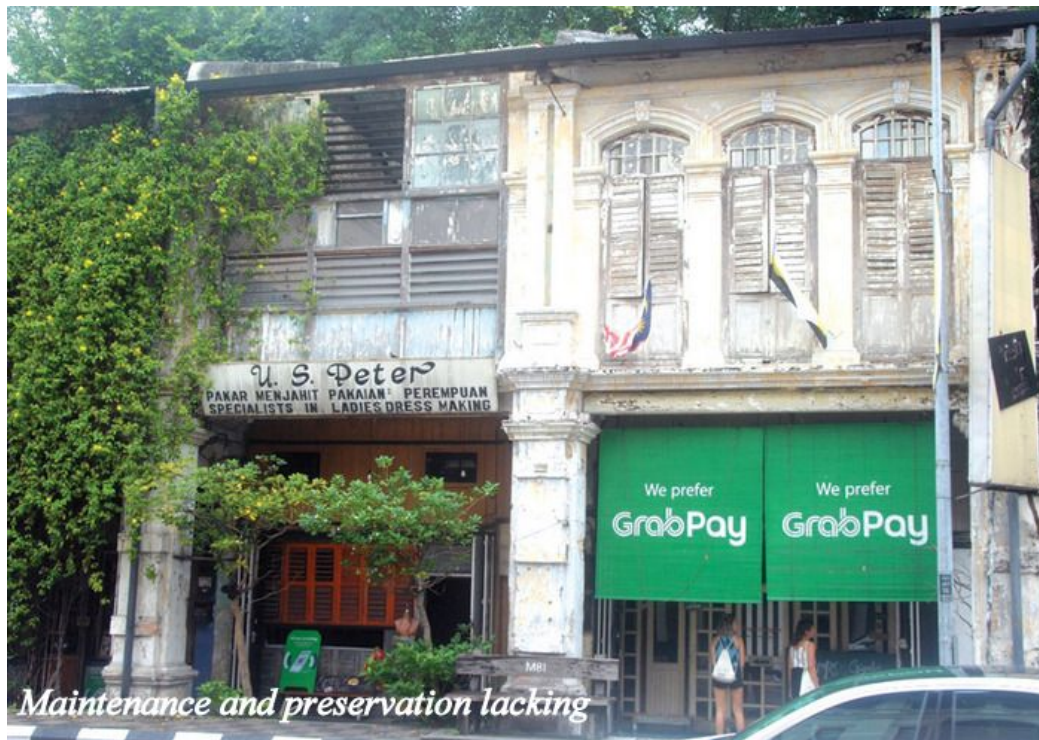


The Ipoh Renaissance - Old Town Out Of Control!

By Ian Anderson

Over the last three years or so, many international newspapers and magazines waxed lyrical about the Ipoh and how it was changing. They dubbed it the “Ipoh Renaissance”. At this point it is necessary to see what they meant, and to do so we turn to the dictionary, which defines renaissance as: Either the culture and style of art and architecture developed during the Renaissance; or a revival of or renewed interest in something. Obviously they were not suggesting that we had transformed Ipoh into the architecture and culture of the 14th century, but simply meant that there seemed to be a greater interest in Ipoh than ever before. In plain language they meant that Ipoh and particularly Old Town were experiencing a tourism boom. This boom can be best understood by the statistics; today there are 634 choices of visitor accommodation in and around Ipoh, according to “Hotels Combined”.



A Town in Disarray



So what has this sudden influx of people done to our Old Town, the heart of Ipoh's history? In one word, they have 'destroyed' it! They have taken away its charm, history and living heritage, replacing it with daily traffic jams, hotels, cafes, double parking, and a galaxy of cheap tourist shops/stalls; the latter selling a wide range of 'small eats', imported toys and clothing, temple items and even second-hand cars being sold

from public parking spaces! Add to that the crumbling murals, overcrowded, broken walkways, the (in many cases) unregulated hawkers blocking pavements and parking spaces, children's 'Games of Chance' machines and you can start to get the picture of a town out of control. Is it any wonder that our tourists are mainly Malaysians who spend as little as possible in what they call "Ipoh Cheapoh"? These are not the so-called 'Tourist Dollars' we need to build up our town, but we shall never see the overseas tourists we hope for, unless something is here to attract them. Why would any visitor from overseas want to buy imported junk?





