

INTERTWINING BUILT HERITAGE PROTECTION AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING: CASE STUDY OF GEORGE TOWN HERITAGE CELEBRATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

By the conclusion of the 46th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, held in New Delhi, India in July 2024, the total number of World Heritage sites worldwide reached 1,223, comprising 952 cultural sites, 231 natural sites and 40 mixed cultural and natural sites (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). The sustainable management of these World Heritage sites, in line with the World Heritage Policy Compendium, has been discussed and debated among the international heritage professional community. World Heritage site managers who have been tasked to address the complex yet essential day-to-day responsibilities at World Heritage properties, have to adopt innovative and ‘out of the box’ strategies to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of World Heritage property management.

This paper focuses on the initiatives implemented in the Historic City of George Town—a UNESCO cultural heritage site—as an integrated approach to managing the tangible heritage and safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage. Since 7 July 2008, the Historic City of George Town has been inscribed with the Historic City of Melaka as a UNESCO World Heritage serial site under the name ‘Melaka and George Town: Historic Cities of The Straits of Malacca.’

The site was recognized for its ‘remarkable examples of historic colonial towns on the Straits of Malacca that demonstrate a succession of historical and cultural influences arising from their former function as trading ports linking East and West’ (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2008).

As published by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre on the World Heritage List

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(2008), the site was listed based on the following three selection criteria:

Criterion II: To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design.

‘Melaka and George Town represent exceptional examples of multicultural trading towns in East and Southeast Asia, forged from the mercantile and exchanges of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures and three successive European colonial powers for almost 500 years, each with its imprints on the architecture and urban form, technology and monumental art. Both towns show different stages of development and the successive changes over a long span of time and are thus complementary.’

Criterion III: To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.

‘Melaka and George Town are living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, and European colonial influences. This multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life.’

Criterion IV: To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or



Figure 1 The Historic City of George Town, boundary of Property and Buffer Zones and coordinates (Source: GTWHI, 2022)

technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.

‘Melaka and George Town reflect a mixture of influences which have created a unique architecture, culture, and townscape without parallel anywhere in East and South Asia. In particular, they demonstrate an exceptional range of shop-houses and townhouses. These buildings show many different types and stages of development of the building type, some originating in the Dutch or Portuguese periods.’

This designation recognized George Town and Melaka as cities where the imprints of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and European influences are reflected on the historic urban fabric, forming the multicultural community who practise their rituals and daily lives in the town and creating unique architectural styles of a townscape that are exceptional in East and South Asia (Figure 1).

STRATEGIES BY THE SITE MANAGER

The focus of this paper is within the Property zone of George Town Historic City which is approximately 112 hectares, surrounded by a Buffer zone of 150 hectares, amounting to a total area of 262 hectares. However, having both tangible cultural heritage (such as monuments, buildings and multicultural religious spaces) and intangible cultural heritage (such as multicultural street names, multicultural social practices and festive events and evolving multicultural life-style) within this site has complicated consequences in terms of management.

To address this issue, George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI)³—a company owned by the Penang State Government, was established in April 2010 as the Site Manager for the Historic City of George Town. The Site Manager office has the mandate to manage, safeguard, and promote the Outstanding Universal Value of the site and act as an intermediary between government agencies and the local communities, organizations and associations.⁴

According to the George Town Special Area Plan that was gazetted under the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Act 172), there are 82 Category I heritage buildings, 3,771 Category II heritage buildings, 587 Replacement buildings and

³ For more information about George Town World Heritage Incorporated, please visit <https://gtwhi.com.my/>

⁴ The conservation and management of George Town Historic City are independent of the Melaka Historic City because they are situated under different State Governments and local authorities. Despite both sites being nominated under the same dossier, they have developed their own conservation management plan and system based on local context and resources. Such an arrangement enables both cities to address the challenges and opportunities from the ground promptly.

