

# RELIVING MEMORIES THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHIC MAPPING OF THE ROYAL MUSEUM IN KUALA LUMPUR

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## ABSTRACT

Inconsistent and incomprehensible documentation of the Kuala Lumpur's Royal Museum will lead to a disconnected narrative of its history. The museum, transformed from a mansion into the National Palace and eventually the Royal Museum, was once a symbol of the nation's unity, strength and governance. It held significant events; coronations, births, funerals, weddings, etc., among other ceremonies that were exclusively dedicated to the occupants and guests, but were inaccessible to the public. Devoid of proper documentation and curation, information of the events will remain unknown and eventually vanish. The thrust of this paper presents efforts to map out moments in the former National Palace since its inception with the purpose of recording its memories for posterity. The study aims to collate and document intangible qualities of the palace to complement a measured drawing exercise conducted by the School of Architecture, Building and Design, Taylor's University. It surveys photographic evidence sourced from the Royal Museum, National Archive and libraries, National Museum and personnel from the palace. This documentation, which is part of an ongoing research project, is the first comprehensive study of the former National Palace. It will eventually be digitized to serve as a historical, educational and public reference concerning the palace, in perpetuity as a national treasure.

*Keywords: National Palace, Malaysia, memory, history, photography.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there have been many efforts to conserve historical buildings in Malaysia, particularly on urban sites due to the need to safeguard heritage resources threatened by rapid development. In Kuala Lumpur, one of the first major rehabilitation initiatives happened in 1986 when an old wet market in the city was regenerated to accommodate a new need that is more appropriate to the development of the metropolis and tourism industry. The Central Market, located on Jalan Hang Kasturi in the city center, built in the 1930s in the Art Deco architecture style was successfully transformed into a cultural enclave comprises of commercial, entertainment and artistic spaces [1]. Due to its success, since then, many other historical buildings have gone through similar process of rehabilitation, an initiative to give a second life to what could be abandoned and dilapidated structures.

In the process of rehabilitation, historical buildings were modified, refurbished or renovated for more relevant use and also to bring in better investment value. Unfortunately some significant historical resources were demolished due to the need to replace them with newer buildings. One of them was the old Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Subang, known as Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport, which was officially opened on 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1965. It had the longest runway in Southeast Asia at that time and was one of the first expressions of modern architecture, reminiscence of Le Corbusier's, in the country. Sadly it was demolished in 1998 with the completion of the new, bigger and more advanced Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang. Other historical resources in Kuala Lumpur that were demolished in recent years included the Pekeliling Flats, one of the oldest residential high-rise buildings, built in 1965. They were demolished in 2014 to make way for a Malaysian Ringgit (RM) 900 million redevelopment project comprising residential, commercial and entertainment outlets [2]. The same fate fell upon the Pudu Jail, a historical



structure, the first and only jail in the state of Selangor at the time of its inception (1891 and 1895). It was demolished starting December 2008 to make way for a multi-billion ringgit mixed-development, the Bukit Bintang City Centre (BBCC) [3].

For the developers, the demolition of the old structures was necessary for a better return of investment and they argued that the redevelopment would revitalize the area. However, to many conservationists, it posed great challenges as the city would lose another part of its heritage and therefore its identity and linkage to its past. A popular phrase, “*A city without old buildings is just like a man without memory*” echoed the concern of many since “conservation of heritage building contributes to the emotional ties of the people and their sensitivity towards the past [1]. Therefore, initiatives to conserve, rehabilitate and sustain historical buildings in the cities of Malaysia are currently of a great concern.

