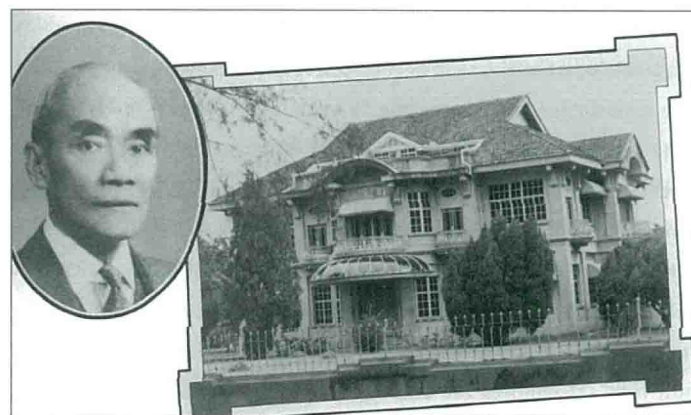
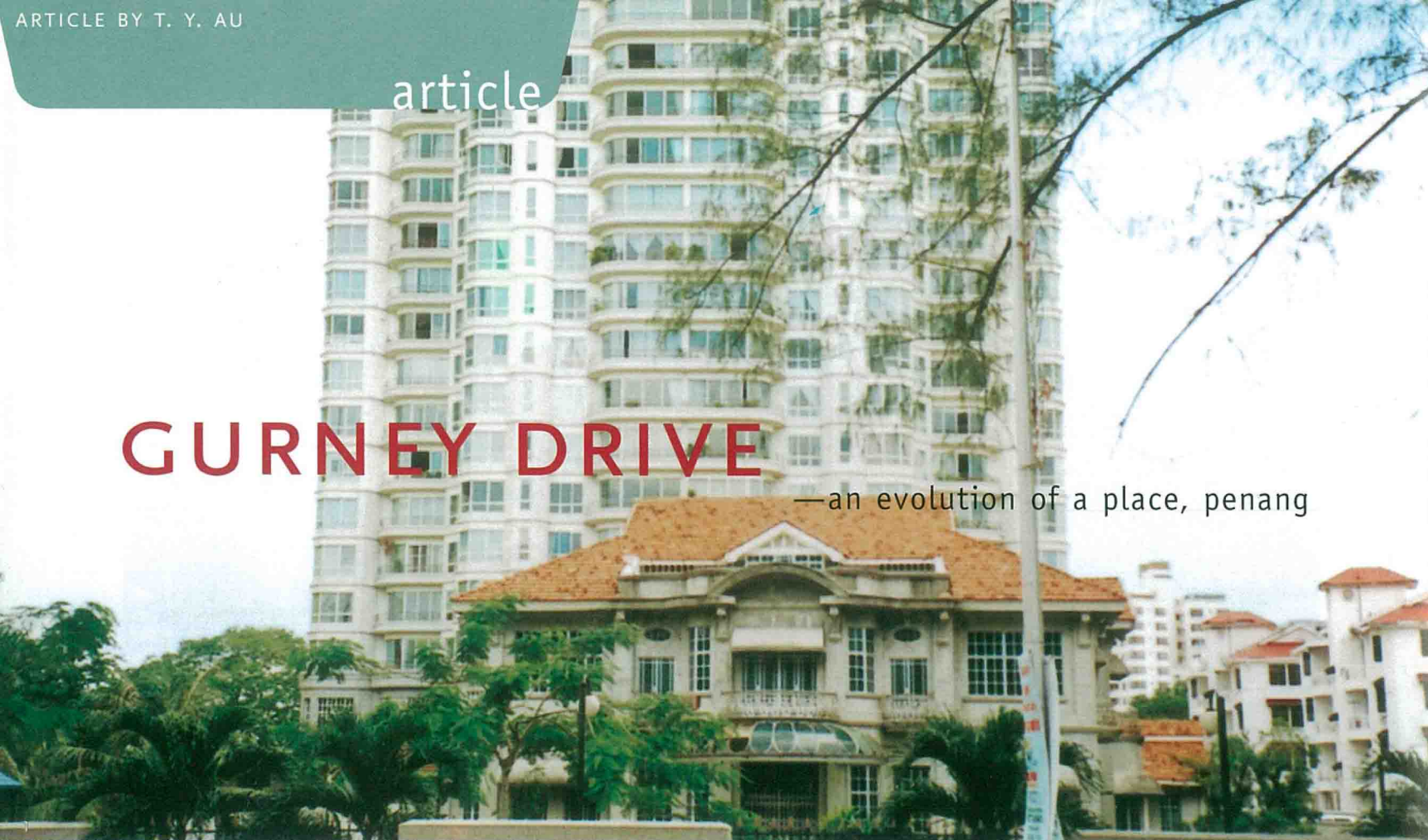




