MAJ
MALAYSIA ARCHITECTURAL JOURNAL

Malaysia Architectural Journal

Journal homepage:
https://majournal.my/index.php/maj
e-ISSN : 2716-6139

# Rethinking Liveable Heritage: From the Experts' Perspectives

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**ARTICLE INFO**

***Article history:***
Received
Received in revised form
Accepted
Available online

***Keywords:***
Liveable Heritage; Conservation practice; National Heritage Act 645; Kuala Lumpur

**ABSTRACT**

Initiatives to prepare policies for achieving liveable cities have improved the economic outcomes of cities - including Kuala Lumpur - and, ideally, provide them with optimal living conditions. The uniqueness of historical evidence and elements is often neglected in liveable policy initiatives, making the idea of heritage as part of liveability secondary to such interests. The Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040 has incorporated liveable city indicators into its city planning policies, but there is little extant research on the relationship between the two concepts because 'liveable heritage' is not a common phrase. This paper explains why the concept of liveability is challenging, complex and contested, especially in city design. Subsequently, a constructivist approach was employed to explore the question of whose interests were defined in the Plan, and by whom, from the perspective of heritage value. This was undertaken through 44 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders who had engaged in conservation work in Kuala Lumpur. The paper then provides a conceptualisation of liveability and heritage by those who perceive its intrinsic value.

## 1. Introduction

Heritage conservation has been regarded, in part, as the continuity of social economic functionality but this does not necessarily apply to the city of Kuala Lumpur. While the theory of urban conservation is well understood, the experience of its application in the context of Malaysia shows less practical implementation. An analysis of Kuala Lumpur's morphology shows that it is a relatively new city, which developed from its origins as the site of small-scale mining activities in the 1850s. In the early decades after Malaysian independence, Kuala Lumpur became successful; it has progressed to become one of the most developed cities in Asia. However, we argue that its historical significance has been

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largely neglected due to, firstly, a lack of understanding of the importance of its heritage and, secondly, a failure to appreciate that heritage conservation can or should be taken as an indicator of positive development. According to Abdul Majid [1], serious conservation activities in Kuala Lumpur only began in the 1970s, driven by the city's massive redevelopment, the goal being that it should become a world city. A review of policy changes demonstrates a gradual growth in the awareness of heritage, specifically as a potential contributor to the city's economic growth. As with many other cities undergoing rapid economic growth, heritage has been regarded in KL as having value in terms of the tourism industry, rather than necessarily in its own right or in relation to residents' positive experiences of place. The new seriousness with which heritage has begun to be treated can be identified in the gazettement of the National Heritage Act in 2005 (Act 645) [2]. Nonetheless, conservation and the protection of heritage assets remain relatively new phenomena; this is possibly evident in the relatively greater importance placed - in policy and investment terms - on township development to cater to the city's growing population [3].However, this comes alongside the dilapidation, abandonment and/or decay of historical buildings that are either being ignored or demolished [1, 4, 5]. These ongoing scenarios can be seen in the weakness of current development policies, such as the Malaysian Plan (RMKe), which regards heritage as important only for tourism purposes and does not support conservation practices. This has led to many local heritage professionals and conservators arguing that the Act should be amended [6].

This paper starts from the premise that heritage can contribute to liveability and that it is important to understand how the one can contribute to the other, the relationship between these concepts and how heritage can therefore be sustained. Sensitive and careful planning of the environment, especially its built and cultural heritage, can contribute significantly to a greater quality of life [7]. Moreover, cities enacting policies aimed at creating a more liveable and healthier ambience clearly take into account existing resources, including heritage resources [8]. In many European cities, the significant potential of heritage has been leveraged to create more liveable environments, articulated through policy instruments. This approach is new in Malaysia since the concept of liveability has only recently gained traction, specifically in the formulation of the Eighth Malaysian Plan (RMKe8) in 2010. Only with the creation of an urban policy - the *National Urbanization Plan 2* (Dasar Perbandaran Negara, DPN2) in 2016 - did heritage sites or buildings come to be regarded as explicitly part of the city's liveability. However, this policy did not elaborate on the concept in detail nor indicate how it will operate [9]. The following section explains the challenge of applying liveability as a concept in relation to city design.

### *1.1 'Liveability': A Conceptual Perspective*

The concept of liveability is challenging, complex and sometimes contested, mainly due to rapid urbanisation and the constant demographic changes in cities. Liveability has developed as a universal narrative or paradigm that transcends jurisdictional boundaries at both state and national levels [10]. However, the emergence over the past decade of the concept of liveability means it has become more than a conceptual objective that policy-making should reflect abstract expectations about the quality of urban life. Liveability is now instrumental in terms of its application in design approaches and its underpinning of a system of values by which cities are assessed and compared. Reflecting this second condition, various city ranking systems focusing on liveability have been developed, effectively forcing cities to compete in theory to provide the best living conditions for their citizens. In this

context, liveability is measured by factors such as the amount of green space provision, the extent to which the environment is conducive or sociable, and the infrastructure quality.