## 2 CONSERVATION OF HISTORICAL BUILDINGS

One of the most important concepts of conservation of historical building is to preserve the “authenticity of the heritage based on the original historical evidence [1]. In the effort to conserve the buildings, it is crucial to “reveal the true nature of the object; authenticity” [1] that includes “evidence of its origin, its original construction and the materials of which it is composed and information as to the technology used in manufacturer” [4]. Furthermore, “authenticity is not only the physical nature of the building but what is most important is the emotion, memory and the resulting sense when the building is conserved” [1]. As buildings are regenerated, it is crucial also to maintain their meaning and value i.e. identity. Harun identified ten basic principles and standards of conservation as per international charters [1]:

1. Careful recording and research before intervention
2. Minimum alteration of historic fabrics
3. Minimal risk of significant loss, damage or uncertainty in performance through intervention
4. Reversibility of intervention
5. Retention of a minimum of the original structure
6. Distinctive or distinguishable use of new and additional material
7. Sympathy in interpretation and sympathy in use
8. Respect for the quality of place
9. Preference for original material and workmanship
10. Longevity in the finished work

## 3 THE ROYAL MUSEUM

In Malaysia, several historical mansions were converted into museums as an option to rehabilitate and sustain the buildings. Among them is the Ipoh Museum which was built in 1926 by Foo Choong Kit, a rich and successful tin miner who sold the building to Perak Government in 1950 who then later converted it to a museum in 1992 [5].

The Royal Museum in Kuala Lumpur is one of mansions that were converted to a museum but for a different reason. Over the 84 years of its existence, the building was occupied by many and used for different purposes. It was once a mansion, a residence for Japanese troops, a British senior military officer’s station, a royal palace, a national and presently, a royal museum. It was converted into a museum since a new palace was built for the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (the Supreme King of Malaysia) in 2011. Largely, the building was well conserved since February 2013, with all its physical structure and components properly maintained and displayed. The Royal Museum is now under the care of the Department of



Museums Malaysia. It aims to “uphold the Constitutional Monarchy by disseminating knowledge about the role of the institution and the functions of the building itself” [6].

### 3.1 Gap in knowledge

When the Department of Museums Malaysia took over the building, they conserved the building as how it was in 2011 [7] when the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* of Malaysia, Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin last resided in the building. The curator, Nor Saleha [7] acknowledged that the building had undergone changes over the course of its life as the *Istana Negara* (National Palace) due to changes required by its main occupant, the King, who is the monarch and head of state of Malaysia. The *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* is “formally elected to a five-year term by and from among the nine states which formed the Conference of Rulers” [8] and during the term he would reside in the official residence, the National Palace. He would be accompanied by his consort, the *Permaisuri Agong* (her Majesty’s the Queen).

During the period of his stay in the National Palace, the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* will execute his official duties for the country while at the same time leading a normal life as a monarch. When he moved into the National Palace, it was customary to get his consent on the arrangement and layout of the palace in order to ensure his comfort and convenience [9]. Therefore, the palace staff would accommodate some changes in accordance to the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong’s* preferences and needs. It was noted that, the changes were however, minimal since it normally only involved furniture and room partitions [9]. Since its inception as the National Palace in 1957 until 2011 when it was replaced, it accommodated thirteen *Yang di-Pertuan Agongs*. Within that period, many events would accompany the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*, both official and unofficial such as the installation ceremony of the Malaysian sovereign, the receiving of credentials of foreign heads of mission, the appointment of Malaysian ambassadors, banquets for heads of states, presentation of medals and awards, birthdays, parties, weddings and even funerals. Every five years, the building would observe and embrace change in its routines and record them silently as they unfold within its spaces.

All of these richly layered memories of the place are currently possessed only by those who stayed in the National Palace and experienced them as it unfolded. Due to its status and the tight security imposed, the palace was only accessible to those few within certain period of services. Many of the events were inaccessible to the public, thus the gap in knowledge and understanding of its significance and contribution to the country. Eventually this might lead to a lack of appreciation of the palace’s contribution and role to the country. As it morphed into the Royal Museum, attempts to capture and display these memories presented great challenge to conservators and curators of the museum.

### 3.2 Narration and curation of memories in the Royal Museum

In their paper, Ramos and Silva [10] cited Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) on heritage, “Heritage...depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as an exhibition of themselves”. It emphasized on the importance of display to provide narrations; and to give voice to the structure of past memories for observers to relate to and perhaps empathize with occasions that had happened. The display entails objects, images and texts. “The objects, thus displayed are often believed to possess some intrinsic value or power, which makes the viewer’s experience relevant, ‘extra-ordinary’” [10].