RECENT BUILDINGS

GURNEY DRIVE

—an evolution of a place, penang



Picture of Lim Cheng Teik and North Beach Mansion.
— *The Historical Personalities of Penang Committee 1986, Phoenix Press p.95*

INTRODUCTION — AT THE MERE MENTION OF GURNEY DRIVE IN PENANG, MOST PEOPLE WILL CONJURE UP IMAGES OF HAWKER STALLS AND THE LONG PROMENADE. IN A FEW YEARS' TIME, THIS IMAGE MAY, HOWEVER, BE ALTERED FOREVER. JUST LIKE HOW ITS URBAN LANDSCAPE HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED FROM A QUIANT ROW OF INDIVIDUAL BUNGALOWS INTO A STRETCH OF HIGH RISE TOWERS, RECENT DECISIONS BY THE STATE AUTHORITIES TO ALLEVIATE ITS TRAFFIC PROBLEMS LOOK SET TO EVENTUALLY TRANSFORM THIS FAMOUS STRETCH.

HISTORY Historically, Gurney Drive had a beachfront where Penangites picnicked amidst the flowering Casuarina trees and children collected 'siput' by the shore. Overlooking this beach and esplanade were 'ang moh laus'¹, bungalows occupied by the rich and famous of Penang stretching from Bagan Jermal and continuing to the Millionaire's Row at Northam Road. Gurney Drive was also a place where in the mornings, people could take walks and perform their morning exercise. Slowly through time, some of the dwellings were converted into coffee shops. After exercise, people would have their breakfast at the coffee shops. And that's how the famous ritual of the morning 'Bah Kut Tea' came about. Later, hawkers also started plying their trade along the esplanade, competing for space with vehicles along the road.

In the early 70s, the first condominium in Penang, the 16 storey Sunrise Towers was constructed. It also contained a supermarket, the now defunct Sunrise Supermarket, at the 2-storey podium. The decision by the local planning authorities to not impose any height restriction along this famous stretch altered the urbanscape forever. Slowly but surely, the bungalow plots were sold and apartments started to take root. No. 1 Pesiaran Gurney, two blocks of 30 storey apartments, at the opposite end of Sunrise Towers, was constructed in the 80s. Thus, two anchors at both ends of this esplanade were

firmly placed. The stage had been set to transform the low rise setting into a high rise urban wall. Silverton Apartments, a 36-storey apartment block, was completed in the early 1990s, the first super condominium in Penang. Now, visitors to Gurney will see the recently completed Regency Towers, and the structural skeleton of a 33-storey super condominium. Other completed towers along this stretch include Gurney Villa, a 40-storey apartment, 36-storey Gurney Hotel and a 16-storey Evergreen Hotel². When the bungalows started to be demolished, the local authority realized that some of them had historical value and outlined certain guidelines with regard to the development of the site. With that, North Beach mansion was preserved with Gurney Villa behind this development.³

PENANG OUTER RING ROAD

Penangites have an indifferent attitude towards hawkers and will tolerate pollution,

noise and so forth in order to enjoy their plate of *char koay teow* or *laksa*. Due to an increase in hawkers plying by the roadside, the esplanade along Gurney became infested with rats. In order to control the traffic as well as to clean up the esplanade, the authorities embarked on a massive cleanliness exercise and rebuilding the sea wall. In the early 90s, the hawkers were relocated to the Bagan Jermal end of Gurney Drive, just directly outside Sunrise Towers.