As they are subject to varying economic, social and cultural characteristics, Western cities may prioritise economic efficiency and social welfare differently in the pursuit of liveability, yet they might still be perceived as performing at similar overall levels based on their ranking [11]. As Paul and Sen [12] found for cities in the global East, socio-cultural dimensions are equally significant when assessing liveability; that is, they argued that to be properly liveable, a town or city must also be distinctive and have a strong identity or sense of place [13]. This dimension of liveability is useful in distinguishing the urban design process by highlighting the impact of a city's evolution on spatial configuration and the cultural relationship of individuals with their environmental surroundings [14, 15].

Central to city design as praxis is a concern with the ways the physical components of place - at a range of morphological and aesthetic scales - affect the quality of citizens' experiences of place and of themselves reflexively [16]. This inference can be drawn from, for example, the work of Kevin Lynch and the roles of those physical elements and qualities of place he identified: legibility (e.g., paths, nodes, landmarks, edges and districts) and building typologies, which play key roles in the quality of people's daily lives. From this, we can deduce that improvements in public spaces should facilitate social interactions between urban inhabitants and contribute to healthy and liveable communities [17]. Moreover, citizens associate historic buildings with particular meanings, creating a sense of belonging to a community and local identity [8]. Therefore, the recovery and repair or restoration of old abandoned buildings, as well as policies which encourage their adaptive reuse, will not only lead to a revitalisation of the physical built environment but also reinforce and sustain cultural and community affiliation, as well as a sense of individual belonging.

### *1.2 Liveable Heritage: Policy and Planning – the Malaysian experience*

As part of its emphasis on economic growth, Kuala Lumpur began to follow many other global cities in embracing the trend of constructing skyscrapers to meet the demand for office space, commercial establishments and property. According to Smith [18], this has been a common phenomenon in developing or rapidly changing urban settings, where the success of financial and global districts is measured by the number of tall buildings, the drive towards which has shaped the landscape of the post-industrial city. However, this drive, which is evident in many developing countries, entails the risk that built heritage will be sacrificed to provide land for tall buildings and profitable real estate development [19]. Even if historic sites are not demolished or cleared, the frequent effect is that heritage buildings are left vacant, leading to their damage and decay. This eventually turns the city into one with no distinctive character.

The main physical planning document in Malaysia is the National Physical Plan (NPP). Based, in essence, on a doctrine of continuity and growth, the Plan is intended to spur national physical planning and strengthen the country's physical, social and economic development. This five-year plan was prepared by the Town and Country Planning Department in Peninsular Malaysia, which is also a member of the National Planning Council. Its implementation is distributed top-down to the inter-agency planning groups and various technical working groups formed by various Economic Planning Units to coordinate planning activities [20]. The vision of the National Physical Plan is designed and intended to be translated into more specific state-level requirements through the Structure Plan. The

last tier comprises local-level development plans, which enact the development policies and strategies in local districts. Local plans need to be formally adopted into national-level policy. By this process, conservation works and the implementation of Act 645 would become the remit of local authorities such as Kuala Lumpur City Hall.

Wan Mohd Rani, Tamjes and Wahab [9] argue that the current approach to policy and practice usually revolves around the interests, values and types of intervention of various actors. Bakri [21] suggests that the status of heritage in planning is predicated on power relations and becomes defined by those holding power and authority; that is, its meaning is contingent on other values and drivers. However, this interpretation has been strongly dismissed by other scholars such as Byrne [22], who argue that the value and therefore the meaning of heritage, as well as the subsequent decisions about its protection, must be based on how people are perceived and valued. In 2014, Cheng Li and Ma [23] have discussed the importance of public involvement in determining heritage significance and its influence on policies. They argue that the 'living testimony' of sites – that is, the essence of their heritage significance - refers to not only properties but also peoples' interactions with them. Significantly, Dian and Abdullah (2013) have pointed out that, in practice, in Malaysia, only individuals who live within or in close proximity to heritage sites have the right to express objections to proposed developments; the wider community or population have no such right, even though they may be equally or even more conscious of a site's heritage significance [24]. The reasons for this remain unclear.

### *1.3 Issues and Challenges of the Current Heritage Legislation*

Statutory development plans play an essential role in the development control system [25]. However, the National Heritage Act has been criticised by many scholars because of its limitations and lack of effectiveness in protecting built heritage [9, 26, 27]. In addition, Act 645 currently lacks operational guidelines and enforcement mechanisms for local authorities [28]. For example, billboards and advertisements cover many shophouse façades along Petaling Street, but no fines have been imposed by the local authorities. This situation effectively empowers a building owner to do whatever they want with their building.

