

14/12/1997

Rejuvenated waterfront proves a crowd-puller

WHILE the clean streets of Kuching help to make it one of the most habitable cities in Malaysia, there are several other factors which have contributed to this.

One of them is the famous Kuching Waterfront which stretches for one kilometre along the south bank of the Sarawak River from near the Hilton Hotel to the wet market in Jalan Gambier.

Easily one of the most successful urban rehabilitation projects in the country, the Waterfront has not only managed to give the former godown areas of Kuching a new lease of life, it is also an extremely pleasant place for Kuching folk to relax.

Unlike other projects scattered around Malaysia which often cater only to tourists, the Waterfront is a focal point for locals as well.

A member of the Waterfront management who declined to be named for policy reasons said a major proportion of the people who come to the Waterfront are locals.

"Every night, we think there are at least 1,000 people who come to the Waterfront. On weekends, the numbers could go up to about 5,000, depending on the activities organised," she said.

The story of its rebirth begins in 1989 when Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud floated the idea. He wanted the stretch of the Sarawak River which fronted Kuching's downtown area to be renewed for a different class of usage. At the time, the dockyard area was silent and empty since the shippers had left.

As shipping activities moved further downstream, the quayside began to crumble from neglect and soon became a collection of dilapidated warehouses and makeshift stalls.

"The (Waterfront) area began dying. The abandoned warehouses were becoming the haunt of drug addicts and vagrants and a terrible eyesore," she said.

Completed in 1993 by the Sarawak State Economic Development Corporation, the stretch is today a promenade with beautifully landscaped gardens and open spaces.

Several of the old buildings were given a new lease of life, and turned into shops, restaurants, an amphitheatre and an audio-visual information centre.

The place also boasts a musical fountain, viewing towers, a tea terrace, cafes, kiosks, a landing for sailboats and the perahu tambang which ferry people across the Sarawak River.

Within the one-kilometre stretch, there are also 60 permanent rubbish bins and another 40 wheel bins. Twenty-two people spread out into two shifts keep the place clean.

"When we began, the sight which greeted me every morning broke my heart. The whole place was like a rubbish dump," said the same spokesperson.

Now, however, it was different. She said the weekly campaigns organised during the first year had paid off.

"Kuching folk are much more civic conscious now. We even see little children throwing their sweet wrappers into bins," she added.

Still, problems abound. Vandalism, is a major headache and replacing stolen or damaged items, whether lamps or wood from park benches, eats up a huge proportion of the yearly budget.

She said the place has even been used as a venue for gang fights late at

night.

"We are working with the police to minimise the problems. They now go on rounds and question anyone who hangs around after midnight."

The spokesperson also said the project had captured the attention of many people, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"All of them, especially those from the local authorities, are usually impressed and want to construct something similar in the Peninsula. But when they hear how much it cost, they usually say it's too expensive."

Indeed, the three-time award winning project cost RM89 million. The bill was paid by the State Government.

Nevertheless, despite the hefty sum, the project has definitely brought benefits to Kuching.

Property values along the Main Bazaar, the street which faces the Waterfront, have gone up two to three times.

Because of the tourist dollar, many of them have changed their businesses from the traditional to the more tourist-oriented trades like handicraft and antique shops and tour agencies.

A lot of the benefits also come in non-monetary forms.

"The Waterfront has given Kuching folk a very nice place for recreation. It has also certainly contributed to making Kuching a very nice city to live in," the spokesperson said.

(END)