

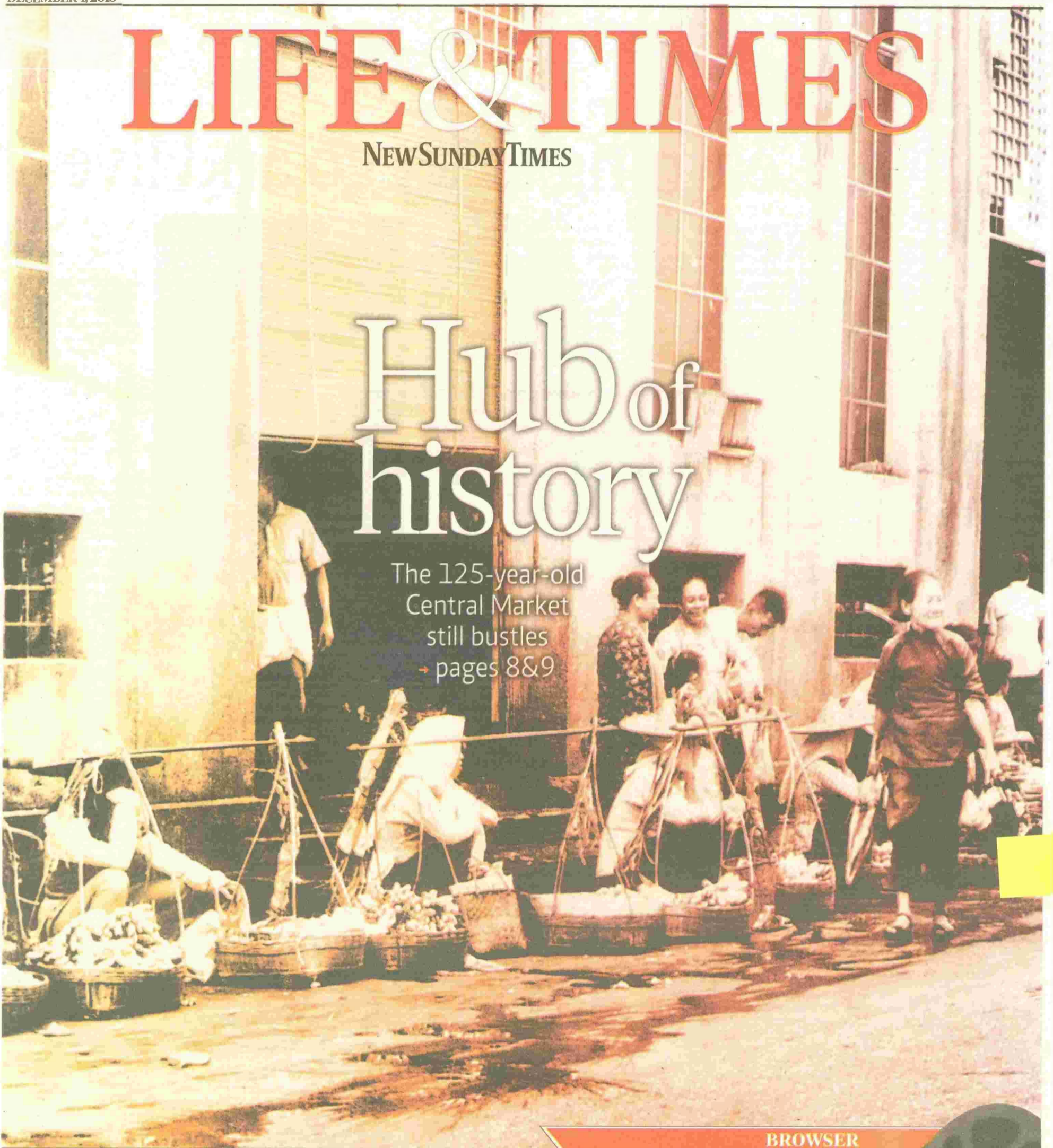
DECEMBER 1, 2013

LIFE & TIMES

NEW SUNDAY TIMES

Hub of history

The 125-year-old
Central Market
still bustles
→ pages 8&9



BROWSER

**CHILD
BEAUTY
PAGEANTS**

→ FAMILY PAGES 4&5

**ARTFULLY
ENERGISED**

→ ART PAGE 7

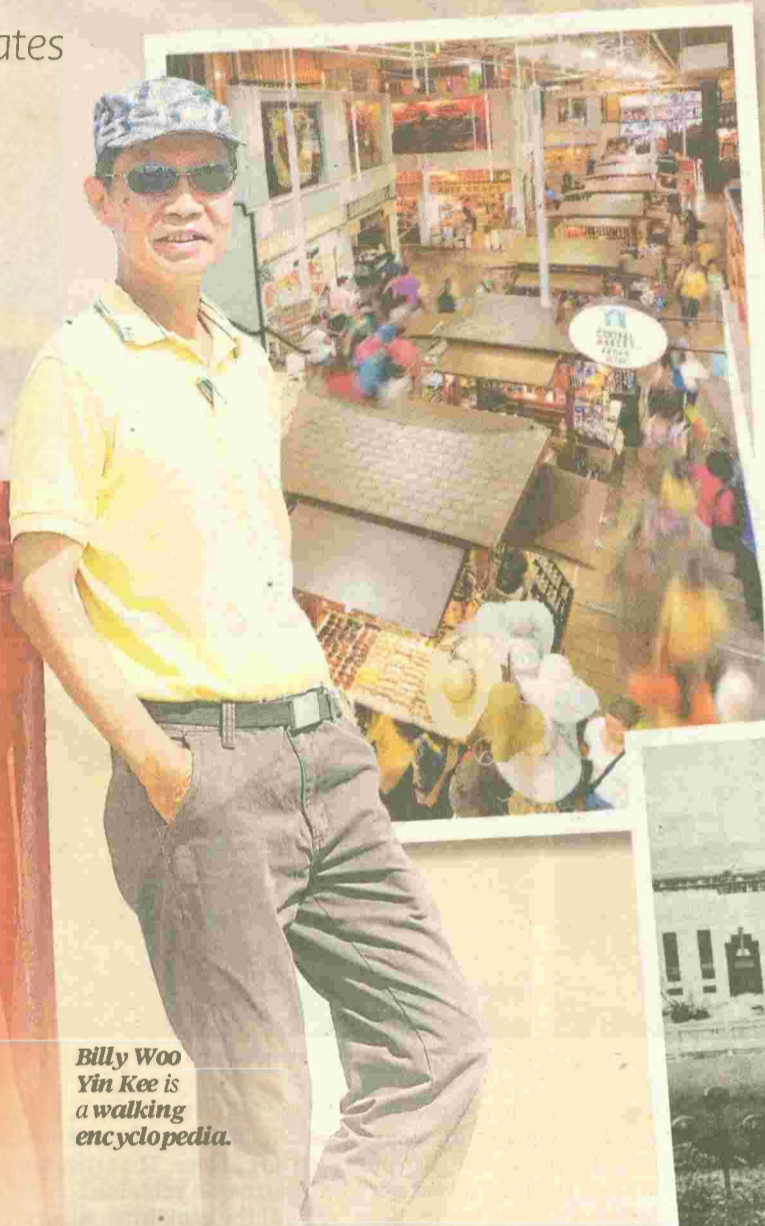
Act local, think global

→ SHOWBIZ PAGE 13

LIFE&TIMES **HERITAGE**

Arts market with colourful history

Central Market celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. Veteran tour guide Billy Woo Yin Khee enlightens **Aneeta Sundararaj** about its past



Billy Woo Yin Khee is a walking encyclopedia.

PICTURE BY AFENDI MOHAMED

CENTRAL Market, one of Kuala Lumpur's biggest attractions and a centre for local culture, heritage, art and craft, wasn't always an iconic attraction and delightful destination for tourists, shoppers and art lovers alike. In fact, many locals will remember a time not long ago when it was still a wet market offering fish, meat, vegetables and other goods.

PRE-CENTRAL MARKET

The precursor to the Central Market, says 70-year-old Billy Woo Yin Khee, a freelance tour guide, was a wet market built by KL Kapitan Cina Yap Ah Loy, situated where Medan Pasar is today (Old Market Square).

