Razing our built heritage would wipe out the memory of who we are and what we contributed to the building of a nation.

WHAT do we tell our children is the soul of this nation called Malaysia?

What would happen if we wake up one morning and discover that a mysterious disease has wiped out all memory of the nation’s history?

All the histories of our faiths and beliefs and cultures, gone.

Would we be able to recognise who we are, what we stand for or how we relate to one another?

How would we differentiate ourselves from the world around us?

Trees have their “memory rings”, what do we humans have?

We would be no more than a memory-less amoeba, would we not?

Can we live a full and meaningful life without a repository of memory and history?

I went to St Mark’s primary school in Penang. I rang the recess bell, a large, solid, cast iron bell that hung over the wooden verandah that missionaries had built.

My sister went to the Treacher Methodist Girls' School in Perak.

My father went to Perak's King Edward school, where he learnt how to scold me in the Queen's English.

My wife, Norhayati Yusof, was a boarder at Convent Bukit Nanas in Kuala Lumpur.

Her mother, Siti Salmah Abu Bakar, wanted to make sure that her youngest child was safe so she applied to be a cleaning lady and scrubbed floors and toilets at the dormitory.

She also sold some kuih to the wealthier girls, with my wife help-ing her occasionally.

My wife would tear up when she recalls guiltily a child's shame at her mother scrubbing toilets while she slept comfortably in the dorm with the other girls.

A nation's story is filled with the sacrifices of her sons and daughters, not just opportunistic politicians.

My point here is that the Christian missionaries built these educational edifices as a tool that boys and girls could use in learning to become good men and women who build families, a community and a nation.I have lectured twice at two different churches on the topic of Islam. I have also delivered a political talk at a hall owned by a Chinese temple.

I look forward to a promised invitation by a Sikh academic to speak at a gurdwara.

Folks, this is the real Malaysia.

Malaysia is mountains, rivers, trees, plants and animals along with 40 ethnic groups that colour our existence with their different cultures, faiths and values.

These groups left roads, buildings, streets, squares and padang as an indelible mark of their loyalty to the country and commitment to being one nation.

Will a 20-storey condominium remind us of that spirit?

Will a plaza of restaurants and shops hold memories of who we are and where we came from?

Once I asked my architect friend Hajeedar (Datuk, of course, and in full, Hajeedar Abdul Majid, but he's a friend) what Malaysia is to him.

He answered, "Malaysia is when you ask yourself when and how you have come to be where you are now. Malaysia is when you discover the many people of all races, religions, cultures and social statuses who crossed your parents' path and their parents' walkways of life.

"Unless you know and understand the intricate web that binds us all, you will never appreciate being a Malaysian. The buildings that we see are testimony to the crossing of our paths in forging our own nationhood."

This deep answer anchors my idea of Malaysia and her architecture.

If we wipe out the buildings of the past, then we will be wiping out the testimony of the "crossing of our people's paths" that helped to build this nation.

We will be a book with many missing pages and, thus, the plot of the story about nationhood would be forever lost.

What is a painting but some paint on a piece of cloth or canvas.

What is a building but some bits of plaster, mortar and timber fitted together harmoniously.

But humanity is the act of using paint to give life and meaning to a canvas, and assembling stone and timber to make hallways, windows and doorways to memories.

And what is a human being without memory, a cultural inheritance, a value system?

What is a nation without testimony of her people and communities now and in the past?

Razing Convent Bukit Nanas – safe for now, yes, but razing any heritage building – can make new economic sense, perhaps, but it would wipe out a part of the memory of who we are and what we contributed to the building of the nation.

It takes more than 100 years to build something that holds a part of the nation's soul and only a few seconds to sign a piece of paper that lets loose bulldozers to destroy that soul.

I dedicate this week's column to my wife's mother who scrubbed toilets so that her daughter could be schooled at Convent Bukit Nanas and have a better future in Malaysia.

Prof Dr Mohd Tajuddin Mohd Rasdi is the Professor of Architecture at UCSI University. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.

Source: https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/over-the-top/2021/04/27/when-a-building-is-not-just-a-building#