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City of future with a strong local imprint

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CITIES have traditionally been creations of chance, starting out as grubby little towns and transforming into some of the world's most glamorous urban centres, thanks to a happy confluence of trade and opportunity.

The downside of such ad hoc growth, however, is the kind of strain on infrastructural resources that we see in our own capital city, which has fast become a pressure cooker of scarce spaces and snarling traffic jams.

In creating Putrajaya, the future site of the federal administrative centre, the Government will be going against these natural laws of development by building a city deliberately...from scratch!

It has been done before but not always with great success. Brasillia in Brazil and Australia's Canberra, for example, have both been criticised for being physically isolated from the national mainstream.

Responding to these doubts, Putrajaya Corporation's president Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin said studying these precedents would go a long way in making sure Malaysia's RM20 billion project would strike out on a more successful path.

The corporation, which was created and empowered by an Act of Parliament, is responsible for managing development and other related matters on behalf of the Government.

"We've looked at cities like Brasillia and Canberra to avoid the problems they have," said Azizan. "Putrajaya won't be isolated. It is only 25km away from Kuala Lumpur. It will only take 15 minutes to travel from the capital, either by the express rail link or the dedicated highway."

Putrajaya, he pointed out, will be located in a growth corridor. The Kuala Lumpur International Airport is being built in the south and growth areas such as the Multimedia Super Corridor's Cybercity will be a neighbour.

"What we've also done," he said, "is draw up a master plan that maps out proper land use from the very start."

But why the need for such an ambitious and expensive project in the first place? Besides the vision of a paperless and high-tech government, the current federal administration's functions has a reputation for, well, slowness.

"Kuala Lumpur (the Government's current seat) is under a lot of strain," Azizan explained, "as it responds to the expanding needs of the population and its activities."

Putrajaya, on the other hand, is designed to ease this pressure on the account of it being built to avoid the problems experienced by Kuala Lumpur.

Doubts about the project, he said, were compounded by misconceptions of its true purpose.

"I want to make this clear," he stressed. "Putrajaya is not a new federal capital. Putrajaya is a relocation of Government ministries and departments."

Azizan debunked fears that Putrajaya's financing would strain the national coffers, especially since other infrastructure projects like the RM9 billion airport are also in progress.

The decision to build Putrajaya came at an opportune moment when the very strong economy could be exploited but this did not stop a few critics from posing this question: How can such a project be paid for without it contributing to economic overheating?

Azizan has a simple answer: "We have enough liquidity in the economy and the burden on the Government is minimised by entrusting the development to Putrajaya Holdings Sdn Bhd."

The company will be responsible for most of the funding, including joint ventures with private companies, he said.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim recently clarified that awarding development packages to the private sector would cap the Government's share of the expense at RM2.6 billion.

Putrajaya Holdings comprises three partners - Petronas, the Government's investment arm Khazanah Holdings (each holding 40 per cent equity) and Permodalan Nasional Berhad (20 per cent).

Aside from Putrajaya Corporation and Putrajaya Holdings, another company responsible for the project is Kuala Lumpur Centre City Berhad, which is acting as project director.

Once the city is completed, it will be managed by Putrajaya Corporation, empowered by Parliament to be responsible for local authority functions and effectively be Putrajaya's City Hall, a first for the country.

The manner in which the project is being carried out has already attracted international interest with countries such as Japan sending representatives to study its progress.

Another point of pride is how the project is getting off the ground with only minimal help from foreign expertise.

"Putrajaya is basically a wholly Malaysian project," he said. "There's been some input from foreign experts in highly specialised areas, but this has been minimal."

Construction began late last year on Phase One A, which targets completing the Prime Minister's Department, the top section of the artificial lake and peripheral areas by next year.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is due to move into his new office in September and Azizan is confident that the Prime Minister is not going to have to wait.

With all the talk about intelligent buildings, telemedicine, Smart schools and computer-based interaction between the public and the Government, Putrajaya is clearly set to be a city of the future.

"Architecturally, Putrajaya will be an indigenous city with a modern look, said Azizan. "Yes, it's a city of the future, but the local imprint is going to be very strong."

There also seems to be a melting pot of cultural styles, from the 100m-wide European-style boulevard that will bisect the core area to the Moorish architecture of the Putra Mosque.

Another priority is having all that technology reside in a Garden City, which is to be brought to life with the construction of parks, lakes and a wetland area.

Greenery in fact, will be the biggest component in the city with a 37.5 per cent share of the land area.

Azizan believes that this attention to the surroundings will make Putrajaya a model city in more ways than one.

"We hope to create a more conducive environment for people to live and work in to reduce the pressures of modern urban living. The hoped for result is a community way of life that encourages high moral values.

"We want the best," he said, "but in the end, technology must be made to make life better for people."

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