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Abstract for Presentation

(UNESCO) World Heritage Site inscription represents international recognition given to a natural or man-made environment which possesses heritage assets of outstanding universal value. The heritage assets on the site is judged according to historic, cultural, social, aesthetic, scientific or spiritual values that are of benefit to humanity and the universe.

This presentation will give audiences a brief idea of the unique history of George Town and how it developed into a multi-cultural site which is of great interest to the world. The first part of the presentation will look at historical and political journey of the town while the second part of the presentation will look at how and why George Town gained the status of a World Heritage Site.

On 7th July 2008, Melaka and George Town were inscribed together as a World Heritage Site validating their outstanding 'cultural heritage'. The built and the living environment of the two 'historic port cities on the Straits of Melaka' reflect the unique coming together of multi-cultural elements from the Malay Archipelago, India, China and Europe to create a living and architectural townscape without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia. George Town is an outstanding example of a traditional multicultural human settlement resulting from human interaction with the environment.

The multiculturalism of George Town is best understood by observing and experiencing the distinctive characteristics of the different social groups - their lifestyles, value systems, traditions, beliefs, dwelling spaces and most importantly their ways of living together.

As one walks through the city, it is possible to sense the historical layering of each of the diverse cultural groups who settled within the innercity. The settlement patterns of the early migrant communities may not be as clearly marked as before but nevertheless these enclaves are discernable from the built and living heritage. The sense of 'cultural space' emerges from the smells and sounds, the names of the streets, the façades of the shophouses, and the trades and occupancy patterns. Each enclave is evidence of a cultural collective displaying traces of its history and culture.

Janet Pillai is a senior lecturer at the School of Arts, University Science Malaysia , Penang. Besides formal teaching at the University, Pillai leads Arts-ED an organization specializing in heritage education, research and publication for community. Arts-ED also specializes in program development and training in non-formal arts education. Research interests include topics such as cultural sustainability, role of the arts in heritage conservation and pedagogical approaches to art education.