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SINCE early this year, a scene some may well describe as one of utter horror has greeted Penangites and hundreds of visitors as they approach the island's beloved Botanic Gardens, one of the oldest colonial-era parks in Southeast Asia. A huge swathe of land in front of the magnificent century-old raintree that looms above the gardens' famous gates has been turned into a monstrous dusty scab, with two gigantic phallic structures built on it.

Most people have been left aghast and bewildered at what on earth could be going on. It is not

just that the structures – which would eventually comprise huge concrete arches and some fountains – are completely out of sync with the lush vistas of the area and the surrounding green hills. The entire RM7 million project by the Tourism Ministry has been rushed into without any consultation with local communities, nature groups and experts, on what the development, officially dubbed an “upgrading”, is all about.

Fed up with the way things have been going, civil society groups recently demanded that the federal government stop the project, at least until a comprehensive masterplan for the gardens has been approved. They protested the ad-hoc destruction of plant houses and plant collections, with natural streams canalised into drains, while oversized glass and steel buildings like an administration block are built in place of trees and shrubs.

“All attempts by NGOs and USM (Universiti Sains Malaysia) academics to put forward recommendations for the future well-being of the gardens have been ignored,” a statement by members of the Working Group of the Penang Forum said.

“The gardens cannot be at the mercy of passing fancies of ill-informed civil servants, politicians and VIPs who might visit and think there should be a ‘Balinese garden’ there and a ‘Japanese garden’ here or some horrendous arches at the entrance,” it said.

“Where do the people of Penang come in? Where do we count? Doesn’t anyone in power care that the future of the garden is being severely compromised?”

Indeed, the project has been a nightmarish concoction of politics and poor planning and foresight. The state government has insisted it can do little. In fact, officials have said the federal government threatened to withhold funding for future projects in the state if this one did not proceed in time.

And the rush has come at a huge cost. The very aesthetics and natural heritage ambience of the place threatens to be compromised. The gardens have been carefully preserved for 126 years since pioneering British horticulturists conceived the area as a rich repository of plant life for the region.

In 1885, it is recorded, no less than 11,500 saplings were supplied from the gardens’ nursery for tree planting in and around the island.

The rush has also impacted on other peripheral aspects. Traders operating at the entrance have been removed to be placed in a shoddily built hawker complex some 500m away. To understand how poor its initial design was, try to digest the fact that when completed, the complex did not even have a toilet.

Facing the complex, a “Tourism Pavilion” is being constructed at the base of a hill, below the edge of a potentially dangerous precipice, with a temple being built up above.

The ministry has responded that there is no turning back as the project has already been implemented under the 9th Malaysia Plan. Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ng Yen Yen did say that the ministry would take a second look at the two controversial arches being built.

But there really seems to be little that can be done now as the structures have already come up, and the project is well under way. Short of an extremely drastic intervention, one can only wait to see the final outcome of how this horror story, that the long cherished Botanic Gardens seems to be in, will eventually turn out.

Video: **The Controversial Arches in Botanic Garden** by [pgmedia](#) .