

## AN INVENTORY OF HISTORIC SHOPHOUSES BUILDINGS IN KUALA LIPIS, PAHANG

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### ABSTRACT

*The most widespread building type of shophouses characterizes the historic core of Malaysia's towns. Different façade treatment, colours, height and width give a unique character to the buildings and hence contribute to the richness and distinctiveness of places as a whole. The combination of different types of uses or activities within the shophouse further makes the places recognizable. These vernacular buildings however continue to be seriously threatened by urban development and quickly disappearing in an increasingly fast paced developing country. Rapid loss of these valuable buildings necessitates the need for documentation in promoting and retaining a place's architectural and cultural diversity. A survey was conducted in Kuala Lipis, a small town in the state of Pahang, Malaysia to identify distinct shophouses buildings with local cultural significance. This study develops an inventory of 95 shophouse buildings that influence the distinctiveness of the town through its distinctive character and values. This information provides a platform for formulating an evidence-based decisions and policies which incorporate culture in preserving the identity of a place.*

**Field of Research:** Documentation, inventory, place, shophouse, small town.

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### 1. Introduction

Built heritage in our cities and towns serves the most potent link for community's roots in the past. Built heritage around the world however suffers from ageing process, natural disasters, and most severely by human negligence. As highlighted in the World Heritage Convention 1972, both cultural and natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of destruction. As stated by Puren and Jordaan (2014), the number of culturally significant places destroyed has increased significantly to make way for the development of new and high rise structures which often characterized as having identical characteristics. This turns the cities or towns into places that are too planned, too boring and in the end irresponsible. A more serious problem will happen as more than 60 percent of the world's population will live in urban areas by the year 2050

(United Nations, 2016). This has alerted the government and private organizations at all levels throughout the world to the need for protecting these valuable resources.

The vice president of a charitable non-governmental organization of Penang Heritage Trust emphasized the need for having an inventory of the heritage buildings as the first step towards safeguarding these buildings (Mok, 2016). According to Pearson and Sullivan (1995), heritage inventory is a tool used to document, either in a written or graphic form, cultural evidence present in a single large or small historic place. As supported by Vileikis et al. (2012), documentation is the essential first step in achieving better understanding of our place. The Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage or commonly known as the Granada Convention 1985 clearly stipulates the need for any place with architectural heritage to be surveyed and inventoried (Article 2). The ICOMOS Principles for the Recording of Monuments, Groups of Buildings and Sites 1996 further highlighted the need for recording as one of the effective ways to give meaning, understanding, definition and recognition of the values of the cultural heritage. Recognizing the importance of documentation practice, this study is therefore undertaken to develop an inventory of shophouse buildings as the most typical urban form that dominate the historic core of Malaysia towns.

## 2. The Significance of shophouses

A shophouse is a two-storey urban house with a ground floor shop open to the road and living quarters upstairs (Chen, 1998). These buildings form an important part of Malaysia's historical and architectural built heritage. According to Wan Ismail and Shamsuddin (2005), they are the oldest urban structures that strengthen the identity of the Malaysia town and city centers. In the context of small towns, Jackson (1973) also described shophouse as one of the most outstanding elements of the towns. This is proven by a more recent research done by Azmi et al. (2014) where the old shophouse was found as the most widespread building type that dominate the historic core of small Malaysia towns. The shophouse is therefore considered to be of fundamental importance to an understanding of the morphological development of a town. For example, these buildings symbolize the start of a modern town of Jasin in the state of Melaka during the rubber boom in the early 1920s and were the pride of Chinese and Indian-Muslim merchants (Talib et al., 2015). Similarly, the shophouses in the commercial centre of Kuala Kubu Bharu (KKB) town in Selangor also found to be significant for its association with the early growth of the town as it was one of the first buildings constructed to induce the relocation of population to the new township of KKB after the old one was swept away by the massive flood.

