Heritage conservation for city marketing: The imaging of the historic city of Georgetown, Penang

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Abstract

The process of imaging for city marketing purposes has the implication on culture, conservation and heritage. City marketing, especially in the European context, has been examined in interdisciplinary literature with special focus on imaging for tourism. Little is reported about the imaging of those cities' ex-colonies in the East. The Historic City of Georgetown in Penang, dubbed 'the City of Living Culture', has been gearing her development towards living up to the image. This paper examines the imaging of the Historic City of Georgetown for heritage tourism and city marketing tool by the public agencies involved. A short introduction to city marketing, imaging and heritage tourism is offered due to sparse literature in the built environment literature and to serve as a foundation to the main discourse of this paper. The bulk of this paper discusses the conservation of heritage as image dimensions in the marketing of Georgetown. We submitted that Georgetown has successfully utilised and capitalised on its cultural diversity and tangible heritage based on its colonial legacy to promote the city as evidenced by its recent inscription into UNESCO's World Heritage Site list. Nonetheless, building and maintaining the synergy between the government, the private sector and the people is essential for the city's heritage tourism industry.

Keywords: City marketing, heritage tourism, conservation, culture, city image

Introduction

The process of imaging for city marketing purposes has the implication on culture, conservation and heritage. City marketing, especially in the European context, has been scrutinised in interdisciplinary literature with special focus on imaging for tourism. Little is reported about the imaging of those ex-colonial cities in the East where local traditions, heritage and culture co-exist with remnants of their colonial past. Cities in Malaysia have their own unique and distinctive images drawn from various cultural elements including traditions, heritage and culture with each element being unique to each city. The Historic City of Georgetown in Penang, dubbed 'the City of Living Culture', has been gearing her strategies towards realising the image. Tourism focus in the Historic City of Georgetown is its heritage buildings and living culture, a culmination of its colonised past and rich history. This paper examines the imaging of the Historic City of Georgetown for heritage tourism and city marketing tool by the public agencies involved. It began with a discussion on city marketing, imaging and heritage tourism to lay the foundation to this study. The context of this paper is set by briefly describing Penang and the Historic City of Georgetown before proceeding to discuss heritage and conservation which

underlie the issue of city imaging and its marketing. This paper concludes by the suggestion that building and maintaining the synergy between the government, the private sector and the people is essential for the city's heritage tourism industry.

