

This awareness-raising can be achieved through workshops and educational events like street festivals, cultural green ways, social pathways events, and authentic religion five footways, which should be held in cooperation among GTWHI, Think City, NGOs, and community organizations, along with local stakeholders (ICOMOS-UK, 2015). Integrating cultural heritage awareness at lower levels of the education system would help George Town's youngest residents appreciate the cultural history and value of their city from an early age.

It is also essential to engage residents in designing development and preservation plans from the start, to create solutions that effectively address their needs, like affordable housing, inexpensive places to eat, and a safe atmosphere at night for social and cultural activities. In addition to civil society awareness campaigns, public hearings for any governmental and nongovernmental actions and design workshops that take place during the design phase of management plans (rather than soliciting opinions after plans have been finished) would be an improvement. For example, the current SAP includes many open public spaces and waterfront development projects to improve livability inside the heritage areas, yet their design was not informed by public input. Residents should be engaged to determine how such open spaces should be structured, and how they can be used more interactively.

Increased public engagement can also lead to greater diversity in architectural design restoration and conservation.

Coordinated administrative oversight for livability and opportunities for public participation

To enact these strategies for public participation and ensure that livability concerns are addressed, there should be coordinated administrative oversight in the form of a strategic authority. This committee would facilitate cooperation among planning and heritage agencies, municipalities, community organizations, NGOs, and universities, whose representatives would make up the authority.

The aim of such a committee would be to both conserve the tangible heritage site and at the same time improve management approaches to include improved public participation in all planning phases. To ensure diversity of stakeholder representation, the committee should determine and categorize all stakeholders and identify each group's concerns to incorporate all of them into the management development plan.

A model for this administrative committee could be the city of Cairo, Egypt. In historic Old Cairo, which was nominated for World Heritage Site status in 1979, NGOs coordinated with public authorities to improve management approaches inside the urban heritage areas. These efforts resulted in the Urban Regeneration Project for Historic Cairo (URHC), which has been working with local authorities since 2010 to prepare planning and management projects that facilitate heritage conservation, socioeconomic revival, and restoration of heritage sites. Effective coordination among the relevant institutions kept local people living and working on their property and enhanced the site's livability for both locals and tourists (WHR, 2013).

As noted, useful lessons can be learned from this example. Once the World Heritage Site was recognized and protected, successful development was achieved through an efficient, comprehensive, and sustainable management system. In George Town, GTWHI would be an appropriate body to initiate a similar authority, and coordinate with the UNESCO committee to facilitate the regulation of licenses for any work locals would undertake in the heritage area, like maintenance and repair of their own premises, and to offer them affordable technical support. More coordination and better contributions from all sectors will help address the needs and challenges of all people within the heritage site.

Conclusion

Community engagement in conservation and preservation management plans for heritage sites can help determine whether those plans will succeed or fail. The stakes are high: without local people's contributions, the social and cultural custodians of heritage will disappear, and physical tangible monuments that were supposed to be preserved will be destroyed.

To prevent the deterioration of heritage and improve its physical condition, current residents and local stakeholders should approve of and be integrated into development and management plans. They are, after all,

uniquely qualified to share their history and values with all international tourists.

George Town is no exception. George Town's part in Asian history and the evolution of Malaysia has yielded tremendous lessons that no one except the local population can impart—including in the form of social and cultural plans.

The UNESCO designation in George Town has had both positive and negative effects on economic, social, and culture trends; tourism; and architectural conservation and preservation work. A lack of local stakeholder involvement in tourism development after WHS status was enacted contributed to the negative effects. Other problems emerged from UNESCO guidelines and restrictions, governmental policies, and the inadequate administrative set-up in the heritage area.

A lack of affordable housing and an increased cost of living led to local people's displacement by investors and increased gentrification, increased businesses at the expense of residences, an increase in vacant buildings and dilapidated premises, and an increase in low-paid services jobs. Professional work now goes to investors and foreigners, rather than local workers, and security concerns have increased (especially at night). Obligating people to use original materials and original construction techniques makes renovations prohibitively expensive for many locals. Additionally, navigating the government's permitting channels is time- and cost-consuming. The lack of governmental transparency has prevented local peoples' awareness of these interactions, and they therefore feel disconnected from the development plans' implementation.

The decline of public involvement directly impacts local people's lives in the heritage areas. Government policies in George Town, such as SAP, didn't provide for effective public participation during various phases of development, or for the support of technical work. That diminished people's involvement in tourism plans and other kinds of permissible development inside heritage areas.

Public participation in George Town could be enhanced by organizing workshops and educational events aimed at multiple stakeholder groups. Other strategies might include creating incentives to attract residents with their businesses to rent vacant buildings, empowering younger generations and engaging them in technical work, and engaging people in SAP design sessions and implementation—in other words, early in the process.

To guarantee that people stay and participate, promotion of affordable housing and building materials should make both additional housing and work available within the heritage area. The heritage area cooperation between GTWHI and Think City should provide materials required for maintenance work—and at the same time, reduce its cost for local people.

