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Community Perspective and Challenges of Heritage Buildings Conservation in Urban Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the significance of Malaysia's heritage buildings, especially in areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, is essential for several reasons. Kuala Lumpur and Penang, a region renowned for its rich architectural and cultural legacy, is the location of various structures that illustrate the city's historical development from the British colonial era to the dynamic, multicultural present. These heritage buildings could become cost-effective investments that benefit ancillary economic growth in local or regional areas. This paper aims to review the Malaysian public's concern about heritage building conservation, including identifying key reasons and challenges for retaining these buildings in Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown Penang. Both locations, which were designated as World Heritage Sites, are renowned for having a large number of historically significant structures that are older than 100 years. However, not all historic structures have been suitably preserved in the neighbourhood, particularly by the owners and tenants. Due to this, there are severe problems with heritage buildings that need to be addressed by the public and their owners. The research method adopted was the quantitative approach employing a questionnaire survey with 100 questionnaires distributed to local respondents. From the community's observation, heritage buildings in Georgetown needed to be adequately conserved compared to Kuala Lumpur. In addition, the study findings conclude that the locals' degree of knowledge in both locations is fairly excellent.

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INTRODUCTION

A heritage building is one of the country's historical structures that holds significant worth for the nation (Naqiuddin et al., 2013). Malaysia has a variety of heritage buildings with distinct architectural styles, purposes, and structural details. Heritage structures are subject to varying degrees of damage and faults depending on several factors, including age, location, environmental risks, and annual upkeep that directly affect the building's lifespan and structural integrity. Particularly in Georgetown, conservation efforts are helpful to ensure that historically significant structures survive and are preserved. However, Georgetown's historic structures and monuments have become worse, showing evidence of disrepair. The absence of community involvement in heritage building conservation may cause this. A few of these historically significant structures require restoration after suffering significant natural disaster damage (Halim & Tambi, 2021). A reflection on the past will highlight the distinct roles that each group and individual played in the development of Kuala Lumpur, creating a feeling of community and connection to the familiar past. The public's interest in Kuala Lumpur's history has recently increased, yet only some organisations can offer comprehensive support (Yuen et al., 2020). According to Ismail et al. (2021), studies showed that inadequate upkeep of documentation is the leading cause of the deterioration of Malaysia's heritage structures. In general, historical building conservation is a technological endeavour. It required concrete steps to protect the historic buildings' materials and structure. The goal of the action is to extend the life of the buildings by preventing degradation. Though the concepts are pretty straightforward, conservation has long been considered rehabilitation. Incorrect beliefs about conservation influence public opinion of local heritage buildings. Building conservation should preserve as much of the original building's structure and fabric as feasible to adhere to the conservation principle. Based on this idea and to maintain the national legacy in its ‘true nature’ or authentic value, it has become significantly complex, particularly when making decisions and judgements related to conservation. The UNESCO World Heritage List officially designated the Malacca Historical City and George Town's Inner City as World Heritage Sites on 7 July 2008. Since then, the preservation of historic structures has gained significant attention, particularly in the travel and tourism sector, and has grown in demand. The general public, professionals, and academics are growing more mindful of and concerned about cultural heritage. Not only are monuments and structures a source of concern, but also the heritage buildings' ultimate appearance and conservation procedure. Preservation of historic structures gives people a sense of emotional connection and historical awareness. The practices of building conservation in Malaysia will be discussed in this study. Additionally, it covers the idea, tenet, and methodology behind heritage building conservation. This paper will present public concerns on the significance of heritage buildings in Malaysia, focusing on Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown Penang heritage buildings to review the public's concerns in Malaysia over the preservation of heritage buildings and highlight the main arguments in favour of and obstacles to the preservation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage Building and Challenges

A cultural practice known as ‘heritage’ explains the history of a town, city or region that one community group passed down to another community. Heritage building conservation is a relatively recent development in Malaysian architecture. Malaysian heritage building preservation has several difficulties. The neighbourhood, the country, and even the nation gains immensely from its presence. The government, non-governmental organizations and even the local community all thoroughly try to protect historically significant structures from imminent demolition (Fauzi & Abdul Ghani, 2022). One common issue is the deterioration of these buildings due to aging and weathering, as seen in the case of Anglican Churches. These structures are in disrepair and have apparent defects. Due to lack of legal protection, these churches frequently rely on congregational donations for maintenance (Ow et al., 2023). Another challenge is the

