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THE beauty and value of heritage buildings is immeasurable.

Although much of Malaysia's built heritage has been lost forever or is at risk, there is a growing awareness and commitment to preserve what we have.

One good example is Sentul Depot in Kuala Lumpur. With a history that dates back to 1905, it was once one of the finest railway engineering workshops in the world, meeting the needs of the Federated Malay States Railways under British rule.

Up until the early 2000s, the workshop was still used by KTM Bhd and stored many decommissioned locomotives.

From 2009, it ceased operations and for a few years, left abandoned, falling victim to dilapidation before being slowly restored as part of YTL Land's urban regeneration efforts in Sentul West since the early 2000s.

Sprawled over 200,000sq ft (18,580sq m) of space, the vision is to repurpose Sentul Depot into a contemporary heritage space and lifestyle destination. With its brick buildings and metal roofs, the place exudes a raw and open feel.

Since it was first opened to the public in 2018, the Depot has hosted over 60 events and activities, right until the start of the pandemic last year. These included curated bazaars and pop-up markets, product launches, photo, film and commercial shoots, art and cultural festivals, and even weddings.

Currently, about half of the total area at the Depot is available for use. The latest addition to the space is Tiffin At The Yard, a food and beverage set-up. Occupying a 20,000sq ft (1,858sq m) area known as "The Yard" at the Depot, it features over 15 different outlets offering fresh seafood, burgers and various snacks to desserts as well as alcoholic beverages.

"Tiffin is the first outlet in our series of exciting ventures envisioned to restore Sentul to its glorious past and turn it into a new centre of cosmopolitan culture," said Yeoh Pei Teeng, director of YTL Land & Development Bhd, in an email interview.

"We planned for a new generation F&B concept to infuse new life

Adapting to the times

Once teeming with railway activities, Sentul Depot's vast, airy space is a promising place-making venue, especially in light of the pandemic.



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into the rustic environment and identified Tiffin – with its ethos of pushing boundaries on culinary creativity and exploration with exciting F&B concepts – to join us in creating a unique haven for foodies at Sentul Depot," she added.

Ongoing efforts

Meanwhile, the Depot will continue to undergo restoration and development of its remaining warehouses – which spread over

100,000sq ft (9,290sq m) – in stages over the next few years.

The entire endeavour has its fair share of challenges.

"Working on the adaptation project to restore the Depot to its former glory required a unique approach and specialised skills.

"Decisions on design and detailing, reconstruction, building form and structure encompass a multi-disciplinary approach to respond to the building's age, characteristics and history.

"We could end up causing irreparable

damage during restoration work unless we have the correct expertise, skill sets and tools," explained Yeoh.

The key challenge, she added, is the preservation of the historical and cultural significance of the heritage buildings, which are all over 100 years old. The warehouses and workshops are in a dilapidated state, having gone through a century of extensive wear and tear.

One issue was in finding the right materials.

"The warehouses feature build-

ing materials that have not been used in over a century, hence innovative solutions were needed for irreplaceable materials. Any new additions should not deviate materially from the Depot's historical value, and materials selected have to be integrated seamlessly into the original architecture," said Yeoh.

Place-making opportunity

The revitalised Depot received many enquiries from event planners and corporations, even during the full lockdown in June, that were adjusting to the post-pandemic situation.

In this sense, the Depot checks the right boxes – high ceilings (up to 30ft or 9m) help ensure good ventilation while huge indoor and semi-indoor free-flowing spaces allow comfortable social distancing arrangements.

"Interesting examples of transformative place-making can be found in London's Coal Drops Yard at King's Cross, Manhattan's Meat Packing District in New York and Xintiandi in Shanghai.

"All of them adopted a similar approach that went beyond revitalisation of urban design to pay particular attention to the physical, social and cultural identity of the community.

"Underutilised and disused buildings and spaces were used creatively to enhance the urban experience and create opportunities for community events and shared engagement.

"It is with this same outlook that we approached the creative adaptation of Sentul Depot for a renewed purpose. There has always been a strong interest and excitement in its railway heritage and historical buildings."

With the transformation of its old warehouses and workshops into a space for various activities, Sentul Depot has become a "catalyst for regenerating old neighbourhoods through effective place-making endeavours", she added.

"The sequence of different spaces enjoys the flexibility of seamless integration within the Depot's spacious light-filled spaces to inspire creative collaborations and promote a safe, refreshing social environment during these pandemic times," said Yeoh.