To ensure open communication channels among all parties involved in the heritage site livability development plan, and to guarantee effective public participation, a committee must be established to coordinate administrative oversight and set up facilitations. This committee should gather up most of the heritage conservation acts and municipalities with representatives of different non-governmental authorities—for example, universities and NGOs—into one

project place. This authority should be charged with implementing a project that conserves tangible heritage, and—at the same time—addresses people’s needs through their effective participation.

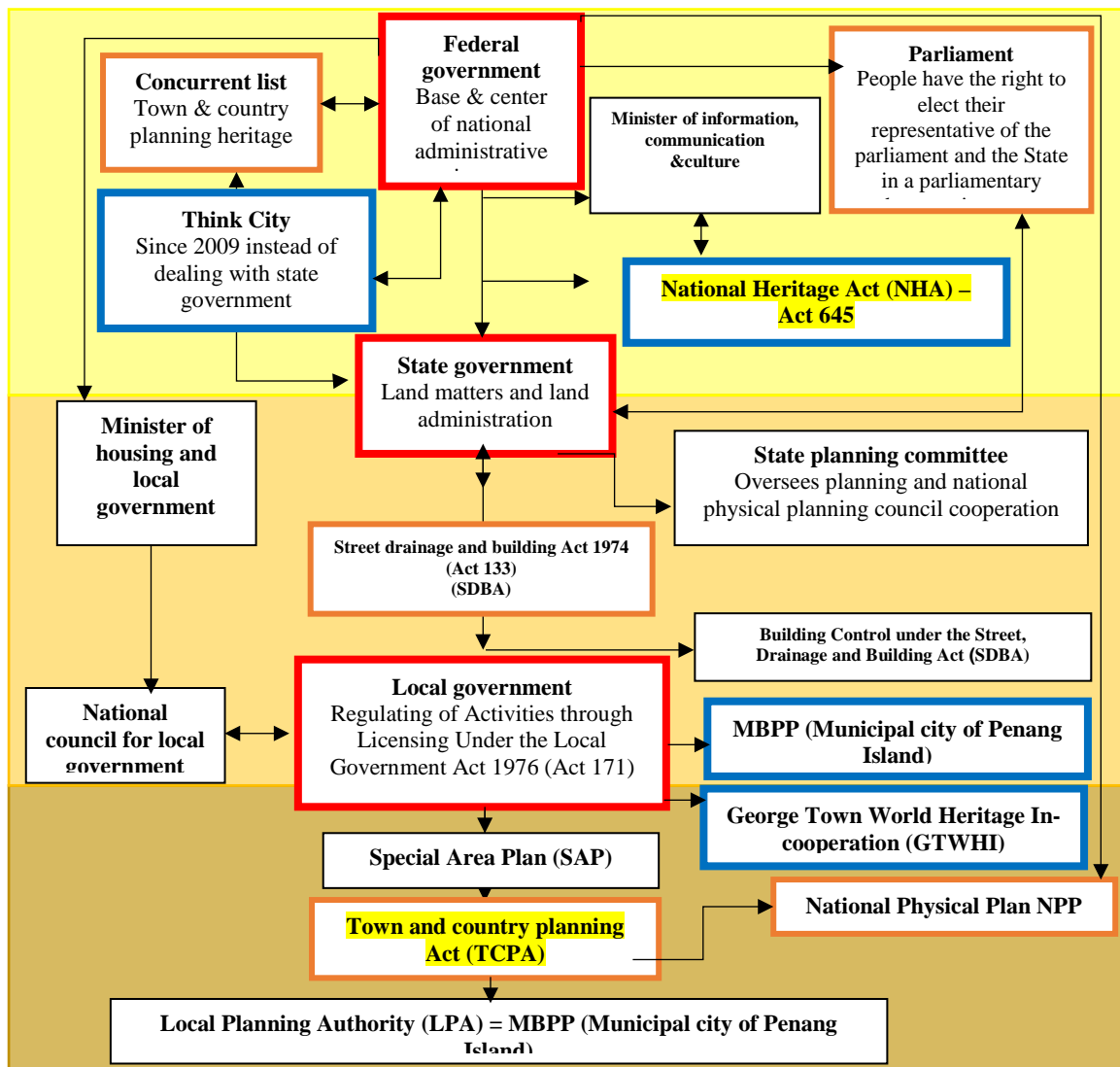
Heritage preservation must extend beyond the preservation of “tangible” heritage like local architecture. For a living heritage area like George Town, future development must ensure that “intangible” heritage is also maintained. For local residents to stay in the heritage site, they must feel that they are a vital part of that place—through participation in all development actions and plans that will shape and direct their lives.