The nature of city marketing

Marketing concepts have permeated across a number of disciplines thus resulting in a burgeoning literature offering various vocabularies and perspectives. Unsurprisingly, a number of promotional activities have been employed by cities as marketing tools, viz. civic boosterism, place marketing, city branding, destination marketing, selling places and city imaging/re-imaging (Smith, 2005). The role of city marketing has been heightened globally by, *inter alia*, global competition between cities, tourism and urban management. Interchangeable with place marketing, city marketing is defined as "*the adaptation of the traditional model of Marketing's 4p's (product, price, place and promotion) and its performance in the procedure of city*
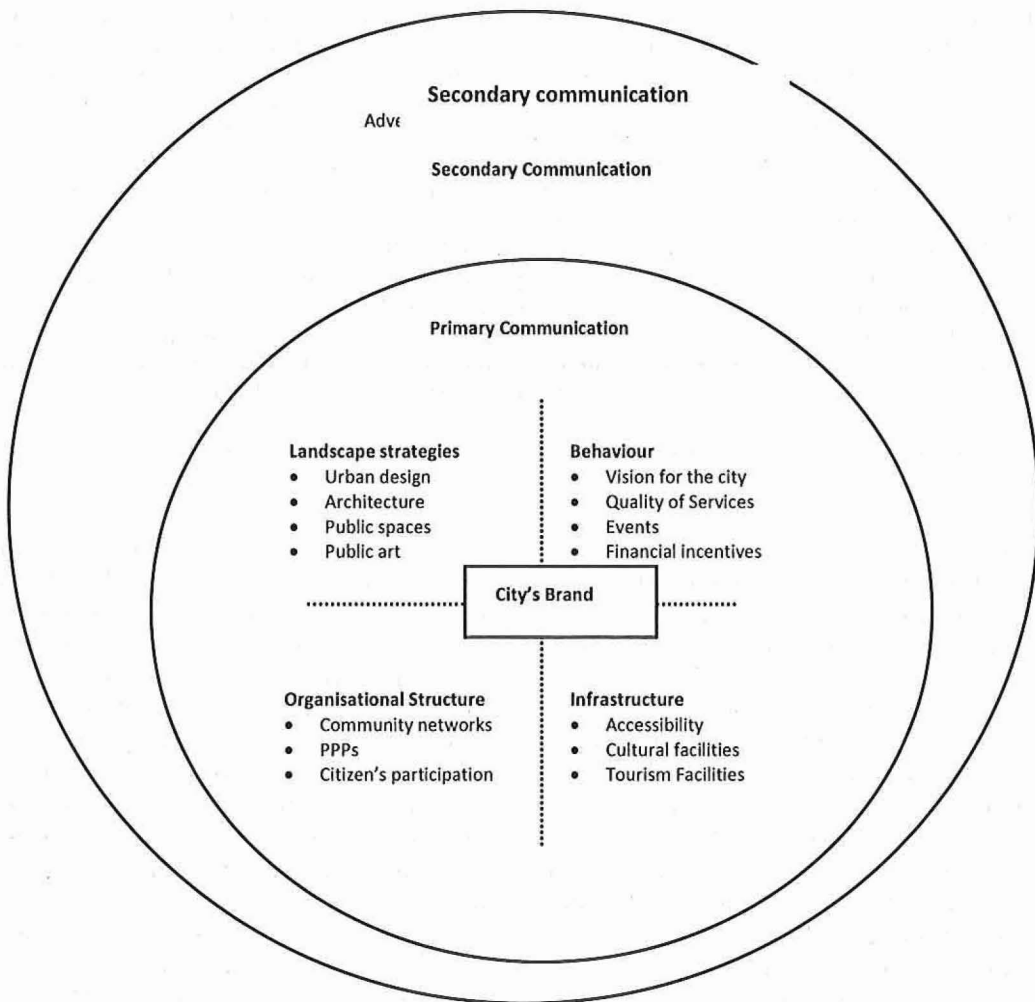

Figure 1: Communication of the city's brand. *Source*: Kavaratzis (2004)

marketing" (Deffner and Metaxas, 2006, 3). Deffner and Metaxas (2006) further argued that vital to the effectiveness of city marketing objectives and strategies are the local distinctive characteristics and particulars of each city. Successful marketing of a city highly depends on the *city branding,* a marketing concept that necessitates the creation of a specifically designed place identity and promotion to identified markets as depicted in Figure 1. A concept increasingly used by European cities, city branding may be said to be the culmination of city imaging, an extension of the image-building strategy in product marketing (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005).

Imaging of the city

A postmodern approach to marketing puts the image as the marketable entity which is primary to the product itself (Firat, *et al*, 1995), an important observation for the tourism industry which itself has been observed to have experienced postmodernism (Nuryanti, 1996). Organisations now realise that successful marketing lies not in the product but in the crafted images, and it is the images not the product that should be communicated in promotional campaigns (Firat, *et al*, 1995; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Taking the cue from the product marketing discipline, the importance of image is transplanted onto city marketing, particularly in the tourism circle where destination image is seen to have a powerful influence in the purchasing process (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). In tourism, destination image may be taken as perceptions of individual destination attributes combined with the holistic impression made by the destination (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). The imaging of a city brings about political, economic and sociophysiological implications to various sects, particularly to the tourism industry. The availability of vast literature on city imaging (and indeed

