



MALAYSIA

KEEPING THE PEOPLE IN GEORGE TOWN'S HISTORIC CITY CENTER

Imagine you fell asleep reading a Joseph Conrad novel, and then dreamed you were traveling in the tropics, on a tramp steamer, and had disembarked at an old colonial port city, at sunset. As you made your way through narrow streets lined with Chinese-style shop houses, you passed vendors hawking bowls of steaming *laksa* noodles, pedicab drivers cat-napping in the seats of their bespangled pedicabs and old men cursing each other across the *mah-jongg* board out in the arcaded galleries. Don't pinch yourself - that marvelous old city actually exists, and it's called George Town, on Malaysia's island state of Penang. While most of Asia's picturesque old cities have long since gone under the wrecking ball and been replaced by the generic amalgam of freeways, shopping malls and tower blocks, a combination of shifting economic fortunes, dusty old laws and sheer historic accident have somehow miraculously preserved almost the entire center of this wonderful old city. And George Town is not only a physical relic but a living, breathing melting-pot of the many peoples and cultures that have made the city and continue to give it its vivid life: Chinese, Indian, Malay, Acehnese, Burmese, Siamese, Tamil, Sri Lankan and even German populations - all with their own neighborhoods, languages, foods, places of worship and coffee houses.

But ironically, just when everybody realized what a treasure they had and began taking steps to protect it, George Town faced the greatest threat of its two-centuries of history. Within a few years, the rent control act was abolished, the city was declared a "World Heritage Site" and the laws allowing foreigners to buy land in Malaysia were relaxed. The combination of these three factors proved to be lethal for the ordinary people who live there. In a city where 85% of the population are tenants, rents skyrocketed, people started being evicted left and right, and old shop-houses (and even temples) started being snapped up by investors and converted into art galleries, cafes and boutique hotels. The real George Town was - and continues to be - in serious peril of being very quickly desiccated and replaced by a fake Disneyland version of the city.

But there are many people in George Town who care passionately about what is happening to their city and have been struggling to find another way, where the ordinary people who actually live and work in the city are taken as an important part of heritage also, along with the material heritage of the city's 5,000 old buildings. In the past three years, three of these groups (Think City, Penang Heritage Trust and Arts Ed) have linked together, and with support from ACCA and the regional network of community architects (CAN), have explored ways to support the city's embattled tenants with new strategies to bolster their negotiations to stay. As part of the process, they launched a small pilot project in which a group of tenants are working together to upgrade the dilapidated shop houses they have rented for generations, on Armenian Street. Word about the project quickly spread, and several other communities of vulnerable tenants and market vendors in George Town joined the process and began exploring their own alternative strategies for staying put (see next page).



ACCA in MALAYSIA :

PROJECT CITIES (total 1)

- George Town, Penang

SMALL PROJECTS

Small projects approved : 5
 In number of cities : 1
 Total budget approved : \$15,000

BIG PROJECTS

(no housing projects yet)

SAVINGS + CDFS

No community savings or city development funds yet in Malaysia

IMPLEMENTING GROUPS

The ACCA project in George Town is being jointly implemented by Think City, Penang Heritage Trust, Arts Ed and the network of tenants and market vendors.

Using the power of coalitions to help keep the **RENTERS** in George Town . . .

The ACCA project in George Town (the single project in Malaysia) is a small one, but it is an important intervention, because it touches on some of the big issues of gentrification, citizen involvement and heritage preservation that are popping up in many Asian cities. The project also brings to these committed groups in George Town the support of the regional ACHR network and its quarter-century of broad experience finding pragmatic alternatives to eviction.

In September 2011, when the pilot upgrading project in Armenian Street was getting started, George Town was the focal point of a three-day regional workshop on the issue of historic cities and how to preserve them in ways which also preserve the people who live in them and the particular cultures which shaped them. The workshop was jointly organized by ACHR, CAN and the key groups in George Town: Think City, Penang Heritage Trust and Arts Ed. The workshop was held in the beautiful 19th Century Confusionist temple of the Cheah Kongsi, in Armenian Street, and brought together about 40 architects, activists, community leaders and government officers from 16 countries, as well as 50 participants from Penang. There were presentations about old city-preservation initiatives in Ahmedabad (India), Kawagoe (Japan), Karachi (Pakistan), Lampang (Thailand), Kathmandu (Nepal), Istanbul (Turkey) and Hoi An (Vietnam), as well as very lively stories from community members who live in the six pilot communities in George Town.



The common thread that linked all these stories was the search for ways by which the people who actually live in these cities - their "living heritage" - can be included in the preservation process, instead of being evicted. As one workshop participant put it, "Heritage should be a very happy, positive issue. But if the relationship between the poor and rich in a historic city isn't balanced, preservation can bring about the same kind of evictions we see happening in cities all over Asia, but for other reasons: for development, for infrastructure, for speculation. So the question for us is how the poor can be part of a city development and cultural and architectural preservation process that is inclusive, not exclusive."

