

KUCHING: The Sarawak Heritage Society (SHS) is appalled by the move made by private organisations, shopkeepers and trustees to destroy one of the city's most recognised heritage sites.

The subject of concern is the 178-year-old Masjid Bandar Kuching, located along Gambier Road in the heart of old Kuching.

Committed to raising awareness of the state's heritage among the community, SHS would like to add its voice to the growing concern surrounding reports that the trustees of the Masjid Bandar Kuching have been proposing to demolish the old mosque to make way for a new and "so-called improved structure".

In a press release yesterday, SHS said the news was in stark contrast to the raging controversy surrounding the proposed works at Jalan Sultan in Kuala Lumpur, which was supposed to be undertaken by a corporation with the blessing of the Government – as claimed by certain quarters.

"The move was against the wishes of the local community, which triggered a political storm that resulted in an eventual u-turn.

"But here in Kuching, this is only the latest in a long line of examples of private buildings being renovated with no thought to preservation of heritage.

"The SHS is dismayed at the realisation that it is the private organisations and owners charged with the care of these historic buildings, who are promoting the destruction of these venerable examples of their own heritage, as in the case of the Summerhouse in the Museum Gardens, traditional shophouses, two town-centre Chinese temples.

"Now it is the Masjid Bandar Kuching," it said.

SHS said although the state government had striven to promote heritage concerns in the state through the creation of its new heritage section under the Social Development, Culture and Heritage Ministry, this decision by a private body appeared to have undermined such effort. It quoted a recent claim made in the media saying that the mosque had never been classified as a heritage building.

"Established in 1834 by the Indian Muslims who came from Southern India, this building falls clearly within the purview of the ordinances in place that govern antiquities.

"Its age alone makes it a heritage building – let alone its significance in the religious and social history of one the founding ethnic groups in Kuching. The claim that the mosque does not have any special design does not hold any weight," explained SHS.

The society pointed out that the mosque's longevity made it unique and its charm and dignity were appreciated by huge numbers of local residents, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. "The mosque had been a well-loved landmark of Kuching for the whole lives of every resident here and the spice shops that formed part of the complex are of great architectural significance," it said.

As to the claim that the structure of the mosque was quite weak, SHS said this was not surprising because the building was built before proper building codes existed.

"But should we consign it to the scrap heap, or work to strengthen it? Both the old Courthouse and the Square Tower required reinforcements as part of their restoration and these two now stand proud on our Kuching Waterfront.

"The goal must be to return the mosque to the height of its beauty so we can ensure that it continues to stand for the next 170 years – a monument to the community that built it and the long-standing ties that community has to Kuching's history," it said.

SHS said the mosque was worth to be repaired at all cost because the long-term gains would surpass the expenditure.

"Penang and Malacca, both are designated Unesco World Heritage sites, have reported significant increases in the values of properties within the heritage core, on top of seeing their tourist numbers swell exponentially."

"Here in Kuching, we have received feedback from locals and tourists alike that they can no longer relate to either the Chinese temples rebuilt from the ground up in entirely new materials, consigning the antique materials and fixtures of their predecessors to the rubbish dump," said SHS.

Therefore, the society is calling on all those who hold the future of the city's heritage in their hands to preserve these private buildings of public interest.

"We ask that they support the aims of the Government in promoting heritage concerns in the state. Of course the Indian Muslim community want a testament to how far they have come.

"But how do you measure this if there is no evidence? The community certainly deserve a 'more secure and beautiful mosque' to worship in. But what could be more beautiful than the one they already have, restored to its former glory?" it said.

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