

Mapping the cultural history of Lunas



1, 2, 3 Lunas shophouses, built in the 1920s

# Of Mind Maps & Heritage Trails

DiGi Telecommunications Sdn Bhd ran five heritage projects this year as part of its corporate social responsibility programme, DiGi's Amazing Malaysians.

In the fourth of a five-part series on the children's unique experiences in the projects, we present *The Heritage Architect of Kedah*.



The smokehouse



Laurence, Alizakri and the students



"If you're driving to Lunas, try not to sneeze, because if you do, chances are you'll miss the town," says Laurence Loh. DiGi's Amazing Malaysian in Kedah may be exaggerating a little, but the fact remains: Lunas is indeed a small town.

Although it is only two roads big, this town, 45 minutes away from Penang, contains, "the microcosm of what Malaysia is today: the colonial history, the migrant's story..." And if anyone should know this particular story, it would be Laurence. For one, this conservation architect who brought back to life the Cheong Fatt Tze mansion has a passionate interest in the history of small towns in general. But more specifically, his grandfather, Loh Boon Ngee, was one of three immigrants from China who founded Lunas.

Given this connection, it comes as no surprise that Laurence was very enthusiastic about conducting *The Heritage Architect of Kedah* project with 80 secondary schoolchildren from Lunas. After having carried out much heritage work in other parts of the country, he was finally going to embark on a meaningful project "back home". What's more, the project would bring pride and joy to the children of their own little hometown.

For three months, the children of Lunas trooped all over town, speaking to the local residents about their personal stories – when they came to Lunas, where from, what they did to earn their living, how many members of the families were still in Lunas and how many had left... From these stories, they created mind maps linking people to buildings and milestones of the town. They also received a crash course on how architecture gives a good indication of when a building was constructed; and of how such "dated" buildings should be renovated in order to retain this link with history.

"We should never forget that our cities are built on the backs of industries like rubber in towns such as Lunas. The importance of towns like Lunas as the basis of our nation's identity cannot be denied."

— TUNKU ALIZAKRI RAJA MUHAMMAD ALIAS, Head of Corporate Affairs —





Working on the residents' stories



Photographic essay on the shophouses



“Let’s not forget that the cultural history of small towns contains the microcosm of what Malaysia is today: the colonial history, the migrant’s story...all encapsulated in one-street towns like this.”

– LAURENCE LOH –

The students did a photo essay of the shophouses of Lunas, built mainly in the 1920s, and gave comments on any changes made to the facades, as well as provided suggestions on how these renovations could have been better done. They also created heritage trails, that take visitors to all the interesting sites in town – such as a house in which there was a murder attempt; the first towkay’s shophouses; the Chinese and Indian temples; the snake temple; the Soon mansion (built by another pioneer, Soon Ah Kee) and even an old smokehouse (belonging to the Loh family).

Lunas was built on rubber. The pioneering Loh, Soon and Lim Lean Teng made their fortunes in this industry. To appreciate the importance of rubber, the children were taken to a rubber estate, where they got to speak to rubber experts. They also produced a selection of traditional games using rubber related products. One of the more ingenious games was congkak, in which rubber seeds replace the usual marbles!

Not content with interviewing the residents of Lunas, the children even went to neighbouring Kulim and interrogated the people there, on their relationship with Lunas, and the paths the two towns had taken since the early days. Dressed in yellow DiGi T-shirts, these children made such an impression that when members of Badan Warisan followed in their steps to make their own enquiries on Kulim, the townsfolk said: “If you want to know about Kulim, ask the children in yellow. They’ve been here already and know all about us!”

Today, all the research material produced by the students is being collated and packaged for display in the old smokehouse which has been renovated and is going to be turned into a town museum. The hope is for visitors, and especially school children from all over Malaysia, to visit this museum so they realise the significance of small towns such as Lunas to the economic development of Malaysia. At the same time, who knows, tourists may also be interested in visiting what for them will be an entirely novel kind of museum... one moreover which was built by the children of Lunas themselves.

And, then, perhaps no-one will dream of sneezing while passing through. In fact, they would not just pass through. They will first stop at the museum, absorb the story of Lunas, and then continue on their journey.



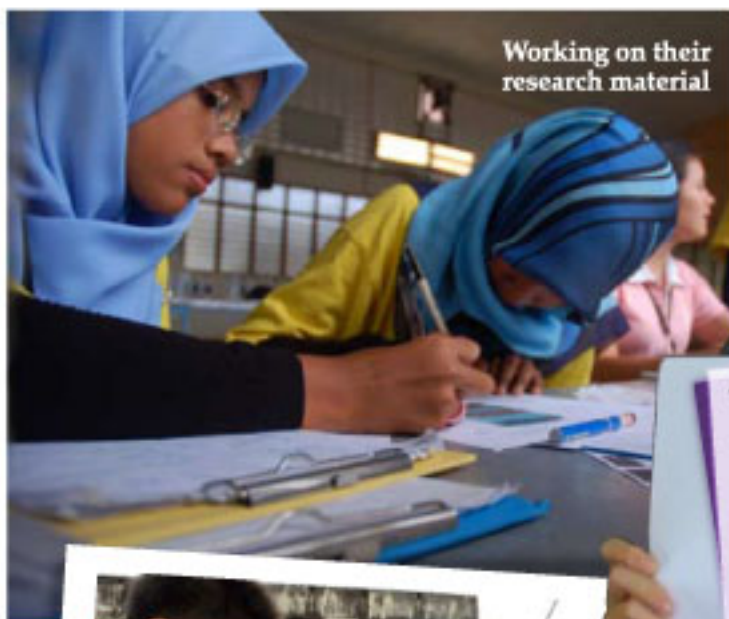
The young historians

“The textbooks don’t mention anything about Lunas, its buildings or its history. I’m glad I got a chance to learn about these, as this is about my family too.”

– MUHAMMAD ADLI HAKIM, 14 –



Lunas, the town rubber built



Working on their research material

Someone who is passionate about heritage? And who is willing to share this passion with a group of youth or children?

DiGi is looking for five Amazing Malaysians to run three-month natural, cultural, social, built and art heritage projects next year. So, if you know of an ordinary person doing extraordinary heritage work, please let us know.

Go to our website at [www.digi.com.my](http://www.digi.com.my) and submit an electronic nomination form. If your nominee is chosen as one of our Amazing Malaysians 2007, you will receive a mobile phone plus a DiGi postpaid line with RM200 free airtime per month valid for a year.

For enquiries, call 0162119718.

DEADLINE: DECEMBER 10, 2006

DO YOU KNOW OF AN AMAZING MALAYSIAN?



On a heritage hunt

DiGi's Amazing Malaysians

