

PRESS STATEMENT: BADAN WARISAN

After labouring to promote a specific law since the early 1990s, Badan Warisan Malaysia had high hopes for the protection of our historic built environment when the National Heritage Act 2005 (NHA) - gazetted on 31 December 2005 - was effected on 1 March 2006. Albeit this Act was not in the form Badan Warisan would have preferred, but finally, there appeared to be a force of law which would champion of the nation's heritage cause.

On 12 April 2006, the President of Badan Warisan wrote to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage nominating Bok House as national heritage as provided for under Section 68 of the NHA. The basis for this nomination was articulated in an in-depth Statement of Cultural Significance which clearly stated its architectural, social and historical values - and which referenced the persona of Bok House expressed in published public documents, historical essays and other records over the past few decades. This request to the Minister was to be an acid test on the effectiveness of the NHA.

We have pursued the matter rigorously after the law was enforced, using all means open to us in seeking the opportunity to explain to all levels of government the unique position of Bok House in Malaysia's national heritage continuum.

The demolition of Bok House, despite our persistent and dogged attempts, sadly demonstrates our failure in getting our appeal recognized and endorsed by Government.

Let us ask one simple and basic question which must be at the forefront of everyone's minds - is Bok House a heritage building?

If the answer is yes, then it should have been accorded protection under the provisions of the NHA, and in this event, protection would have been in the form of gazettal, regardless of financial implications. Why then has it been allowed to be demolished? If there was objection to its gazetting, the laws of the country offer recourse for the landowner, and logically, the law should be allowed to take its own course. Or were there not powers to gazette it?

We can only presume that the decision-makers at Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) have approved the demolition. Can we assume also that the highest authority in DBKL would have deemed it expedient to refer to his superiors before making this momentous and unpopular decision. DBKL could not but be aware that Bok House, and its future, was already an issue, expressed not only in a letter from our President to the Mayor, but in the innumerable letters, and public discourse in the national press? It is a subject within the public domain.

In the final analysis, can we assume Bok House has been deemed to be NOT a heritage building?

We have been given to understand that an agency of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage has written a letter to the Trustees of the Estate of Chua Cheng Bok on 28 February 2006 - precisely one day before the NHA came into force. Supposedly the letter stated that at a post-Cabinet Meeting on 22 February 2006, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage decided it was no longer interested to take over, or, to gazette Bok House as a Heritage Building, and it therefore did not have any objections to the development proposals for the site.

So, if this building which is of such great historic prominence and provenance has been deemed by the authorities not to be a Heritage Building, Badan Warisan Malaysia would like to know what the government's definition of heritage is and what criteria were applied to arrive at this decision.

Sadly, we cannot but come to the grave conclusion that the demolition of Bok House within the first 12 months of the life of the NHA is an omen of things to come.

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BOK HOUSE 1929

BY AZRUL K. ABDULLAH

► Ask anyone who would have started working in KL in the 50s and 60s about a good place to have dinner, and an almost immediate response would be Bok House. Located on Jalan Ampang, just a stone's throw away from KLCC, the old house which was occupied by the Le Coq d'Or restaurant for years, is a focal point for residents of KL.

The English Palladian style mansion built in 1929 by architects Swan & McLaren (who incidentally designed Istana Negara in KL and Raffles Hotel in Singapore) still maintains a magnetic presence in KL amidst the high-rise development projects of Jalan Ampang and the surrounding golden triangle.

According to Chandran Jeshurun Ph.D., there were at least 10 grand mansions of similar stature along Jalan Ampang from the heyday of the 1920s, though Bok House is the only one left standing intact without any additions. The rest have since been demolished or put through 'insensitive' adaptive re-use.

A Home KL Inherited. The sheer scale of Bok House and its Neo-Classical grammar often detracted from the fact that it was, in essence, a family home with members living there until the 90s. Speaking to Ar Chen Voon Fee, the home's presence as part of KL's early entrepreneurial history and its richness in architectural detail should be reason enough for its preservation. "It's a home KL inherited and it should be enjoyed by the public," he added.

Apart from the building itself, the furniture, fittings and fixtures are relics from the 20s. Like a time capsule, the numerous visitors to Bok House often walked around the home perusing the various rooms and artifacts. "I would rate this as a grade one home," Chen said.

The home's large iconic columns (3 columns at each end) are hallmark of the 'giant order'; combined with the sheer size and scale connotes order, solidity and permanence. The wide verandahs themselves serve as 'external rooms' where people

would often congregate; a subtle yet practical adaptation to the tropical climate. "Each corner of the verandahs are braced by three columns, which is in keeping with the grammar of this form of Neo-Classical architecture popularised by Andrea Palladio, after whom the Palladian style takes its name," says Ar Lim Take Bane.

Bok House In the Late 90s. Lunch and dining at the old house pretty much continued to the very last days of Bok House. It was a popular spot for office dwellers to take a retreat from their air-conditioned workstations, and perhaps for a moment, envelope themselves with a "correct" meal and the old world charm of the house. Steaks and Bombe Alaska were common staples with Le Coq d'Or's diners.

The hall on the first floor was silent with just some mismatched chairs and tables. The landscape oil paintings were looking somewhat tired and for want of cleaning and restoration. One of the large bedrooms was obviously in need of some repairs with apparent water damage to the ceilings. The hall upstairs was often the scene of events, airline cocktail parties and wedding receptions in better times.

To the right of the foyer as one enters the house, was the bar. With a side door that will lead patrons out to the cavernous verandahs, the verandahs were also loosely decorated with aged chairs and coffee tables where one could while away the afternoons or evenings.

Bok House finally closed to the public in 2001. The plaque above the front door that greeted guest since the house was built is missing. It read: "Bok House 1929". This venerable time capsule of KL's historical past has closed and many of her secrets locked away.

Bok House Today. Five years have passed since the house has been closed and sealed (literally). The house has suffered some setbacks in its history including one partial demolition to the rear of the house in 1999.

Unlike some of KL's other landmarks including Stadium Merdeka and Stadium Negara, which were bought back from the hands of the developers, Bok House is unlikely to get the same treatment. Yes, the home may not be at the heart of national interest, but it definitely qualifies as being an element that is so intrinsic to KL and its inhabitants. Public support and responsible corporate citizenship is all that stands between saving one of KL's icons from extinction. am

- 1 Bok House shortly after it closed
- 2 The large verandahs which serve as exterior rooms
- 3 The foyer: the door leads to the bar

- 4 The chamber used as the bar
- 5 The porch and front door which used to have a plaque above it





The full extent of the damage after demolition