

Majestic house of memories

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THE marble yard is stained with rain, but it has not fallen into ruin. Weeds have not seeded the roof nor cracked flowered tiles grandfather brought, shining in crates from China.... Someone has saved the old house....

Author Shirley Geok-lin Lim's words from *Monsoon History* could well have been referring to The Majestic Malacca. Constructed in 1929, the gracious old building had very nearly fallen to bulldozers beating on its front door.

But many admired the mansion's distinctive architectural style that mirrors Malacca's multi-faceted community and long history. So it was saved from destruction when YTL Hotels and Properties Sdn Bhd bought the building in 2004 to turn it into a boutique hotel.

The building was originally the private residence of prominent businessman Leong Long Man, who came from Guangzhou, China, to make his fortunes in Malacca at the turn of the last century. The British Government then was encouraging locals to plant rubber, and Leong eventually owned more than 150ha of lucrative plantations.



The Majestic Malacca as it is today, a lovingly restored boutique hotel.

With his newly found wealth, he commissioned a grand mansion to be built across the Malacca River from the St Peter's Church. But just two years after moving in, Leong contracted tuberculosis. Fearing that the virus might spread to his family, Leong seldom spoke and remained silent until his death in 1931 at the age of 59.

Leong's eldest son, Alex Leong Yong Kok, was entrusted with the family estates but, as seems so often the case with the second generation, Alex became a spendthrift and led an extravagant life with several mistresses.

He eventually had to sell the mansion to another Leong family in 1952, who in turn rented out the building to entrepreneur Lim Heng Fang who converted it into The Majestic Hotel in 1955.

The 24-bedroom hotel was a popular watering hole for both local and foreign travellers and older Malaccans today still fondly recall holding or attending many weddings here.

On July 31, 2000, the State Government bought the land, and the hotel closed; the land it sat on became a parking lot for the neighbouring hospital.



Thanks to the meticulous restoration, The Majestic Malacca still retains the look and feel of a private residence.

A new lease of life

Plans were made to destroy the rundown structure to make way for new buildings. But in 2005, a newspaper report calling for the restoration of the old mansion caught the attention of YTL Hotels and Properties' executive director Datuk Mark Yeoh. The article triggered a memory in him.

"When the Eastern and Oriental Express (E&O) was launched in 1993, we held gala celebrations at historic hotels in cities that the train passes through; and so we had parties at The Oriental in Bangkok and The Raffles in Singapore," Yeoh recalls.

"Although YTL is the largest shareholder of the E&O and the train passes through Malaysia for 60% of its journey, we didn't have a significant historic hotel to hold its launch party in Kuala Lumpur! We had to use The Regent Hotel (now renamed the Grand Millennium).

"I remember talking to then Tourism Minister, Datuk Sabaruddin Chik, that it's sad our city lacked a worthy historic hotel. He replied, "Well, why don't you do something about it?"

After reading that newspaper report, Yeoh quickly contacted the Malacca State Government and began negotiations. Two years later, YTL had secured the property for adaptive reuse as a luxury boutique hotel.

Restorations on the mansion and the construction of a new 15-storey block behind it took off, and, in January this year, The Majestic Malacca was reopened with much fanfare as the first property under the company's new Classic Hotels range.

The hotel's unique architectural style mirrors Malacca's multi-faceted community and its historic past. It draws on influences from the Portuguese, Dutch, British and the Peranakan cultures, and these elements have been carefully preserved and complemented with modern amenities, such as a glass-walled gymnasium and wireless broadband.

The louvered shutters on windows have been carefully painted in their original green shade and the lovely ceramic floor tiles have been restored. Even the *pintu pagar* or double swing doors have been maintained.

Furnishing has been kept chic and elegant, with teak wood fittings and handsome leather pieces.

The new block houses 54 guest rooms and YTL's signature Spa Village using traditional Peranakan treatments.

Guests can enjoy charming old-fashioned luxuries such as four-poster beds dressed in silks and smooth cottons and a marbled bathroom with a claw-footed porcelain tub and modern rain-showers.

The Majestic Malacca's restoration came as a huge relief for many Malaccans who have long cherished the building. They only had to look up at the neighbouring hulk of a hospital building painted a garish blue to instantly see how precarious The Majestic Malacca's fate was.

A beloved home

The hotel's original inhabitants were more than relieved to see the gracious old house preserved.

The building had been home to Leong Sui Ying for 23 years when she stayed there under her father's roof from 1929 until it was sold in 1952.

"My childhood spent there was reflective of an era gone," Leong, 84, reminisces during a recent dinner hosted by YTL.

"I was a student at the Holy Infant Jesus School. Those were carefree days cycling around Malacca with my friends. The town was then sleepy and charmingly free of the endless traffic flows today!"



Leong Sui Ying is happy to see her old home restored to its former glory.

The building sheltered the Leong family through World War II. As a young woman at the time, Leong was oblivious to what was going on.

"I was just happy that school had closed down when the war began (for Malaya in 1941) on Dec 8," she recalls.

"I only remember how serious the adults were. Rice was rationed by the Japanese occupation army but we had enough to eat.

"Mum had to sell her jewellery to raise money to buy supplies but we still owned 300 acres of rubber plantations."

Leong married in her mid-20s and settled down in Kuala Lumpur. She has been living in Petaling Jaya since 1981 with three sons and a daughter and is the proud grandmother of five.

Returning to her childhood home brings back fond memories for her.

"I am so glad YTL has kept its word by preserving the building so beautifully," she says. "The only changes have been the removal of one staircase behind the bar, and putting a new block where the old servants' quarters used to be.

"But if I sit quietly here, I can still remember how it used to be my home."

The world came to its doors

The old mansion that was constantly filled with life had seemed huge to little Lim Fang Biau. The five-year-old would sneak out of bed and peep through the carved wooden balustrades at the men talking around over the bar downstairs, sometimes in the company of mysterious women dressed in alluring baju kebayas.

In the 1950s, The Majestic was the biggest hotel in sleepy Malacca, drawing ministers, foreign diplomats, and even founding member of the MCA, Tun Tan Cheng Lock as a guest. Lim's father was then renting the building from the Leong family and had set it up as a hotel. Occupancy never dipped below 80%.

It catered to many a travelling salesman needing a place to put up for the night.

The 1970s brought in backpackers and hippies from Western countries. Room rates were just about RM20 or RM40 a night.



Back in its day, the building was among the finest in Malacca, befitting one of the town's richest men.

"It was constantly lively here and there was always some interesting or eccentric traveller to meet!" says Lim, now in his 50s and at the same dinner. "They had many stories to tell of their travels that endlessly fascinated me.

"I'd play hide and seek around the building with my younger brother and sister. The upper floor was partitioned off into guest rooms (it is now used as the hotel's restaurant).

"As a teenager I used to sneak a smoke around the back doors near the servants' quarters while my father was busy manning the front desk."

Lim left for Taiwan to continue his studies in graphic design when he was 21. After seven years he returned to Malacca with his Taiwanese wife.

"The first time I brought her here to see the hotel, it was in a sad state. Now, its former glory has been restored. I'm glad this priceless piece of architecture that represents so much of our identity and history has been preserved."