In order to cater for this sudden explosion of local tourists many building owners have transformed their properties overnight with minimum expenditure and paying little or no attention to preserving the heritage aspects of the town, while making, we believe, maximum profit with minimum outlay. Good business if you can get it! But let us consider the longer term: without effective maintenance and preservation these old buildings will continue to deteriorate until one day they will simply collapse (it has happened before) or have to be demolished. On the other end of the property scale are those buildings that are already beyond straightforward repair. A quick makeover job is far too

expensive for these and so they are left to rot. Two sets of tourists from overseas have already expressed their concern to us about the safety of our Old Town tourist areas and decided to return to their hotel. What sort of reputation is that to be painted with? What message will they spread when they get home?



What Old Town Needs

So who is responsible and what can be done; or is it too late? Of course not! What Old Town needs is some basic governmental control. A few months ago many local people saw the dramatic change in the political climate as a golden ray of hope for Ipoh and its future. The new State Government team is younger and appear to be more enthusiastic than those dyed-in-the-wool, long-term politicians who occupied their offices before them. These are the new breed of politician with technology at their fingertips and all the vigour of youth that their new role should bring. Five years is a short time to hold power and if they wish to hold on to it they must get to work now.



So what have they done so far? Well, the *Sama Sama* programme ran for a month and it was a good attempt at getting the community together, but it is time that those in authority realise that not everybody uses Facebook or Twitter. Sometimes old-fashioned methods are still the best. If they had arranged for better publicity, several of the events would have been a more solid success than they turned out to be. Apart from that, there does not seem to have been any positive step to cure the blatant ills of our hometown. Sure, there had been suggestions of some sort of exhibition centre, an art gallery, and a couple of Waller court blocks to be landscaped and turned into small 'start-up units, but surely this is missing the point entirely. Before we create other possible 'White Elephants' like the Darul Ridzuan Museum, (which ranks as 59 out of 65 Ipoh attractions on TripAdvisor), sensibly we should be trying to put right what we already have in our city. May I suggest that our excos and councillors pay an unscheduled surprise visit to Old Town one Sunday and see the chaos for themselves? We would be happy to guide them.



Double parking, vying for space

What Needs To Be Done



Boy falling

For a start, let us have something done about the double parking, unregulated hawkers and broken pavements, all of which are a hazard to children and old folks alike. It is not only the government, but every citizen's responsibility to ensure the city is safe.

Then, in the Old Town heritage area, hawkers' licenses should only be issued for sale of a wide range of appropriate goods, not imported plastic rubbish. Old Town does not need the Chinese street market it now has, with its uncaring hawkers blocking the streets and walkways.

Similarly second-hand cars and those ugly modern 'Games of Chance', should also be removed immediately. There is plenty of scope for quality items and entertainment to replace all these.

Ipoh is said to be a food haven. So let us turn Old Town's Concubine Lane, the very centre of our heritage, into just that. Only issue licenses for a range of quality heritage souvenirs and food, some of which are already there, but operating in entirely the wrong place. Offering quality rather than rubbish will attract a larger number of overseas tourists spending their money here, and that is what we need. There is plenty of room in other parts of town for a daily street market if we really need it. All this requires is effective licensing. In parallel with that, the tourist authority should put Ipoh on the world map. Currently their website <http://www.ipoh-city.com/> does not have any Ipoh attraction on its front page, Ipoh City's top three attractions are said to be: Kuala Sepetang, Kellies Castle, and Gua Tempurung. Are they not aware that Ipoh itself actually has several quality homegrown top attractions?



Enforcement is Essential

Government and public should all remember that Laws and By-laws exist to cover most of the above ills. Sensible enforcement is what is needed. I am not suggesting anything draconian or out of the ordinary; just that those in authority pay attention to what is happening in the town and ensure that council officers do their job effectively, across all aspects of Ipoh. It is their job to make sure that things run as smoothly as those that passed the laws intended. Then residents and visitors alike will be able to enjoy the Ipoh Renaissance and Ipoh will be a better place to live.





To this end, the talented planning department of MBI have produced a well thought out proposal to turn Old Town, and a part of New Town, into a heritage enclave. It is a comprehensive study with all the supporting facts and figures and it is an excellent plan. This is not the first time that such a plan has been put forward but so far the Executive have never grasped it. Perhaps this is the moment for the new Government to show their resolve and take positive action!

Should the Government fail to grasp these thorny problems once and for all then once the excitement of the Renaissance wears off, Old Town will simply become a slum, a place that nobody wishes to visit. Surely we cannot allow that to happen?