

GETTING THE JOB DONE

From setting up George Town World Heritage Incorporated to becoming Mayor of Malaysia's largest municipal area, Maimunah Mohd Sharif talks about the importance of leadership in bringing about urban transformation.



Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Seberang Perai's energetic mayor.



When George Town and Melaka were jointly inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) in 2008, you were tasked with setting up George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) from scratch. Tell us about the process.

“When the CM¹ initially told me to take up the position of General Manager of what would eventually become GTWHI, I was reluctant. It was a heavy responsibility on my shoulders, as my entire working experience had always been in the public sector. I had no idea how to establish a company much less one that would provide heritage leadership in a WHS; there was no model in Malaysia for me to follow. In fact Melaka was waiting for us to start before setting up its own heritage office!

However, I had been involved with the dossier for George Town's listing since 1986 and had visited plenty of other world heritage sites – Paris, Luang Prabang, Macau. Each site is obviously very different, and the various heritage offices were set up differently and had very different systems.

After deciding to take up the challenge I had to work quick. We didn't have a management plan to guide the new company and the priorities fell into three key areas:

The GTWHI building became a learning centre for good conservation practices. Every time major renovation work was carried out, local architects and contractors were invited to observe and learn.

1. The big picture was to create a Conservation Management Plan and Special Area Plan that would provide direction for the George Town WHS, without this we would be managing the site “blindly”.
2. Before we could even get started I had to build a work flow for GTWHI from scratch, which meant hiring a team, working out terms of reference, you name it. It's very different walking into an established organisation which has systems already in place compared to creating all the systems yourself; it was a very steep learning curve, five months actually.
3. On a micro level, once the state government identified a heritage building for us to use as our office we had serious work to do to the office. It had a leaking roof, termites, no telephone or broadband cables, it was totally unsuitable but we had to fix it up and get on with it. This was the scale of the job!

To familiarise myself better with George Town I'd walk the streets every day for at least an hour before the day began, from 730am to 830am. I'd meet people, talk to them, study the buildings and architecture, learn what was happening along each street.

¹ Chief Minister of Penang, Lim Guan Eng.

What about the challenges?

Getting things done meant building a dedicated team. As a civil servant I've seen jobseekers apply because they can't find jobs in the private sector. I didn't want that, although realistically I knew it would be hard to recruit people with a high level of technical skills (in conservation and heritage). To compensate I looked for passion, for interest in heritage and George Town.

Janet Pillai from Arts-Ed (see page 47) helped me to interview potential recruits, we would send them off on assignments in the WHS and then assess them. I wanted people who could be hands-on and go down to the ground and interact with the community. Leadership is also about working with people as we have to realise that we can't do everything ourselves.

I think that having the right mindset was crucial to getting the GTWHI office operational and the Draft Special Area Plan ready in such short time. My old office (planning department of the local council) was on the 16th floor, in those days my attitude was different perhaps because I was physically cut off from the stakeholders. I used to be very inflexible in drafting planning guidelines (*laughs*).

Then when I was setting up GTWHI and was more hands-on dealing with conservation experts and architects I realised that not all the guidelines we drafted actually worked on the ground. It really made me realise that as a leader I had to listen and couldn't assume that I knew best all the time.

What do you consider your achievements as GM of GTWHI?

A number of things, but I think I really have to stress the time frame. I was appointed GM in November 2009, by April 2010 I had established the actual GTWHI office and put together a team. In March 2011 we were finally installed in our renovated office with a visitor centre. Three days after completing the move, I was asked to take up the office of Seberang Perai Mayor, I didn't even have time to unpack my boxes!

In those 16 months as GM I'd overseen the completion of two major reports – the Conservation Management Plan and Special Area Plan and George Town Draft Special Area Plan. Both reports were submitted to UNESCO and in a way have set the benchmark for future Malaysian heritage sites – the Lenggong Valley² team looked to GTWHI's experience to assist them with their own listing and I was also a part of the committee.

I'm also proud of the Greening of George Town Plan. I was so impressed by streets in Paris and Seville and asked myself, "Why can't we plant trees in the city, here?" The street in front of the GTWHI office seemed the best place to start! It was a project that faced plenty of initial objections from the public who were worried that the trees would affect the feng shui, telephone lines, you name it. In the end after many rounds of public engagement, the community even offered to water the trees!

