

# OPINION



AZMI ANSHAR

PRICELESS HERITAGE

## TIME TO SHOW GREATER LOVE AND RESPECT

There is a plan to turn Carcosa Seri Negara into an Asian Peace, Arts and Cultural Heritage Park

**W**ITH all the trappings of resplendent historicity, Hollywood glamour, green sanctuary, architectural majesty and touristic magnetism, Carcosa Seri Negara possesses a magnificent aura that no other heritage site arouses.

Yet, Carcosa and Seri Negara, two colonial mansions primed on a luscious 30-acre government site in the greenest heart of Kuala Lumpur, were in a horrendous, derelict and, arguably, treasonous state, if you can appreciate the magnitude of their antiquity and provenance.

The state of disrepair and neglect greeted social enterprise Asian Heritage Museum Sdn Bhd (AHM) when it assumed — with no government funding — a three-year tenancy of the site in April 2017.

Constructed in 1897 by Sir Frank Swettenham as the official residence of the British High Commissioner, Carcosa briefly morphed into a boutique hotel (like Seri Negara) in 1989 for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to also host Queen Elizabeth as honoured royal guest. It was abandoned in 2009 and left to rot.

Seri Negara, built in 1913 as a government guest house for visiting world leaders, was the official guest palace of the first king, Tuanku Abdul Rahman from 1957 to 1960 while the second king, Sultan Hisamuddin Alam Shah, passed away in Seri Negara in 1960 and was laid in state there. From 1955 to 1957, the Constitution of Malaya was drafted in Seri Negara and on Aug 5, 1957, the Merdeka Agreement was signed by the nine rulers in Seri Negara. This makes Seri Negara



(From left) Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah viewing the original Merdeka Flag at Carcosa Seri Negara on Jan 17, 2018; Tuanku Muhriz Tuanku Munawir and his family at the launch of the Jalan Merdeka Exhibition at Carcosa Seri Negara on Aug 31, 2017.



the most sacred historical building in Malaysia. Yet, abandoned in 2015, the landlord — a federal land agency — left the two edifices to rot with no upkeep and maintenance.

Such contempt for our nation's heritage is still puzzling. There is, of course, the RM20 million estimated repair and restoration costs. AHM's plans for the setting up of an Asian peace museum and artefacts' centre were thwarted by the buildings' untenable and unproductive condition that stifled its business to generate income to pay the rentals.

The landlord agreed in writing in April 2017 not to charge rentals until new building plans were approved by City Hall but with no funds forthcoming from the previous government to repair and restore the buildings, AHM was simply unable to submit building plans.

As a responsible party and at its own cost, AHM did justice by giving "life" to the two buildings: the ground floors and surrounding areas were cleaned, repaired, maintained and secured to make them partially productive and safe for public use.

AHM then collaborated with five relevant government agencies to organise the deeply patriotic, non-profit and free entrance Jalan Merdeka, a highly visual exhibition on the people's struggle for Merdeka and how a new nation was born in 1957 without bloodshed but with much sacrifice by the founding fathers.

Launched on Aug 31, 2017 by the ruler of Negri Sembilan, Tu-

anku Muhriz Tuanku Munawir, Jalan Merdeka was highly praised by the media, NGOs, educational institutions, corporate sector and government agencies.

Deputy King and Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, who toured Carcosa Seri Negara on Jan 17, 2018, was so impressed by the exhibition that he wrote off in the visitors' log: "Wonderful Exhibition, Congratulations".

Due to popular demand, Jalan Merdeka has been extended indefinitely.

The reality of exorbitant costs of repair, upkeep, maintenance and security compelled AHM to permit public bookings to hold events and functions. However, it needs to be reminded that these are not AHM's core business: it is still intent on setting up a world-class museum and arts centre to promote peace, heritage and cultural diversity.

AHM's financial audit shows a net loss for operations at Carcosa Seri Negara in 2017 at RM279,000. The estimated net loss in 2018 was RM600,000. The estimated accumulated net loss to date, despite income from events and functions, is now RM1 million, a sacrifice and contribution that AHM is making for the country.

But there is a little silver lining: AHM is proposing a US\$500 million (RM2.095 billion) Asian Peace, Arts & Cultural Heritage (Apach) Park project, via a Private Funding Initiative, at Carcosa Seri Negara.

Despite this promising source of funding, AHM insists that the

government also evaluate other proposals based on merit.

In the meantime, AHM expects to complete its Carcosa Seri Negara tenancy in March 2020 as originally agreed and in compliance with the rule of law and natural justice.

Federal Territories Minister Khalid Abdul Samad, in a letter of support to AHM in March, expressed gratitude to AHM for "taking good care of Carcosa Seri Negara".

"You have done a lot at your own costs by repairing — maintaining the entire 30-acre government-owned site for the public to visit.

You have also organised the highly acclaimed Jalan Merdeka Exhibition," he said in extracts of the letter.

Khalid has also expressed full support and appreciation for AHM's proposed Apach Park as an effort to make Kuala Lumpur a world-class city of peace, cultural diversity and tourist attraction.

AHM's Council of Advisers comprises Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin Tuanku Muhriz, Maria Chin Abdullah, Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman, Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin, Datuk Shabudin Abdul Wahab, Hamidon Taib and K.K. Tan. Special Adviser is Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz. Senior consultants include Datuk Hajeedar Abdul Majid and Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor.

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