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lack of comprehensive conservation efforts, which destroys heritage buildings (Mohd Dian et al., 2022). Governmental authorities, preservation organizations, community groups, and concerned citizens must work together to address these issues. Enhancing preservation laws and regulations to give heritage structures legal, solid protection is one way to strengthen conservation efforts. In addition, this includes raising public awareness to encourage support and advocacy for historic protection through media campaigns, outreach initiatives, and education. Definitional confusion, difficulties in announcing heritage buildings, vandalism activities and lack of cooperation from building owners are significant challenges in conserving heritage buildings. To address these challenges, it is crucial to improve preservation efforts, involve public participation and embed human rights elements in legislation. In numerous earlier studies, various issues about the sustainability of the condition of heritage buildings have been widely discussed. Common faults, sometimes called cosmetic defects, account for most issues with heritage buildings' conditions (Zuraidi et al., 2018). According to Nowogonska (2020) and Zolkaflu et al. (2018), apart from giving a bad appearance, those faults also give the perspective that remedial actions are not given enough attention.

Importance of Maintenance

When many old structures underwent the conservation and preservation process to be reused again, Malaysians witnessed a beneficial trend. Upkeep is necessary for an activity that is crucial in determining the building's lifespan, in addition to guaranteeing the physical and operational integrity of the historic structure. Baharuddin et al. (2014) discovered that the following are the most essential elements and challenges associated with conserving landmark buildings:

(i) Lack of Maintenance Staff Training & Expertise - It was discovered that the most crucial element in the maintenance management of historic buildings is the training and experience of the maintenance crew. Furthermore, fewer maintenance organizations have been established for each landmark structure.

(ii) 'Just in Time' or Unplanned Approach - A scheduled maintenance method is only used for historic buildings if specific requirements, such as mechanical and electrical works, are met. It was also discovered that the maintenance strategy for landmark buildings needs to include strategic planning. Most respondents are unaware of how crucial strategic planning is in achieving 'value for money'.

(iii) The Absence of Guidelines regarding Maintenance for Historic Buildings - The National Heritage Department and other authorities have not established any particular norms, policies, methods or systems about guidelines on maintenance for historic buildings.

(iv) Lack of Financial Support - Financial support is the primary problem with historic building maintenance. Furthermore, the financial budget allocation is restricted to the designated historic buildings only.

Awareness Among the Community

The number of historical sites UNESCO designated as world assets sites is rising, and so is public awareness of conserving cultural assets. According to Suraiyati (2018), the trend towards preserving, repairing and modifying ancient structures and sites has also been widely explored and implemented. Aisiah et al. (2016) described historical awareness as the mentality and condition that arises when people recall the significance and intent of history. An essential element of historical awareness is comprehending historical events regarding values, effects and lessons learned from earlier events. Malaysia started endeavouring to conserve its historic buildings only about thirty to forty years ago. Though it is happening

