

More calls to protect ashram

NGOs highlight concern against commercialisation plans for KL's iconic building

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BADAN Warisan Malaysia has joined the chorus of discontent surrounding the uncertain fate of the iconic Vivekananda Ashram site in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. Its president Lim Wei-Ling expressed dismay at the changes outlined in the draft Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040 (KLLP2040), highlighting concern over the lack of due process in rezoning a gazetted heritage site in Brickfields to a commercial zone.

"We question both the blatant change of land use knowing fully well that it is a gazetted heritage site, and the complete disregard for what 'gazette' means," she said.

She was responding to a *StarMetro* article on March 23, that instead of being recognised as a heritage site, the ashram has been earmarked as a major commercial area.

The 120-year-old Vivekananda Ashram building was gazetted on June 16, 2016, by the National Heritage Department (JWN) due to its historical, social, spiritual and aesthetic heritage values.

"This building's level of significance is not only local to Brickfields and Kuala Lumpur but is also significant nationally and internationally," she said.

Lim added that the Brickfields area, also known as the "Divine Location," holds significance due to its diverse places of worship representing various faiths.

StarMetro had reported that during a recent briefing with the Save Kuala Lumpur Coalition (SKL), residents were appalled to find that land around the iconic building was not designated as a heritage site in the KLLP2040, but instead was labelled as a major commercial area with a high plot ratio.

This revelation sparked concerns among residents about potential redevelopment plans and the preservation of the area's cultural heritage.

Lim said Vivekananda Ashram has been part of the historical development of Brickfields with the multi-ethnic social profile of the area, that greatly influenced the advancement of Brickfield's cultural, spiritual and architectural heritage for over a century.

"There are many tangible and intangible aspects of the cultural



Flashback of the *StarMetro* report on March 23

heritage significance in Brickfields.

"The high level of tourism to the area reflects the appreciation of Brickfield's unique heritage and many tourists visit Vivekananda Ashram to begin their tour of the area," she added.

Lim said gazettement of a heritage site is meant to safeguard it from any form of development and encroachment on the ground or above it.

"The purpose of a gazette is to protect the land and its buildings for the benefit of all Malaysians now and in the future.

"The reversal of any designated heritage sites' status will mean losing important buildings that can never be recovered; these are an important part of our city's tourism, cultural and heritage landscape and should be protected.

"Losing the Vivekananda Ashram would be like losing a piece of our city's soul.

"As an independent non-governmental organisation, Badan Warisan Malaysia is committed to create a conservation-friendly environment to ensure the survival of our nation's heritage assets," she added.

SKL chairman Datuk M. Ali said it made no sense to gazette a building with heritage status, but conversely designate the surrounding land of the site as major commercial.

"Where is the buffer zone as required by the National Heritage Act 2005?" he questioned, and wondered about the thought process of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) planners when preparing the plan.

"If this draft plan goes through, what we will have is a historical building that is completely overshadowed by surrounding skyscrapers in the future; its significance in history will be lost," Ali said.

Meanwhile, the planned peaceful protest scheduled for yesterday against the designation of certain parts of Brickfields as major commercial areas in the KLLP2040 had to be postponed because the organisers were unable to secure a permit.

However, spokesperson R. Rajaretinam told *StarMetro* that they will submit their objection to DBKL next Monday against the proposal to classify some Brickfields areas as major commercial zones.