city re-imaging) especially in the European context confirmed this (McCarthy, 1998; Smith, 2005; Deffner and Metaxas, 2006; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2007; Luque-Martinez, *et al.*, 2007). The imaging of a city is vital to accommodate tourists' requirement of *'a coherent representation/ meaning of the city, one that is easy and pleasant to consume'* (Balibrea, 2001: 189 as cited by Smith, 2005). Ashworth and Goodall (1989) further illustrated how a holiday destination is selected based on the *naïve image* (image formed through the formal and informal amassing of information) being well above the *evaluative image* (the aspiration level). Nevertheless, studying a city's image is not only for the benefit of the city's strategic planning and marketing but also reveals its citizen's level of satisfaction and pride (Peleggi, 1996; Smith, 2005; Luque-Martinez *et al.*, 2007). Luque-Martinez *et al.* (2007) discussed in detail the process and various elements needed to quantify a city's image. From their study, heritage was confirmed as a dimension that is ranked highly important by residents of the study area. Image contrived from heritage not only provides tourism a selling point, but it also evokes emotions and visualisations that local residents experience on a daily basis.

Heritage tourism

Heritage as a dimension of city imaging brings about socio-psychological advantages as well as, perhaps more importantly, economic benefits under tourism which Archer and Fletcher (1990 as cited in Nuryanti, 1996) categorised as direct, indirect and induced types accrued in terms of foreign exchange, government revenues, new jobs and businesses with targeted markets coming from national and regional tourists as well as ex-colonialists (Peleggi, 1996; Nuryanti, 1996; Mohamed and Mustafa, 2005). Although Peleggi (1996) and Nuryanti (1996) have demonstrated the

locals' appreciation and pride of their own hegemony may cause heritage tourism to be more popular among domestic tourists, this only reinforces the case for heritage-related tourism products as a marketing stratagem for the relevant organisations. Using images of the past, heritage tourism is not without detractors. Attractions that are heritage-based have been accused by Baudrillard (1983: 13 as cited in Peleggi, 1996) as '…*a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity*". Nuryanti (1996), within the context of developing countries' viewpoint, shared the scepticism of linking heritage with tourism as she argued that the meaning and significance of heritage may be contested, reinterpreted and even recreated. Yet proponents ignored the abstract arguments for more tangible and immediate gratifications of heritage tourism. In developing countries, the public sector leads the sector which normally lack strong private sector or an experienced tourism industry, normally assuming multiple roles of tourism educator, industry regulator and entrepreneur (Nuryanti, 1996).

Setting the context

As an island state steeped in rich culture and traditions, Penang has pursued heritage based tourism as a key economic activity (Mohamed and Mustafa, 2005). The small state is situated at the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia (see Figure 2). Although composed of an island and a portion of the mainland, "Penang" generically refers to the Penang Island to locals and foreigners alike. The state capital, Georgetown is located on the north-east corner of the island. Founded in 1786 by Francis Light, Georgetown and Penang thrived on their colonial past. Its colourful history is a major selling point for the state's tourism, as illustrated by this note from the state's tourism promotional body:

"*Penang was little more than a small island overgrowing with lush, tropical foliage… Light had little use for Penang's overabundant greenery and mangrove swamps. One anecdotal story has Light firing cannon full of gold coins into the heart of Penang's jungle. Light then sent the locals forth to clear it. The implication being that while they hacked and chopped down the*

Figure 2 : Location of Penang
Source: http://www.hbp.usm.my/conservation

Figure 3: Conservation Areas in Penang
Source: Penang Structure Plan 2020

trees and bushes, whatever coin they found was theirs to keep."
(*Source* : Timeless Penang, Tourism Division, Penang Development Corporation)

The beaches form an attraction for locals and tourists alike, alongside Bukit Bendera which was a rest and recreations area for British administrators during colonial times. The natural attractions, nonetheless, are secondary compared to its cultural attractions. Penang's cultural diversity forms a niche upon which Penang has focused to market Georgetown and Penang in the international and domestic tourism trade (Kee, 2004). Figure 3 displays the six conservation areas in Penang, each with its distinctive flavours, building characteristics, social fabric and cultural ambiance (Mohamed *et al.*, 2001). The current study on imaging of Georgetown intends to link the heritage conservation efforts of the state government with the overall view of the city's marketing plans.

