

## **'Road to Nationhood' The restoration of Merdeka Stadium, Kuala Lumpur**

### **Section 1**

Merdeka Stadium was built as the venue for the nation's official declaration of Independence in 1957, when tens of thousands of people crowded inside to celebrate an unforgettable moment in Malaysia's history. Nevertheless, Merdeka was nearly demolished in the late 1990s when it was given to a private company to redevelop into an entertainment and office complex, in exchange for building the new National Sports Complex at Bukit Jalil, hosting the 1998 Commonwealth Games.<sup>1</sup> The company did not proceed with the redevelopment however due financial difficulties and the site was abandoned. The land was put up for auction in 2000 and Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, chairman of Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB), a government-led equity trust company, brokered the purchase of the site in order to save it from destruction. It is no coincidence that he is also the President of Badan Warisan Malaysia, or the Heritage of Malaysia Trust, whose mission is the preservation and conservation of Malaysia's built heritage.<sup>2</sup>

The project seeks to maintain the authenticity and integrity of the visual, cultural and historic landscape of the nation by celebrating Merdeka as a symbol of Malaysia's Independence. The first phases of the redevelopment are now complete with parts of the Stadium demolished in the 1970s having been reinstated to their 1957 form, and some facilities upgraded for contemporary use.

"Knowing the value is crucial in understanding the preservation and conservation of heritage ... I see Merdeka as more valuable than my life because it was there that Tunku proclaimed Independence. It should be taken as a sacred place and I would attribute any attempt to destroy Merdeka Stadium as a sacrilegious act," said Ahmad Sarji, recalling attempts to demolish the stadium. "It has to start with awareness and then appreciation", he added.<sup>3</sup>

### **Section 2**

When Tunku Abdul Rahman, proclaimed Independence on 31st August 1957, he stood in the middle of the Stadium field and shouted out "Merdeka" seven times. This scene, often shown on film and in print, is etched on the psyche of all Malaysians.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the threat of destruction and the loss of this important spirit of place, the main aim of the project is to articulate the Stadium's heritage values, give it new life and recover the nation's collective memory. This is being achieved by a programme of restoration, started in the fiftieth year of Independence; the creation of an Interpretation Centre to tell the story of "The Road to Nationhood"; and the commemoration of its landmark status as a living monument of Independence that all Malaysians from every walk of life will want to visit at least once in their lifetime.

### **Section 3**

The strategy to secure Merdeka Stadium's future was two-fold. Firstly to restore it back to its original form; secondly to create a public trust with charitable status to manage the site in the future. Once PNB had purchased the Stadium site in 2000, securing its legal protection was the first step towards a sustainable future and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism gazetted the property as a National Monument in October 2005. The next was to begin conservation works, not least in order to meet the deadline of the 2007 anniversary celebrations. With the positive and enthusiastic support of Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the mandate and responsibility for delivering the project were

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given to Badan Warisan Malaysia (BWM). Approval of the conservation plans was expedited through an agreement between PNB and the Prime Minister himself.

The project has brought together a heritage trust, a private company and government departments:

- The limited company PNB has funded the project, from its purchase of the stadium and the adjacent sites for approximately US\$100 million, to its maintenance and now its restoration. It has also taken the lead role in terms of risk assumption and entrepreneurship.
- BWM, a heritage NGO, has provided technical expertise and vision for the conservation and management plans. It has also made the critical link with local people throughout the restoration process.
- The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage and other government departments have given political support, such as an agreement in 2001 with the Ministry of Sports for the Stadium's continued use as a sports venue, and the government's heritage, education, sports and tourism agencies are providing future funding, depending on the nature of projects.

The Public-Private Partnership has culminated in the formation of the Merdeka Heritage Trust, a specially constituted public trust with the aim of preserving the place in posterity for the nation.<sup>5</sup> Its establishment is another landmark, returning the site from private ownership to the citizens of Malaysia. The MHT will generate funding through tax-exempted donations, rentals for events and sports activities and entry fees for visitors on guided tours.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Section 4**

The on-going conservation work has had its ups and downs. The biggest challenge was to get all the stakeholders, consultants and contractors to understand that this was indeed a conservation project, a difficult concept for a relatively modern building, half of which (the upper tiers added in the 1970s) needed to be demolished! However, the project team have been successful and the work is considered a benchmark by the conservation community, winning a UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award of Excellence in 2008. The Stadium continues its multi-functional sports and events use but now restored and with upgraded facilities, it is much better positioned to serve the community and has contributed to the economic viability and social vibrancy of the surrounding environment. Several sporting bodies have located themselves in the neighbourhood precisely for this reason, adding to the synergy between related activities. The Partnership has confirmed the importance of cultural NGOs and private companies working alongside government agencies to gain higher levels of understanding and in the words of Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, "A strong political will is vital"<sup>7</sup> – from providing heritage education in schools to earmarking conservation areas in their local plans and supporting tax incentives.

#### **Section 5**

As phase two of the conservation works draws to a close, the lessons learned from the Partnership begin to become clear:

- In many heritage PPPs, long-term protection is often driven by the public sector. This was not the case at Merdeka although when the authorities understood the clamour to preserve the Stadium, they acted to support this with designation. Legal protection and enforcement is essential for PPPs.

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- In the early stages, this partnership seemed imbalanced by the huge investment of the PNB and relatively low risk taken by the public sector. This project should give public partners greater confidence for future heritage PPPs.
- The formal establishment of the MHT means that the public can reclaim ownership and responsibility for the property in a defined agreement.

This case study shows us:

- How important it is to find the right balance between use and value.
- Unlike other categories of urban infrastructure, the leverage of public to private resources in heritage PPPs can be very high – making frugal use of scarce public sector resources.
- In most places there is a sense of ‘ownership’ of heritage buildings, regardless of who the deed holders happen to be.

**Section 6:**

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**Section 7**

<sup>1</sup> King, Ross, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia*, 2008 NUS Press, p 124

<sup>2</sup> Submission for *UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation*, 2008 Badan Warisan Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> *Too much to lose*, 6 Sep 2011, The Star (Pages 1-3)

<sup>4</sup> King p xxiii

<sup>5</sup> Announcement of the formation of the 'Merdeka Heritage Trust' *Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia*, Statement, 8 February 2007

<sup>6</sup> *Trust To Manage Merdeka Stadium, Stadium Negara*, Malaysian National News Agency, 8 February 2007

<sup>7</sup> Ibid *Too much to lose*

**Author profile**

Catherine Leonard joined the UK National Trust in 1999, when she was responsible for the Trust's work with overseas heritage groups and managing the European Network of National Heritage Organisations. Catherine now heads the INTO Secretariat and is the strategic lead for the organisation's international co-ordination, including resource management, programme development, communications and relationships with INTO members (including BWM), other ngos, policy makers and institutions worldwide. Catherine studied languages

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