In the case of the Royal Museum, conservation work was focused on the physical structure of the building while little attention was put on its displays. It is understood that “design



(architectural styles) and material is the most an authentic criterion in conservation of heritage building” [1] since it brings together the history of the past”. However, in order for the viewers to have full understanding of its significance, more needs to be done to its displays to ensure actual connection to its history and meanings. It is crucial to look at conservation holistically since “conservation of heritage buildings contributes the emotional ties to the people and the sensitivity towards the past” [1]. An inconsistent and incomprehensible display of the past will lead to disconnected narrative of its memories, which eventually cause the heritage building to be not being fully understood and appreciated. Ultimately, isolated and finally, demolished.

Nevertheless, as per any good practice of conservation, it is necessary to capture and present narration of the events based on its true nature i.e. authenticity. For the Royal Museum, it was found quite challenging due to its history of changing qualities of space and events. There is a need to ascertain periods of significance in order to establish specific time frames for the display to be presented.

### 3.3 Methodologies

Against the background of these ongoing challenges, this paper explores the issue of narration in curating display in the Royal Museum of Kuala Lumpur. Since it is part of an on-going project, it focuses on the first phase of investigation; data collection and discussion of its finding. On-site observation and measured drawing exercise was conducted by which all display i.e. objects, images and texts were catalogued. In addition, 26,867 official photos from the Department of Information of the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia Malaysia were collated and inventoried. Interview with staff in-charge and the head in-charge of the gallery of the Museum were conducted to get insight of the conservation process. Furthermore, communications with the former *Dato’ Paduka Maharaja Lela* (the Grand Chamberlain) of the National Palace were documented as narrative of his experiences in the Royal Palace and supported by his personal collections of photographs. An inventory of furniture, equipment and rooms in the palace, documented by the Public Works Department for the duration of 1989 to 1994, identified the arrangement of the furniture, equipment and rooms suiting its occupants at that time.

The project is an attempt to document the Royal Museum to assist in conserving its tangible and intangible heritage. It will eventually be digitized to serve as a historical, educational and public reference of the palace as a national treasure. The discussion below elaborates on the Museum’s history, current display and material acquired as a step towards determining its authenticity in order to support the full narration of its history.

## 4 HISTORY

This section describes the changes that happened over the period of 100 years of its existence.

### 4.1 Pre-World War II: the mansion

The mansion, located at Jalan Istana (Palace Road), right in the heart of the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur has become an important part of the history of the country. The building was built on the slope of a hill, Bukit Petaling, within a serene 5.2-hectare compound with a beautiful landscaping [11]. It was originally a double storey mansion and was heavily influenced by Palladian architecture. It was designed by one of the oldest Singaporean architectural firms, Swan & Maclaren for Chan Wing and his extensive family [12]. The construction of the mansion started in 1928 and was completed in 1933.



#### 4.2 World War II: the Japanese officers' Mess

The strategic location of the mansion was one of the determining factors for the Japanese military to use it as the Japanese Officers' Mess between 1942 and 1945, i.e. during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. After the end of World War II, the British Military Administration used the Mansion briefly as the quarters for its officers above the rank of Brigadier [12].

#### 4.3 Post-World War II: the residence of the Sultan of Selangor

With the formation of Federation of Malaya in 1950, the Selangor State Government rented the residence from the owner for 5000 Straits Dollars a month until the Malayan independence in 1957. It was then renovated to become the palace of His Majesty the Sultan of Selangor. In May 1957, a total of RM 328,000 was spent to renovate the palace under the supervision of the architect E. K. Dinsdale [11].