Methodology

The study area comprises the Historic City of Georgetown, also known as the "City of Living Culture", considered as possessing distinctive images of heritage and conservation. The city has presently been inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage Site together with the Historic City of Malacca. The Nomination Dossier for both cities mainly highlighted buildings of colonial period to the international organisation. The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate the imaging of the Historic City of Georgetown via heritage-based tourist attractions as a city marketing tool by the public agencies involved. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interview which suited the type of data involved. Various approaches were used: personal interviewing of key personnel involved in the conservation, development, promotion and marketing of

the city; observation of various landmarks and secondary data collection. An account of the city in relation to various popular images drawn from the media, historians, archives, brochures and magazines was also undertaken. This is to give an in depth understanding of the issues surrounding the projected image.

Having identified those images, the next step was to identify the key actors involved in the image building process from the perspective of the authorities. A list of all the actors involved was identified through 'snowball sampling". The process of tracking down key actors involved in the image making process was also done through networking.

The organizational structure

The management of heritage conservation in Georgetown is under the purview of the Conservation Unit, a division under the Building Department of the Penang Municipal Council. Any physical work is either carried out entirely by the private sector or with financing by the Council. Nonetheless, the creation and promotion of the city's image encompassing religious and colonial buildings as well as tangible and intangible heritage is undertaken by Tourism Penang and other relevant tourism agencies. The promotion of the Historic City of Georgetown and Penang as a tourism product also falls under the responsibility of both State and Federal Agencies. The Ministry of Tourism, the federal agency responsible for promotional activities, maintains an office at the state level under its Tourism Malaysia arm. The state too has its own body to strategize and promote tourism in the state via the State Exco tourism committee, which is also in charge of Culture, Arts and Women Development before the 12th general election. Beside this committee, the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) also has a division dealing with tourism development.

The tourism section of the Committee, with the help of consultants and experts on tourism, was responsible for the "Timeless Penang" and the "City of Living Culture" image creations. In collaboration with Tourism Malaysia and the Ministry of Tourism these image are then promoted locally and overseas, using "Timeless Penang" and the "City of Living Culture" to market Penang's tourism products.

Heritage Conservation in Georgetown

The Historic City of Georgetown focuses its conservation efforts on pre-war buildings. Penang is proud of its reputation as having the most number of pre-war buildings in Southeast Asia especially in Georgetown; a sentiment that is true at least among the state government and certain NGO's. This coincides with the reconstruction of Penang's history which highlighted the establishment and development of Penang, and particularly Georgetown, with colonialism. Such being the case, conservation in Georgetown is concerned with the conservation of its colonial past and its melting-pot image. The government's effort to put the old city or historic centre on the World Heritage List is an example of this.

The site which has now garnered the World Heritage Site title covers an area of approximately 259.38 hectares comprising the 18th century town grid close to the waterfront and the historic multi-cultural neighbourhoods. The justification for Georgetown's nomination as per Criteria (ii) and (iii) in the Nomination Dossier submitted to the UNESCO (outstanding universal values) includes:

"As an outstanding example of 18th -20th century architectural ensemble of European, Chinese, Indian and Malay origins which illustrates the legacy of multi-culturalism of the Straits Settlements and mercantile history of the Straits of Melaka."

"As an outstanding example of a traditional multi-cultural settlement which best represents the culture of tolerance, peace, diversity, conflict and continuity in the face of modernisation and social change."

Another statement that propounded Georgetown's melting-pot image is:

"No other historic part town on the straits of Malacca or in Asia offers a multi religious community, each practicing their own heritage tradition and values. This can best be seen in the existence of different religious buildings; the Malay mosque; the Chinese temple; the Indian temples; and the churches of the core and buffer zones of Historic City of Georgetown. The architecture of these religious buildings is exceptional".
Source: http://www.hbp.usm.my/cad/Q &A/Questions/Q5.htm

The site of the conservation zone is bordered by Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah covering existing conservation areas in the inner city area as well as important heritage buildings outside of the area as shown in Figure 3 above.

