

Where Have All The Flowers Gone?

A journalist recently puzzled me with her observation that Malaysians loved to renovate their homes. She went on to highlight that the moment housing schemes are completed and handed over to the house-owners, the whole area becomes a construction site again with numerous homes undergoing major renovations.

First to be thrown out are the standard kitchen sinks, the plywood doors and locksets, the average-priced tap fittings, followed later by the floor tiles and parquet, to be replaced usually with higher-cost finishes. What a considerable waste of time, resources and money!

Maybe the newly developing countries such as Vietnam and China got it right by selling bare-finished "shell homes". This allows house-owners to source for their own finishes and fittings. By so doing it also supports a thriving small builder/renovator business and helps give a constant flow of work for skilled tradespeople. At a time of scarce resources and increasing costs, can we still afford to build-in unwanted or unnecessary wastages? Put in just to throw out? Is there a better way that we have missed out on?

In our rush to achieve a vision, we sometimes miss out on the finer details. New becomes synonymous with Good and Grand with Better. Old is gold and forgotten. This is clearly seen in the loss of many very valuable historical landmarks in our cities. Selfish short-term development has always been the arch-enemy of conservation. Yangon, a city left out from the mainstream of capitalistic commercial development for perhaps the past 40 years is a good laboratory standard. One can still find many of the old buildings from its colonial past in good condition – and still being used for the purposes for which they were built. Several buildings there are almost a replica of what we used to have here.

All is not lost yet. There is still time to cultivate again a love for the old. Whilst there have been pockets of good conservation works and a resurgence in adaptive re-use and urban rehabilitation of old areas here and there, much more needs to be done. PAM has since the early days of its pioneers held the standard high for more to be done in the area of heritage conservation. Perhaps with the new Heritage Act in place, we can now start to re-think again that old can be gold. The time to act is now... lest we say at the end of the road to developed status "... where have all the flowers gone?"

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