

KL's growing pains

Federal capital's growth strains housing, traffic and infrastructure

ON any given day, the population of greater Kuala Lumpur brims dynamically with 8.8 million people inhabiting 10 cities and towns across 2,800sq km. Around 2.075 million live and breathe life into the 167-year-old federal capital, literally translated as “muddy confluence”, inside a landlocked jurisdiction of 243sq km. As South-east Asia’s fastest-growing metropolis, the population is expected to swell by 2.25 per cent annually until it hits 9.8 million by 2030. Greater Kuala Lumpur is Asean’s fifth largest economy after Singapore, Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila. The current 2.075 million residents are not static: over the weekend, especially if neighbouring states enjoy a public holiday, a big horde of “outsiders” drive or take the train, joined by ubiquitous foreign tourists, to crowd downtown metropolitan haunts. It’s conspicuous when visitors flood KL: traffic congestion quadruples, the MRT/LRT becomes standing room only, e-hailing cars are hard to access, parking becomes invaluable real estate, while illegal parking offers an opportunistic bonanza for eager tow trucks. Visitors concentrate at major tourist traps, the massive shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur’s famed Golden Triangle, making pit stops before the Petronas Twin Towers for obligatory photo shoots after invading favourite tourist attractions. On days like these, locals know better than to mingle with the

maddening crowd, preferring to shop and dine at their respective suburbs, flourishing with boutique malls, restaurants and food courts.

Kuala Lumpur’s career, trade and commerce opportunities, and bright lights, are impetuses for unstoppable and exponential growth.

The question is, how does City Hall

“Greater Kuala Lumpur is Asean’s fifth largest economy...”

cope with the population boom? The key will always be conceiving creative ways to accommodate demands for affordable housing where land is ultra-scarce, pressured by rural and foreign migration. As a liveable city, Kuala Lumpur is under heavy pressure from mass migration: unless curtailed or controlled, the city’s fringes are ripe for unwitting slums. With affordable housing spreading thin, remaining vacant slots are acquired and developed at premium prices, resulting in new properties only the wealthy can afford. The latest cycles of completed infrastructure and basic services’ modernisation and upgrading are repeatedly upended by the intense weight of humanity and traffic. One proposal has percolated for years: a deterrent entry fee per vehicle into downtown streets, which may be pertinent as a way to control traffic and popularise public transport. Nagging air pollution remains problematic, while dwindling green lungs are characterised by disappearing neighbourhood football fields and playgrounds, sacrificed for new high-rise housing, office and retail projects.

Careerists overcome housing conundrums by following the lead of Malaysians down south: live in Johor Baru but hold jobs, some menial but lucrative, in Singapore. That’s why the North-South Expressway is perpetually choked during rush hour by traffic from immediate Selangor districts and even Seremban and Melaka. It’s the only affordable compromise, notwithstanding the exhausting commute — or they could switch jobs to within their domiciles for lesser prospects. Still, Kuala Lumpur’s seductive lure is irresistible.