Harun [26] and Mustafa and Abdullah [29] have suggested that the current Act 645 be revised, either to an upgraded version or with additional complementary specific bye-laws and guidelines. However, no such advances have occurred since the Act was gazetted in 2005. The need for supplementary guidelines, as well as enforcement and monitoring controls, is also discussed by Yusoff and Hanafiah [30]. Ideally, such mechanisms would increase awareness of heritage, and the imposition of strict fines would discourage the misuse of heritage assets while simultaneously protecting them.

## 2. Methodology

For this review to obtain in-depth insights into the interpretation of liveable heritage, qualitative research provided a suitable methodology. The first stage of this research included a scoping and review of the pertinent literature by employing two search terms - 'liveable' OR 'liveable' AND 'heritage' - via two databases. Elsevier's SciVerse Scopus (Scopus) and Thomson Reuters Web of Science were used for their reliability and extensive coverage from 2004. The scoping results show that the relationship between liveability and heritage has not been widely discussed in the academic

literature, but it is commonly mentioned in policy documents. This subsequently demonstrated a disconnection in the understanding between theory and practice, assuming academic literature provides more theory than practice, which is usually undertaken by policy makers. This review process, involving both academic discourse and policy statements, helped the researcher to progress the search from the general literature to a more focused research topic. It also broadened the researcher's knowledge of the subject and subsequently facilitated a better understanding of the local planning scene and the Malaysian context. This step also guided the researcher in strategising the interview themes and the discussions with potential stakeholders.

Since the study was conducted in Kuala Lumpur, the selection of stakeholders to interview was conducted using a purposive sampling method, bracketed within the local professional population of potential interviewees. The selection focused on personnel from government agencies and professionals with relevant involvement, either as policymakers, policy implementors or registered conservators. According to Hashim [31], it is essential to obtain information from the right respondents who understand a given context; he explained that in-depth knowledge about heritage phenomena can only be obtained from those who have worked within this specific field. Ethical approval was required by the university before conducting this study as it involved human participants. This was granted prior to any field work. A total of 44 semi-structured interviews were conducted from June 2023 until December 2024. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the interview stakeholders participating in this research, each of whom was given a code. These are used when presenting their statements in this article.

**Table 1**
Number of interviewee

| Category | Code | Number of respondents |
|---|---|---|
| State/federal government | SS-A1-1, SS-A1-5, SS-A1-6, SS-A1-4a, SS-A1-4b, SS-A1-7, SS-A1-8, SS-A1-9, SS-A1-10a, SS-A1-10b, SS-A1-10c, SS-A1-10d, SS-A1-11a, SS-A1-11b, SS-A2-1, | 16 |
| Local government/ government agencies | SS-A1-2, SS-A1-3, SS-A3-1, | 3 |
| Heritage bodies/NGOs | SS-B1-3, SS-B1-1, SS-B3-6, SS-B1-2, SS-B3-4 | 4 |
| Registered conservators | SS-B2-4, SS-B2-7, SS-B2-8, SS-B3-5, SS-B3-8, SS-B3-12, SS-B3-13 | 7 |
| Academicians | SS-B2-1, SS-B2-2, SS-B2-3, SS-B2-5, SS-B2-6, SS-B2-19, SS-B2-10 | 6 |
| Other professionals | SS-B3-1, SS-B3-3, SS-B3-7, SS-B3-9, SS-B3-10, SS-B3-11 | 8 |
| Total | | 44 |

*Source: Author (2024)*

The interview questions were developed to align broadly with the research objectives established at the beginning of the study. The questions focused mainly on a set of themes relevant to the participants' knowledge and understanding: 'experience', 'interpretation', 'value', 'challenge' and 'governance system'. An additional aim was to elicit examples from the stakeholders' experience of addressing the issues and policies related to heritage and the liveability of the environment. After completing the interviews, the main themes were formed and analysed using NVivo 20 software. Codes with similar meanings were grouped, and a list of key themes was then developed and organised.

(1)

## 3. Empirical Findings & Discussion

The characteristics of the 44 interview participants were classified into three categories. Eight government agencies and four non-government agencies were involved in this research. Additionally, seven participants identified themselves as registered conservators, while the remaining thirteen comprised a combination of academicians and professionals working in the heritage field. It is important to highlight that some interview questions required modifications and adjustments tailored to the specific categorisation of each participant and their scope of work. Throughout the interview sessions, the researcher found that the interview questions was changed or was diverted to some extent, according to aspects like the participants' varying levels of experience in the field, their reluctance to address certain inquiries due to perceived risk or the consistent frustration they felt when addressing particular issues. Furthermore, the potential complexity of some questions must be acknowledged, which may have posed challenges for participants, possibly preventing their comprehension and the effective articulation of their responses. This difficulty in digesting and comprehending questions might have contributed to some participants struggling to provide coherent answers.