#### 4.4 Post-Independence: the National Palace

A few months before the Independence of Malaysia, the Federal Government bought over the mansion at a cost of RM 1.4 million, converting it into the National Palace, the official residence of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* until 2011 [13]. An extensive renovation was undertaken in 1980 where an annexed unit, The Throne Room, was added and it was the first time that the Installation Ceremony of the 7<sup>th</sup> *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* was held at the palace [12]. The building had undergone several renovations since it was first completed in 1928. Unfortunately, full documentation of the renovations is not accessible to the public.

#### 4.5 Present: the Royal Museum

The National Palace was designated as a national heritage under the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645) in 2007 (Gazette No. P.U (A)-277). The building was originally proposed to be converted into a heritage hotel. However, it was decided as inappropriate by the cabinet ministers in a meeting on 28 September 2011. Consequently, the building was then agreed to be conserved and opened to the public. Among its objectives are to educate, foster and disseminate knowledge to the public on the Malaysian monarchy. One way to achieve this is by providing brief captions on the artifact, equipment, spaces, furniture and other related facilities in the building [14].

This former National Palace has always been the home of powerful people and has witnessed the great development of Malaysia both culturally and historically (Figs 1 and 2). It was first opened to the public on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 after being converted into a Royal Museum. The museum served as a nostalgic icon of the unique Malaysian monarchy [15]. The 'Our King' exhibition was the first exhibition organized by the Department of Museums and was held in the Throne Room [6]. This exhibition was initiated to bring the history of the Royalties closer to the general public.

### 5 DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

#### 5.1 On-site observations and measured drawing exercise

Based on on-site observations and measured drawing exercise conducted in January 2015, the displays within the Royal Museum were done replicating its ambiance as it was during the year 2011; i.e. the year it was vacated and relinquished from its position as the National



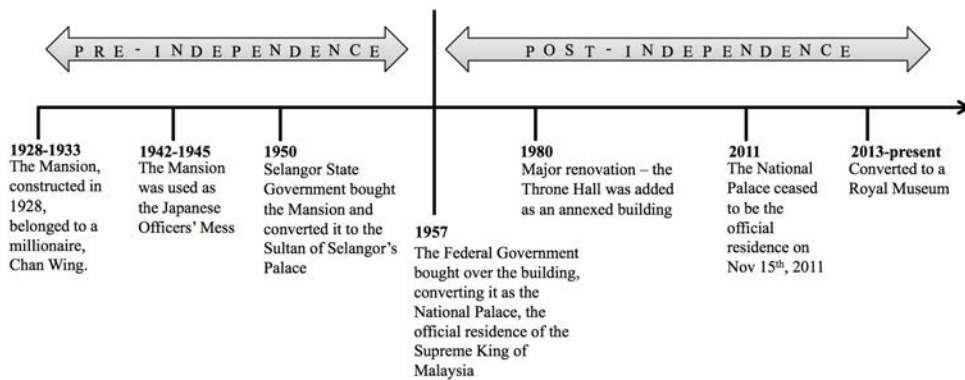


Figure 1: Timeline of the transformation of the building. (Source: Author, 2017.)



A photo of the building in 1945, showing the façade, with balconies on the second floor and open cupolas on the rooftop



Workers doing final touches for the preparation of the Installation Ceremony of His Majesty Yang di-Pertuan Agong VII in the newly renovated Throne Room

Figure 2: Photographs of the building in 1945 and 1980. (Sources: *The Star*, 2013 and *Bernama*, 1980.)

Palace. While some of its objects, furniture, decoration pieces and paintings were brought to the newly-built palace, others; of many varieties of design and patterns, were haphazardly displayed in the Royal Museum as there was no attempt to cohesively arrange them. The diagrams below (Fig. 3) indicated the layout of the Royal Museum as documented through the measured drawings exercise.

At the *Anjung Utama*, the main entrance of the building, there is no attempt to provide or display an overall layout of the building. Visitors are led through a designated and controlled passageway to view the rooms and their display. There is no information on the history of the building and on the objects available. Nevertheless, each room was labelled with information board that briefly described the function of the rooms. There is no indication of any specific historical events related to the room.