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more slowly, awareness is gradually growing. Further work to preserve these structures could positively impact the nation, particularly for the next generation. However, many people frequently wonder if these structures should be maintained. After all, the government is primarily responsible for promoting public involvement to jointly protect the country's legacy by implementing pertinent laws and authority policies. Ultimately, it is critical to recognize that heritage building protection is a limited resource and that, in addition to embodied energy, these structures also hold the nation's spirit and identity (Azhari & Mohamed, 2012). Furthermore, the shifting social and economic landscape significantly impacts public awareness of cultural preservation. The two critical public concerns regarding conserving the built environment heritage are retaining product originality and creating new jobs. It is vital to ascertain the public's basic understanding of conservation issues and whether they are interested in the topic to gauge their perception of heritage building conservation in Malaysia before it is too late to ask about the significance of preserving them. In addition, if the heritage buildings are not adequately maintained, the appearance of the buildings and the structures are not good externally, and the site's development will be adversely impacted by a decrease in visitors. A lack of public understanding may jeopardize efforts to conserve cultural property. This occurs when property owners choose to dismantle their historic structure without appreciating its historical significance; for instance, to modernize, the 1920-built Runnymede Hotel was dismantled (Halim & Tambi, 2021). In actuality, over 39,000 historic structures nationwide from 1800 to 1948 deserve preservation (Sodangi et al., 2014). Ignoring this endeavour could reduce the country's prospective cash stream and endanger the nation's identity. All efforts to conserve heritage buildings in Malaysia are through the government's support, and indirectly, awareness among the local public is also essential to protect historically significant structures from imminent demolition. In addition, the preservation works must also be improved to have a proper plan for preservation works from the beginning until the end of the project. All the proper plans must include public awareness, a timeline for the preservation, the proper training and expertise of staff, preparation of all the guidelines, and sound financial support.

RESEARCH METHOD

Accordingly, the research methodology adopted is the quantitative (questionnaire survey) approach. The main aim of the questionnaire is to identify the condition of the heritage buildings, the critical reasons for preserving them, and the challenges in conserving them within the sampling frame. The respondents involved are the community and visitors of the heritage buildings within Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown Penang. Quantitative research aims to achieve precise and dependable measurements using formal, objective, logical, and deductive approaches and systematic tactics to acknowledge generation and refinement in problem-solving. Its design can be either experimental or non-experimental. In order to explain phenomena, quantitative research gathers large amounts of stable, in-depth data that are then analyzed using mathematical techniques. In particular, statistics answers questions about who, what, when, where, how, how much and how many. It uses logic, numbers and an objective viewpoint (Mohajan, 2020). The quantitative statistical analysis for the questionnaire is carried out through descriptive and inferential statistics. This method assists the researcher in generalizing and quantifying the findings from the sample to be applied to the population. Sampling is a procedure to select a sample from an individual or a large population group for research purposes. Sampling is used because it is too expensive and time-consuming to survey the whole population in a research study (Bhardwaj, 2019). Convenience sampling is used in this paper's data collection using the community around heritage buildings located within Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown. These two locations are rich with heritage buildings, including UNESCO's award for cultural heritage conservation. There are also unique heritage sites with a wide range of heritage buildings with potential for conservation. This paper only considers building locations that are part of active tourism in Malaysia. The popularity of the buildings would later help in the questionnaire phase involving visitors to the buildings as respondents. The method used for this study is convenience sampling (non-probability technique), which is used in the data collection regarding the community or visitors around the buildings.

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The total sampling size was conducted using G*power software. From an economic point of view, studies with a sample size that is too large may waste time, money, effort, and resources, especially if availability is limited. Studies with a sample size that is too small provide low power or imprecise estimates; therefore, they may not answer the research questions. For this reason, considering limited resources and budget, sample size calculation and power analysis may require a trade-off between cost-effectiveness and power. From an ethical point of view, studies with too large a sample size cause the research subjects to waste their effort and time and may expose them to more risks and inconveniences. In this research, the questionnaire uses the ordinal scale to make it more user-friendly for the respondents. The respondents for the questionnaire are mostly visitors and the community within the heritage buildings previously identified. This is to gain a broader perspective on the heritage buildings in place for conservation, assess awareness, and encourage the public to participate in decision-making for heritage buildings. Using the ordinal scale, respondents can make decisions more accessible. This is essential because 50 questionnaires for each location (100 sets) are distributed to the respondents, and the time to answer the questionnaire is limited. One hundred questionnaires were distributed with a 100% response rate.