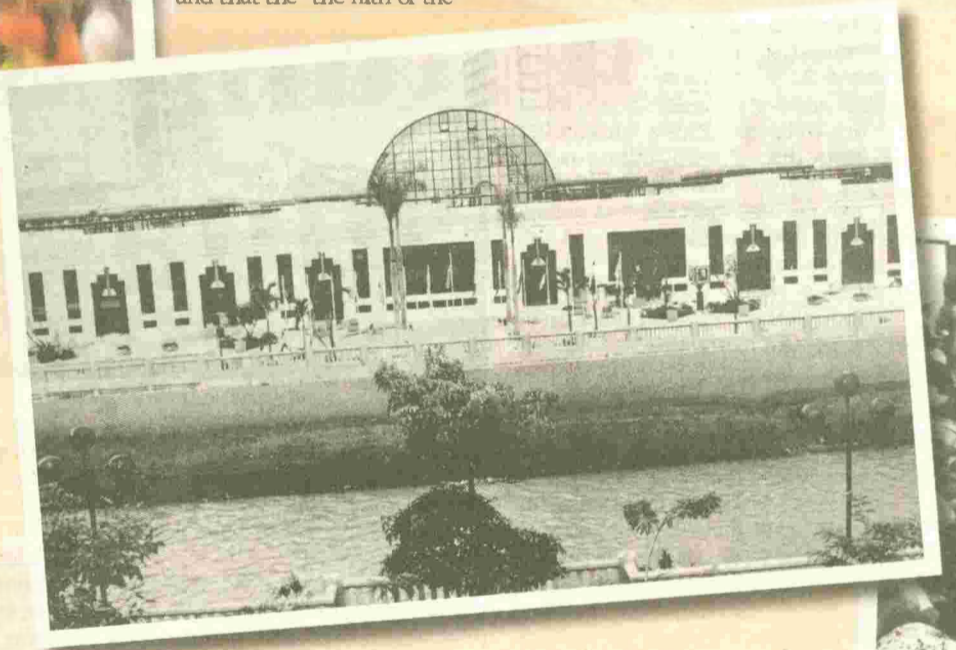
Woo says Sir Frank Swettenham, the resident general of the Federated Malay States, was supposed to have described the market as "a very insecure shed" and that the "the filth of the

market was indescribable".

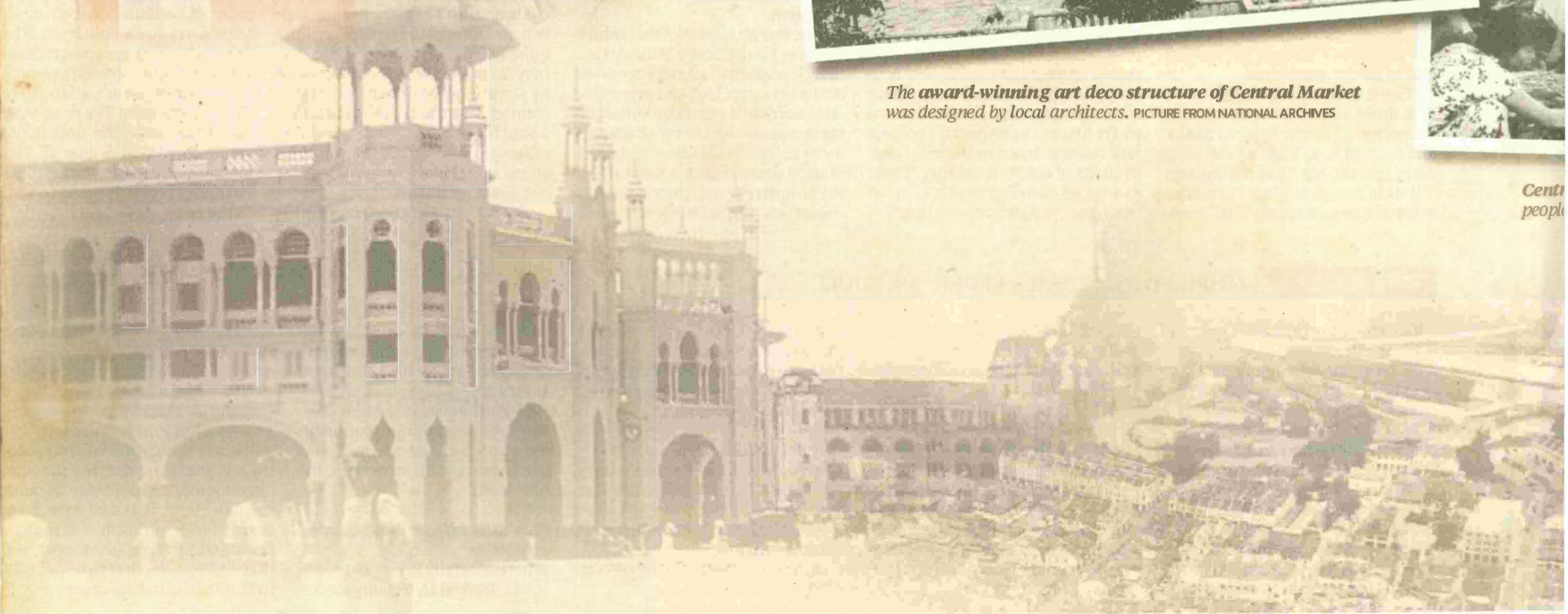
"You have to understand the geography of this area," he says. "As we all know, KL is the confluence of two rivers — Sungai Gombak and Sungai Klang. So, all the goods, mainly tin, would come up the river and all the trade happened in and around this area. You had the landing spot, near what is now Medan Pasar. This was where traders sold groceries and food.

