



From left: Chung, Maimunah, Tay and Au

Talk of the town

The Edge Malaysia editor emeritus Au Foong Yee moderates a panel featuring Kuala Lumpur's first female mayor Datuk Seri Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Sime Darby Property's head of Business Unit 6 Chung Chai Yin and Veritas Design Group vice president Lillian Tay, as they look into efforts that make the city more liveable and loveable

BY KONG WAI YENG

Au Foong Yee: Datuk Bandar, you were appointed nearly eight months ago as the 15th mayor of Kuala Lumpur. Could you share with us the challenges of your role and goals for the city?

Datuk Seri Maimunah Mohd Sharif: When I was appointed on Aug 15, 2024, I thought I had a month to get to know KL, especially since it has different acts and guidelines compared with Penang, where I was the mayor of the Island City Council. But on my fifth day as Datuk Bandar, there was a flash flood, followed by a landslide in Genting Klang and a sinkhole in Jalan Masjid India the next day. Suddenly, researchers and geologists started appearing on social media, claiming that KL was not safe. So, the very first difficult question I had to answer was: Is KL safe?

I told my colleagues there are three stigmas about the city I would like to do away with: traffic jams, flooding and corruption — all of which are challenges faced by many cities globally. Being a mayor also means understanding what the people really need. That is why I implemented a bottom-up approach, which prioritises public engagement instead of public participation. The former is a monitoring system, ensuring your ideas are being taken into account. I strongly believe in the principle of 4P: public, private, people and partnership. It is very important for us to listen to the private sector but also the voices of the community.

Chai Yin, as Sime Darby is one of Malaysia's leading property developers, how vital is community engagement, especially considering its extensive developments in KL?
Chung Chai Yin: Being a developer these days is very different from when my parents or uncles were looking for a home. It is no longer just about having a roof over your head — we need to create spaces that incorporate sustainability and social responsibility while addressing the needs of both people and the environment. As we continue to face

rapid urbanisation, balancing high-density development with green spaces and affordable housing has become increasingly daunting. However, green technology does not come cheap. While we aspire to promote sustainable solutions, property developers lack sufficient incentives to incorporate them — it doesn't matter whether a building has platinum, gold or silver certification. In other cities, developers receive tax incentives for adopting eco-friendly practices.

Another hurdle in property development is that it remains a male-dominated industry. That said, greater female representation has brought fresh ideas, making KL not just liveable but also loveable. For instance, we have a development near Desa Melawati called KL East. Complementing its nature-focused environment is the KL East Park, a green sanctuary offering 53 acres of lush, naturally regenerating secondary rainforest within the township. As an avid hiker — my usual spot is Taman Tugu — I find the park's air quality really good.

Another example is our KLGCC Resort adjacent to Bukit Kiara Federal Park. The road leading to the resort's International Gallery, which connects the golf course and Bukit Kiara, has been transformed into a biodiversity corridor planted with trees assessed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This corridor aligns with the KL Structure Plan 2040, linking green spaces from Taman Tugu, Lake Gardens, Bukit Gasing and Bukit Kiara to Bukit Lanjan in Selangor. From a lifestyle perspective, we have also created a wellness hub consisting of pickleball and padelball courts, along with a dedicated studio for yoga.

Lillian, as a strong advocate for creative spaces and urban architectural heritage, how would you describe KL as a cultural and conservation hub?

Lillian Tay: KL has made significant progress over the past 25 years, and there is a stronger awareness of the importance of conservation. In the 1970s and 1980s, we lost many of

our heritage buildings. Jalan Ampang, for instance, was previously lined with colonial mansions but today, almost none of that architectural fabric remains. Every one of those villas has been replaced by tall buildings. While some parts of the city have been sacrificed, thankfully, not all is lost. There is now a growing passion for heritage preservation, as reflected in the KL Local Plan, which enforces stricter controls over conservation zones. Historical parts such as Petaling Street, Kampung Baru and the city's original settlements are now much more protected.