After all the interview data had been collected, the next stage entailed listening to the audio recordings and outputs from the semi-structured interviews, which were then grouped under deduced themes. In Nvivo, themes, sub-themes and constructs are the key organisational elements used to analyse and interpret qualitative data. Themes represent the main concepts or topics that are of interest to the researcher and derived directly from the data. Sub-themes are more specific categories that fall under the broader themes. It is useful to refine the analysis by breaking down larger themes into smaller and manageable units. Constructs are abstract concepts or ideas that are theorised or inferred from data; they represent theoretical concepts that the researcher seeks to explore or test. All this process involves actions such as coding, memoing and querying the data to identify patterns and relationships between different elements.

Table 2 shows the themes that emerged from the NVivo coding analysis. The following section includes the discussion and analysis of the research topic.

**Table 2**
Themes emerging from NVivo

| Themes | Sub-Themes | Construct |
|---|---|---|
| Interpretation of Liveable Heritage | Context interpretation among stakeholders | How scope of work influence the interpretation |
| | | Individuals personal background |
| | | Level of awareness about heritage |
| | Adaptation to city planning | Heritage Management and Planning |
| | | Professional Involvements |
| | | Duration of projects |
| | Challenges | Decision making |
| | Values | Community influences |

*Source: Author,2024*

### *3.1 Interpretation of the Context*

The first step in understanding the meaning and developing the research framework was to explore the interpretation of and within the stakeholders' topics. Based on the responses from all the stakeholders, their interpretation of the topics of 'liveability' and 'heritage' appeared to vary greatly; that is, between government agencies and professional stakeholders, as well as within the internal government agencies themselves. The literature indicates that while the meaning of liveability varies between individuals, it also became evident through the interviews that its meaning can also vary and be confusing within organisations.

This difference in interpretation can be attributed to three reasons: 1) scope of work, 2) individual backgrounds, and 3) levels of awareness regarding heritage.

Addressing the first reason, the participants having difficulties to discrete their personal and professional views regarding this research topic. The interviewees' understanding of liveability varied widely, creating difficulties in seeing the concept as a general framework that is independent of personal opinions. Liveability is interlinked with the discrete lifestyles of individuals, so participants tended to answer questions based on their everyday life experiences rather than the context of the professional environment in which they worked. One participant from the government agencies acknowledged that liveability has no specific definition in the context of Malaysia, with the somewhat loose concept having been derived or adapted from international rankings such as MERCER, EIU and Singapore (A1-4). Ranking systems have become part of the scope of work of some participants, specifically those from government agencies, which may have contributed to each individual having a different understanding of and assigning a different meaning to the concept.

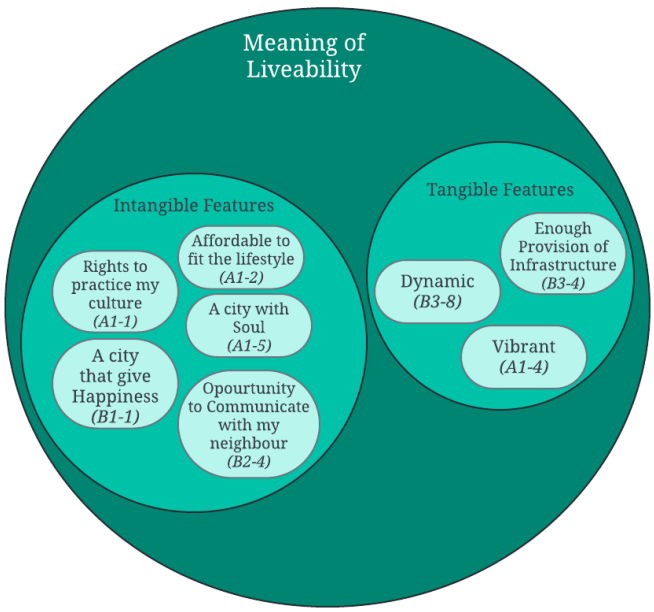


**Fig. 1.** Meaning of Liveability
*Source: Author,2024*

The analysis of the data obtained from the interviews is summarised in Figure 1. This illustrates, firstly, how the interviewees' interpretation of liveability fell into two categories - the tangible and the intangible and, secondly, the respective features of these categories. This early indication enables an understanding of the basic context of a desirable and meaningful urban environment, as well as ways to plan one, as this is later reflected in one's experience of place. As discussed by Sheikh and van Ameijde [32], psychological needs are critical for survival in a city and can only be achieved when all 'human needs' are met. This is one reason why urban elements will affect the quality of spaces in cities, thus influencing the city's liveability [33]. As two of the professional interviewees said:

> *Liveability is a city that has a soul. (A1-5)*

> *A city that is dynamic, sustainable, [and has an] intact character with an improved infrastructure. (B3-8)*

To be considered truly liveable, a city needs to feel alive and vibrant while being practically efficient. Thus, the above excerpts suggest that a liveable city is defined by more than just practical aspects. Unique identity and essence derive from the cultural evidence, historical footprints and sense of belonging that imply the 'soul' of a city. This evidence can be seen through both intangible and tangible elements, which subsequently balance a city's dynamic with its sustainability.

