

# Revitalising Kuala Lumpur – bringing back the heartbeat of the city

The year was 1985. Melbourne City Council, together with Victoria state and local stakeholders, executed the 1985 Strategy Plan aimed at reinvigorating and revitalising the city centre. The previous two decades before that had seen the city turn into a “doughnut city”, with a hollowed-out core inner city surrounded by expanding suburban neighbourhoods. Increasing private car usage, a contracting economy over the previous few decades and continued expansion of suburban development were major contributors to the decline. As a result, retail jobs in the inner city disappeared and commercial activities declined. By the late 1980s, the residential population in the city centre had dwindled to only about 2,000 residents.

By contrast, almost four decades on, Melbourne has repeatedly been acclaimed as one of the best cities to work and live in, with about 592,000 people living in the inner city. Since 1985, more than 45% of downtown Melbourne has been rebuilt and repurposed, focusing on bringing back economic and retail activities and, crucially, placing residents in close proximity to the central city. In a 2016 census, by then just 10.2% of residents in Central Melbourne travelled to work by car, with 36.2% on foot and 39.1% catching public transport. Melbourne has successfully transformed from a declining and emptying city core into a vibrant and bustling one.

Kuala Lumpur has flourished as a city since the early 1900s, partly due to tin mining and the development of rubber plantations. Fuelled by urban migration since the early 1950s, it now boasts a population of two million. Its modern and increasingly recognisable skyline is dominated by skyscrapers, from the iconic Petronas Twin Towers to the newest additions Merdeka 118 and the Exchange 106.

Yet, there are signs of the “doughnut city” syndrome creeping in. Kuala Lumpur is showing similar symptoms to Melbourne in the 1980s, of a city at risk of losing its vibrancy and liveability. As workers leave their offices after working hours, parts of the city become lifeless, deprived of economic and social activities after dark. Crucially, those who work in the city are unable to afford living in it. As work from home gains acceptance, many now have the option to not go into town, and they increasingly don't. At the same time, new property development in the city continues to be dominated by luxury malls, expensive skyscrapers and high-end apartments, many of which remain vacant. Concurrently, the expansion of suburbs continues unabated, exacerbating problems such as traffic and pollution, despite already very expensive investments in increasingly complex highways and public transport.

This urban development path will eventually lead to the death of the Kuala Lumpur we know and love. To revitalise the city, there must be a clear focus on bringing people back to live, work and play in the city by restoring the inner city with a dense urban fabric.

What is required is an urban transformation strategy that enhances the city's strengths while addressing its weaknesses.

The timing couldn't be better. Economically, Malaysia has the potential to seize upon geopolitical developments. It can cement itself as a regional hub for the Global South, acting as a centre for research and development, education and a “control tower” of sorts for global businesses to thrive in Southeast Asia. The “rise of the rest”, as opposed to a binary US vs China framework, sees other regions such as the Middle East and South America participating in the global market and future-looking industries extending their presence in Southeast Asia, long seen as a crucial “choking point” for global logistics. Kuala Lumpur is instrumental in facilitating such evolutions.

Socially, our multilingual and relatively young and educated population provides a highly skilled workforce for forward-looking industries, many of which are actively seeking to reconfigure their operations by setting up bases in countries like Malaysia. Geographically, our mild weather and lack of natural disasters are additional plus points.

In short, Kuala Lumpur, as a reflection of Malaysia's unique confluence of culture, architecture and ethnic heritage, should be a natural destination for those of diverse backgrounds to congregate and collaborate.

But for this potential to be realised, the city needs to revitalise its inner core and bring people and economic activity back to the city. To achieve this, we need a new mindset on housing and urban planning.

First and foremost, the creation of suitable housing stock is vital. The prime minister's recent emphasis on development of affordable housing projects in the capital is commendable. The key here is to create a sustainable housing stock that is affordable to people of all walks of life – that is, all workers populating the office towers, malls or skyscrapers, white collar or blue collar workers, should find it possible to live in the inner city. This means greatly expanding the availability of rental housing options, among others. New affordable housing schemes must focus on a rental model instead of an ownership model, catering to low- and middle-income residents, whether urban poor, young families, students or working couples just starting on the career ladder. Now is also the time to explore alternative financing models such as a real estate investment trust to create sustainable financing cycles.

We must also find ways to repurpose the many dilapidated, older buildings by transforming them into housing or recreation options for city dwellers to enjoy. The recent revival of Chinatown is a shining example of this endeavour. Through public grants and private



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initiatives, pockets of that neighbourhood have gradually come to life as spaces are reactivated not just as restaurants and bars, but also for cultural activities such as pop-up libraries and event space for art exhibitions. We need more such projects.

Government-linked companies and government-linked investment companies, which collectively own more than half of the skyscrapers in the city, can play a big role in repurposing many buildings and, by extension, revitalising Kuala Lumpur's inner city. As offices move from older buildings to shiny new builds, the vacant buildings

can be transformed into places that generate a positive impact on their neighbourhoods.

Revitalising Kuala Lumpur's inner city also requires solving its notorious traffic congestion. Instead of continuing to build highways to “link” the suburbs to the city, efforts should turn towards enhancing walkability and other options to move people around the city, for example, in between public transport stations and public walkways. The River of Life project may need improvements, but its concept is commendable. Many more such links between cultural heritage sites, public recreation spaces, and commercial and residential quarters, should be built. These projects need not be expensive, and as long as they are strategically aligned, they will greatly enhance Kuala Lumpur's inner city neighbourhoods. Budget 2025's RM600 million allocation for cultural heritage will contribute towards enhancing the city's appeal and identity. Coupled with efforts to make the city more affordable to live in and more vibrant to spend time in, Kuala Lumpur will continue to be not just an economic hub for the nation, but one that thrives on and engages with its residents.

Starting from this vision and drawing upon lessons learnt from other successful city transformations – Melbourne being just one of them – a strategic plan and policy framework that focuses on the right direction will take shape. Such efforts, led by a strong enabler such as Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) will also require the alignment and involvement of different levels of government, as well as private, non-governmental organisation actors and, not least, local community representatives. After the previous few decades focusing on “starchitecture” resulting in tall, shiny landmarks, Kuala Lumpur's aspiration and identity should now shift to be a shiny example of a mixed-use, dense, well-connected city exhibiting high quality spaces, thriving economic activities and purposeful living. ■

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