There are many buildings that are not as appreciated as they should. Do you think economic considerations are a major hurdle?

Tay: There should be more incentives directly tied to building conservation. One common approach, widely practised in many developed cities, is the transfer of development rights (TDR). This ensures heritage property owners are not deprived of the opportunity to realise the full value of their family-owned building. A great example is New York, where you can find an eight-storey tower next to a church. In such a case, the church transferred its development rights, raised a lot of money and got to keep its structure. It is a win-win situation.

Datuk Bandar, what are your thoughts on this?

Maimunah: I believe TDR was introduced in Penang in the early 2000s, where there is a 'bank' [that allows the government to purchase TDR credits from landowners and then resell them to developers]. This system helps preserve both individual buildings and the overall fabric of the city's heritage. I am pleased to say that the prime minister is also highly supportive of preservation. The Warisan Kuala Lumpur initiative covers key areas, including Dataran Merdeka, Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, Carcosa, Kampung Attap, the River of Life — where the Klang and Gombak rivers converge, next to Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul

Samad, the city's oldest mosque — and Kampung Baru. I once took a journalist with London's *Wanderlust* magazine on a tour around the city. When he saw Masjid Jamek, he said, "This is the place I'm going to use to promote Kuala Lumpur". Asked why, he responded, "Because I can see life; where it all began". This is exactly the reason we need to restore KL's rich narrative and cultural content. We're working closely with Khazanah Nasional and Think City to achieve this.

If you were to backtrack, say, eight months, how would you have defined a liveable and loveable city? Now that you've assumed office, how has your perspective shifted in terms of practicality and what is achievable?

Maimunah: Making sure no one is left behind and promoting inclusivity is crucial. Having served as the under-secretary-general of the United Nations and executive director of the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) from 2018 to 2024 [when I was based in Nairobi, Kenya], I believe KL is very liveable. We have access to essential amenities such as housing, water, electricity, education and roads. However, I still feel a sense of emptiness. That's why, on Aug 26, my birthday, I introduced the hashtag #loveable. We need to give love to the city in order to feel loved in return — and that comes from a shared sense of belonging, whether through cultural activities or the arts.

One weekend, we invited 15,000 people to join us for *iftar* at Dataran Merdeka. When I asked if they love KL, they all said yes. But if that is the case, why was there so much rubbish on the ground? In the end, the attendees cleaned up the *padang* themselves. Making KL liveable is not just about providing citizens with basic necessities; it is about inspiring them to create and innovate. DBKL can be the enabler that helps everyone prosper further.

How are your current efforts to overcome the three stigmas mentioned earlier progressing?

Maimunah: I went on a three-day retreat with all my department heads and senior officers — holding discussions until 3am — to tackle these issues. From that, we identified five key focus areas for this year: planned land development (*permakluman*) — keeping the public informed about government-gazetted developments; climate change and a green connector — creating seamless connectivity to make the city more walkable; community engagement (*komuniti to komuniti* or "K to K") — strengthening connections between communities; heritage preservation — protecting and celebrating KL's cultural and architectural history; and good governance — addressing corruption, not just in the financial sense but also in integrity. If you are supposed to be in the office by 8am, do not show up at 10am.

These five focus areas are designed to drive 15 specific outcomes. I have deliberately assigned responsibility to individuals rather than departments, establishing clear accountability and progress tracking. Looking ahead, 2025 is also a pivotal year for us as Malaysia takes on the Asean chairmanship [which is committed

to strengthening regional peace, stability and prosperity]. With 250 programmes targeted, we hope KLites will play their part in keeping the city safe and clean.

On the topic of KL landscape, like it or not, high-rise buildings are the norm. However, many of them — whether privately owned or managed by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT) — are not properly managed. Are there any plans to rejuvenate them?