Statistical Analysis

The characteristics of data collection that describe the data are called descriptive statistics. Before formal inferences are drawn, descriptive statistics are employed. It provides an overview of the data on the sample under study without making any probability theoretic deductions (Kaliyadan & Kulkarni, 2019). Inferential statistics are used to make decision about a population under study from samples of that population, commonly through hypothesis testing. The role of hypothesis testing is to judge whether the result obtained from analysis could have occurred by chance. The null hypothesis, the hypothesis of no difference or no relationship, is tested through these statistical tests (Sheard, 2018). For analysis purposes, the parametric Student's t-test has an analogue in the form of the Mann-Whitney U test or Wilcoxon Rank-Sum test. With the assumption that the data does not follow a normal distribution, it compares the means between two independent groups; hence, it is helpful for continuous or numerical variables. To compare continuous variables like age or height between two groups in a study, including non-normally distributed data, researchers can employ the Mann-Whiteney U test (Sundjaja et al., 2023). The descriptive analysis provides an overview and description of a dataset's features, which is beneficial for displaying and comprehending the information. They simplify complex datasets into comprehensible synopses, facilitating an understanding of the big picture. Thus, inferential tests help draw conclusions, make predictions based on statistical evidence, and allow generalizations on a population based on sample data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background of the Community

Results for this study are within Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown, with 100 responses received from respondents who worked, studied, or lived in the conservation location of heritage buildings. In terms of age for Kuala Lumpur, most respondents were in the ages 30-40 age group and for Georgetown, most respondents were within the ages of 20-30. Regarding education, most (63%) respondents had at least Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and a tertiary degree. This result demonstrated that the current generation has, at the very least, obtained an SPM certificate upon completing their formal education in Malaysia.

Condition of Heritage Buildings

Malaysia’s complex historical and architectural past is reflected in the heterogeneous state of its heritage structures. These structures can be landmarks that have been preserved or ones that are in various

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degrees of disrepair. Concerning literature, the condition of heritage buildings also indicates the perspective that remedial actions are not given enough attention. This data shows the latest condition of the heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown based on respondents' observations. The questions asked to the respondents include the condition of the heritage buildings, whether the building has been appropriately conserved, existing defects, whether the current conservation approach is suitable, and any related cost issues regarding the heritage buildings for future research.

Table 1. Condition of Heritage Buildings (Mann Whitney)

Ranks			
Questions/elements	**Locations**	**Mean Rank**	**Sum of Ranks**
Conserved Properly	Kuala Lumpur	48.00	2400.00
	Pulau Pinang	53.00	2650.00
Sign of defects	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Building needs the conservation approach	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Current conservation approach suitable	Kuala Lumpur	48.00	2400.00
	Pulau Pinang	53.00	2650.00
Agree with new development cost model for heritage buildings	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
New development cost model for heritage buildings useful	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00

Source: Authors (2024)

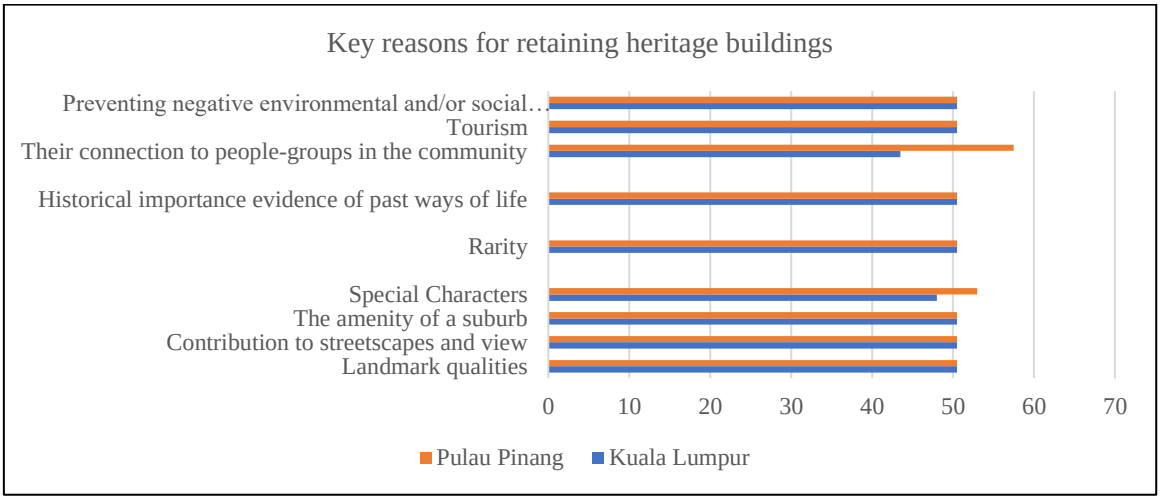

Fig. 1. Key Reasons for Retaining Heritage Buildings

Source: Authors (2024)