The Inner City Trails of Georgetown (a series of walking tours promoted by the Penang Heritage Trust) are found in this area comprising:

Table 1: The Inner City Trails of Georgetown

Name	Area
The Spice Trail	Around Little India , Mahamariamman temple, Kapitan Kling Mosque, etc.
Heritage Trail 1	Yap Kongsi, Khoo Kongsi, Acheen Street Mosque, Syed Alatas Mansion, Sun Yat Sen's base, Cheah Kongsi, Teochew temple, City Hall, Fort Cornwallis, State Assembly Building, Town Hall, Penang State Museum, Court Buildings, Convent Light Street, St. George's church, Penang Peranakan Mansion, King Temple Street, Goddess of Mercy Temple.
Heritage Trail 2	Penang State museum, Cathedral of the Assumption, Saint Xavier's Institiution, Hainanese Mariners Lodge & Penang Heritage Trust office, Carpenter Guild, Goldsmith Guild, Home of Batu Gantung, King Wan Association, Hainan Temple, Benggali mosque, Cheong Fatt Tze mansion, Leong Fee's mansion, Residence of Ku Din Ku Meh, Christian Cemetery, Saint Francis Xavier Church etc.

Source: Historic Georgetown Trails, published by PHT and ARTS-ED, Penang

Figure 4: Penang Heritage Trail 1
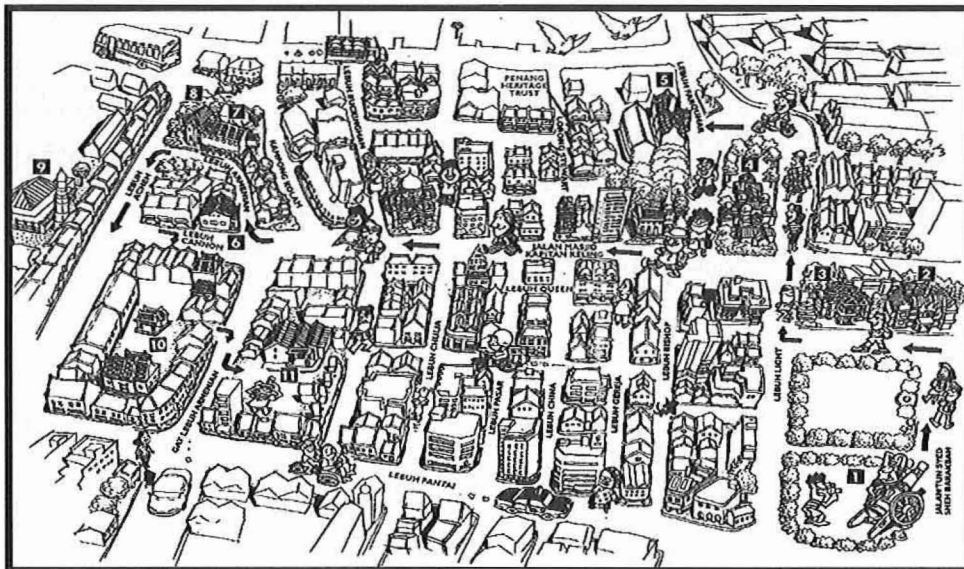
Legend:
1 Fort Cornwallis
2 City Hall
3 Town Hall
4 Court Buildings
5 Penang State Museum
6 Yap Kongsi
7 Dr.Sun Yat Sen's Penang Base
8 Syed Al Atas Mansion
9 Acheen Street Malay Mosque
10 Khoo Kongsi
11 Cheah Kongsi

Source: The Official Website of Tourism Penang by The Penang Tourism Action Council (www.tourismpenang.gov.my)