573 Infill sites in the Historic City of George Town. The George Town Special Area Plan as the main legal instrument of the World Heritage management and the recognition of the built environment categories have been instrumental in protecting the built fabric of the town. Yet, almost all the buildings (99 percent) are privately owned, with a very high percentage of tenanted units. Such complications prompted GTWHI to adopt holistic management strategies based on a few important principles.

Like many other cities in Malaysia, George Town Historic City is a highly urbanised, multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual living city. In this beautiful city, people who speak different languages, practise different social rituals, eat different food and have different religions, live, work, and visit every day, peacefully. Efforts were also conducted by GTWHI to inventorize, document, and implement policy to safeguard the living heritage of this vibrant historic city.

Therefore, as the custodian of this World Heritage site, the GTWHI team manages daily operations, offers professional consultations and mitigates challenges in conserving over 3,800 heritage buildings and approximately 1,200 modern structures and lands within the World Heritage site. The team also works on the living heritage safeguarding with local communities who live, work and use George Town, as well as conducts education and capacity-building programmes for them. To achieve this, GTWHI conducts around 60 projects annually, including cultural heritage promotions in schools, developing and creating volunteer activities to facilitate youth participation, disaster risk reduction, training workshops, and many more.

With an office located within the heart of the World Heritage site, GTWHI has grown into a strong team with 40 positions, consisting of multidisciplinary professionals from the fields of accounting, anthropology, archaeology, architecture, building surveying, conservation, communication, event management, political science, quantity surveying, sociology, town planning, and more.

In particular, GTWHI emphasizes the importance of establishing trust and inviting collaboration from all stakeholders. The GTWHI team actively listens to the underlying issues of the stakeholders, grasping valuable insights and information that contribute to a more sustainable and long-term solution. Such a process prompts the team to communicate in a clear and comprehensible manner, avoiding the use of jargon or terminology that may confuse the audience.

GTWHI also respects the fact that heritage is part of the life and livelihood of the local community. Heritage is an important source of identity building, and GTWHI moves away from segregating or compartmentalizing heritage into subcategories (such as tangible, intangible, movable, immovable and so on). Adhering to these

principles, GTWHI as the site manager can share a common cause with its stakeholders, build a shared identity, and collectively work towards the management and conservation of the World Heritage site for future generations.

Strategies and approaches of GTWHI—incorporating intangible cultural heritage safeguarding on World Heritage management is best exemplified through the George Town Heritage Celebrations, which will be elaborated further as a case study in this paper.

GEORGE TOWN HERITAGE CELEBRATIONS

George Town Heritage Celebrations⁵ is a bottom-up project organized by GTWHI that attracts participation from more than 40 multicultural, multilingual, multireligious associations and groups in Penang each year. Held annually in July, the Celebrations feature a variety of interactive and educational programmes such as workshops and performances, which take place in the streets of the heritage enclave.

Back in 2008, George Town Heritage Celebrations commenced as an activity to celebrate the inscription of George Town Historic City as a World Heritage site. From 2009 to 2013, it was continued under the umbrella of George Town Festival as a performance-based event. With the George Town Festival gaining international notice, George Town Heritage Celebrations also gradually grew into a platform for the local community to celebrate their cultures and search for the unique George Town identity that belongs to its people.

From 2014 to 2019, George Town Heritage Celebrations continued to develop by featuring different themes and intangible cultural heritage domains each year. The Celebrations gained increased involvement from community groups, who were mobilized to run their own interactive workshops. GTWHI also brought in professional project teams to help develop the programme content and manage the project execution. It not only enhanced the event but also provided the GTWHI team with valuable experience in event management, allowing them to eventually take over the entire process.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, George Town Heritage Celebrations was forced to pause in 2020 and 2021. It returned in 2022 as a general theme-based event which allowed more inclusive and diverse programmes. In 2023, a new component was introduced: the community-led programme. This initiative empowered the local community to organize their own mini celebrations under the name of

⁵ For more information about George Town Heritage Celebrations, please visit <https://gtwhi.com.my/george-town-heritage-celebrations/>



Figure 2 Official logo of George Town Heritage Celebrations 2024 (©GTWHI, 2024)

George Town Heritage Celebrations, giving them a sense of ownership over the event.

