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# Penang Port makeover needs world-class creativity

**WHEN** I first set sight on Baltimore's harbour 15 years ago, I reflected on the development of Penang Port.

I was wondering why the port in my hometown was so humdrum compared with what I saw, on that cold, wintry morning.

I was in awe as there was so much to see and do at Baltimore's harbour. Little did I know I was then staring at the soon-to-be world's No. 1 harbour.

I asked a fellow editor who was with me at the time as to whether public-private partnerships could revitalise Penang Port.

There was so much tourism, business potential, especially with many "low hanging fruits", I enthused.

But the editor dismissed my flight of fancy, saying it couldn't be executed because of vested and conflicting interests.

Perhaps, one of the major gridlocks then stemmed from a probable situation where the authorities concerned were not on the same page.

Fast forward to this year and some action is gradually under way. This could be due to a similitude in the thought process after the general election on May 9 last year.

For a start, the Penang Port Commission (PPC) has called for a request for proposal from the private sector to revive the existing marina and the waterfront, which has been quiet except when big cruise liners call.

During its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, Penang Port was a hive of activity, especially during the

hajseason as it was the major port of embarkation and disembarkation to and from Mecca.

It is, therefore heartening to learn that PPC officials are calling for creative ideas to re-develop the waterfront and unlock the value of the area, which has been dormant for far too long.

Six warehouses built near King Edward Place in the 1900s will be redeveloped, in line with heritage requirements, to complement the current extension to the Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal. The terminal is expected to be ready by year-end to handle 12,000 passengers at any one time from 8,000 presently.

When the December 11 deadline closes, the re-development proposals had better be above par to prevent "white elephants" from parading along the shoreline.

When the Suez Canal opened in 1869, Penang Port was the first port of call east of India, which subsequently led Penang to experience a flourishing international entrepôt trade serving southern Thailand, Sumatra and the northern Malay Peninsula.

But the port's strategic maritime role was, however, significantly impacted when its free port status was removed in 1969. In 1974, PPC relocated its cargo and container operations from George Town to Butterworth to accommodate larger vessels.

Swettenham Pier, the sole remaining harbour facility in George Town, was redeveloped into a cruise shipping terminal in 2009 and has since evolved into

Malaysia's busiest harbour for cruise ships, overtaking even Port Klang in 2017.

Penang Port's rich historical tapestry can be resurrected and narrated for the benefit of present and future generations, and tourists alike. All it takes is creative and far-sighted planning to develop what is best for Penang.

The state government can complement by developing the car park space opposite the iconic Bangunan Tuanku Syed Putra, Penang's first multi-storied government building, into something attractive to house new tourist attractions.

A multitude of attractions can be established on that prime area besides providing valuable car park space for the surrounding heritage area that includes Fort Cornwallis and the State Legislative Assembly Building, now being refurbished.

Perhaps a high-rise lookout tower or a lighthouse can be erected like the Seattle Needle or Tokyo Tower to introduce another landmark attraction. That should add life to the inner city, which has since seen the migration of many city dwellers to the suburbs following the repeal of the Rent Control Act.

We don't even have to compare Penang Port with Baltimore's harbour. Melaka, the other Unesco Heritage City site in Malaysia besides George Town, has done an even better job by capitalising on its seafront and riverfront with many tourist-related attractions.

It has established a maritime

museum near the famous red-coloured Stadthuys. Built in 1994 as a replica of the Flor de la Mar — a Portuguese ship — the maritime museum provides an enlightening trip back into Melaka's past.

And Baltimore Harbour? It has transformed Baltimore city from a small industrial town into a booming world-class tourist destination. In the past, its strategic importance generated successful trading, shipbuilding, canning, and steel industries. But these rapidly deteriorated the water conditions, pipes, and infrastructure, forcing Baltimore to revitalise and reorganise its economy.

Today, creative re-thinking has propelled Baltimore's inner harbour to be the main driver of the city's tourism industry and has become a model for waterfront re-development globally.

Exhibits like coral reefs, open ocean environments, tropical rain forests, hidden sea life, among others, draw in huge crowds all-the-year-round.

In a competitive environment for tourists' wallets, the rejuvenation of Penang Port needs bold innovations, far-sightedness and creativity to anticipate new business demands.

Its attractions need to be world-class, nothing less.

PPC should set sail and rise to the occasion to reflect the state's motto of "Penang Leads".

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NST 13 JUN 2019

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