Photo 1 : Entrance of Fort Cornwallis

Photo 2 : Dr. Sun Yat Sen's Base
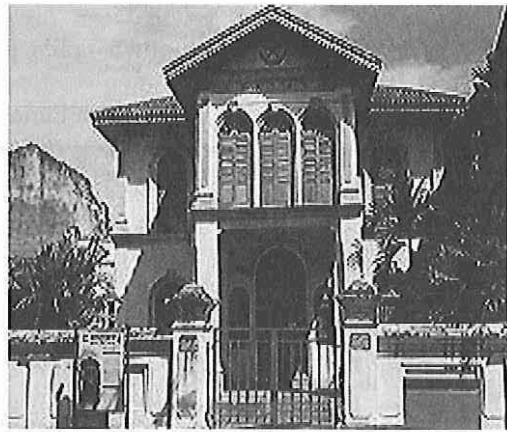
Photo 3 : State Assembly Buildings

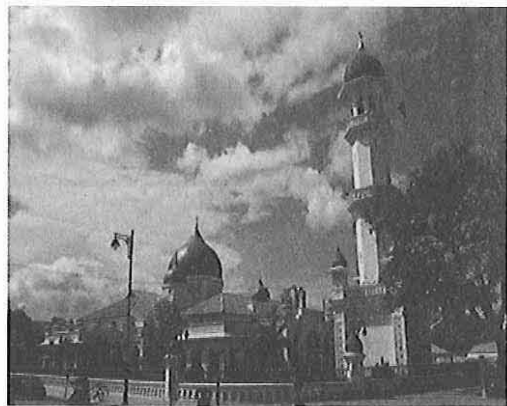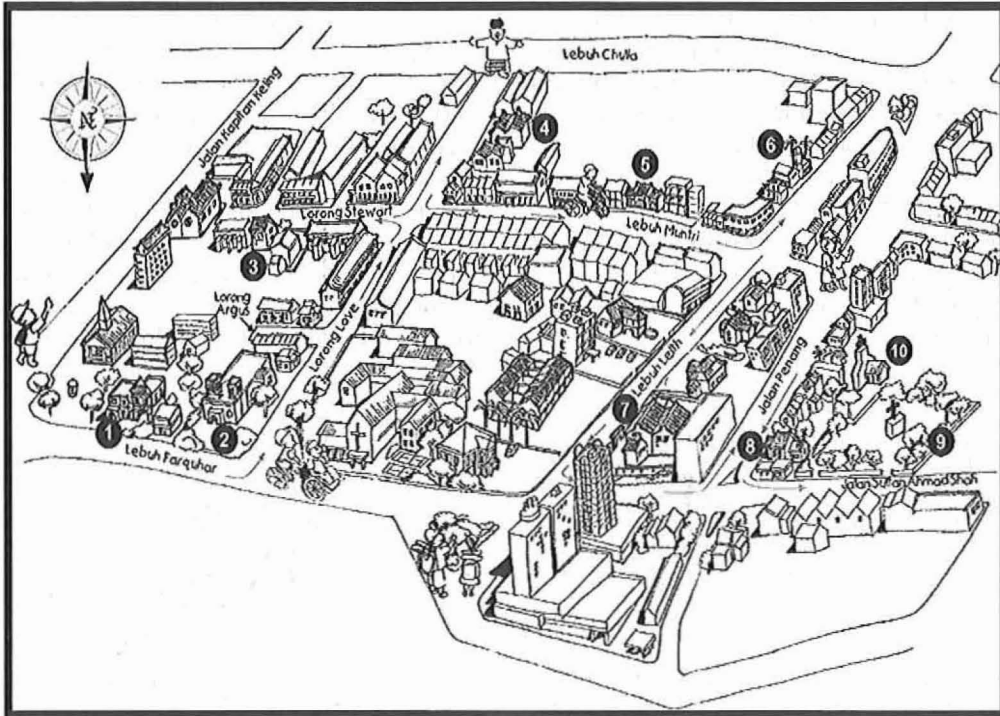Photo 4 : Syed Al Atas Mansion

Photo 5: Kapitan Kling Mosque

Photo 6 : Acheen Street Malay Mosque

Photo 7 : Khoo Kongsi

Figure 5 : Penang Heritage Trail 2

Legend:
1 Penang State Museum
2 Cathedral of the Assumption
3 Hainanese Mariners' Lodge
  (Penang Heritage Trust)
4 Carpenters' Guild
5 Hainan Temple

