

The case for urban redevelopment

In the early years of the country's formation, squatters and slums were part and parcel of urban living, as people from rural areas migrated to towns and cities in search of jobs.

As these settlements were not equipped with public utilities and proper facilities, over the years they became inhabitable, especially in terms of security and sanitation.

Public housing schemes such as the Razak Mansion, Pekeliling Flats, Sri Selangor Flats (San Peng Flats), and the oldest, Suleiman Court are evidence of the government's early efforts to address the housing needs of the lower-income city dwellers in Kuala Lumpur.

Suleiman Court was developed in 1957, with the first occupant moving into the affordable housing project in February 1958, even though the country's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had wanted it to be ready by Merdeka day on Aug 31, 1957.

The first block of the Razak Mansion was built in 1961 while the Pekeliling Flats were built in 1967. There was even a P Ramlee movie shot at the latter.

With the redevelopment of Suleiman Court in 1986 and Razak Mansion in 2017, as well as the demolition of Pekeliling Flats between 2006 and 2014, the San Peng Flats, built in 1972, are now the oldest inhabited public housing scheme in the capital city.

With the passing of time, many of these old flats are now in a dilapidated condition. Most low-cost high rises are maintained by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) rather than the residents' joint management body.

Maintenance and cleanliness are not a pri-

ority in these flats. As a result, broken-down elevators, uncollected domestic waste and vandalism are daily realities that the residents have to endure. Children from low-income families are easy targets of crime rackets, as they are mostly left to their own devices.

"The maintenance of the flats depends on who is the officer in charge employed by DBKL. If the officer is efficient and plays an active role, the flat will be properly maintained," says Ratipah Adam, 66, the owner of a unit at Gombak Setia People's Housing Programme (PPR).

PPR Gombak Setia is a relatively new development, with the earliest residents having moved in around 1998. Residents who had rented the flats for more than 10 years were offered the opportunity to buy their units from DBKL.

DBKL did not respond to *The Edge's* request for an interview.

As an owner, Ratipah has to pay RM45 per month in management fees to DBKL, which maintains the PPR. However, she claims that DBKL has not been proactive and efficient in maintaining the flats.

Issues such as lack of sanitation, faulty corridor lighting, broken-down elevators and crime have been plaguing the flats, she explains. This has led to difficulty in collecting management fees, as owners are unhappy with the conditions at the PPR.

Ratipah bought her two-bedroom unit for RM40,000 in 2018. A similar unit could fetch around RM200,000 now, according to several property sites.

While there have been no overtures from either DBKL or property developers to buy

over the entire project, the strategic location of the PPR — served by the Kelana Jaya LRT Line and just 1.5km away from the Gombak LRT terminal and its park and ride facility — is a strong selling point.

If the proposed Urban Renewal Act (URA) is passed, PPR Gombak Setia could be a prime candidate for redevelopment because of its location. While that remains to be seen, the owners and tenants of the low-cost flats in Datuk Keramat experienced the process.

In the early 2000s, Perbadanan Kema-juan Negeri Selangor (PKNS), a Selangor government-owned corporation, proposed to redevelop the Datuk Keramat commercial centre (Pusat Bandar Datuk Keramat) and the four-storey walk-up flats there.

According to news reports, PKNS paid compensations of between RM250,000 and RM300,000 for each residential unit, and between RM450,000 and RM500,000 for each commercial lot, depending on the sizes.

The redevelopment became a political and racial issue when PKNS unveiled plans for a luxury condominium with four blocks called Datum Jelatek at the site of the Datuk Keramat commercial centre.

The opponents to the redevelopment argued that the Datuk Keramat area was among the few Malay-majority enclaves in a largely "Chinese" city, and that Datum Jelatek would destroy the identity of the area, as more non-Malays moved in.

While the majority of the flat owners agreed with PKNS' buyback compensation scheme, around 10% rejected the offer but agreed to be relocated to the PPR Jelatek nearby.

Besides the redevelopment of the Datuk Keramat town centre into Datum Jelatek, the successful redevelopment of the Razak Mansion in Sungai Besi is another example of urban redevelopment that has taken place in Kuala Lumpur without the URA.

However, not all efforts for redevelopment have been successful.

Take the Desa Kudalari condominium, the country's first high-rise condominium, located within the vicinity of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre. The project was developed 40 years ago in 1984.

In 2016, an effort to sell the entire Desa Kudalari was mooted by its management corporation (MC). However, after prolonged negotiations, the proposal was dropped as the MC could not get the agreement of all the unit owners.

Although Desa Kudalari is considered a luxury condominium, it is not immune to decay. According to reports, while the brick structure is intact, the piping, roofing, corroded rebars and potholes require RM12.5 million to be repaired.

In the words of Minister of Housing and Local Government Nga Kor Ming, just like human beings, every building has a lifespan.

"Consultant engineers and architects will tell you that every building's lifespan is about 70 years. Just like human beings, when you are above 70, you either get [admitted into] IJN (Institut Jantung Negara) or a hospital somewhere to do medical check-ups.

"[The] same thing happens to buildings. Do you think the pipes, wiring and all can last forever?" he asks. ■