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New trees planted along Lebuhraya Carnarvon by the GTWHI office.

²The Lenggong Valley in Ulu Perak is one of Malaysia's most important archaeology sites and excavations have revealed many traces of Malaysia's prehistory. It is the site of the oldest known place of human activity in Peninsular Malaysia. The Lenggong Valley was successfully inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 30 June 2012.

Finally, I'd have to say I'm very proud of the work we did in getting the George Town Festival (see page 60) up and running. The CM really wanted the Festival to be a month-long celebration and only gave us six weeks to come up with a programme, invite artistes, find sponsorship, create publicity, a logo, everything. The team and I slept a lot in the office during that time. Yet we pulled it off, we all worked together, ate together, it was hard work but a lot of fun working with Joe Sidek (the George Town Festival Director)."

What was your working relationship with Think City like?

I have very fond memories, they are a young, energetic yet experienced team. We used to get a lot of work done after office hours over a meal together. They would tell me, "Ok GM we work like this, there's no such thing as a free lunch!"

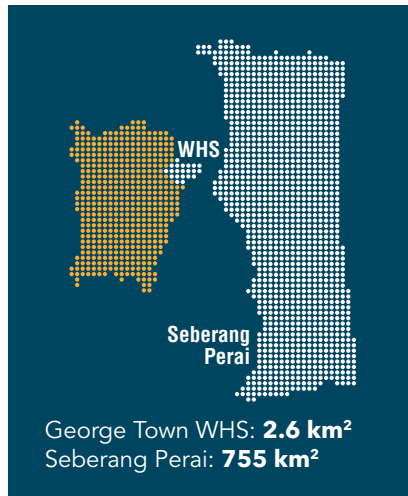
Even though I'm now stationed on the mainland, our relationship has continued with two important projects: The Butterworth Transformation Programme, which will upgrade the town's physical and economic well-being and the second is the Perai Story modelled on the Penang Story (see page 31).

How different or similar is your leadership style as current Mayor of Seberang Perai?

At GTWHI I was able to build my own team, while as Mayor of Seberang Perai I have come into a long-established organisation with over 3,000 staff. I would say that my attitude is very similar although the approach is tailored for different circumstances.

I believe in engagement – with the community and my staff – as well as having a clearly defined vision or focus. My time at GTWHI really taught me the power of community engagement and this is useful in Seberang Perai which is a very mixed area, from urban centres, villages and industrial estates to agricultural land. To fix the issues, we need to go to the ground to understand the problems.

Having a clear vision is also very important and a new initiative I put into place in 2012 was to work with the management team to come up with a special focus above and beyond



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our day-to-day work. For instance in 2012 we looked at ways to create an eco-community, increase community participation in fiscal management and enhance our human capital. We're transparent and put this online so that our progress can also be monitored by the public.

2012 was a trial year for us, in 2013 I asked the staff if they wanted to continue with this and they said "Yes!". This year's focus is on enhancing the environment, flood mitigation measures and better enforcement, among others. Both roles at GTWHI and the Seberang Perai Municipal Council (MPSP or Majlis Perbandaran Seberang Perai) have taught me perseverance, that nothing is impossible. It's just how much you want to do something.



Lim Choo Ping, General Manager of GTWHI described the working relationship with Think City.

"We work with Think City on a number of projects in the WHS. I consider Think City a close partner. Our partnership is in many forms and many areas as long as it is related to the WHS.

Think City acts as a major funder of our projects because we are constrained by our budget; we offer our assistance in terms of organising and coordinating meetings between the local government, state agencies and NGOs involved (for specific projects).

GTWHI is more localised and we have to solve the problems and issues on the ground, Think City doesn't have these duties so it is able to look at a much bigger picture. They have great international contacts and help us to source for experts and consultants. We complement each other well."

- 01 From managing a heritage area measuring only 2.6 km², Maimunah's new post has taken her to much larger district.
- 02 MPSP's annual Fokus publication outlines specific targets that the management team has set for themselves.