

- **Collective** effort is needed to encourage, or even force, developers to take care and ownership of the little bits of city passing by their properties' entrances
- **Develop** social ownership so people will contribute to keeping the city beautiful for everyone



by
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It isn't a major revelation to say that very little of what we can see in KL nowadays was there 20 years back, just the seeds in the shape of the first super-tall Malaysian building of a series to come.

Since I arrived in Malaysia more than three years ago, I have been reluctant to climb to the top of Petronas Twin Towers to see the city.

On the contrary, I keep thinking that the Twin Towers would be, at the moment, the most interesting thing to see from up there, and I have been saving that ceremonial moment for a very special occasion: the completion of our Oxley Towers in 2022, a building with which I'm very much involved.

However, over recent years – and this is becoming increasingly true – the number of interesting buildings to view from the Twin Towers has increased, not only in the KLCC area and its associated park, but also in other areas of the city from Bangsar to Mont Kiara. More and more attractive tall structures and memorable landmarks have appeared on the skyline.

KL up here

Viewed from any of the fancy skyscrapers' restaurants and bars that many frequent, Kuala Lumpur presents itself as a blooming, vibrant metropolis.



Up there, the fancy Le Nouvel standing next to the majestic Petronas Twin Towers

KL 300m above ground



An artist's impression of the 340m Oxley Towers, designed by Veritas, which will stand next to the Petronas Twin Towers

This is especially true at night when the neon lights at the shopping malls illuminate the streets with whimsical colours, when people look like ants, cars look like fireflies and problems melt away like ice in a cold drink.

Taking the fast shuttle lift down, by contrast, the view that KL offers to pedestrians is very different at the street level – which gets worse the further we get from the KLCC area.

There are broken and discontinuous sidewalks, unfriendly to pedestrians and impossible for anyone with special needs; dangerous open drains and sumps; unpleasant litter; neglected parks and battered green areas (when they exist at all). The illusion of a beautiful city for everyone quickly vanishes.

A collective effort is needed, based on KL City Hall's (DBKL)

policies, to encourage developers, perhaps even force them, to take care and ownership of the little bits of city passing by their properties' entrances.

If successful, these initiatives have the potential to contribute greatly, in the big picture, to beautify the city that we all use.

The contrast between the more expensive condominium towers around KLCC and the grotty, dirty sidewalks and roads at their feet never ceases to amaze and disappoint me.

Another area of concern are the more-or-less unwalkable avenues punctuated with superfluous front entrance drop-offs that seem only to serve to confuse pedestrians; a situation exacerbated by drivers not respecting pedestrianised areas, perimeter plantings and perimeter fences force pedestrians to walk into the road – inexcusable in the heart of such a major, international city: a city where cars take precedence over people and where sidewalks and public realm are so clearly neglected.

In what sounds like an excuse for the situation at street-level, I'm often told that Malaysians don't like to walk.

This is patently not the case; thousands of people go out for lunch every day, walking from the office to the mall, or to and from MRT and LRT stations, to their residences or places of work.

I also can't believe that nobody would like to take a sunset walk. I often laugh, imagining those who think that everyone takes a GrabCar to go from doorstep to doorstep, as if it was the only way or even the

most common choice.

As if Kuala Lumpur was the only city in a hot climate. As if people don't walk in Singapore, Rio or Cape Town.

Who doesn't like taking a walk in Barcelona or London, to mention just two destinations that everybody knows. Cities may be very warm, or very cold, but weather doesn't prevent people from using their streets. Then people ask me: how do you guys in Europe design and maintain such beautiful cities?

Investing in social awareness today

There is no simple answer to such a question. Firstly, many European cities are old and have been consolidated over centuries in most cases.

But there are also fairly new settlements, or simply extensions of growing cities which still carry the values of the original, ancient parts of the city.

Second, the economy: at various times many European cities have been major centres of wealth – but I refuse to believe that KL's issues are only a matter of finances, not least since its wealth has increased so dramatically over the past couple of decades.

Third, and most importantly in my view, social awareness and ownership: people who live in beautiful cities like living in such places and don't want to step back, thus they will actively engage and contribute to keeping the city beautiful for everyone.

One of the main strategies to improve the situation is, how else, taxes. Developers first, and

then communities, will contribute to the social wealth with taxes that permit city halls to maintain sidewalks and roads, parks and green areas, trees and street furniture, street lighting, that is the public realm network across the city. Taxes.

But what if developers don't want to pay? They have to. But what if communities don't want to pay? They have to.

By law, you cannot develop this piece of land if you don't contribute to enhance the part of city passing by your doorstep: simple as that.

A few meters side walk, with its trees, its public lighting and street furniture, bicycle lanes, bus lanes, car lanes: a one-off investment by developers to be maintained over time by communities.

Harvesting social ownership tomorrow

Although there are a number of initiatives in some areas of KL, a more urgent and comprehensive plan and actions are needed before the situation deteriorates.

Some recent initiatives have sought to beautify some parts of the city; the picturesque back alleys at Jalan Changkat in Bukit Bintang, for example.

Both locals and tourists go there to snap some pictures and then they go. No doubt, it's a more pleasant place to pass by now, and the increased pedestrian traffic has positively contributed to remove some undesirable activities from those backlanes.

However, despite the murals, poverty remains behind the façade and, when the sun is gone, the colourful alleys become again a nest for illicit activities. Intervention must be much deeper, much more cohesive and comprehensive, having the long term as an object: otherwise it's merely cosmetic.

I am not a tax expert nor do I want to be; but I am a foster child of a beautiful city which could be so much better if there were a collective effort, and I would love to see the beauty of this city reaching every single citizen or tourist using it.

Despite the impact which taxes might have on the profit margins of developers, I believe the value of properties would eventually grow across the board.

Likewise the value of the city, as people grow their awareness and their feeling of ownership over the city where they live, the city they have built and which belongs to them; people value what they pay for; then the country and then the economy.

Who wouldn't pay a little extra to live in a better place, not only within the boundaries of an exclusive private compound or when you are 300m above ground. **FocusM**

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