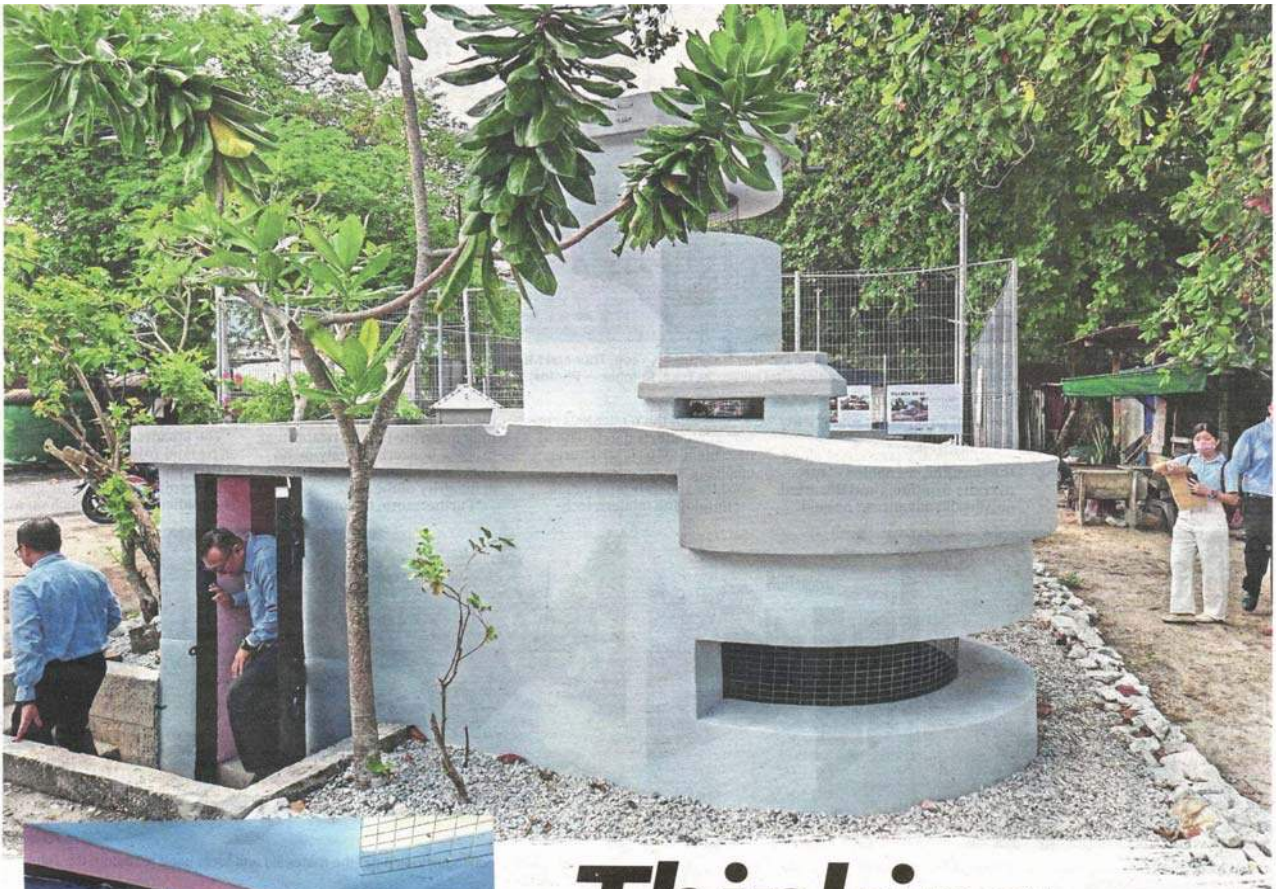




24 MAY, 2023

## Still standing guard after all these years

The Star, Malaysia



# Thinking out of the pillbox

While Penang is restoring the 17 World War II concrete guard posts in the state with the aim of turning them into tourist attractions, a competition is being held to find innovative ways to repurpose the historical structures. >2&3

**All spruced up:** The restored coastal heritage pillbox in Teluk Kumbar handed over to George Town World Heritage Incorporated on May 15. (Inset) The interior of the pillbox that used to house six to eight military personnel. — Photos: KT GOH/The Star



24 MAY, 2023

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Stories by BERNARD SEE  
metro@thestar.com.my

EFFORTS to restore military pillboxes throughout Penang, many of which are in a poor condition, are proceeding well with three out of 17 completed so far.

The pillboxes dating back to World War II can be found in Teluk Kumbar, Permatang Damar Laut, Relau, Mount Erskine and Tanjong Tokong on the island and Bumbung Lima in Kepala Batas on the mainland.

The restoration work is being done in stages by George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), with plans to also market them as a tourist attraction as part of the state's heritage trail.

Pillboxes are similar to defensive line bunkers but smaller.

In the past, they were commonly used to camouflage remote guard posts and each pillbox could hold a few soldiers with machine guns.

Penang tourism and creative economy committee chairman Yeoh Soon Hin said three of these pillboxes in Teluk Kumbar had been restored by contractor 7DSM Projects Sdn Bhd at a cost of about RM100,000.

Two pillboxes, BD01 and BD03, located next to the flood mitigation centre in Teluk Kumbar and opposite SK Teluk Kumbar respectively, were restored and handed over to GTWHI last September.

