



# Research **NEWS**

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IT is the weekend, and Melaka is packed with tourists.

Visitors from all over the world swarm the city centre; pedestrians bustle about the streets, taking photographs of the colonial architecture and sampling local cuisine while those with vehicles fill up the main roads of the city.

The locals may not be fond of the resulting congestion, but this is a common sight in the state, which was recognised with a joint inscription with George Town on the Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage list in 2008.

Being on the World Heritage list brings higher international fame, with Unesco saying the resulting prestige often helps raise awareness among citizens and governments about heritage preservation.

But now Melaka is looking to expand its development with the Straits of Melaka Waterfront Economic Zone (SM-WEZ) project, which will include building on Unesco gazetted reclaimed land.

Early last month, it was reported that the Chief Minister Datuk Seri Ab Rauf Yusof had said that the state had applied for the development and is awaiting approval from the National Heritage Department after its first application was rejected.

#### Unesco designation in danger

If Melaka gets approval to build on gazetted heritage sites, experts warn it may cost Melaka its Unesco World Heritage status.

This is because being a Unesco heritage site comes with operational guidelines under the World Heritage Convention 1972 says Dr Shahrul Yani Said, an associate professor at the faculty of architecture, planning and surveying at Universiti Teknologi Mara.

She points specifically to Paragraph 172 of the convention, which states that parties are invited to inform the committee of any intention to undertake or authorise any new construction in a protected area that may affect the property's outstanding universal value (OUV). The OUV of a site is one of the major considerations when applying for Unesco World Heritage site status.

"This shows the importance of safeguarding the world heritage site and ensures any new development won't affect the OUV of the place."

"There are cases where the guidelines were not followed and a place which was listed sometimes got delisted."

"Once the OUVs are missing, the potential of delisting is higher, therefore it should be avoided," Shahrul says.

Malaysia has also previously recognised the importance of conserving a Unesco World Heritage site as stated in the 2013 State of Conservation Report presented by the country to the World Heritage Committee.

In the report, Malaysia states that it has amended its draft Special Area Plans (SAPs) that now stress the importance of new developments not detracting from the OUV of the property

# Status quandary

Melaka is applying to develop land gazetted as a World Heritage site. While this move could be key for the state's development, it will impact not only the city's Unesco listing, but also George Town's.



**Global profile:** Being on the World Heritage list has brought higher international fame to Melaka, as seen here in 2008, with Unesco saying the resulting prestige often helps raise awareness among citizens and governments about heritage preservation. — AFP

and require Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA) for all new developments, says Badan Warisan Malaysia president Lim Wei-Ling.

Shahrul adds that aside from the SAPs, Malaysia has also come up with Conservation Management Plans (CMP) to help sustain the OUV of heritage sites.

"In terms of balancing development and conservation, the CMP and SAP set-up has outlined what to do and not to do," she says.

"Furthermore, the National Heritage Department has been monitoring our World Heritage sites and we can say that compared with before, the department has actively engaged with relevant parties to safeguard our heritage."

The Housing and Local Government Ministry also launched the Urban Regeneration implementation guidelines in 2023 to show the government's stand in protecting heritage sites in urban areas.

In Melaka, while its historic area has been recognised as a heritage enclave by Unesco, the coastline is just as important, she adds.

As such, high-impact projects

such as the SM-WEZ will almost certainly affect World Heritage status, Lim says.

"Badan Warisan would suggest that any application to 'reclaim' or 're-designate' any part of the designated Unesco World Heritage site needs to be carefully done so as not to jeopardise its current heritage status."

#### Implications for Penang

Then there is the impact of this move for George Town, another historic city that enjoys a large influx of tourists every year.

"It would be prudent to consult George Town on this matter as it may affect George Town's World Heritage status too."

"It should not be a unilateral decision by Melaka alone. Any attempt by Melaka to enlarge the World Heritage site must be carefully considered, planned and executed," Lim says.

The Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) does have something to say about Melaka's application.

First of all, the body reminds stakeholders that the title of the World Heritage inscription given to Melaka and Penang is very clear: ie "Melaka and George

Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca"

As such, it says there is "definitely" a danger of not only Melaka but George Town also losing its World Heritage status.

Despite Penang's stake in this, the PHT says it is not aware of the first application as mentioned by Rauf.

It acknowledges that rezoning is a state matter and Melaka has the discretion to rezone any property. However, it noted that if informed, the World Heritage Committee will likely reject the change in the use status of the land and advise against it, especially if it is in a core area or buffer zone.

But heritage conservation and urban development need not be in contention with each other. PHT says culture-based economic development has many benefits too, especially within World Heritage sites.

"One does not preclude the other. The Melaka government uses this as an excuse, which should be rebutted."

"Already there is over-tourism evident in Melaka, mainly due to the cachet of the World Heritage status."

"Land prices have also shot up due to the scarcity value. The listing has brought international fame, national pride, and recognition."

"Think City, originally founded in 2009 to manage urban rejuvenation in George Town, concurs with the view that heritage preservation does not need to compete with economic development."

Its managing director Datuk Hamdan Abdul Majeed says the continued international recognition is important as it lays the foundation for new forms of economic development based around heritage and culture.

According to him, based on Think City's study, visitors to Penang have increased from six million to nine million in the last decade, much of it aligned with cultural tourism.

"We believe that the path forwards is through sustainable urban development complementing the preservation of heritage assets."

"Promoting growth and infrastructure with new development surrounding heritage sites, keeping them intact, is encouraged," says Hamdan.

## STATUS QUANDARY

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