6 Benggali Mosque
7 Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion

8 Residence of Ku Din Ku Meh
9 Christian Cemetery
10 Saint Francis Xavier Church

Source : The official website of Tourism Penang; (www.tourismpenang.gov.my)

The design of the brief tour of the nominated World Heritage site will expose one to buildings which are mainly of European and Chinese origins (depicted by the images in previous pages), with a few exceptions like the Sri Mahamariamman Temple, the Acheen Street Malay Mosque and the Kapitan Kling Mosque. It is history, but it is colonial history. For some this may depict an image that they are not comfortable with. To the British tourist, it is nostalgic, reminding them of the glorious past of the British Empire; to the Chinese and Indians it may remind them of their beginnings and their success in Penang; but to the indigenous population whose ancestors watched Light's first landing on the island, these historic buildings may be painful reminder of their downfall and exclusion from Georgetown. Images give rise to emotions and sentiments for different people. Thus Columbus Day is a day of celebration for the new Americans, but a day of mourning for the original Americans, just as the Statue of Liberty is a symbol of hope for the European migrants as they sailed into New York harbour, but possibly a symbol of their downfall to native Americans.

Living Culture Images

Conservation of historical buildings without a living culture in its midst is seen to be a static image not sufficiently attractive to tourists. The historical buildings standing proud but empty except for tourist moving in and around them tells only half of the story. They need to be situated within the vibrant, living culture of the community. Georgetown, with its population consisting of Chinese, Indians and Malays lays a claim to a living culture thriving on its diversity. Its local culture, a mixture of Chinese, Indian "Jawi Peranakan", Jawi Pekan and Malays (of local Arabic, Rawa, Minang, Achinese, and Javanese descent) traditions, is a potential selling point of Penang's heritage. Nonetheless, these cultural resources, analogous to "raw materials" in the production process, need to be pummelled into a saleable tourist product. Thus an image is constructed of a community whose members consist of different ethnic groups practicing their separate cultures but able to live side by side in harmony. The Harmony Trail with its collection of historical buildings of Chinese, Indian and Malay origins has come to this harmonious

Photo 8 : Penang State Museum

Photo 9 : Cathedral of the Assumption

existence. The State government, in its successful effort to place Georgetown on the World Heritage List banked on the image to fulfil UNESCO's Criteria (ii), that is, *"Exhibit an important in interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture and town planning"* and Criteria (iii) *"...be an outstanding example of traditional human settlement"*. In reality, the dominant community and culture in the Historic City of Georgetown's inner city is Chinese with Little India and Acheen Street and the Acheen Street Mosque being sizeable Indian Muslim and Malay enclaves in the inner city. It is, however, the image that guides action. Thus much money, time and energy are spent by the government and some parts of the private sector to realize this image on the ground, at least to maintain it while the tourists are present. Certain materials and non-material elements of Malay, Chinese and Indian culture perceived to be of interest to tourist are promoted. The Little India, the Shop House City and Acheen Street (including the mosque) receive attention from various quarters, governments or otherwise, as these areas could attract tourists in their search for the "City of Living Culture" image marketed by the tourism industry and tourism sector of the government. The open house concept associated with various festivals is extended to the community, where it is the community that opens its doors to tourist and locals on festive occasions like Hari Raya, Chinese New year and Deepavali. Ethnic food, colourful and exotic clothes, festivals, traditional handicrafts and music and cultural performance are "sold" to tourists, portrayed as authentic cultures of the various ethnic groups of Georgetown.

Discussion

Image creation is a selective process; certain items are selected and incorporated into the image while others are excluded and eventually forgotten. In the case of Penang, it is colonial history that has been chosen as its image. The "Timeless Penang" image was created for the state, following which the "City of Living Culture" image was tailored for Georgetown. Items from Penang's colonial past were chosen to be incorporated into the "Timeless Penang" and "City of Living Culture" images, while items from its pre-colonial era were excluded. It is the colonial heritage buildings which have been chosen for conservation and promotion as tourism products. It is, moreover, the cultures of all ethnic groups which have been selected to be conserved and promoted and not just one single ethnic group. For example, the list of the non-material items includes languages/dialects, belief system, ritual and lifestyle. As for material items, Acheen Street Malay Mosque, St. George Church and Penang High Court were included. The heritage list, on the other hand, mainly comprises buildings of colonial period in the heritage trails.