### *3.2 Adaptation to City Planning*

As exemplified in the excerpts below, all the interviewees agreed that the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645) is an important mechanism for protecting the nation's built heritage and has successfully served its purposes:

> *When a building [is] declared as heritage, it comes with restriction [s] that make it impossible to do anything [that you want] about it. (A1-8)*

> *Talking from the point of physical heritage, our Act 645 [National Heritage Act], is strong. Why do I say so? ... That is because it has been supported by other Acts and statutory legislation. (B3-8)*

However, since its gazettement, the Act 645 has constantly received criticism, especially regarding its validity and efficiency, as well as its effects on implementation programs. Certain frustrations were expressed by interviewees, as evident from the following excerpts:

> *[The] provision of the Act 645 created the National Heritage Department but when they put the department under the Ministry of Tourism, they [the National Heritage Department] don't have this power to do much. There is one section in the Act [Section 32, which reads:] "Whenever the commissioner gazzetted the building or property, the commissioner must inform the local authority and the land office to make it in the register". (B1-2)*

> *The Act is too general, not specific enough. That is why [the] public (especially developers and consultants) tend to argue, although it [is] stated [that the Act]*

> *'must be read together with heritage design guidelines. But guidelines is a guidelines which we all know, guideline come with a loophole. Guideline can always be contested, as we all know, because it's not regulated. (A1-5)*

> *Act 645 only works for [a] national monument. So what happened to the heritage on city's level or state level? (B3-4)*

> *The Act 645 does not imply and empower the community to protect their heritage. How can they play a part? What is their interest? (A1-1)*

Based on the above excerpts, the Act 645 (National Heritage Act ) faces significant challenges due to its general provisions, which limit the authority of the National Heritage Department, especially when placed under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC). The Act 645 focuses primarily on national monuments, leaving city- and state-level heritage unprotected, and it relies on guidelines that are easily contested due to their non-regulatory nature. Furthermore, the Act does not empower communities to actively participate in heritage protection, creating a gap between legal frameworks and local interests, which often leads to disputes with developers and consultants.

In contrast, despite these authorisation limitations, the interviewees attributed the responsibility for heritage to the National Heritage Department. This was evident when recruiting interviewees for the research: when approached, most state and local government officials and authorities asked the researcher to first liaise directly with the National Heritage Department before pursuing the interview. This suggests that the responsibility for built heritage is seen, at the local level of government, to reside with the Heritage Department, even though they do not actually own the heritage assets. The perception that the National Heritage Department has sole responsibility for the heritage – even at the local level - may have become entrenched, leading to the continued reliance on the department for heritage-related matters. A review of the literature also suggests a lack of resources or capacity by which state and local governments can manage heritage assets. This situation has caused distress and led to ineffective heritage protection, as perceived by the professional interviewees:

> *I have no faith in the department as I have a lot of problems dealing with them. They have to do the law things but [have] no power to enforce the law. They can tell people what to do but cannot MAKE people do it. (B1-2)*

> *The National Heritage Department should play their role. They are stronger than the policy makers. (A1-5)*

> *The National Heritage Department need to rethink their roles. Are they just administrative or are they advocating and championing cultural heritage? (B3-4)*

> *All responsibilities [for] taking care of the building are back to the National Heritage Department and heritage owners. (A1-10)*

> *Everything involving heritage, the Local Authority will not make any decision on it. The commentary will be "Please consult and get approval from the National Heritage Department". (A1-7)*

These observations suggest further exploration is needed on the operation of heritage policy in Malaysia, which needs better and clearer management and structures to deliver conservation outcomes. The National Heritage Department is perceived by insiders as the primary authority or point of contact, although most decisions related to heritage sometimes depend on the jurisdiction of the local authority. In this case, Kuala Lumpur has thrived, having been safeguarded by its specific regulations and laws enshrined in the 'Federal Territory Act 1982 (Act 267)'. This Act contains provisions for controlling and regulating proper planning within the jurisdiction of the Federal Territory. Although Act 267 does not specify heritage and conservation works, interviewee B3-8 who is a registered conservator and also academician explained that the National Heritage Department could help the local authority in coordination and administration, while the local authority should play their role in controlling development near the heritage core:

> *Yes, the Heritage Department can help to guide the principles. Meanwhile, taking care of the built environment is under the local authority, including conservation, urban renewal and urban design. However, it cannot be exercised by all local authorities.*

In contrast with some stakeholder responses, the following excerpts show that local government players (A1-2 and A1-11a) are confident that the success of Act 645 can be justified through the success of conservation activities in Malaysia and its regulatory condition in the development plan.

