

## **Keeping the Old City Breathing**

A story of Malacca & Kali Besar

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How would we remember a city? Is it by the roads and buildings that we passed through? By the food we ate at a certain store? By unfamiliar faces of people we met on the street?

We could find thousands more of answers, still it would come back with the sense of place in our mind.

The sense of place is defined by time-historical and political time-, they do not work with timetables, lists of departure and arrival times. Old cities usually leaves one with a certain image of a frozen 'here, now and then' place.

As one of the city that is considered as Malaysia's most historic place, Malacca has an interesting blend of Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch and British influences. We could still see the old architecture of Malacca is being well conserved.

Malacca was once the most important trading port in the region but is now little more than a sleepy backwater. Ancient-looking junks still sail up the river, imbuing the waterfront with a "wants to be" timeless charm. The city remains full of intriguing Chinese streets, antique shops, townhouses, temples and nostalgic reminders of the now-departed European colonial powers.

One of the relic came from Dutch period in Malacca is the massive pink town hall, *Stadthuys*, built between 1641 and 1660. It's believed to be the oldest Dutch building in Asia and displays all the characteristic features of Dutch colonial architecture (read incredibly weighty doors and louvered windows). The building houses government offices and *Ethnographic Museum*, which intended to highlight aspects of local history and culture.



All red along the Riverside Street, Malacca –  
photo:Fransiska Prihadi

The ruins of *St Paul's Church*, built by the Portuguese over 400 years ago, stand in an attractive setting atop St Paul's Hill. It was regularly visited by St Francis Xavier, who was buried here for a short period before being transferred to Goa in India. The church fell into disuse when the Dutch arrived, but is still surrounded by Old Dutch tombstones. Buildings on St.Paul's Hill and all along the River Side Street (included the old shop-houses) are now all red-painted. It's indeed amazing to see how much effort that the Malacca Municipal Council try to conserve the old part of city, no matter how audacious it may seem.

For a few decades, the Malacca Municipal Council was on improving economic and infra-structural conditions of the state by doing lots of heritage conservation.

One could notice all the signboards of buildings construction while strolling along Malacca's old town, especially in some of the Malaccan townhouses in *Heeren Street*.

As a mixed of European-Chinese influences with local tropical compromise, many of the Malaccan townhouses are no longer utilized as it meant to be. Some has already turned into tourists hotels, swallow birds' nest houses, antique shops, bar & cafes.

One could not escape the feel that these townhouses are manipulated to draw tourists, businesses and property speculators.

Tourism is undeniably one major reason that keeps the old city of Malacca breathing.



Malaccan townhouses along the Heeren Street, Malacca – photo:Fransiska Prihadi

For a comparison, Kali Besar Street in Jakarta is also struggling to keep the soul alive. Although government had claimed that tourism would be a major reasoning to improve the old part of town, one would easily feel that it's being abandoned in a massive chaos improvement.

If we agree to think simple that a heritage of an old part of town could be named success when visually it is good in 'aesthetics', then 'taste' would be a later topic of discussion. The old historic buildings along Kali Besar Street is not ephemeral, it has duration. Conservation plays an important role, gives the surrounding its texture and communicates its solidity. By exploring the expressive potential of Kali Besar Street, disappointed feeling will rose to see of what it's becoming now.



When one goes to a so-called old city anywhere in the world, there are great expectations of how it's being preserved for various sake of reason. Tourist agencies worldwide sell the local heritage of a city with 'try authentic experience' package to tourists and visitors. They turned heritage issue into a global commodity for greater mass consumption.

Even when we let the consumerism save our old part of Jakarta city (as it happened in Malacca), Kali Besar might have to wait longer to breath again among the clothes and under-wears that's being dried along the river.

Kali Besar, Jakarta waiting to breath again among the underwears – photo:Fransiska Prihadi