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Retaining heritage buildings is crucial for several reasons, each contributing to preserving cultural, historical, and architectural heritage. All these factors show that the community around the heritage buildings is highly aware of the need to retain heritage buildings. Table 1 shows that for Kuala Lumpur and Penang respondents, raising awareness about heritage buildings is crucial in garnering support for their preservation and fostering a deeper appreciation of their significance. Maintaining cultural identity, preserving history, encouraging sustainable development, cultivating community pride, bolstering local economies, and meeting the duty to future generations depend on preserving heritage buildings, including improving lives and fortifying communities by protecting these priceless possessions. The relationship between the community and unique characters demonstrates a distinct outcome compared to previous outcomes. The results indicate that Georgetown received more favourable responses than Kuala Lumpur. The primary rationale for preserving heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur is less on their connection with the local population and the unique characteristics of the buildings.

Challenges in Retaining Heritage Buildings

Heritage building preservation is a complex undertaking with many obstacles. These difficulties may differ according to socioeconomic, governmental, and geographic conditions. The respondents were asked about the main challenges in retaining heritage buildings/places for this part.

Table 2. Challenges in Retaining Heritage Buildings

		Ranks	
	Locations	**Mean Rank**	**Sum of Ranks**
Compliance (heritage approvals-development approvals) / regulatory barriers / policy requirements	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Cost/Investment	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Availability of funding sources	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Uninformed client/customer	Kuala Lumpur	38.00	1900.00
	Pulau Pinang	63.00	3150.00
Technical barriers/design/engineering /element/construction material	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Project risk	Kuala Lumpur	46.00	2300.00
	Pulau Pinang	55.00	2750.00
Poor maintenance of current building stock	Kuala Lumpur	47.00	2350.00
	Pulau Pinang	54.00	2700.00
Contamination (asbestos, contaminated soil etc)	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00
Ongoing maintenance after renovation/high cost	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00

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Urban development	Kuala Lumpur	50.50	2525.00
	Pulau Pinang	50.50	2525.00

Source: Authors (2024)

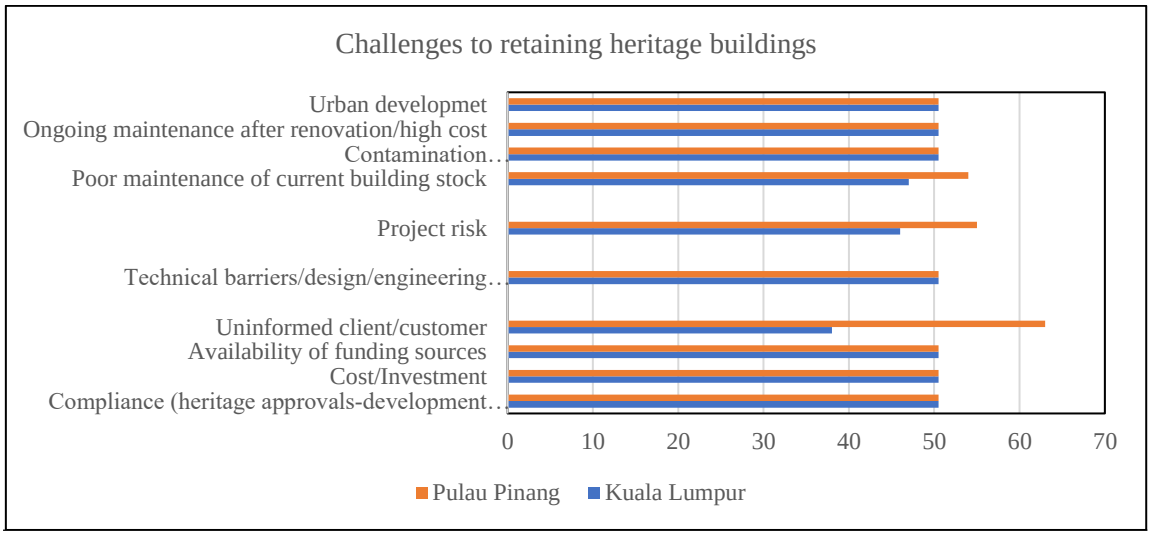

Fig. 2. Challenges in Retaining Heritage Buildings

Source: Authors (2024)