Maimunah: Some time ago, I visited several homes under the Program Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) and, beyond the concern of cleanliness, I discovered a major problem with the lifts. I remember replacing 38 of them — some residents would carry heavy motorcycles up to their homes due to security reasons or even urinate in the lifts — and the repairs cost nearly RM22 million. So, I told the residents, "If you take care of the facilities, I will allocate RM300 per floor [to beautify the place]". To my surprise, they transformed the common space outside the lifts into small meeting rooms or libraries. With the right encouragement, we are seeing improvements in civic responsibility. I find the younger generation especially impactful — even children now remind their parents not to litter. Singapore [despite always being used as a comparison] is not clean just because it is a city state, but because of the attitude of the people. When we learn to love Kuala Lumpur, we will naturally take care of our homes and surroundings. Love is a very powerful word.

Chai Yin and Lillian, will the concept of love be incorporated in your upcoming plans and projects?

Chung: We need to educate people on why certain measures are taken — for example, to reduce maintenance costs or prevent damage. To answer Datuk Bandar, I believe everyone loves KL.



Tay: We need to take ownership and go beyond our usual scope of work

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— Datuk Seri Maimunah Mohd Sharif

No matter where we travel in the world, we always want to return here. Change starts with engagement and education.

Tay: That is true. We need to take ownership and go beyond our usual scope of work. As an architect — and one of the agents translating City Hall's vision into reality — we see opportunities for developers to do more within their budget than they initially envisioned. That spirit is very important. Our job is to ensure the buildings align with the Datuk Bandar's goal, whether by benefiting the streetscape or the community. In my 35 years of designing for KL, I have always found that when I present a fair proposal to City Hall, they listen. I have never encountered a closed door at DBKL.

For example, along Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, buildings were set back slightly to create more green spaces, because we recognised it as a high-footfall area. Every structure should reflect its role in making the city better, contributing incrementally to a more vibrant and walkable street. Developers and owners cannot just focus on fences, compounds and security gates — they need to open up and make things better. Taking ownership means acknowledging city-building is a shared responsibility, not just someone else's problem.

What is your biggest pet peeve about KL? Also, name the top cities in the world, apart from KL, that have qualities you admire.

Maimunah: Walkability. I want to make KL more pedestrian-friendly — seamless and free of obstructions — because during my six years in Nairobi, I walked a lot. That is why I'm taking action against buildings that have encroached on public pathways, even shutting down an illegal, unlicensed hotel recently. There is a lot of cleaning up to do. As for cities I admire, I love Vienna — it is incredibly liveable — and also Shenzhen in China.

Chung: I have noticed that not many locals visit the city centre anymore. These days, it is mostly tourists and foreigners. I would love for KLites to rediscover what the city has to offer. Additionally, pedestrian connectivity needs improvement, and we should work on restoring the urban fabric. I also enjoy visiting Seoul because it is innovative, with many impressive biodiversity initiatives in place.

Tay: I have been waiting to answer this! My office was in front of the Petronas Twin Towers for the past 30 years, and I have watched every building erected around them. My ultimate pet peeve is this: Why wasn't more of KL built by Malaysians? The centre of KL has been shaped largely by non-Malaysian architects. We have never fully believed in our own skills.

Look at Maimunah — she led UN-Habitat, a global organisation with authority over cities worldwide. Yet, we still lack confidence in our homegrown talent. If more Malaysian architects had lived and grown up in the city, they might have been more sensitive or attuned to what the streets truly require. There needs to be greater participation in shaping the heart of the city, wherever it may be — perhaps even in Kampung Baru.

My other favourite city in the world is definitely New York, where I formerly worked. Why? Because of the amazing Central Park — an incredible green space that has remained uncompromised since it was built in the mid to late 19th century. The government had the foresight to protect it and other pockets of green, allowing dense, high-rise developments to be built around them. At the end of the day, it is about setting the right vision from the start and having the courage to correct shortfalls or missteps along the way. We just need a stronger sense of ownership over what's home. And for most of us here, KL is home. ■



The River of Life project aims to transform the Klang River and Gombak River Basin areas into a dynamic and habitable waterfront icon