Starting with five communities :

Building a network of learning and mutual support between George Town's vulnerable communities . . .

1 ARMENIAN STREET TENANTS: This project is a rare collaboration between a group of low-income tenants and the Chinese temple that owns the run-down (but historic) shop houses they occupy. With help from Hooi Seam and the ACHR-CAN team, the tenants got together, discussed their problems, surveyed the repairs that were needed and used the \$15,000 small project grant from ACCA to set up a revolving loan fund to finance the house repairs, in which members can borrow up to 4,000 Ringit (US\$ 1,330) at 2.5% interest, repayable in two years. At one point, ACHR and Think City organized an exposure visit to see community-driven upgrading projects in Thailand. On that trip, the Armenian Street tenants traveled with one of the trustees from temple that owns their houses. The team was especially inspired by the 30-year leases many poor communities in Bangkok had gotten. The happy ending of the story was that finally, the tenants were able to persuade the temple to give them all ten-year leases!



2 CANNON STREET TENANTS: Another group of tenants live in two rows of historic houses owned by the Khoo Kongsi, another big Chinese temple known for maximizing profits from its real estate. This organization had converted its own opulent temple into a tourist attraction, and evicted the residents of 25 shop houses to make a boutique hotel. So the Cannon Street tenants, who've stayed here for generations, were understandably nervous. Mr. Fung, a Cannon Street tenant: "My grandfather moved here and rented our two-story shop house in the 1930s for 45 Ringit (\$15) per month. Now we pay 550 Ringit (S\$183) per month. The Khoo Kongsi used to give us 2-year leases, but now they give us only 1-year leases, and some tenants have no agreement at all, so if the owner wants the house back, they can take it any time. But after living here for so many years, we feel that this is a wonderful place, and although it's not our house technically, it is our house in the heart - we keep it tidy and clean, we repair it."



3 ACHEEN STREET FLEA MARKET VENDORS: This old flea market has 300 vendors who sell their second-hand goods every evening in this shady square. In a city which increasingly caters to the needs of *outsiders*, this is one of the few remaining markets that caters to George Town's own low-income *insiders*. But when some tenants in the high-end art galleries near the market complained, the city threatened to evict them. After that, the vendors had to play a cat and mouse game with the council trucks and enforcement staff. With help from the Think City and CAN team, they formed a committee, discussed the problems and decided to protect themselves by developing their own market regulations, which answer the city's complaints: no blocking the street, no selling blue films or pirated goods, and everyone gets a fixed 4x8 foot space. They presented their plan to the city council in August 2011, and used it to negotiate permission to keep the market going. Now relations with the city are much improved.



4 ST. FRANCIS XAVIER'S TENANTS: Another group of tenants occupied a small group of houses in the tranquil, shady compound of the St. Francis Xavier Catholic church, in the center of George Town. These low-income families, of south Indian origin, had been living there and serving the church as servants for generations. But when the church announced plans to evict these families and redevelop the land for "charity work", a century of good relations turned into an ugly battle. As Khoo Salma, from Penang Heritage Trust said, "That land was given to the church for housing poor Catholic families, but sometimes, the bishops may have different ideas about how to use church land. We face this situation all the time, where we have to argue for cultural and social value over purely economic value." With support from the George Town team, the community people developed a land-sharing plan, but the Bishop wouldn't even discuss it, and the people were all eventually evicted, although with some cash compensation.



5 CLAN JETTY COMMUNITIES are like long wooden villages built on stilts right over the water. Each jetty is associated with a different Chinese clan, and the people who lived and worked on the jetties were integral to the import-export trade these clans controlled: the ferry-men and stevedores who unloaded the ships in the harbor. Some clan jetties have been demolished, but representatives of the six remaining jetties formed a committee to work together to defend and upgrade these very old, unique communities, which are now under serious threat. Cheu Sin Ping is a resident of Cheu Jetty: "We have problems of toilets, trash and old wiring, but our biggest problem is eviction. We've lived here for centuries, but we have only temporary occupancy licenses and can be evicted if we don't renew them. I was born here and I love this place. The feeling of living on the clan jetties is totally different than the rest of the city. Once you step into the jetty, you will feel the peace and feel that you are out of the stress of the city."



THE "SOCIAL WEALTH" THAT STILL EXISTS IN GEORGE TOWN: "We have visited several pockets around George Town - the kongsis, the church, the markets, the clan jetties. I am so impressed that the structures of community which link people together in different ways are still so much alive here in Penang. You are very lucky. In other Asian cities, these kinds of social structures are all gone now, and they have become cities of isolated individuals, who go home every night to their apartments and lock the door, and nobody knows their neighbors. In George Town, this social wealth still exists, but now these marvelous community structures are under threat. There are no clear policies to protect the 85% of George Town's inhabitants who are renters, and legalistic systems are replacing the human relationships. How can we find a more compromising way to develop the city, in which these very old, very rich communities can stay? So the city's economy and the lives of ordinary people can develop together, in a more balanced, more interactive process? How can we keep from selling our souls for money?" (*Somsook*)