Retaining heritage buildings can be challenging due to various factors, as shown in Table 3. The result shows that the respondents also know the challenges in retaining heritage buildings. One of the highly ranked factors in retaining heritage buildings is cost, and most respondents agree that heritage buildings are a high-cost investment. One of the reasons is that heritage building conservation practices usually use traditional materials and methods and frequently need specialized care and restoration work that can be expensive and labour-intensive. Also, heritage buildings may need to be sufficiently protected from inappropriate renovations or demolition by insufficient or inconsistent building codes, zoning laws, and heritage protection legislation; this is one of the challenges in retaining heritage buildings. Besides that, in rapidly growing urban areas, heritage buildings may face pressure for redevelopment or repurposing into more financially lucrative uses such as commercial spaces or residential units. Lastly, apathy or indifference towards preserving heritage buildings may arise from a lack of public knowledge of their importance. Unsolicited community support can make conservation initiatives more difficult. Poor maintenance, project risk, and uninformed clients/customers yield distinct outcomes. Challenges of maintaining heritage buildings in Georgetown reveal that, in contrast to Kuala Lumpur, where the three criteria are not the principal obstacles to preserving heritage buildings, most respondents strongly agree with all the factors. According to Halim and Tambi (2021), a lack of public understanding may jeopardize efforts to conserve cultural property. It will occur when property owners choose to dismantle their historic structures without appreciating their historical significance. With this research, it is noted that based on the respondents' answers, indirectly, the public has a basic understanding of conservation issues and whether they are interested in heritage buildings before it is too late to ask about the significance of preserving them.

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CONCLUSION

In summary, the level of awareness among the local community for Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown towards conserving heritage buildings is moderately good. In addition, local communities should take a more active part in heritage-building conservation initiatives to foster a sense of cultural ownership. Maintaining historic structures is critical for maintaining historical history, architectural heritage, and cultural identity. This research also highlights how the importance of preservation could be effectively communicated since there may be specific challenges related to raising awareness and education about heritage conservation within Malaysia's diverse and sometimes economically challenged communities. These historical structures represent the workmanship, morals, and social advancements of bygone eras as physical reminders of the nation's history. Keeping them safe and intact pays tribute to the nation's ancestors and accomplishments and dramatically improves the communities. However, there are obstacles to maintaining historical structures, including the requirement for adaptive reuse, pressures from urban growth, and budgetary limitations. Governments, communities, historical organizations, and private players must work together to overcome these obstacles. It entails putting in place sensible preservation regulations, obtaining sufficient financing, educating the public, and supporting creative conservation and sustainable development methods. Ultimately, preserving heritage buildings represents a dedication to respecting common history, ensuring it remains relevant, and leaving a rich legacy for future generations. Raising community awareness about heritage buildings is crucial for preserving and promoting their significance. Lastly, by encouraging support for preservation efforts, promoting cultural identity, creating educational opportunities, increasing tourism and local economies, promoting environmental sustainability, improving community engagement, guarding against development pressures, and preserving intergenerational legacies, community awareness plays a critical role in preserving heritage buildings. Heritage buildings may continue improving the lives of locals and tourists by raising community awareness, which will add to the vibrancy and individuality of local communities worldwide.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ezyana Anyzah Marmaya conducted the research and wrote the article. Rohana Mahbub conceptualised the central research idea and revised the article. Faudzi Muhammad and Mas Ayu Mohd Tahir provided primary data support. Rohana Mahbub supervised the research progress, anchored the review and revisions and approved the article submission.

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