

A tale of two wireless cities

Travelling to America is the price of doing business in Northern Virginia's Telecom Valley. Once work is done, I usually drive down to Colonial Williamsburg or sometimes Monticello. Colonial Williamsburg is 150 miles south of the bustling DC suburbs of Northern Virginia. Four-lane highways cut through a meandering landscape and the drive is not entirely different from the one I now frequently make from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh.

Williamsburg, too, is not too different from Ipoh in size, quiet ambience and a British past.

Settled in, I sit at Aroma's for my morning coffee, soaking in the summer sun. The College of William and Mary stares back at the café. George Washington taught here. Thomas Jefferson studied at William and Mary before moving away to set up The University of Virginia closer to his residence at Monticello. Williamsburg has yet to forgive that perfidy.

Way below the Mason-Dixon Line, and south of Richmond, Williamsburg is Dixie. Up until the Twenties, it was swathed in run-down plantations with equally run-down African-American settlements at their periphery. This is how the Rockefeller family found Williamsburg in the Twenties when they took it as another exercise in massive philanthropy.

From early childhood, John D J Rockefeller learnt that success for him would not be the money he made, but how wisely he gave it away. In one of the 20th century's most significant philanthropic initiatives, the Rockefellers set to rid themselves of their holdings. In 1927, John D Rockefeller Jr camped at a hotel with his wife and began reinventing Williamsburg.

The Rockefeller Foundation purchased

acres of plantation land, historical homes and buildings from the government and absentee families and donated them to the College of William and Mary as well as to the local municipality. By the time it was done, the land and buildings had been transformed into Colonial Williamsburg.

In an ongoing effort to entice tourists, local families volunteer to don 17th century colonial garb on certain days as they go about their daily chores. It works because I queue to pay US\$4 for an espresso that would have cost a dollar something at Starbucks in Washington DC.

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Between the students and tourists, Williamsburg is flush with funds. Using some of this money to up the ante, the city has now gone WiFi. Earlier, public WiFi was restricted to the William and Mary campus. One has indelible memories of sitting in William and Mary's Sunken Garden, surfing the Net in the golden glow of a waning sun. Today, one has access all over the city. The Sunken Garden, however, continues to be an outdoor office like none other.

Wealth from cotton may be a distant mem-

ory to Williamsburg, but so is tin money to Ipoh. The Kinta Valley saw a steady emigration around the mid-to late 19th century and by the time Richmond in Virginia had been razed and the fate of cotton plantations sealed by the Yankees and carpetbaggers, there were almost 40,000 Chinese emigrants in Ipoh, making it the tinsmelting centre that eventually went to seed in a gentler decay than the Confederate disaster.

Thriving Colonial Williamsburg is done with its development phase, at least for now. Ipoh, in contrast, is a beautiful, graceful city just about to smell the coffee. As Ipoh girdles up, it will do the architects some good to bet-

ter understand the difference made by business philanthropy to Colonial Williamsburg as well as the early and massive adoption of technology to create a modern infrastructure beneath the façade of an 18th century American colonial setting.

The alternative is for Ipoh to do a Penang where concrete rules, with some colonial bits and pieces here and there.

Rockefeller had no history with Williamsburg. He was neither William and Mary alumni nor a resident of the city. Yet, he donated massively to change its face. I mentioned the Rockefeller divestment to a rich Malaysian businessman who regularly professes his spirituality over the media and in self-published books. Other than verbosity, I drew a blank. Asian businessmen typically make money for themselves; posterity is not usually part of their real calculation.

Tajol takes up the challenge

A while ago, I threw a challenge to Malaysia in one of my articles. To demonstrate the futility of a 3G-based wireless strategy, I offered to install two long-range WiFi base stations to test them against competitive products and technologies.

Within a few days of the article being published, Perak Menteri Besar Dauk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali was on the phone. "I am taking up your challenge, Rais," he said. "Come and install the base stations. If they are what you claim them to be, let's deploy them." Ipoh was on its way to becoming a wireless city.

Here's a quote from Tajol's recent speech on "Wireless Perak". "The Perak state's recent and decisive action to lay out wireless infrastructure in Ipoh and its hinterland suggests Ipoh is hunched up to sprint. Massive government plans are afoot to fund underlying infrastructure as bait to engender development. Ipoh's very own Multimedia Super Corridor is in place and businesses are coming in. Regional hubbing of telecommunications services is to begin out of Ipoh. Ipoh may be coming out of slumber but the city needs to awaken without losing the Old World charm writ in its walls lest it becomes neither fish nor fowl."

Maybe it's time for another challenge. As Ipoh surges, it's better it becomes a Williamsburg than a typically dysfunctional, gritty mix of Asian old and new. Better a Williamsburg than a Pattaya. The Williamsburg experiment resulted from an enlightened local government given a philanthropic hand. In Ipoh, the former is in place while the latter needs to stand up and be seen.