Architectural styles of shophouse in Malaysia demonstrate hybrid characteristics incorporating building styles which were derived from traditional Malay practices, Chinese, Indian, and European sources (Elnokaly and Wong, 2014). Different façade treatment, colours, height, width, and forms from these styles are the features that giving a unique character to the buildings and hence contribute to the richness and distinctiveness of places as a whole. As argued by Lynch (1960), distinctiveness of the physical environment forges the image of an environment as well as its individuality and oneness which further intrinsic for its recognition as a separable entity.

In addition to local and foreign practices, the unique form of Malaysia shophouse is also influenced by overall climatic conditions (Elnokaly and Wong, 2014; Wan Ismail and Shamsuddin, 2005). As supported by Le Roux (2003), tropical architecture is greatly known for its remarkable cohesive towards design that response to climatic conditions. In particular, the five-foot-way or in the Malay language called *kaki lima* fronting the entrance was introduced to accommodate wet weather in the region. While used to protect pedestrians from sun and rain, the sheltered passageway also gives the buildings their unique character and therefore assisting in creating a clear sense of place. For Jamaludin et al. (2014), this type of building can be considered as naturally sustainable as it is designed to harmonize with the local climate, traditions, culture, and the immediate environment.

Apart from aesthetic contribution it makes, the influence of shophouse to the unique townscape of the towns is also reflected in its use as activities settings (Relph, 1976; Shamsuddin, 2011; Tugnutt and Robertson, 1987). Concentration of activities lends the building a unique character and makes it more noticeable in the sense of smells, sounds, visual aspects such as colours, and the crowds that they produce. As argued by Montgomery (1995), good cities with distinctive identities and characters need an element of chaos or an active urban setting. Furthermore, the traditional practice of combining residential and trading use within single shophouse building also leads to a more vibrant atmosphere as well as a safer environment due to the presence of people throughout the day and night (Shamsuddin, 2011). The change of function involving the dwelling units in the upper floors is however, common nowadays.

According to Aranha (2013), the current trend which favoured buildings with single function has left the upper floors underutilized. The fact that the shophouse sat empty for a number of years will rapidly deteriorating the buildings and eventually cause the buildings to collapse (Mohd Baroldin and Mohd Din, 2012). As argued by Thomsen and Flier (2011), obsolescence is often treated as a condition to justify demolition of existing buildings. For example, shophouses in Kampung Kepayang, Perak which were abandoned and neglected for many years turning the village into ghost town. For Koh (2014), and Abdul Mohit and Sulaiman (2006), the repeal of the Rent Control Act 1966 (Act 56) in 1997 coupled with uncontrolled development has led to the destruction of many shophouse in Malaysia and the resultant loss of an important part of cultural heritage and community memories. Continuing threats to these buildings is therefore necessitates the need for documentation in protecting a place's distinct identity and exceptional characters.

### 3. Methodology

This study begins with an information gathering stage in which the significance of shophouses in identity development is critically reviewed in order to explain the needs of documenting this building. This phase also focuses on researching background information of the shophouses building within the selected case study particularly the small town of Kuala Lipis in Pahang to familiarize the researcher with the places. This information is acquired from official documents published by governments, newspaper, journals, and also informal conversation with local people who may have knowledge about the places. Based on this information, a preliminary inventory of the buildings is drafted to facilitate the subsequent survey. As argued by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sports (2008), it is more practical to develop an inventory incrementally and further adding properties as opportunities arise and resources allow. The second stage of the study involved an observation survey to identify shophouses that may have been overlooked in the phase one. For the purpose of this study, only shophouses building that portrays at least one of the pre-defined criteria is recorded. In particular, this criteria comprised the aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, and economic values which adopted across Australia and England in identifying local significance places (English Heritage, 2010; Government of South Australia, 2014; Heritage Council of Western Australia, 2012; New South Wales Heritage Office, 2011). In ensuring consistency of the information collected, a standardized survey form is prepared by considering the types of information to be recorded as demonstrated in existing practice of surveying historic places (Heritage of Malaysia Trust, 1990; Kioussi et al., 2011; Mohd Baroldin and Mohd Din, 2012; Saskatchewan Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sports, 2008). Each of the identified shophouses is also photographed and marked on a map to show the location of the building.