Now, there is a decision to place the hawker stalls with which Gurney Drive has been synonymous, at the soon to be completed Gurney Mall. Coupled with the plans to construct a 4-lane highway from Bagan Jermal, for the Penang Outer Ring Road, Gurney Drive will be altered forever, and tourists and locals alike will lament a loss of a heritage and tourist landmark.

It was reported in the papers that in exchange for constructing the Penang Outer Ring Road, the project developer

would receive rights to develop housing and commercial units, on reclaimed land, perhaps⁴? Now, there is talk that the Penang Second Link will also originate somewhere along Bagan Jermal⁵. Due to lack of information available on all these plans, Penangites are often in the dark about the projects and most can only speculate on the type of development allowed.

¹ Colloquial for Englishman's mansion.

² The hotel was constructed on a former mansion owned by Lim Lean Teng, a prominent businessman in Penang.

³ North Beach Mansion is also known as LCT Mansion. This mansion was originally owned by Lim Chinasion was Chew Eng Eam. Lim, K.S. Personal Interview. 19 Mar 2001.

⁴ "9 Km Penang Outer Ring Road To Cost RM268M." David Tan, *The Sun*, Sep 8 1997

⁵ "Work On Second Link To Star Before 2003." *The Star*, 25 Nov 1999

¹ View of LCT mansion.

² One of the remaining few historical buildings along Gurney Drive. This is the St. Joseph's Seminary.



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COMMENTARY

There seems to be two schools of thought about the present state of development in Penang. One has it that the island has to be 'preserved' and kept in a constant state of flux. This school of thought would like a major part of the island to be returned to its idyllic era. The second would rather let free market forces dictate the way the urban-scape is shaped.

In the case of Gurney Drive, it would be another oversight by the authorities if development guidelines, policies and traffic plans especially are not properly planned and thought out. The view and skyline of Gurney Drive has been likened to Waikiki Beach but unfortunately very little has been done to take advantage of the famous promenade. Most major cities by the coast in the world have used their waterfront to their advantage. Battery Park City, New York; Mission Bay, San Francisco; Canary Wharf, London; and even Singapore are examples where public spaces coexist with development. Closer to home, we can refer to the very successful Kuching Waterfront Development.

In Penang, it is often left to the private developers to try to create some sense of a public space. At Gurney Drive, other than the area at the hawker center, there is hardly any public space. Recently, Gurney Hotel successfully planned a short stretch of 'public space' modeled after KL's Bintang Walk, albeit commercially driven with cafes, pubs and so forth. Gurney Walk is successful but catering mostly to the teenage crowd. What we need is a visionary plan that will allow Gurney Drive to coexist with the modern development of skyscrapers yet retain the public realm.



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Change in the physical environment will always occur. Nevertheless, to preserve the old without understanding or questioning the past is not proper. Likewise, the task of creating the future without an attempt to understand the past is also foolish. Gurney Drive has always been a place of gathering, a place of convergence since its early inception.

As architects and urban designers, and as observed by Kevin Lynch, "our real task is not to prevent the world from changing but to cause it to change in a growth-conducive and life-enhancing direction. The environmental image of time-places can play a role in speeding that necessary change and its analysis can tell us what some of the features of a life-enhancing universe would be. We can change our minds so that we enjoy the dynamics of the world. We can also change the world to correspond more closely to the structure of our minds."⁶

It would be a real pity for Penangites and tourists alike if at the end of the day, the future of Gurney Drive were not carefully thought out.

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3. Gurney Drive Promenade.

4. A bungalow converted into a coffee shop. If you look closely, there are elements of Palladio in the design, albeit modified for the tropics.

5. View of Gurney Drive from the Bagan Jermal end.

6. Another bungalow converted into a coffee shop. This building is in art deco period.

⁶ Lynch, Kevin, *What Time Is This Place*, (Cambridge:MIT, 1985), p. 242

About the author.

T.Y. Au, a registered architect and urban designer, maintains a practice in Penang, Malaysia. He has working experience in U.S.A, Hong Kong and Denmark besides lecturing extensively overseas and in Malaysia.