Tajol went on to say, "The trick is for businessmen and government to build on an existing ambience and sell it. Ipoh's civic and architectural linchpins are all there. The great fire of 1892 almost totally gutted the area east of the Kinta River. Reconstruction with ample tin money brought in proper town planning with buildings filed along roads in systematic grids."

The blueprint to emulate a Rockefeller-type vision in Ipoh exists. So does the shell. For every piece of colonial legacy that Williamsburg boasts, Ipoh has its own — the Perak Museum, town hall, clock tower, Royal Ipoh Club, the gracefully ageing buildings and, of course, St Michael's School (with a building comparable, if not superior, to most structures at the beautiful William & Mary College campus).

A Rockefeller-type initiative can be launched by appropriating property around these landmarks and recreating the required ambience before donating it back to the city council or a non-profit body to manage it. Ipoh can be transformed into a college city of international repute with St Michael's School serving as an educational hub. This way, Ipoh can compete with Singapore and South Korea to attract students in biotechnology, genetics and computer sciences.

The campus will completely transform the cultural and intellectual feel of the city, resulting in a kind of prosperity far removed from the tourism frenzy of a Phuket or Pattaya.

All over the world, savvy operators and governments exploit the nostalgia railways evoke. India's Palace on Wheels is a fantasy that tourists do not mind paying to experience. Beneath its grim trappings, loose wirings and tinsel commercial establishments, the Ipoh Railway Station and its Moorish bearings are also an icon waiting to happen.

There's a lot of talk now about YTL's plans for a bullet train from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore (a 365km journey that will be reduced to barely 90 minutes). While railroads are still on its mind, I challenge YTL to do something equally significant at Ipoh. After all, that's where it made its fortune.

Cleansed of its grime, the Ipoh Railway Station could be an attractive setting for repose besides playing its primary role of handling the transient traveller. A landscape exterior appropriately installed with WiFi could give us our very own Sunken Garden for locals and tourists to relax and communicate at.

Doing a Williamsburg at Ipoh will not be easy. It may not have the return on investment that YTL seeks from businesses like the bullet train.

Ipoh got its name from a tree originally called Upas by the Orang Asli who dipped their darts into its poisonous sap. The abundance of the trees decided the city's name. Today, only two trees remain and they are under assault.

The government may spur economic growth but a cultural renaissance requires the active involvement of the citizens. A purely government initiative can turn into something like Cyberjaya while a government-business effort can quite possibly result in a Williamsburg.

If the multimillionaires that Ipoh has created can look at the once magnificent Ipoh Railway Station — scarred by massage parlours and electrical wiring — without a tinge of regret, then it is unlikely they will have the resolve to change it. But if they want to act, they should take up this challenge with the alacrity that Tajol Rosli demonstrated in kick-starting the initiative to move Ipoh forward. ■

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Listen as much as you talk

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Our conversation over the next hour was very painful. What I discovered was a man who had been promoted over 25 years, from one position to another, always successful and always productive. He was a natural choice for CEO when the former CEO retired. However, what was not obvious was that as he received each promotion, he got further away from the technical, hands-on work that he had performed years earlier. And with each promotion, to "cover" his lack of confidence, he added another barrier between him and his people.

These barriers made it harder for his staff to reach him. Messages, emails, and announcements would come from his office. He was trying to do the "right thing" and lead the company toward a profitable future, but as he became increasingly unfamiliar with the higher, strategic issues he had to face, rather than build a supporting team of people who were experts and professionals who could advise and educate him, he pulled away. By the time I arrived on the fateful day in his office, he had literally created a barricade that physically, socially, and intellectually separated him from those who could help him be successful.

The receptionists, cabinets and doors all seemed symbolic of the roadblocks he had carefully set up so that no one could get to him.

After listening patiently to his concerns, I told him of the situation he had created, and that his four vice-presidents had bypassed

him and demanded of the board that either he be fired, or they were all going to quit!

The CEO slumped in his chair, became strangely silent, and then his lip quivered, tears filled his eyes, and he finally blurted, "I didn't know... I didn't know... nobody ever told me." What was so obvious to me, which he was oblivious to, is that he had made it almost impossible for anyone to reach him. He had become so disconnected that he was driving his vice-presidents crazy and they had decided as a group to finally take action.

The board generously allowed the CEO a gracious departure. He was past the point of recovery. He was too far out of touch, he was no longer trusted, and no one wanted to follow him. Well, if you don't have followers, you cannot be a leader.

This turned out to be one of the saddest encounters I ever had coaching a leader. He was not aware that he had not only stopped listening, he made it impossible for anyone to cross the barriers and give him accurate feedback.

How about you? What is your leadership style? Do you listen as much as you talk? A simple formula, but one which in this case was the undoing of a good man. ■

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