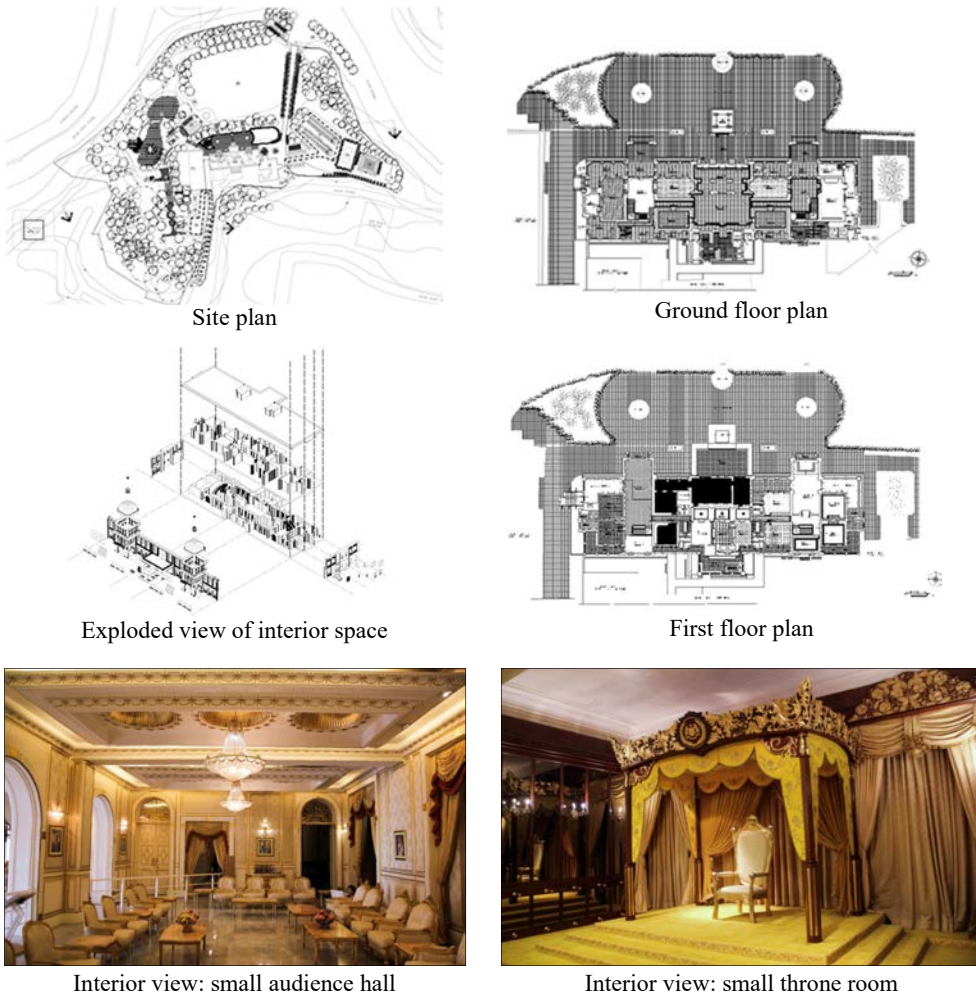


Figure 3: Layout and interior views of the Royal Museum.

Framed pictures of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agongs* and his consorts could be seen inside the rooms and along the corridor. However about 80% of them showed the King being outside of the building doing activities, meeting people and visiting places. Those photographs which captured people within the interiors of the building however, lacked reference to the actual room where the event occurred. Other pictures are arbitrarily displayed as decorative features such as pictures of flowers, butterflies, ships, scenery in rooms etc. which seemed irrelevant and out of place.

Decorative objects such as vases, statues, flower bouquets and souvenirs could be seen placed around furniture. However, they are without any information on their significance and connection to any of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agongs* or the *Permaisuri Agongs*. Some of the furniture also looked aged and lacked reference as to those who had used them.