### 3.1 Background of Kuala Lipis, Pahang

Kuala Lipis is the district capital of Lipis (Figure 1), with an area of 1,041 hectares and an estimated population of 17,660 (Majlis Daerah Lipis, 2009). Gold mining activities had created this small town more than 100 years ago. The activities has also made the town an important trading and commercial hub in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where businesses of every kind mushroomed and prospered. As reported in the Lipis Special Area Plan, this period saw major development of timber shophouses and other facilities in the town, and can be said to be the start of Kuala Lipis as a town in its own right. Kuala Lipis's days of glory further sparked in 1889 when the British involved in the administration of Lipis district. Soon after their arrival particularly in the 1898, the Kuala Lipis town was selected and declared as the capital of Pahang state. By the 1920s, Kuala Lipis turned into a complete administrative center with a full range of amenities including government offices, houses of worship, post office, schools, hospital, railway station, shops, police station, and a good transportation system. The change of state capital to Kuantan in 1955 however altered the face and environment of Kuala Lipis, changing it from a busy town into a sleepy and deserted settlement. Notwithstanding the fact, many of the town's physical features still can be seen nowadays, and thus need to be investigated further.

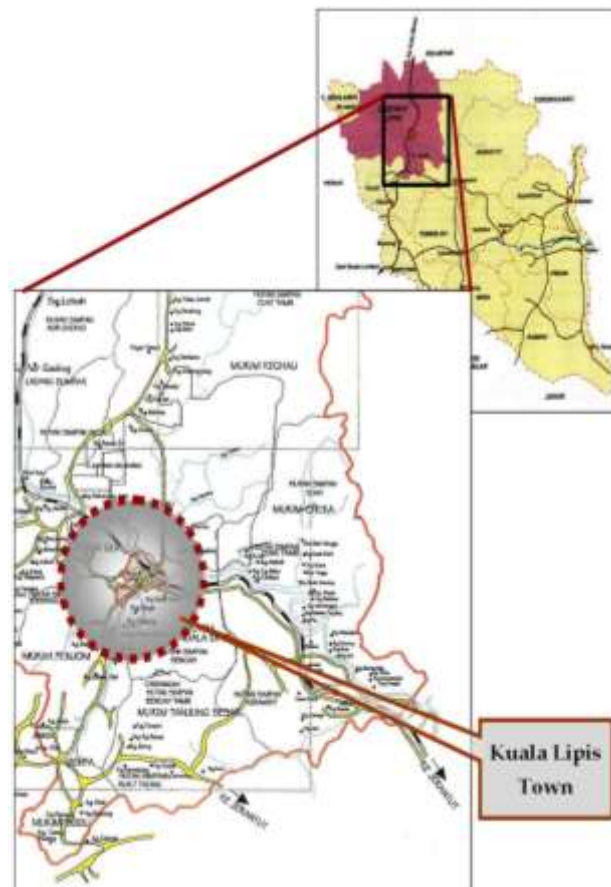


Figure 1: Location of the Kuala Lipis town  
Source: Majlis Daerah Lipis (2009)

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

The theme of historical heritage city was selected for Kuala Lipis as there are many unique historical and architectural reserves found within the town area. The distribution of the 95 shophouse buildings of local significance identified through the survey is illustrated in Figure 2. The red shaded area clearly shows that the buildings dominated the older commercial center of the town. This is in line with Jackson (1973) who perceived shophouses as one of the universal features of small Malaysia towns. Furthermore, the results also confirms the former function of Kuala Lipis as an important hub for trading and commercial activities. As argued by Shamsuddin (2011), the character of a town is very much influenced by the function and geographical setting of a place. Figure 3 illustrates some of the surveyed shophouses in the Kuala Lipis town.