The Penang State Government, although serious in its efforts to conserve heritage of the colonial period as parts of its urban tourism development project, needs to work out smart partnerships with the private sector. Failure to do this would result in oppositions coming from the private sector and thus threatening the continuing conservation of local heritage, especially the heritage buildings. Active participation of the private sector will ensure not only the conservation of these buildings but also the conservation of local culture.

The creation of an image is one thing, but the promotion of that image is another. Penang has worked hard at creating the image, and has managed to create a strong image. The next step is to aggressively promote the image and sell the tourism product that the image is promoting. Again, the private sector has to play an important role in the matter. Participation

of the private sector will go a long way towards making Penang's urban cultural tourism a viable and sustainable product. Concurrently, it is essential to garner people's support and participation in realizing the image that is being promoted in the tourism market. Without the people's participation, the urban cultural tourism that Penang is focusing on, the image it has painstakingly created and promoted will not bear fruit. The people have to actively support and translate the image into reality for Penang's urban cultural tourism sub-sector to remain sustainable. A creation of officials, the urban dwellers of diverse cultures may not give full support to the main tourist attraction which is the image created.

Conclusion

In this paper, the Historic City of Georgetown imaging for heritage tourism and city marketing is carefully considered. The Historic City of Georgetown's image is portrayed as a "City of Living Culture" in "Timeless Penang". Its colonial legacy, seen in the numerous historical buildings, and its potpourri of culture is an attraction for tourists from various corners of the world. However, the intransience of this image as tourist attraction will depend on how successful the government, the private sector and the people make this image come alive on the ground. An image that is attractive only in the realm of imagination but not in reality will not be able to ensure sustainability of Historic City of Georgetown's heritage tourism industry. The maintaining of the synergy that exists between the government, the private sector and the people is therefore essential.

There is no obvious sign of power struggle between officials and locals in determining the images that Georgetown should promote for tourism. As the major findings indicate, most officials and key actors in the tourism sector are aware of the official image for Georgetown, created for city marketing and promotion. A few key respondents indeed conveyed their views on the official/unofficial images that are being portrayed and promoted in the promotional and the travel brochures. As far as the local culture and identities are concerned, they felt that it depends on the situation. For example, the local culture is being promoted in various ways through festivals, street life, food, music and dance, either in the actual form or on promotional media. Locals are engaged either directly or indirectly in the activities. The Ministry of Tourism together with other government agencies, on the other hand, are working closely to include community participation through community-based projects and activities related to tourism like the enhancement of the Malay *kampung* (village) areas. Cultural sustainability in the context of Georgetown will depend on the political will on the part of the State Government to create the policy and climate favourable to the conservation of both the built heritage and the living culture. Presently, the State Government has the Conservation Guideline for Georgetown Shophouses and the Heritage Act 2005 to provide it with necessary statutory powers for its conservation endeavours. More importantly, however, is the need at state level to initiate and develop a conservation management plan that will maximise cultural sustainability in line with the promotion of the cultural pluralism in a multicultural society.

The Historic City of Georgetown has successfully utilised and capitalised on its cultural diversity and tangible heritage based on her colonial legacy to promote the city as evidenced by its successful bid for UNESCO's World Heritage Site. With a well structured heritage policy underlining its future development, the Historic City of Georgetown is on its way to ensure that its lives up the image that it is promoting, that is, a Historical City. However, while

the image can be projected in a static way via conservation and preservation of its tangible assets, it can also be projected in a dynamic way by promoting the people. A concerted effort between the government, the private sector and the local community that is continuous in nature is not only desirable, but could be vital, to ensure the sustainability of Historic City of Georgetown's heritage tourism industry.

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