

# Restoring Faith

The restoration work of a shophouse is no mean feat, **Dato' Dr Wazir Jahan Karim**, an economic anthropologist with a passion for conservation anthropology, chronicles her experience

No. 85 on Armenian Street, formerly Malay Lane, is a shophouse located in the enclave of the Unesco World Heritage City of George Town, Penang. The house was formerly occupied by the Al Iman Society, which protects and promotes the identity, language and culture of Indian Muslims in Penang. The house dates back to the 1860s.

This was when Malay Lane and its neighbouring street Lebuhr Achek housed an enclave occupied by thousands of Kedah

Malays, Peranakan Arabs, Jawi Peranakan and Indian Muslims. They were traders of pepper, spices, rice, food products, brassware, textiles and Islamic books (kitab) from Aceh, Melaka, Surat and other pre-colonial port cities of the Straits of Melaka and the Indian Ocean.

Most of the houses of the original Muslims, built from a combination of masonry and timber, were razed to the ground during the Penang Riots of 1867. The few Armenian families that were here in the

first few decades of the nineteenth century moved out as the Straits Chinese moved in. They sub-divided the lots and put up the traditional South Chinese shophouses that exist to this day.

## Almost a Derelict

85 Armenian Street is one of the double-storey traditional Southern Chinese shophouses from the nineteenth century. It has a façade of wooden louver windows on the first floor and high decorative doors

on the ground floor that are flanked by two wood-carved windows with metal bars. The façade on the ground floor does not have the decorative Chinese tiles, which were only later adopted by the Straits Chinese in the 1920s. The walls are painted with lime wash or indigo.

None of these features existed when I bought the house in late 2012. In fact, the house was almost in a derelict state, having been abandoned and wrongly modified several times. Its restoration was major and costly.

When I acquired the building, the façade was a modern botched-up job, a far cry from the art deco style popular in the 1960s. The walls were oozing with salt while the roof and wall edges were leaking in several places. Parts of the roof beams were attacked by termites. The ground floor was raised by a layer of cement and covered with mosaic tiles that had split, exposing the cement at various places.

The wooden planks on the first floor, however, were still usable with only three planks attacked by termites. Two wooden beams at the kitchen ceiling were also attacked by termites and had to be replaced. Partitions to create smaller rooms and sub-units had dangerously narrowed the pathway to the exit door while the ceiling had been covered with fibre board sheets and asbestos in the back area. Rust had taken over the metal casings and frames for the staircase, partitions and windows.

## The Jawi Peranakan Revitalisation Project

Keen to open a café gallery, my son Nurilhakim and I started the revitalisation project of 85 Armenian Street. Here's where I house my wood art, economic products collection acquired several decades ago from Malays and the Orang Asli and a series of early scenes of George Town by Ismail Itam, a specialist in architectural drawings in water colour and black ink. It's also a home for my publications on heritage such as 'Feasts of Penang: Muslim Culinary Heritage'.

This was our project to promote the revitalisation of Jawi Peranakan culture and culinary arts. We wanted the house's Sino-Malay eclectic features to be retained to complement the ethnic hybridity of our Jawi Peranakan food. The idea was to retain the atmosphere of a family home while the food and artworks blended in a passage of time to recapture the early lifestyles and culture of entertainment and hospitality of the Jawi Peranakans, noted for their passion for elegant furniture, vibrant colours, good food, romantic music and esprit de corps.

## The Restoration: The house gutted down

George Town being a Unesco Heritage site, I had to adhere to stringent guidelines on restoring heritage buildings. Looking at the house's condition then, a full restoration back to the features of the shop house in the 1860s would have been virtually impossible and only an estimated 85 percent of the original interior structure and design could be restored.

Furthermore, changes in weather



The building's façade before restoration work

conditions made it difficult to work with natural lime wash without reinforcing the wash with other types of organic paint. Working closely with the contractor ensured the right materials were used and the right methods applied according to the restoration requirements established by the Penang City Council.