With July 7 designated as a public holiday in Penang, the Celebrations mostly take place on this day each year. This continuous support and commitment from the Penang State Government has made George Town Heritage Celebrations a highly anticipated event among local and international celebration-goers, who eagerly await this day every year to immerse themselves in the living traditions of George Town. It also raises awareness of the need and importance of safeguarding George Town's Outstanding Universal Value for future generations.

To elaborate on the impact of George Town Heritage Celebrations in intertwining built heritage protection and intangible cultural heritage safeguarding for the local community, it shall be elaborated in the following four perspectives, namely, all for one, community-based heritage celebrations, intertwining tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and engaging the youth and younger generations (Figure 2).

All for One

Today, George Town Heritage Celebrations is a celebration by the community for the community, transcending culture, ethnicity and social background. It is now a platform for people from all walks of life to gather and celebrate their own culture while having the opportunity to learn about others.

Since its inauguration, the Celebrations has been maintaining the same format, that is to have a major celebration event on the 7th of July, with side events that differ each year. During George Town Heritage Celebrations 2024, 22 workshops and interactive performances were carefully curated by the GTWHI team and implemented with the help of professional event service teams and volunteers. Associations and individuals representing different cultures, crafts or social practices of their larger community groups were provided with the platform to show-

Table 1 List of George Town Heritage Celebrations 2024 cultural workshops and interactive performances

No.	Affiliation	Name of Workshop/ Performance	Type of Workshop
1	Badan Warisan Masjid Melayu Lebuah Aceh	Malay Musical Instruments: <i>Persembahan Bunyian Tradisional dan Gendangan Kontemporari</i>	Music Instruments Workshop
2	Boria Omara	Boria: Warisan George Town	Interactive Performance
3	Dikir Barat Suara Mutiara	Dikir Barat: Clap with Awok-Awok!	Interactive Performance
4	Henna Artists	The Glamorous Henna	Hands-On Experience Workshop
5	Loh Ban Tatt and Teoh Han Hoon Traditional Dough Figurines	Dough Figurine: Beyond Tradition	Hands-On Experience Workshop
6	LUMA	Play-Play Penang!	Games
7	Lum Yeong Tong Yap Temple Youth Section	Chinese Paper Cutting and Flourish Strokes	Hands-On Experience Workshop
8	Malaysian-Japanese Society	Japanese Dance: Love Affairs	Traditional Dance
9	May Lim Siew Seng	Immerse in the Beading World	Hands-On Experience Workshop
10	North Malaysia Malayali Samajam	The Making of Thiru Udayada	Hands-On Experience Workshop
11	Penang Chingay Association	Chingay Parade	On-Street Performance
12	Penang Dhol Blasters	Dhol and Bhangra: Feel the Beat	Interactive Performance
13	Penang Hindu Association	Old is Gold: Spice Grinding and Pounding	Hands-On Experience Workshop
14	Penang Hindu Sabah	Grace In Fabric: Vesti and Saree Draping Workshop	Hands-On Experience Workshop
15	Penang Siamese Committee Association	Loy Krathong Dance	Traditional Dance
16	Penang Telugu Biddalu	Telugu Biddalu Dance: Daathubhajana and Chirathalu	Traditional Dance
17	Persatuan Warisan Dato Koyah	Bamboo Lantern: Shine Like A Star	Hands-On Experience Workshop
18	Sim Art Studio	Build Your Own Tiles!	Hands-On Experience Workshop
19	Teochew Puppet and Opera House	Disguise in Teochew Opera Face	Hands-On Experience Workshop
20	The Pink Hibiscus Club	Make A Kimono Doll Bukkumaku	Hands-On Experience Workshop
21	Wak Long Music and Art Centre	Wayang Kulit: Miniature Puppet Bookmark Creation	Hands-On Experience Workshop
22	Warisan Balik Pulau	The Colours of Batik	Hands-On Experience Workshop

case their culture, be it dancing, making handicrafts or simply playing board games (Table 1).

