



# George Town

## Creating public spaces through the revitalisation of backlanes in the World Heritage City of George Town

### Overview – Project background

George Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that covers nearly 260 ha (2.6km<sup>2</sup>) of the city centre on Penang Island, north of Malaysia. The city is an eclectic mix of old and new buildings and infrastructure, featuring pre-war buildings that dates back centuries amidst modern buildings constructed in recent decades. In recent years, gentrification and a slow decline in population in the city centre has brought on urban decay. The City Council of Penang Island then embarked on a Repopulating George Town Programme to bring people back into the city centre.

One of the ways to bring people back into the city is to improve its livability by turning it into a fun and trendy place to live, learn, work and play. Thus, the plan to create a network of green public spaces within the city centre was mooted. This network of open public spaces that winds through the back lanes of heritage houses provide a safe haven for pedestrians and residents while increasing the number of green pockets in the city. It is a sustainable way of bringing life back into the city. The revitalization of the back lanes not only created new green spaces for the people but it also enhances the rich historical elements of the city while bringing the beauty of the heritage buildings in the city into stark relief.

### The problem

George Town city was built in a haphazard manner with heritage buildings leaning on each other in rows situated on a maze of narrow crisscrossing roads. These heritage buildings are interspersed with modern buildings, all of which has a mixture of residential, commercial and retail usage.

Over the years, the back lanes of these premises were neglected and forgotten. These spaces were unkempt, dirty, and unsafe. These are vacant open spaces that spreads out over 10 acres but were not fully utilized. The back lanes were dark, hidden away from the main roads and often treated as dumping grounds leading to it being rat and cockroach infested. Studies on people's perception of the back lanes revealed that they believe it to be unsafe, dirty, and inaccessible due to manmade obstructions. This creates a negative image of George Town as a whole and a solution is needed to turn it around.

### Our aim

Our aim is to introduce a placemaking project that could ensure its sustainability by ensuring that the people take ownership especially if it fulfills their needs. So, the elements below were introduced to create public spaces through the revitalization of back lanes:

- i) Comfortable spaces for casual encounters and gatherings were created through beautifully landscaped, revitalized areas at unused back lanes.
- ii) High quality and functionally designed streetscapes, combined with green spaces, became the backbone that enhances the visual experience of George Town World Heritage Site.



### Design concept / Solution

The neglected and dirty back lanes can be transformed into "backlane gardens". The "Backlane Gardens" emphasizes on the addition of green elements including urban farms in the upgrading works. Potential spaces were identified as green spaces that can also be used as safe, comfortable public spaces.

A survey conducted among local communities found that the design of the back lanes revitalization must focus on these 5 main things, as stated below:

- i) Greenery: trees, shrubs, pocket parks, urban farms
- ii) Safety features: CCTV, solar sensor lights, universal design approaches
- iii) Cleanliness: covered drains, relocation of rubbish bins
- iv) Accessibility: Bicycle and pedestrian paths, disability access for disabled/people with special needs, public seating, fire access
- v) Attraction: Art sculptures, mural paintings

The "Backlane Gardens" enhances and improves the area's livability and sustainability. It will leave a positive impact on the local community. There will be marked improvements in walkability, cleanliness, accessibility, noise level and community spirit within the city, away from the busy main roads. The "Backlane Gardens" will create a safer, greener, cleaner and healthier interactive environment in the city for the local communities while maintaining the heritage and cultural values of George Town World Heritage Site. Urban farms at strategic locations will provide sustenance to the local community while adding to the green spaces.

### The results

The back lanes were equipped with security features such as CCTV and bollards to prevent vehicles from entering. Greenery such as trees and shrubs were introduced, adding a soft element to the spaces. The backlanes were cleaned and the road surface upgraded to provide comfortable access for pedestrians, bicycles and the disabled. Rubbish bins were relocated and drains covered. Features such as children's mini playground, sports facilities and caricature sculptures were added as interest points and attractions.

### Innovative highlights

The project brought about an increase in public and social activities in the back lanes such as outdoor workouts, sports and leisure activities. One of the back lanes became one of George Town's many popular street arts sites. There was an increase in popularity of these back lanes among outsiders and tourists visiting these areas, spurring the tourism industry.

### The criteria for backlane selection

The criteria for selecting back lanes to be transformed into back lane gardens and green community spaces is mainly based on public engagement with an emphasis on back lanes in poor conditions. Engagement with stakeholders and residents is an important component of the back lane revitalisation project. Stakeholders' views and feedback on the conditions of the back lanes were evaluated while on-the-ground checks are conducted to evaluate the feasibility of the revitalisation project. Back lanes in poor conditions



that could lead to public health and security issues are the first few projects selected for revitalisation. These back lanes were clogged with rubbish, thus making it a fertile ground for pest infestations that could threaten public health and safety. Frequent complaints by nearby residents and stakeholders on the conditions of these back lanes further compounded the need to clean up and revitalise these areas.

Furthermore, the City Council of Penang Island has mapped out a master plan to link up these revitalised back lanes in the UNESCO World Heritage Site as an open green community space within the city. So far, the master plan has a connected network of 9km of open green spaces made up of mostly back lanes to allow residents and the public to walk or cycle around the city safely and comfortably, away from the busy main thoroughfare. This is in line with SDG 11 of creating a safe and resilient city with green and culturally inspiring living conditions. The back lane revitalisation project aims to improve the living conditions in George Town city through intelligent urban planning.

#### The rationale for the designs of the back lanes revitalisation projects

As stated earlier, each project that the City Council of Penang Island undertake will go through public engagement. Feedback and opinions from stakeholders and residents are collected before any decision on the projects are made. Similarly, for the back lane revitalisation project, residents and stakeholders were consulted and given a choice on what they feel is suitable for the back lanes. As the project affects their daily life, they were given the space and time to submit their opinions, ideas and feedback for the proposed revitalisation of the back lanes. Studies have shown that increasing green spaces through planting of trees and addition of urban farms can effectively lower the temperatures of a city.

This revitalisation project also safeguards the cultural and natural heritage of the city as each element in the upgrading project is in accordance with the UNESCO World Heritage Site guidelines. Each revitalisation project takes into account the surrounding built and cultural heritage and was designed to enhance, improve and protect the heritage site. These spaces were designed by taking into account the feedback and the needs of the affected stakeholders while in compliance with UNESCO and at the same time, to fulfil SDG 11 of providing a modern, sustainable city of inclusiveness, safe, affordable, resilient and green.

Some of these spaces as community spaces for cultural events were meant to create culturally inspiring living conditions in compliance with SDG11.

#### Conclusion

The creation of public spaces through the revitalization of back lanes has been a success for George Town among the local communities, as well as tourists. This project has the potential to be extended to all states and countries, and can introduced around the world. This contributes towards George Town World Heritage Site's goal of achieving the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) targets that include creation of more green spaces, promoting good health and well-being of the people, gender equality, employment and economic growth as well as sustainable cities and communities.