

By ANIZA ABU BAKAR

KUALA Lumpur is often celebrated for its rapid development and cosmopolitan appeal. Yet, beneath the gleaming skyscrapers and vibrant street life, the city teeters on the brink of a catastrophic crisis that could undermine its very foundation.

As the city expands at a break-neck pace, it faces challenges that threaten its sustainability and liveability, especially in the face of an ageing population and advancing climate change. By 2050, Malaysia is predicted by the World Bank to be a super-aged nation with 20% of its population aged 65 and above. The temperature meanwhile is expected to rise to 40.5°C, sparking various environmental challenges.

In facing this future, two glaring issues demand urgent attention: the alarming lack of open space, and the reckless overdevelopment of high-density areas. Addressing these crises is crucial to ensure that KL does not spiral into urban chaos but remains a vibrant and inclusive city for all its residents.

Federal Territory Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa, in her recent speech at the launch of the 10 Planning Guidelines for the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur 2024, has voiced concern over the lack of green spaces and rising air pollution. She emphasised the urgent need to balance development with the well-being of residents.

Yet, words must translate into action. Her ministry, particularly its agency, Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), must take charge of steering KL away from the brink of becoming a soulless concrete jungle. The city must live up to its slogan of “City for All” and adopt a more sustainable and inclusive urban planning approach.

Open spaces are the lifeblood of any urban environment. They offer essential space for recreation, relaxation, and community gatherings, promoting residents’ physical and mental wellbeing

A concrete jungle or a future paradise?

Kuala Lumpur must live up to its slogan of ‘City for All’ and adopt a more sustainable and inclusive urban planning approach, says the writer.

while strengthening the community’s social fabric.

Open spaces also play a pivotal role in environmental sustainability, acting as green lungs that filter air, regulate temperature, and mitigate flooding. Yet, KL is increasingly becoming a concrete jungle, with green spaces vanishing at an alarming rate. The city’s transformation into a sprawling mass of steel and glass is not just a byproduct of development; it is a deliberate trend fuelled by developers’ greed, complicit local authorities, inconsistent government policies, and weak enforcement.

Consider the cases of Taman Rimba Kiara, Jalan Kuching, and Taman Desa – these once-green havens now stand as stark reminders of the growing struggle to balance development with public wellbeing in KL. Setapak, once a suburban area lush with greenery, has now fallen victim to rampant urbanisation. Projects like the proposed high-rise developments in Taman Tiara Titiwangsa and Jalan Genting Klang have sparked outrage among residents, who fear their community spaces

will be swallowed by high-density developments. This relentless march of concrete threatens to erase vital urban lungs, reflecting a broader disregard for environmental sustainability and community health.

High-density development is often hailed as a sign of urban growth and economic vibrancy. But in KL, this rapid and poorly planned development is more of a curse than a blessing. The city’s skyline is filling up with high-rise residential and commercial buildings, often erected without adequate infrastructure improvements. This is glaringly evident in areas like Setapak, where local authorities have allowed a flood of high-rise developments that outstrip the capacity of local infrastructure, choking the life out of these neighbourhoods.

The toxic combination of shrinking parks and recreational areas with uncontrolled high-density development is not just eroding the quality of life for city dwellers, it is also intensifying environmental problems. Open spaces, which act as natural air purifiers, heat regulators, and



Losing green lungs: Taman Rekreasi Ayer Panas in Setapak has also fallen victim to rampant urbanisation. — IZZRAFIQ ALIAS/The Star

flood mitigators, are being replaced by concrete slabs that exacerbate pollution, raise urban temperatures, and increase flood risks. KL is already grappling with these issues, and the current trajectory of development threatens to make things far worse. Authorities, seemingly oblivious to the longterm damage, continue to prioritise short-term economic gains over sustainable urban planning.

Community involvement is key. Residents must be given a voice in planning processes and empowered to hold local authorities accountable. This will ensure that developments meet the needs of the community while preserving the cultural and environmental heritage of neighbourhoods.

The Draft to Kuala Lumpur Local Plan 2040 (PTKL.2040) must deliver sustainable solutions, and authorities must demonstrate the political will to shape KL into a city that is not just economically vibrant but also environmentally sustainable and humanely liveable. KL today stands at a crossroads. It can either live up to its slogan of “A City for All” or continue down a path that could see it become a dystopian slum. The choice is clear, and the time to act is now.

Dr Aniza Abu Bakar is an assistant professor at the Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design in the International Islamic University Malaysia. The views expressed here are solely the writer’s own.