> *Although the development pace is really high in Kuala Lumpur, at the same time, the historical evidence is still intact up until today. (A1-2)*

> *We take this view [of heritage], and we have highlighted its importance in the 2040 Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan by identifying heritage areas, heritage zones and heritage buildings. We also have provided heritage guidelines to control the development at these heritage zones so that we can protect, conserve and preserve its integrity, especially in terms of plot ratio control and plinth area management. (A1-11a)*

As illustrated above, heritage has gained substantial government support, but this most probably happened because of the contribution it makes to tourism and economic development. Interestingly, some professionals expressed different viewpoints about 'success', as mentioned in the excerpts below. Many professionals took issue with the way the government perceives heritage conservation policy as a 'success' as they had experienced the reality of conservation projects in Malaysia, which have remained at 'low' and undesirable levels since the National Heritage Act 2005 was gazetted. Besides, the long timeline to complete conservation projects was also raised as an issue by the professional conservators. Some shared their experiences of conservation projects that had taken up to two years to complete. As a result, not only do conservation projects become undesirable practices, but they also fail to offer professionals enough return on their investment. Therefore, some professional interviewees regarded conservation projects as mere hobbies.

> *Heritage projects in Malaysia (in general) are low and super limited, not because there is nothing to conserve but because there is no demand and fewer people like to venture into this, especially craftsmen [with the right] skills sets. (B3-5)*

> *The minimum time to finish a heritage project is one year, but if you ask me about the number, of course, [any] building that is considered heritage needs to be conserved now. (B3-8)*

> *As for now, I don't get involved with too many conservation projects because, one, there are so many conservators but very few projects. There are too many of us [conservators], and in the end, [projects are] circulated again among the same conservators. It's either you get the opportunity to join them or not having the opportunity at all. (B2-7)*

However, the situation is contradictory for some government agencies because they focus more on in-house projects related to government buildings or those of national interest. Most in-house conservators from government agencies who take part in government-led conservation projects are very passionate and dedicated to driving the projects. In fact, they can easily shift their focus from physical projects to consultative roles:

> *We are constrained in terms of manpower and staff to do an in-house project; therefore, we [are] focusing more on giving advice to other agencies. (A1-6)*

From the government's perspective, having a policy demonstrates its strong commitment to conservation and heritage. All government agencies are convinced that heritage and conservation will boost the country's economic viability, and this does not refer to only Kuala Lumpur. As described in the following excerpts, the government agencies, NGOs and conservator each agreed that the role of heritage for tourism is central to the city's liveability in terms of the area's substantial economic vitality:

> *We are concerned about the preservation of the heritage as it is one of our income generators for tourism. (A1-10)*

> *Heritage is in line with tourism, so we must do something. (A1-4)*

> *Visitors will not come over just for a shopping experience. Heritage places have given added value in terms of the place's character [and] identity; therefore, when you preserve and conserve its character, the place will attract people to visit the city. Look at Italy, they conserve the whole city and tourism is their main income. (B1-1)*

> *It is important to do preservation; at the same time, you may gain benefits in term of economy, which [is] when the tourism aspect [comes] in. (B2-1)*

The discussion above shows that heritage and tourism are strongly related and mutually dependent; therefore, conservation activities must be prioritised, undertaken continuously and supported sufficiently by the government.

However, other statements indicate clearly that some believe that the current policy and legislation have failed to understand this context in the realm of the built environment. Azmi, Ali and Ahmad [19] mention the very limited powers of the National Heritage Department since the conservation of buildings falls under the jurisdiction of local authorities, which provides no absolute power to the commissioner to make decisions. Besides, heritage management failures have not been acknowledged, specifically when delivering and implementing the policy, or in the failure to provide a transparent measurement and any means of ensuring or monitoring progress. This situation and the related challenges were very clear to most professionals working in conservation industries:

> *The only problem with [the] Act 645 is the commissioner does not have any jurisdiction to enforce it. (B1-2)*
>
> *Heritage is not heritage unless it has been gazetted. (B3-4)*
>
> *Making the guideline is just to please yourself and a merry-go-round, yeah, up and down. The guideline is just a guideline: if you want to use it, please do, but if you don't, then you have the option not to. (B2-4)*
>
> *[The] guideline is just a guideline; it does not carry much so-called enforcement to it. We need to [have] some kind of enforcement [because there is] nobody there to take it seriously. (A1-1)*
>
> *We are doing things for the sake of 'doing things'. For example, our policies [are] also contradicting ... each other. You want to be sustainable, you want to be a low-carbon city and you already prepared policies for that, but at the same time, you built more highways. (B1-1)*

### *3.3 Inconsistent Decision-making*

Professional stakeholders appeared to acknowledge the communication gap between the government and local communities regarding how the policy is created and applied. Based on the interview data, the majority of professional stakeholders had never been invited to a focus group discussion or any meeting before the policy was drawn up, although some had been in that industry for some time and were well-known in the field. This profound dynamic illustrates the possibility that the government tends to act without consultation, so it does not understand what has been happening on the ground.