As the event only went on for a few hours, it was not the aim of the Celebrations to teach the visitors specific skills or techniques, or for them to master a craft, but only to expose them to various cultures, rituals, social practices, etc. Through these experiences, the visitors can be inspired, gain understanding and recognize other cultures that coexist with theirs on the same land—the Historic City of George Town.

The Celebrations also offered an opportunity for community groups to interact not only with visitors but also with one another. This interaction helped them realize that while different cultures have their own uniqueness, many share similar characteristics. They witnessed the passion that the visitors have for George Town’s cultural heritage, through people who came to the event every year and were willing to spend time queuing to experience each workshop. It demonstrated that there is significant interest among the public in different cultures, offering potential for the community groups to organize similar activities by themselves in the future, without fear of lack of public interest (Figure 3).

However, due to limited time and venue, George Town Heritage Celebrations can only accommodate a limited number of community groups each year, while there are still many sub-groups and sub-minorities in Penang that constantly seeking opportunities to be seen. The possible way out of this is to encourage each group to do their own mini version of the Celebrations.



Figure 3 Local and international visitors were painting the classic patterns of Malaysian Batik (©GTWHI, 2024)

Community-based Heritage Celebrations

Now that we recognize that the communities can appreciate, interpret and even document their own cultures, it is essential for them to learn how to promote these cultures in various ways, with support from GTWHI. Hence, since 2023, we have introduced a new component under George Town Heritage Celebrations: the community-led programme. Community groups from all over Penang were invited to submit proposals for events that they wished to organize throughout the year. It could be a workshop, a seminar, or even a celebration dinner, as long as it has cultural significance to the communities (Figure 4).

Each year, George Town Heritage Celebrations receive extensive media coverage, showcasing its growing popularity and strong reputation among the public and media. It has become an ideal platform for the people of Penang to promote their traditional crafts and cultures beyond their community groups. Through the community-led programme, we provided financial support for the selected community projects using funding allocated by the State Government. These projects were promoted as side events of the Celebrations, drawing more attention from the community and also the media. Government officials and state assemblymen who were often invited to these community events were able to witness the vibrancy of the events, which in turn helped to secure financial grants from the State Government for conducting the event annually.

The branding of George Town Heritage Celebrations has been very well received, thus many want to be part of it. GTWHI team constantly struggle to decide whether the Celebrations should last one day, three days, or more than three days.



Figure 4 GTHC 2024 Community Briefing Session for all community groups in Penang who were interested in participating in the programmes (©GTWHI, 2023)

Intertwining Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Celebrations have always aimed to organize the event within the backdrop of the built heritage landscape. All workshops and performances took place in one of the most culturally significant areas of George Town, which features five Category I heritage buildings surrounded by numerous Category II traditional shophouses. Some workshops were conducted by the communities associated with these heritage buildings and several supported the Celebrations by opening their compound for the use of the workshops and performances. On the event day, the roads were turned into pedestrian walkways, allowing visitors to explore the heritage enclave while enjoying the workshops. This also provided them with an opportunity to visit the ticketed sites free of charge (Figures 5 and 6).

However, there were challenges in utilizing these venues, as some activities could



Figure 5 Dance performance by the Malaysian-Japanese Society in the compound of Seh Tek Tong Cheah Kongsi, a Chinese clan house (©GTWHI, 2024)



Figure 6 Visitors were walking along the streets within the historic landscape while exploring the workshops (©GTWHI, 2024)

potentially cause minor damage to the sites. While we strive to maximize the use of these venues, we are careful to avoid causing any harm, which has encouraged our team to be creative in curating the format of the programmes and be mindful of mitigating potential issues. Another challenge is the unpredictable weather associated with outdoor events. We always had thousands of raincoats ready, but fortunately, we have yet to encounter this issue. Organizing such a large-scale event is also very resource-consuming, requiring a significant amount of human resources, time, finances and communication. Moving forward, we aim to explore other suitable venues and formats for George Town Heritage Celebrations.

