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Improving quality of city life

AS a city, Kuala Lumpur is bustling, bursting at its seams with concrete and people, polluted and congested. Before Malaysia turned into the economic powerhouse it is today, Kuala Lumpur was a relatively small city with few cars and a lot of green. It was a city pleasant in the sense that it was a throwback to simpler, less harried times and the tallest buildings were in America and the best hotel was hardly 20-storey tall. There were more pre-War buildings than there were skyscrapers and the city dwellers certainly did not dream that one day soon many of these buildings will give way to commercial buildings - including the world's tallest - road expansion, light rail transit, and condominiums.

Kuala Lumpur has become that, and more. It is congested with traffic, more than a million vehicles enter the city daily, changing the quality of its air for the worse, and there are squatters where people could not afford to rent homes or stay too far away from the city and their jobs. The LRT route, zig-zagging across the city centre, has further changed the landscape of Kuala Lumpur. Most major hotel chains have an outlet in the city and big corporations are still building headquarters and their own buildings in and around the city. Congestion is expected to get worse before it gets better, but the authorities have been taking measures to ensure that the city is kept clean and as comfortable as one could make a rapidly-growing city. Bus lanes have been introduced, and to reduce the number of cars in the city, car owners have been urged to car-pool and new buildings told to limit the number of parking bays. Sooner or later, the City Hall people are expected to be forced to introduce restricted zones and parking charges may be as expensive as in Singapore and Tokyo.

What Kuala Lumpur is facing has already been faced by some cities in developing countries and will be faced by others as they progress and develop. Some years ago, when Bangkok earned the notoriety for its traffic jams, city planners in this country went to the drawing board to look at ways to avert the same happening to Kuala Lumpur. Partly because of the mid-1980s recession and partly poor planning, Kuala Lumpur could not learn from the mistakes that Bangkok had committed. For example, years ago, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his speeches recommended that broad sidewalks be constructed in the city to make Kuala Lumpur pedestrian-friendly. This was done but not widely or uniformly. Trees were planted only when the Government said Kuala Lumpur could do with more greenery. There was little consideration for the people who work in the city, less so for the visitors. There was not much thought given to aesthetics, signages and tasteful billboards. In short, parts of the city developed separate from any form of aspirations that city dwellers might have for quality of life.

Which is probably why Dr Mahathir said cities will have to redefine their philosophy and identity in terms of an improved quality of life. This, he said, should be done as they wrestle with increases in population size, high rise concrete structures, horrendous traffic and ever-increasing demands by citizens for services. In his message for the "Quality Urban Life '97" exhibition in Kuala Lumpur this week, Dr Mahathir urged city planners in the South to come up with some solutions to the issues concerning their cities.

In Malaysia, the Government has taken the initiative to move the administration centre to Putrajaya. Putrajaya and Cybercity, the other

"city" within the Multimedia Super Corridor, will take into account the environment, business needs as well as quality of life of the people living and working in the Corridor. Hopefully, this will ease the pressure on Kuala Lumpur, especially after the entire LRT network is completed and the public transportation in the city is improved. Certainly, city dwellers can expect to pay for the services and for a better quality of city living. It would be ideal, though, if they are not made to pay exorbitantly for the failures of the planners to learn from the mistakes of other cities.

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