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Progress and heritage can co – exist

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Malaysia has come a long way since 1957 and the development is there for all to see, but we have lost a lot of heritage too. The two need not be mutually exclusive.

THE antique Usha fan circled slowly overhead, its thick blades swishing as they went round. Despite its age, it worked well, and the air felt cool.

The switches to turn on the fan were just as old – big black round things that have long gone out of fashion.

Then, there were those “stockade doors” of the ‘50s. Remember them? There are two brackets on either side of the door, and after closing it, one places a hardy timber bar on the brackets. No thief is about to break down that door.

And here’s the clincher. This lovely old bungalow – part brick, part timber – in Rawang, just off the North-South Expressway, is reputed to be the first house in the country to have electricity.

It was built in 1920 by Berjuntai Tin Dredging Bhd, which held a mining lease for the area at the time. The mine is believed to have bought the country’s first electricity generator and used it for its activities – and for the house.

The house got regular electricity back in 1959, about 10 years after the Central Electricity Board – now Tenaga Nasional – was first set up.

This 100-year-old house is about heritage; it’s about history. Sadly, it is about to become history.

The residents were evicted last week, and the house is set to be

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Why not?

demolished for quarrying work for cement manufacturing.

It is sad. Maljindar Singh Sidhu Brar, known as Jimmy, who has lived in the house since 1962, says the family has tried to buy the house, but to no avail.

He claims his grandparents had actually bought the house in 1959, but the property was not alienated to them, although the grandparents had transferred it to his family in 1989.

Now, it is all about to be gone, another living heritage consigned to the dust heap of history.

We are a young nation – the peninsular side is about to turn 69 on Aug 31 – but already, there is a lot we have lost.

Many youths would not recognise this country from the one that first won independence from the British in 1957.

The rubber estates and tin mines are mostly long gone, many

now turned into housing estates. A few of those estates made way for the nation’s administrative capital Putrajaya and the technological centre Cyberjaya.

Kuala Lumpur’s race course has gone from Ampang to Sungai Besi. In its place, the imposing PETRONAS Twin Towers rise majestically. The Merdeka Park, once an icon of the country’s independence, is also no more. The majestic Merdeka 118 tower now stands there.

The Bukit Nanas cable car service is also no more. The KL Telekom Tower stands on the land that was once the Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve.

There is nothing really wrong with all that. Progress is good, but it should not mean being in a rush to get rid of all that is old.

Anyone who has been to Europe can see how much of the old has been kept, even as the new has been embraced. So many heritage buildings house modern offices. The insides may have changed, but the outside remains as it was.

We, too, are a changed country, and we are still changing. But do we need to really keep on building and building?

Near Ipoh, an old karst mountain now faces extinction.

Gunung Kanthan is home to millions of years of flora and fauna evolution, including rare

species of spiders and snails. It’s part of the Kinta Valley National Geopark site.

However, another company has been given a lease to carry out quarrying activities there. The company has promised to try its best to conserve the environment, but there’s no telling how much of the area’s biodiversity will be threatened by the quarrying.

Anyone driving past Ipoh on the North-South Expressway can see the damage that can be done to the hills.

Like in Rawang, the residents of Gunung Kanthan – a group of Buddhist monks who use the caves as a meditation centre – have been told to leave.

Meditating monks do little or no harm to nature, although they have a statue of the Buddha in a cave. But quarrying could do irreparable damage. Just think about that.

The monks are seeking the Prime Minister’s help, as Gunung Kanthan is in his constituency. Over to you, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The monastery in Gunung Kanthan, like the house in Rawang, should be on our heritage list, a place to welcome tourists and tell them about our living history.

Gunung Kanthan, in fact, was once listed in many tourism por-

als as a great place to visit, to meditate in and to learn about the ancient flora and fauna there.

What has changed? Has the need for construction material overtaken our desire to keep our heritage?

Quarrying at these caves can lead to problems, and we in Malaysia know about it.

Back in 1980, there was quarrying work at Batu Caves. Decades of blasting damaged the local ecosystems, and the Dark Cave had to be closed to visitors due to structural safety.

Protests followed and a year later, the state government ordered the end of the quarrying. But portions of the karst hill and local flora and fauna had been too badly damaged, with many cliff faces still un-rehabilitated.

The Dark Caves, once a paradise for adventure seekers, remains closed to this day. But at least it is still there, and the Malaysian Nature Society now cares for it – or what’s left of it, anyway.

I hope the house in Rawang will also be spared, even if the surrounding areas are used for quarrying.

It could still be living history in the midst of modern Malaysia. There is no reason why development and heritage cannot thrive side by side.