## 5.2 Photographs

The Department of Information of the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia Malaysia made available 26,867 official photos related to the National Palace for public viewing in its portal at <http://my1foto.penerangan.gov.my/>. The photographs elucidate on formal ceremonies and events that took place in the National Palace from 1957 to 2011 (Fig. 4). The photographs are mostly centered on the event of coronation, receiving of credentials by foreign heads of mission, appointment of Malaysian ambassadors, banquets for heads of states and presentation of medals and awards. Funerals were also captured in the collection.

The pictures identified the events, dates and the individuals involved in each event. However, there is lack of description on the actual room where they took place.



*Yang di-Pertuan Agong* Tuanku Abdul Rahman consented to chat with guests from Canada at National Palace, Kuala Lumpur on Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1957.



The late Sultan Hisamudin's hearse was taken from the National Palace to Sultan Abdul Samad Building on Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960.



*Raja Permaisuri Agong*, Tunku Hajah Bahiyah trying on the robe to be used during appointment as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chancellor of University Malaya at National Palace, Kuala Lumpur on Sept. 20<sup>th</sup>, 1974.



Honourable guests taking pictures together during the Royal Wedding Ceremonial between Tengku Muhaini Sultan Ahmad Shah and Tengku Ibrahim Indera Putra at National Palace, Kuala Lumpur on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1981.

Figure 4: Formal ceremonies and events that took place in the National Palace.



### 5.3 Interview with the museum's curator

An interview was conducted with the staff in-charge and the head in-charge of the gallery of the Royal Museum on 20 January 2015 to gain insights on the conservation process that had occurred after the building was converted into a museum. The staff in-charge, Nor Saleha Gazali and the head in-charge of the gallery, Azzro Azman, have worked with the Museum for more than a year. Based on the interview, both demonstrated good knowledge of the Royal Palace and its history. They were able to identify important events that had happened in the Palace such as the inauguration of foreign ambassadors, the inauguration of the chief judge and receiving of credentials of foreign heads of mission. They were able to elaborate on the changes that were done as a result of the changes in the role of the building.

### 5.4 Narration by the former Grand Chamberlain and his personal photographs

Personal communications [9] took place with Dato' Zubir Ali, the former *Dato' Paduka Maharaja Lela* (the Grand Chamberlain) of the National Palace, who served four *Yang di-Pertuan Agongs* from 1990 to 2001. As the Grand Chamberlain, Zubir was responsible to look after household matters and the protocol of all official ceremonies that the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* would be involved in. His narration of the experiences he had throughout the 10-year period lent voices to the pictures which he personally archived (Fig. 5).

### 5.5 Furniture, equipment and room inventory by the Public Works Department

An inventory of furniture, equipment and room in the National Palace from 1989 to 1994 by the Public Works Department (PWD) provided a reference on how the palace was during that time (Fig. 6). Richly decorated rooms and furniture exude grandiose and majestic feeling of the place. However, the inventory lacked information on the events that had taken place at the rooms.



Datuk Zubir with the *Permaisuri Agong* Tuanku Najihah binti Almarhum Tunku Besar Burhanuddin.

Picture taken during *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Al-Haj birthday celebration.

Figure 5: Photographs from Dato' Zubir's personal collection.



The inventory of the King's Audience room listed the objects and furniture in the room.

The inventory identified objects and furniture by a numbering system that suggest quantity and room number.

Figure 6: Sample PWD inventory of the National Palace (1989 to 1994).

## 6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This preliminary study confirmed that the conservation of the National Palace and its transformation to a Royal Museum was not done holistically to incorporate a complete narration of its history. The lack of consistent and comprehensible documentation contributed to the disconnected narrative. It is vital to record and display all information with the intention to present the building and its history to the visitors in achieving its main objective of educating, fostering and disseminating knowledge on the Institution of Monarchy in Malaysia. Multiple sources of information is required in order to fully grasp what had occurred within its wall since accessibility was an exclusive right and only a limited number of people were involved in its day-to-day operation.

This project continues to develop an inventory database and later on, images library that would channel out information not only on the building but also the memories of events that had happened throughout its life for reference and education for the future generations.

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