The interior of the house was gutted and the walls were scraped down to the last layer of paint, exposing the original red bricks sealed with mud. The ceilings on the ground and the first floor were stripped to expose the original wooden beams. The floor was hacked to the last layer of cement and pesticide experts injected the perimeters of the floor with anti-termite chemicals to prevent further termite attacks.

## Peranakan Roofing

Work on the roof took more than two months. The roof had to be stripped bare and checks were made to ensure that the beams had not been attacked by termites. Luckily, most of the chengal wooden beams on the ground and first floors could still be used. New rafters had to be placed to lay the V9 Peranakan tiles required for core zone houses in George Town.

The tiles were purchased from Kluang in Johor, since we were told that the quality of V9 tiles from Vietnam was poor and importing them from China would have taken about a month. Laying the tiles was an arduous task – the tiles were thin and easily broken when stepped upon. To minimise damage, we hired nimble, hard-



The façade today with louver windows on the second floor and carved wooden doors below







working workers from Myanmar who had a reputation for being the best artisans for masonry and terracotta work in George Town.

Re-roofing in the core zone can take up more than 50 percent of the budget for restoration and house owners. Be warned: This is the stage when contractors run off and abandon the project! The shortage of highly skilled contractors and workers for heritage conservation and the constant adjustments of quotations by contractors – usually higher than earlier estimates – will make it difficult for house owners to manage their budget and to complete restorations on time.

#### The Façade Restored to its Former Glory

The central door of 85 Armenian Street was covered and replaced with a narrow side

door. The original façade was reconstructed by demolishing the ground floor's front wall and replaced with red bricks sealed with lime cement.

The solid wood frames for the door and two carved windows were locally produced in Penang while the solid wood carved front door and windows were imported from China. Each window of the façade had two layers – steel bars separated the coloured glass interior windows from the carved exterior wooden windows.

For the interior windows, teak wooden frames were used. To bring back the lustre of the hallway, we used windowpanes made out of Malay kampung coloured glass in traditional blue, green, yellow and white. On the first floor, the metal and clear glass windowpanes were replaced with eight louver windows made locally from solid wood.



Structural changes made on walls led to changes in window styles. Knocking was minimised to prevent further structural damage and to retain the windows that were replaced with solid wooden frames and kampung glass.

Seven dark green ceramic air-vent tiles from China were added to the border of the upstairs, enabling natural light to come through. Air vents with steel bars were further added above the windows. This enhanced the vintage and eclectic ambience of the shophouse, allowing mirages of coloured lights to reflect onto the timber floor.

#### The Air Well

The floor of the air well area was laid with fungus-resistant terra cotta tiles imported from Italy. Miniature glazed terra cotta tiles with an Arabesque design now skirt the air well and the vintage basin stand.

Due to the current stormy and unpredictable weather conditions of Penang, the air well (covered with a two-tiered transparent sunroof) enables ventilation while allowing sunlight to come through. This prevents permanent damage to the walls caused by heavy rain.

Originally, the exposed air well was coated with the first layer of lime wash that was 'washed' away by heavy rains. The final choice I made was to combine lime wash with Murobond natural paint produced in Australia.

To prevent constant leakage along the sides of the roof, we resorted to stronger sealants, reinforced with metal washing. This also prevented seepage into the kitchen and bathroom walls. Rainwater is drained

out by a concealed gutter at the opening of the air well with a pipe drawn down into the air well.

The terra cotta tiles at the air well were similar to those used on the ground floor. The flooring of the air well was hacked to the bare ground and the contractor could not find the original granite slabs which were typically laid at air wells in George Town's shophouses of this period. They had obviously been removed from previous renovations.

The newly constructed Roman-style washbasin, framed with glazed terra-cotta tiles with old brass fittings, added to the quaint ambience of the air well. Under Unesco World Heritage guidelines, house owners in the core zone are allowed to include minor additional structures for practical purposes.

