

# MANAGING A WORLD HERITAGE SITE: CHALLENGES & COMPLEXITIES

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Since its listing as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, George Town, the capital of Penang, has seen its tourist numbers soar, with an influx of international visitors drawn to the city's rich multicultural heritage. However, with the rise of tourism came multiple challenges: gentrification, depopulation and dilapidating heritage.

Struggling to maintain liveable standards while preserving the outstanding universal values (OUV's) that put George Town on the World Heritage List in the first place, the city embraced a tailored management structure to kick-start the island capital's transformation.

## A SPECIAL PLAN FOR A SPECIAL SITE

In 2009, a year after the listing, the state government of Penang installed a dedicated agency — George Town World Heritage Inc. — to manage the heritage site.



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Charged with laying down rules and regulations, the agency was also mandated to educate and increase awareness, as well as to monitor and supervise conservation and renovation works.

In addition, The Federal Government allocated RM20 million to preserve and protect the city's status as a George Town World Heritage Site, sparking the birth of Think City, a social purpose organisation set up to oversee the urban rejuvenation of the city and a subsidiary of Khazanah Nasional Berhad (the investment arm of the Malaysian government).

As a neutral body, and apolitical organisation, Think City moved to fill the gaps, connecting the public, private and community sectors with a two-pronged strategy, implementing both bottom-up and top-down initiatives at the same time.

Operating in a city where 85% of the buildings were in private hands and 75% of the businesses were tenants, the strategy was to start at the bottom. To empower and incentivise the local community, Think City introduced the George Town Grants Programme, disbursing over 200 grants worth \$4 million. The programme has since yielded over 100 projects, from the renovation of the copper dome of a mosque to the set-up of a revolving fund for a row of 10 shophouses.

Beyond physical impact, the projects catalysed support within the community, and likeminded urban rejuvenation initiatives. Capacity building, cultural mapping and content creation formed the backbone of the process. Understanding the history, identifying common ground, and building local intelligence, knowledge and networks formed the foundation for George Town's future planning trajectory.

## THE MAKING OF A MASTERPLAN

Within the next five years, the collective experience led to more top-down policies and strategic projects. Learning from their experience with the community, the organisation shifted from a tactical crowd-sourced approach to a more evidence-based strategic approach. Supported by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), Think City worked closely with Plan Malaysia at the federal level, George Town World Heritage Inc. at the state level, and the Penang Island City Council at the local council level, to embark on a Strategic Master Plan.

This also led to the implementation of the George Town Conservation Development Corporation (GTCCDC), a tripartite partnership established in 2015 between the Penang State Government's Chief Minister's Incorporated, Think City and AKTC. In collaboration with the City Council, the GTCCDC implemented strategic projects to mitigate



the effects of gentrification, develop strategies to repopulate the historic core area, and drive large-scale master planning in George Town's Northern and Eastern Seafronts.

Interventions targeted three main areas:

1. Regulations and Guidelines for Development Projects;
2. Facilitation between different stakeholders; and
3. Demonstration projects: in upgrading the public realm and the programming of places

## TRANSFORMATIVE PROJECTS

The Strategic Masterplan was significant in instigating operational projects that proved to be transformative for George Town. These projects not only set the benchmark for conservation work in an area of heritage significance and demonstrated how to design commercial development with sensitivity to its natural and cultural surroundings, but also convincingly showed how to include participatory processes in the preservation of monuments.

Examples include:

- The rejuvenation of Armenian Park — what began as a neighbourhood park became an area-improvement project including laneways and other surrounding areas;
- The conservation of Fort Cornwallis — the restoration of a historic fort, an archaeological programme with students, and the rehabilitation of open spaces; and
- The restoration of the North Sea Front — the drainage, resurfacing and landscaping of the esplanade, renovation and revelation of archaeological layers of a historic seawall, and establishing a network of cultural spaces, galleries and museums.

## MANAGING CHARACTER AND CULTURE

Today, investing in quality public spaces and upgrading the public realm has become very important in George Town where, due to the rise of tourism, many spaces have become commercialised. It is essential, therefore, to have places that are inclusive and accessible, and which help to circulate crowds while connecting different locations. Different layers of wayfinding and heritage interpretation are also key components of this.

Programming is equally important. More than just for the branding of the heritage city, it is about using festivals, activities and events as tools to have the community participate and feel like they belong to the city.

Culture is also fluid in George Town. This increases the complexities of managing a heritage site and requires delicately managing the cultural identity of the place, particularly as the city is experiencing a time where the purpose and demographics of the place are changing. Understanding the perceived identities of the people living there and taking care of cultural sensitivities is specifically important as the multi-layered, multicultural and multigenerational communities embrace a plethora of different values and perceptions of place.

Cultural Mapping has also been a tool that has helped strengthen the sense of ownership and sense of place. For Think City this has not been a one-off exercise; urban regeneration in a heritage site requires continuous cultural mapping, constant comparisons and frequent tuning-in to residents, shopkeepers and property owners to regularly refresh the understanding of place.

## DO'S

- **Start with a grants programme** to reach, incentivise and involve different communities.
- **Find a joint approach in collaboration** with the government to intertwine the bottom-up and top-down approaches.
- **Make a Master Plan** to get all government levels and different stakeholders on board.
- **Set an example by initiating transformative and demonstrative projects.**
- **Be sincere and modest about suggestions**, be courteous and build personal relationships. People who trust you are more likely to be honest with you.

## DON'TS

- **Don't undermine the government's KPIs and limitations.** Try to understand them to be able to add value, and provide solutions, not complications.