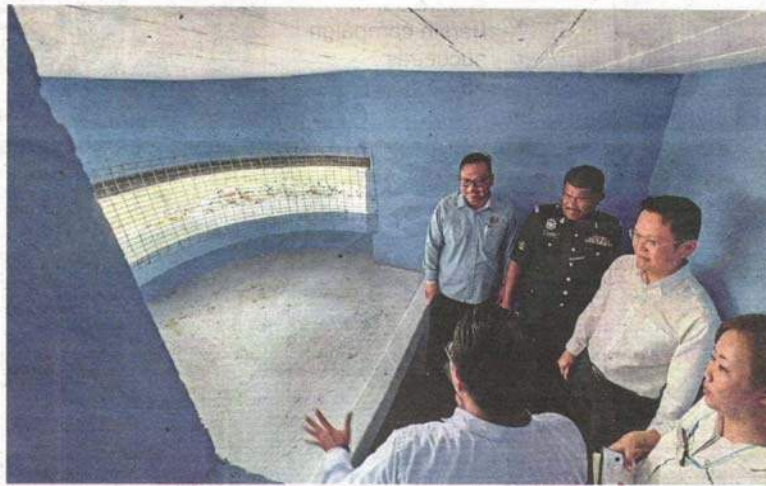
"The restoration of the third pillbox, BD02, was completed in early April, and handed over to GTWHI on May 15.

"When in use, the coastal-type pillbox, measuring 3.3m high and 2.5m wide, could house about six to eight military personnel," said Yeoh.

"Built before World War II, this fortified structure served as a crucial line of defence against

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## Restoration project employs various techniques to retain authenticity of coastal military pillbox



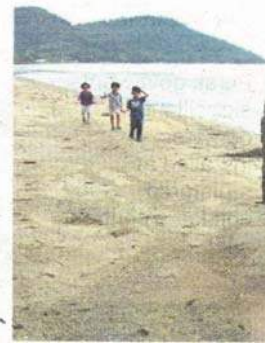
(Clockwise from top left) Khalid, Sjn-Mej Nasaruddin, Yeoh, Thor and Muhammad Hijas checking the wire-mesh interior of the restored coastal pillbox in Teluk Kumbar. - Photos: K.T.GOH & LIM BENG TATT/The Star

potential adversaries and enemy landings.

"Strategically positioned along the coastline, it enabled control over the frontlines and thwarted any hostile advances," he said.

Yeoh said the meticulous conservation efforts had breathed new life into these structures, ensuring their continued existence for generations to come. "Employing modern tech-

niques, wire mesh has been skillfully integrated in the restoration process, bolstering safety measures and enhancing the structural integrity of the fort. "Furthermore, the out-



ward-facing entrance has been expanded, affording visitors a greater sense of security while simultaneously providing a more spacious interior.

"Samples of the original building materials were collected and analysed in a laboratory to ensure the utmost accuracy in reproducing the fort's composition.

"Drawing from valuable insights gained through previous pilot projects, the techniques employed during the restoration of the latest pillbox have been refined to retain its authenticity."

During World War II, British soldiers manned hundreds of pillboxes along the coast of Malaya, in anticipation of a Japanese invasion by sea.

The Japanese, however, invaded by land from Thailand.

Each pillbox could hold a few soldiers manning machine guns. The soldiers would crouch on a



(From left) Yeoh, Thor and Muhammad Hijas with signboards explaining the Teluk Kumbar pillbox restoration process.



Thor (right) with a colleague looking at the materials and tools used to restore the Teluk Kumbar pillbox.



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A World War II pillbox at Permatang Damar Laut in Bayan Lepas, which faces the Straits of Malacca, has sustained damage from sea erosion.



The pillbox at Mount Erskine cemetery has been vandalised.

ledge with the ceiling just inches above their heads.

Yeoh said these pillboxes were a vital piece of Penang's history and also a testament of the state's commitment to preserve its heritage for present and future generations.

"Beyond serving as an educational tool for the public, the restoration of the BD02 pillbox has transformed it into an attraction, aligning seamlessly with the concept of heritage tourism as outlined in the Penang Tourism Master Plan.

"What sets this conservation project apart is the involvement of the local community.

"After years of neglect, the pillboxes have been embraced by locals who have put efforts into beautifying the surroundings

with trees and various plants.

"With the unwavering support of the state, we anticipate that these collaborative endeavours will further elevate the image of Penang and bring significant meaning and benefits to the local community.

"Let us unite in moulding the minds of the younger generation, instilling in them a deep appreciation for our heritage to ensure the preservation and seamless transmission of our priceless assets from one generation to the next."

Yeoh said the coastal pillbox in Permatang Damar Laut was damaged by sea erosion and GTWHI was now looking into ways to save it.

The pillbox was built by the British in the 1940s during World

War II, possibly to defend against Japanese forces from the south.

Present at the handover were GTWHI built environment and monitoring department manager Muhammad Hijas Sahari, 7DSM Projects Sdn Bhd restoration director Thor Saw Khim, Wawasan Open University (WOU) School of Science and Technology deputy dean Dr Teoh Ping Chow and Prof Abdul Rashid Abdul Aziz, Teluk Kumbar village head Khalid Zakaria and Teluk Kumbar police station officer-in-charge Sjn-Mej Nasaruddin Ismail.

Responding on the issue of vandalism of the BD01 pillbox in Kampung Nelayan, Nasaruddin told Yeoh that he would instruct police officers to conduct more patrols there.



The Tanjung Tokong pillbox is also in bad shape.



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### SUMMARIES

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