Figure 2: Distribution of the identified shophouse in Kuala Lipis



Figure 3: Shophouses in Kuala Lipis town



Table 1 summarizes all the recorded information relating to the shophouses in Kuala Lipis. The results demonstrates that the distribution of the buildings that were constructed during pre and post-war period is more or less the same. In particular, 57.6 percent of the buildings were constructed during pre-war period and the remaining 42.4 percent were built during the post war period. With respect to the occupancy status of the buildings, almost 100 percent of the shophouses in Kuala Lipis were occupied. In contrast, only two (2.1 percent) of the surveyed shophouses were vacant. This may give a plausible explanation of why the percentage of the buildings in good and fair condition is high as shown in Table 1. Finding that shows these buildings are structurally sound and well-maintained although they are 100 percent owned by private is therefore in contrast with Wan Ismail and Shamsuddin's (2005) study. According to these authors, one of the challenges in protecting the old buildings lies in the fact that they are privately owned properties.

Table 1: Recorded information of the shophouse buildings

		Percentage (N=95)
<i>Age</i>	Pre-war	57.61
	Post-war	42.39
<i>Occupancy status</i>	Occupied	97.89
	Vacant	2.11
<i>Ownership</i>	Private	100
<i>Building use</i>	Commercial	71.58
	Mixed use	26.32
	Others	2.11
<i>Condition</i>	Good	60
	Fair	32.63
	Poor	7.37
<i>Architectural styles</i>	Early Transitional	7.61
	Straits Eclectic	6.52
	Neo-classical	42.39
	Art Deco	14.13
	Modern	29.35
<i>Cultural significance</i>	Historic	100
	Aesthetic	96.84
	Social	10.53
	Economic	91.58

In terms of building use, the survey revealed that the majority of shophouses in Kuala Lipis are used solely for commercial purposes (71.6 percent). Only 26.3 percent of the buildings continued the traditional practice of combining residential and trading function within single property. As discussed in Section 2, this problem is becoming more common nowadays and may cause the buildings to deteriorate if left unresolved as what happening in other small towns today. Shophouses that are unutilized at the time of the survey is grouped under the 'others' category. Table 1 also presents a range of architectural styles reflects by the shophouses in Kuala Lipis. It is demonstrated that the majority of the shophouses was erected in a simple Neo-Classical style particularly with 42.4 percent of the

buildings. Its unique architectural style featuring tall columns that rise the full height of the building, symmetrical façade, classical elements such as pediment, and a sparing used of ornament on exterior wall has contribute to the aesthetic qualities of the buildings. Clustering of shophouses of different architectural styles together in a single street further makes the town area interesting and lively.

In addition to the aesthetic features of the buildings, the shophouses were also found to be historically significant to the locality (100 percent) as they helped confirm the role of Kuala Lipis town as an important hub for trading and commercial activities in the district. According to the Australia ICOMOS's Burra Charter 1999, a place will be of historically important to the locality's history if it is associated with an historic figure, event, phase or activity. Furthermore, the survey revealed that there is a relatively large percentage of shophouses in Kuala Lipis town with economic value, representing 91.6 percent of the total number of buildings identified. This is not surprising since majority of the shophouses still operating as venues for different commercial activities such as restaurants, clinics, bakery, and grocery stores which provide day-to-day goods. Apart from monetary benefits, the use of the buildings in supporting local activities has also provide the boost in making the town more recognizable for both visitor and local people thus contributing to its distinctiveness.

## 5. Conclusion

Shophouses buildings are significant in shaping distinct and unique identity of Malaysia's towns. This is evident through the cultural significance values and qualities that the buildings hold. For instances, a wide range of architectural styles of the shophouses contributes to the character of places. Historical significance of the buildings enriches people sensory experience through its existence. From the economic point of view, the shophouses further plays an important function as activities settings which eventually provide a vibrant and alive atmosphere in a town. Forming part of the constituent elements of a place, it is therefore crucial to protect these buildings especially under present day condition where the identity of towns is rapidly weakening. The process of developing an inventory of cultural places is evident to serve as a crucial tool in identifying and documenting community's cultural resources. By documenting the places using existing national and international strategies, this paper represents an initiative undertaken to make evident the shophouses that have been previously overlooked. It is anticipated that the information obtained will facilitate planners to make an informed and evidence-based decisions as well as policies which integrate culture as a mechanism to preserve identity of a place.

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