The final effect of the air well's restoration was a rustic cosy garden setting with plenty of light. It is now a favourite spot for young couples and bookworms who read while sipping our nutmeg juice with lime or a local coffee brew.

#### Fixtures and Fittings

Structural restoration took about six months in all. All the water pipes were changed and the whole house rewired. Air-conditioning compressors were moved to the back of the house and a modern kitchen was installed to accommodate the requirements of a café.

Design and construction using 100-year



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This is the first floor gallery before restoration work

What the first floor gallery looks like today, note the chaise lounge and louver windows

old recycled wood for the interior's wooden fittings took about two months. I worked side by side with the carpenter through the selection and staining of several strips of recycled wood acquired from different trees of various ages and hues, to achieve an even finish. Finally, we achieved a bar and shelves which had the desired vintage effect.

The staircase required major restoration since the original banister and balusters were discarded to accommodate a modern staircase of unsightly metal frames and banisters. Again, recycled aged wood was used to reconstruct the banisters and balusters. To aid elderly visitors up the steep staircase, a wooden handrail was added to the left, against the wall. Today, many elderly visitors say that it was the best thing we could have done because they would not have been able to visit the gallery on the first floor otherwise.

Shopping for antique oil lamps was frustrating since these were grabbed the moment word got around town that they were for sale. After combing through several catalogues and shops, I acquired Indian wall lights and hanging oil lamps that resembled those found in George Town in the nineteenth century.

Selecting the right furniture was made easy due to the variety of period furniture I inherited from several generations in my family while others were bought from other Muslim families in George Town. For instance, I had procured a harvest from Mummy Poonu on Argyll Road and a Georgian chaise lounge from Othman Pillai some 40 years ago at Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling.

#### Finishing Touches

It is interesting that the early Jawi Peranakans and Indian Muslims used Chinese carpenters to design their house furniture (most of the furniture makers of the last two centuries were from Aceh and Canton) but without the mother of pearl

inlay work and extended animal motifs.

In any case, there is a tendency to assume that furniture designs in the late nineteenth century in George Town were primarily Chinese but kopitiam chairs and tables, in the Straits Settlements, for example, were primarily introduced from Yugoslavia and Poland while bentwood chairs were imported from Victorian England.

Red and gold hue fabrics were chosen for upholstery, cushions and skirting to emulate the richness of Jawi Peranakan, Arab and Chinese preferences – all these communities through some happy coincidence were partial to red and gold hues which universally symbolise hospitality and wealth and for the Chinese, prosperity and fortune.

Antique furniture and fabrics favoured by the Jawi Peranakan completed the nostalgia of a bygone era when women made masala chai and biryani for loved ones, while listening to romantic evergreens played on a gramophone.

#### And the Result is...

Jawi House has been functioning for close to a year as a café gallery and its eclectic ambience of Sino-Jawi Peranakan vintage and class has attracted both locals and tourists to hang out and soak in the ambience while savouring the delicacies of Jawi Peranakan cuisine. I take pride in this cultural advocacy project to bring Malaysians and tourists back to a bygone era when architectural and culinary heritage was synonymous with the 'good life'.

That was when men and women dressed up to take studio pictures while horse carriages ferried George Town's elegant gentry. Now friends and families can savour Jawi Peranakan delights from our café as they glimpse into the past and listen to nostalgic songs from P Ramlee, Andre Goh, Edith Piaf and Aznavour – a cosmopolitan trilogy of Penang life at its best.



Ground floor hall after restoration and notice the wooden beam ceiling and terracotta floorwork

**Jawi House Café Gallery** also accommodates the Jawi Peranakan Heritage Society where Dr Wazir is President. It's opened every day, from 10am to 6pm except on Sundays. It is open for group bookings in the evening. For further information, see [www.jawihouse.com](http://www.jawihouse.com) or call +604 2613680.



The ground floor before restoration work