However, this point has also been argued by government agencies. For example, according to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), the existence of community groups intended specifically to safeguard intangible heritage, such as traditional dance clubs or art societies, has strengthened the framework model of policy-making, in this case is the recent National Cultural Policy 2021. By advocating for the preservation and promotion of intangible heritage, these groups draw attention to the importance of cultural diversity and the need for supportive policies. Thus, cultural events, performances and festivals are easier to organise, manage and promote than immovable and privatised tangible heritage. Unfortunately, the participation of these community groups depends on ministry invitations, especially when framing some specific implementation program or when

particular funding is made available. The availability of funding is known to be crucial to ensure the continuity of cultural programs and dedication to cultural preservation, as stated below:

> *A dedicated fund from the government is crucial to run a program. It shows not only dedication but also commitment [and] endorsement. (A1-1)*
>
> *I don't think the state government allocated some funding and budgeting for heritage works this year. (A1-4)*
>
> *Although heritage generates income for tourism, the owner of the heritage asset must play their role. To do this, they need some funding. (A1-10)*

On the other hand, it seems easier to apply for funding for cultural programs than for physical modification of heritage physical infrastructure. Some interviewees reported difficulties accessing certain funding in relation to tangible heritage, such as building preservation. Interviewee B2-2 said, "No one can give us some funding for [our] heritage project. We fought and try to find funding for almost two years, but no one can really give us. It is difficult". Others may believe that the conservation of heritage itself can barely provide a direct economic benefit for either the local or the city economy. In addition, the expectations of the building owners are also high, yet without incentives, preservation and conservation are merely ideas that do not encourage actions.

### *3.4 The Power of the Community*

Besides funding, three interviewees mentioned the challenge of preserving heritage buildings due to the high cost involved. This frustration also aligned with the comments by the local-government interviewee, who cited the high cost of repairing national monuments.

> *To remain and maintain [a] heritage building is really difficult due to its high cost. Not all people think it is worth to keep [it] rather than rebuild a new building instead of restore. (B2-9)*
>
> *[There is] too much cost to conserve [it] and too much cost to strengthen it. (B3-5)*
>
> *If you don't maintain it earlier, it becomes very costly to repair later on unless you do regular maintenance, and continuously. (B7-2)*
>
> *We can't even maintain the Sultan Abdul Samad building [a national monument]. [It is] too expensive and COSTLY! (A1-8 & A1-10)*

This situation explains the existing poor condition of heritage properties in Kuala Lumpur, especially national monuments such as Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad and Carcosa Sri Negara, as mentioned by interviewees A1-5, B3-5, B3-6, B3-7 and B3-13. The condition of national monuments, whereby some are poorly kept and not regularly maintained, has tarnished the image of Kuala Lumpur because they are among the country's most renowned monuments. The participants also questioned the responsibility for maintaining these monuments. Some agreed that those who occupy a building should retain it, rather than the heritage owners being responsible.

In addition, there was confusion around who should take responsibility for the protection and maintenance of heritage, since Act 645 is not fully clear on this. The Act did not specify any regulation that private owners should perform maintenance, thus making them reluctant to spend money on doing so. Left unresolved, this situation will encourage owners to sell properties to the highest bidder. While this might not yet be happening to national monuments, the future is unknown.

This absence of a maintenance strategy was commented on by many interviewees, who referred to the loopholes and inefficiencies of controlling and managing heritage that is not directly government-owned. Only later were such provisions made by the Town and Country Planning Department of Malaysia, which set specific guidelines for private owners: the Conservation of Heritage Areas and Buildings Guideline 2023 (PEWARIS) was published in February 2023.

> *Because the guideline is implanted by the local authority, ... it is logical that Plan Malaysia to produce the guideline as 'to guide'. This guideline [Pewaris] is specific for [any] building which does not fall into category 1 or 2. But because it's a guideline, I cannot ensure [that] it's effective. Some states will apply it fully, while some will adjust [it] according to the compatibility of their state environment. Some can also refuse it because 'planning' is the state's 'right'. That's why every state has [its own] State Planning Committee... Depending on their awareness, as some states/local authorities do apply initiative to preserve and conserve their heritage, but it is challenging, which we acknowledge. (A1-11)*
>
> *I support the effort of producing this guideline, even though it's quite generic. (B2-8)*

Professional interviewees stated that although the guideline remained generic and contained fewer technicalities, the effort to produce it was commendable. Besides, the document focuses on guiding heritage owners and could be improved by being based on the public's preferences.

Ultimately, many scholars agree that whereas heritage sites belong to the people, only those who live in, with or within these sites know best how to undertake an effective and workable preservation plan [24]. This consideration plays an integral part in decision-making processes, although public comments and suggestions are not fully taken into account in policy making. In fact, the public may be unaware of their capacity to be involved in heritage matters, which has led to deplorable involvement results due to low awareness and understanding, as well as different attitudes. Interviewee A1-10 acknowledged that the public had recently been more vocal in giving opinions concerning heritage, and although awareness was very low, each recommendation counts and is recorded during any public hearing. This is a vital step towards knowing that heritage is slowly becoming part of people's lives and environments.