"Then you go one step further inland to the High Street. Today, this is known as Jalan Tun H.S. Lee. It was actually higher and didn't get flooded when it rained. This was where you could get things you don't need so often."

Referring to a collection of photos he had brought along, he says: "Further inland, near Petaling Street, you'd find shops offering



The award-winning art deco structure of Central Market was designed by local architects. PICTURE FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES



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things you may only need once in a lifetime, such as coffins.”

NEW SITE

Yap Ah Loy was supposed to have lived in the area occupied by HSBC Bank today. “You can see why this area was so important to him. He lived here, he worked here and had his trade here,” says Woo, a former agriculturalist and a grandfather of two.

The description he gives of the area surrounding Central Market in the late 19th Century is not so different from what it is today: A commercial centre where people from all over come to trade their wares.

After Yap Ah Loy's demise, the wet market was moved to its present site. “In 1888,” says Woo, “the wet market was 76.2m long and 27.4m wide. The floor tiles were placed on a concrete base and there were wooden walls with a corrugated iron roof. It also had ornamental cast-iron railings and gates. It had those louvred windows and it was only one storey high.”

BIGGER BUILDING

Having spent two years in Germany in the late 1960s, Woo is fluent in both



Central Market when it first moved from Old Town Square. PICTURE FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES

English and German. With a licence from the Ministry Of Tourism And Culture, he is one of the few local tour guides able to conduct tours entirely in German.

“You know what? When I do the heritage walks, especially the Chinatown walk, we often start at Central Market. When we finish the walk, the tourists will ask to come back to Central Market.”

As the open market continued to expand by the 1930s, the structure was improved to feature the facade which we see today. With facts and figures rolling off this tongue, Woo says: “The architects were a local firm — Messrs TY Lee Architects. The structure they built had three cold rooms, 170 stalls

for fruit and vegetables, 158 for fish, 36 for beef, 27 for pork and 20 for poultry. They also used Calorex, a special glass that lets in only 20 per cent of the heat. This glass is still there today.”

Indeed, this new art-deco structure won many awards, with one of them being the Coronation Architecture Design Award in 1953.

IMPORTANT ROLE

Woo is at pains to emphasise that other than being a “handsome” building, Central Market served an important purpose. “Many restaurants in Masjid India bought their groceries from here,” he says. “At the front, they used to sell dry stuff such as curry powder. On the side, the part where we now call Jonker Street, they sold vegetables and fruit. Stalls offering beef, poultry and pork were located at the back section of the market.”

Towards the end of the 1970s, the Malaysian Heritage Society decided to preserve the building under its heritage programme. With a grant of RM9 million from the Federal Government, the building underwent another facelift to renovate this bustling structure in the heart of the metropolis (with the facade unaltered) from a wet market to what it is today.

What: In conjunction with the 125th anniversary celebrations of Central Market, there will be a special photo exhibition showcasing its glorious past and present.
When: Until Dec 8.
Where: Annexe Gallery, Central Market Annexe, Jalan Hang Kasturi, Kuala Lumpur.



Interior shot of the wet market

PICTURE FROM NST ARCHIVES



Central Market has remained a commercial centre where people continue to trade their wares. PICTURE FROM NST ARCHIVES