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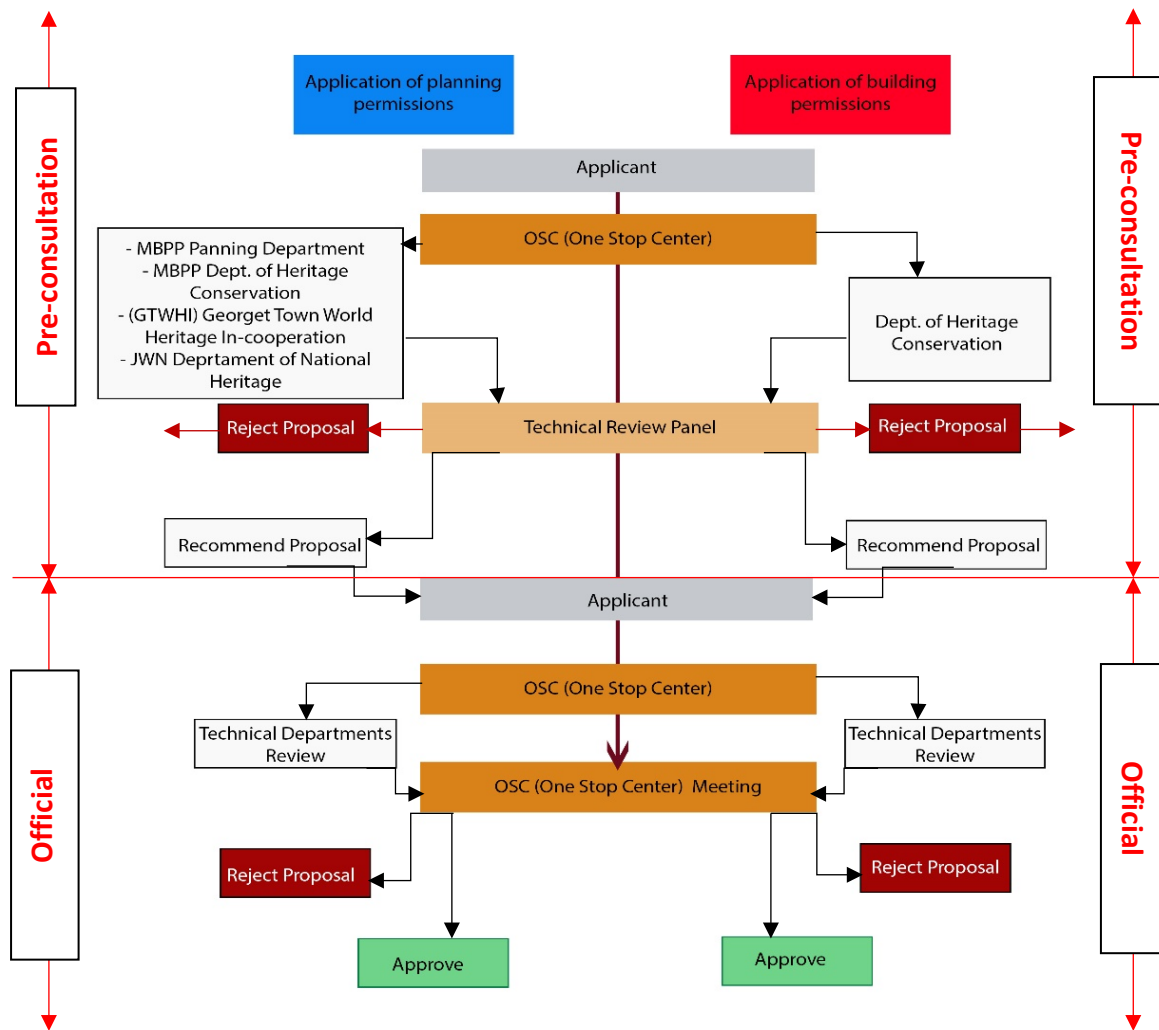
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Appendix 1. Proposed governmental authorities' levels that deal with heritage and ownership of different kinds of premises
Source: Author



Appendix 2. Flow chart for the application of planning permission and application of building plan to MBPP.
Source: SAP

Name:

Age:

Country:

Work:

Housing location:

Work location:

Do you find world heritage site designation in Penang achieve good livable circumstances? And why?

Yes No Don't know

How do you find local regulations for housing, rent, and interventions? And why?

Good Bad Don't know

Do you prefer working and housing inside George Town touristic area? And why?

Yes No Don't know

Do you find governmental actions in George Town satisfying? And why?

Yes No Don't know

Are you satisfying about economic heritage development plans in George Town? And why?

Yes No Don't know

Do you find governmental investments and high rise investments affect locals work and housing? And why?

Yes No Don't know

What are the positive / negative points for UNESCO sites?

What are the basic needs you don't find in living or working in George Town Penang?

Where do you prefer to live and work, inside George Town area or near areas for new investments? And why?

Appendix 3. Interview questionnaire

Notes

¹ Think City G. T., 2015

² Think City study of the change in land use and population in George Town (Think City, 2013)

³ Many young people leave George Town entirely due to a lack of jobs that require university degrees, rather than the tourism services jobs that predominate (Think City G. T., 2015).