Engaging the Youth and Younger Generations

Another important impact of the Celebrations is its ability to provide children and young people with hands-on experiences in cultural activities that are beyond their usual school curriculum. Through the cultural workshops, we have observed how deeply focused the young visitors are, showing a genuine interest in the activities. Through these engagements, we hope to inspire at least a few of them to develop an interest, eventually taking up a more active role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Like many other historic cities around the world, the younger generation no longer resides in the city and lacks the memories of growing up, playing and wandering around the streets and lanes. George Town Heritage Celebrations has become an intermediary for young people to foster a connection with the city by creating memories of them enjoying the workshops, playing games on the streets, dancing with others against the backdrop of the heritage buildings and many more (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Children were trying out the traditional Malay musical instruments (©GTWHI, 2024)

We understand that it is crucial to receive recognition from Penang State Education Department, before achieving the bigger goal of integrating cultural components into the school curriculum. Thus, we started off by distributing the event posters to primary and secondary schools around Penang through the platform designated and strictly controlled by the department, of which only permitted printing materials are allowed.

To further encourage public participation in the Celebrations, the Volunteer Programme has played a significant role in providing opportunities for the public aged 16 to 80 years to join the programmes. Over the years, at least 70 percent of the volunteers have been young adults (30 years old and below), with nearly 90 percent of them being local residents of Penang. These volunteers are important frontliners for the success of the Celebrations, as they play important roles in fostering relationships with different communities and visitors from various backgrounds, ethnicities and religions while promoting mutual understanding and respect (Figure 8).

The volunteers received comprehensive training that equipped them with the skills needed to execute their tasks, including briefings on their roles and responsibilities, as well as practices on hand-sign language and sighted guide. For workshops that require specific skills, such as Nyonya beading, the volunteers also underwent simple training with the community groups to ensure that they can assist the visitors in the best possible way.

While it has been encouraging to see increasing youth participation in the programme, it remains GTWHI's target to have continuous participation of the youth, with the hope that they can have strong ownership in the path. The opportunity to improve this is to get support from the education agencies and



Figure 8 Volunteers were teaching the visitors how to play the innovative board game (©GTWHI, 2024)



Figure 9 Volunteers of GTHC 2024 (©GTWHI, 2024)

other entities within the government as well as from the private sector (Figure 9).

CONTRIBUTION TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

From the above elaborations, it is evident that George Town Heritage Celebrations is one of the exemplary examples of the possibility of synergizing the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and conservation of tangible cultural heritage. In fact, the Celebrations have also successfully echoed the global effort in integrating cultural heritage into sustainable development, the Celebrations have contributed to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 5, SDG 10, SDG 11, SDG 13, and SDG 15.

Goal 11: Make Cities and Human Settlements inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable

The Celebrations contribute the most to SDG 11, which explicitly references built heritage in Target 11.4. Through George Town Heritage Celebrations, we help to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage through community-based activities. The Celebrations have drawn a high number of visitors and generated increased interest in the historic fabric, especially the religious buildings of different faiths, the ethnic quarters, the town-houses and shophouses of George Town Historic City. During July (in particular), such increased interest and attention has a positive impact on encouraging public appreciation of heritage (both tangible and intangible heritage), increasing public participation in such heritage conservation and safeguarding efforts, and providing recognition and encouragement for the heritage practitioners and heritage buildings owners to continuing their dedications.

Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls

While curating the programmes for George Town Heritage Celebrations, the team is dedicated to promoting and achieving gender equality, in particular, empowering all women and girls, to lead, perform, manage or participate in the activities of the Celebrations. The authors' observation over the years since the inception of the Celebrations in 2008 is that the community and the public today have very high acceptance of gender equality in leading cultural heritage organizations (such as holding positions as important decision-makers including the chairperson, secretary or committee member), to lead cultural heritage workshops and stage performances (such as Dikir Barat performance, Lion Dance performance, and traditional dance and music performances), and to serve as part of the project team or volunteer team. George Town Heritage Celebrations' 'gender equality culture' has also yielded far and beyond the organization and George Town, to enable, encourage and empower all genders to be given the same rights to participate in and serve cultural activities.