### *3.5 Interference from and Speculation by External Sources*

Despite the success of ensuring the functionality of the policy documents, which was acknowledged by many stakeholders, the impact of policy on society remains low and unsatisfactory:

> *I think Malaysia, in terms of policy, we are one of the best. The policy all very pretty, that is, but it isn't got to the bottom part of society. There is some lacking in that. (A1-4b)*

Indeed, interference from external sources was found to have become one of the challenges of making the policy as workable as it should be. Although acknowledged by only a few participants, this was an important research finding that needs to be addressed further as it will affect the whole governance and administration system, specifically when thinking through any prospective implementation strategy.

Although not directly related to conservation, some heritage enclaves in Kuala Lumpur are still affected by the external interference of Kuala Lumpur's Kapitans.[1] Although they pose no threat to the public, they retain strong links with the area due to their establishment as guardians of the area and their cultural relationship to the place since the city's foundation. Their existence is acknowledged and it has been claimed that they hold power over those living in their community, so their strong bond to the place has made it impossible to make certain changes or mitigate plans without their permission. This means the local authority must hold a series of discussions with these community 'leaders' as part of an engagement process. The lengthy negotiation process means local authorities often choose to abandon specific projects that are related to, or cross the boundaries guarded by, certain groups because they need to work within the budget and meet the given deadlines. Unfortunately, this has led to the failure of some implementation plans in core heritage areas in Kuala Lumpur, a reality which is difficult to explain to the public.

> *Some areas in downtown Kuala Lumpur have their own guardian (*penjaga*). When we decided to do some research/fieldwork, it become necessity for us to pay a 'visit' to the guardian. In fact, the guardian will remind his/her people who [are] already nearby to not disturb our fieldwork. That [has] become the main reason why some of the projects involving the downtown area in Kuala Lumpur [are] becoming too challenging as it takes too much time, time that we don't have. As a result, we decided to abandon the project instead of going forward.*[2]

Other professionals and some heritage experts, however, were unaware of this situation and consequently blamed the government for their failure to deliver the plan for and protection of the area. From the government's perspective, this situation may be rather complex and difficult to understand, and it can become very risky for anyone trying to address this subject.

## 4. Conclusions

This research paper explores the concepts of liveability and heritage, as well as the impact of their interrelationship on the ongoing conservation activities in Kuala Lumpur. The paper also reports findings from recent research into the question of dominant interests regarding Kuala Lumpur's heritage. The concept of liveable heritage is practically new in academia and often discussed in different contexts. That is, concerns in policy and practice terms tend to focus on liveability connected

[1] Historically, *Kapitan* means 'Captain', which was originally a title given to a group leader of the Chinese community in early Kuala Lumpur.
[2] Due to ethical and privacy concerns, the participant giving this specific quote requested to not be named.

to housing, neighbourhood quality and the environment, but liveability is not seen as a dimension of conservation. Heritage has never been seen as contributing to or even an aspect of place liveability. In the context of Kuala Lumpur, this may in part account for the deterioration of the heritage core. This could be why heritage has been valued less compared to newer and modern placemaking development. The interpretation shows that the relationship between liveability and heritage is not significant, and it depends on both the subject and the context. Policymakers tend to perceive heritage as an instrumental opportunity for tourism, while other stakeholders are more keen on its continuity for historical references and narratives, as well as even a mere hobby. It seems that while policymakers take some interest in the concepts of liveability and heritage, they lack any strong mechanism and a practical approach to achieve the mission. This paper has shown that the different interpretations of the notion of liveability mean the subject causes confusion, thus creating issues with the implementation plan and activities related to conservation.

The study also demonstrates the impact of conservation policies on people's general well-being. Similar findings are discussed by Katapidi [34], whereby good conservation policies have successfully moulded the local understanding of heritage. As such, heritage protection should start with proper education and raising awareness, and the responsibility for this should not fall under the scope of certain departments but assumed at all levels. Although it is acknowledged that heritage has recently received more public attention, continued effort and exposure are needed so that it comes to be regarded as not simply a tourist asset but more as a lifetime achievement and part of the country's narrative. The importance of heritage makes it more than just a tourism product, a reality that should be recognised by policymakers, who should plan for future heritage sites beyond national monuments.

**Acknowledgements**
This research was not funded by any grants. However, the author would like to thank all the stakeholders, including the Kuala Lumpur City Hall all heritage professionals (conservators, experts, and academicians), for their time and valuable insights while participating in this research. The author of this research also would like to acknowledges the contribution made by Starke Marine Sdn Bhd for funding the conference fee.

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