Goal 10: Reduce Inequality within and among Countries

George Town Heritage Celebrations exemplify the commitment to reducing inequality by providing equal opportunities for all groups, regardless of their differences, to participate in the programmes. The continuous, enthusiastic and high level of involvement from various community groups volunteering as local partners (such as Badan Warisan Masjid Melayu Lebuah Acheh, Penang Hindu Association and Penang Siamese Committee Association) on the annual George Town Heritage Celebrations serves as evidence that this programme successfully creates a comfortable, fair and harmonious platform for all groups. The project team also pays additional attention to ensure that opportunities are given (and created) to encourage and accommodate new groups (such as Penang Hindu Sabah, LUMA and Penang Chingay Association) into the programmes.

Goal 13: Take Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change and Its Impacts

Efforts to combat climate change are reflected in the focus on minimizing single-use materials during the Celebrations and making additional efforts to use recycled and recyclable materials. One of the most successful milestones achieved by this Celebrations is to cultivate the 'Bring Your Own Bottle' culture. Free water dispenser stations were provided at 20 strategic locations. Visitors are encouraged to bring their own water bottles and to refill the drinking water. Introduced in 2016, this campaign is now one of the cultures well practised by heritage celebrations goers, and it is also widely practised by other events and activities conducted in Penang. On top of this, the project team also minimize the usage of non-recyclable materials (such as styrofoam, tarpaulin canvas and poly-

propylene board), and maximizes the usage of recyclable materials (such as timber and metal) for environment decoration.

Goal 17: Strengthen the Means of Implementation and Revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Through George Town Heritage Celebrations, GTWHI forms partnerships with local groups and associations of diverse backgrounds, including cultural, linguistic and religious communities, in sharing a vision and project that benefits everyone collectively. The partnership strengthens interpersonal, intra-group and inter-group communication and collaboration at the local, national and international levels, thus prompting a better understanding between groups that are more willing to accommodate differences and celebrate the similarities in an emphatic manner.

THE WAY FORWARD

George Town as one of the leading cases highlighted during UNESCO Naples Conference 2023, has successfully yielded synergy between the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Through the case study of George Town Heritage Celebrations, this paper has elaborated on the efforts conducted by GTWHI, as the site manager, in intertwining built heritage protection and intangible cultural heritage safeguarding.

Experience from George Town confirms that heritage conservation and safeguarding for George Town needs collective and continuous commitments from all stakeholders, including the heritage building owners, tenants, users, as well as cultural heritage practitioners.

Through the case study of George Town Heritage Celebrations presented in the paper, it is evident that built and intangible cultural heritage are intertwined and have been part of the life and livelihood of the stakeholders and local communities. This event has received gradual recognition and reputation as the melting pot of George Town Historic City and is well-accepted by the general public and the festive goers.

This paper also emphasizes the role of Site Managers as the fundamental link between the international and local. Site managers are the ones who work at World Heritage and advocate for World Heritage. In particular, the goal is to achieve the five Strategic Objectives of the Convention (also known as the 5Cs, including Credibility, Conservation, Capacity Building, Communication and Communities). It is hoped that this paper will be able to yield and generate the

international community to support the shared vision and strategic positioning, and formally recognize the Site Managers' role and function in the World Heritage system for the effective implementation of the 1972 World Heritage Convention by adopting the George Town Declaration (2024).⁶

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⁶ George Town Declaration is a document launched during the 2024 We Are Site Managers International Symposium, urging formal recognition of the role and challenges of World Heritage site managers. For more information, please visit <https://gtwhi.com.my/we-are-site-managers-international-symposium/>