

A Budak Flat's take on urban rejuvenation

About a month ago, my editor forwarded me an article on the staggering RM70 million in rental arrears owed to Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) and asked what should be done with the errant tenants.

"Eviction," I said.

"So cruel," she replied.

I didn't think so at the time. But after having some time to reflect and reconnect as I travelled to the neighbouring archipelago, I found myself questioning that cold pragmatism. After all, I too grew up in a People's Housing Programme (PPR) flat in the 1990s — the Pekeliling Flats to be exact. These government flats housed families like mine who needed affordable accommodation in the city. Just because I have managed to climb the economic ladder does not mean that I should forget where I came from or dismiss the struggles of those still fighting to stay afloat.

(Cue Aman RA's *Budak Flat* ~ "Budak Flat, bangun!")

The harsh reality is this: if tenants cannot afford the modest monthly rent of RM124, eviction cannot be the viable solution. We would simply be pushing the poor further out to the margins, creating homelessness rather than solving housing problems.

Instead of eviction (which DBKL is not considering, hence the arrears), I propose that DBKL consider a radical alternative for those who really cannot afford the rent: grant qualified tenants the right to remain in their

homes and provide meaningful responsibilities, opportunities or a job placement that would enable them to pay rents in the future, if not the accumulated arrears.

This is not about free housing, nor should it enable dependency. It is about recognising that stable housing is the foundation upon which people can build better lives, find steady work and contribute to their communities.

Tenants who genuinely cannot afford rent due to financial hardship can be offered positions as block managers for their PPR buildings. They would be responsible for maintaining corridors, staircases, lifts, lighting, drainage and other common areas.

The current state of many PPR flats is frankly embarrassing for a city with Kuala Lumpur's international profile. By employing residents directly, DBKL could reduce costs paid to third-party contractors while providing stable income to struggling families and instilling a sense of purpose and pride in belonging to a thriving community. Wouldn't that be a huge change compared to the neglected state of PPR flats and huge rental arrears?

(I'm channelling the late Miss Whitney while I write this ~ "Give them a sense of pride to make it easier ...")

There is a real difference between receiving charity and dignity in earning your place through meaningful work. Residents would develop skills, take pride in their environment and have a genuine stake in their

community's well-being. Performance-based incentives could reward the most effective block managers, while training and support would help those struggling to meet expectations.

Of course, the programme should target only those facing genuine financial hardship, not blanket debt forgiveness for those who simply choose not to pay. The latter should most certainly be chased to pay up or be evicted.

The rejuvenation of the city's public housing is part of the meaningful urban reform Malaysia needs. From traffic congestion to public housing and from crime to pollution, our cities face

challenges that require creative solutions that cut the wastage of taxpayers' money.

By empowering residents to take ownership of their living spaces, we could transform neglected public housing into communities that residents are proud to call home.

During a recent visit to Johor Bahru for *The Edge*-HSBC Forum on the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (JS-SEZ), my colleagues Luqman Amin and Sam Fong and I saw first-hand the city's contrast as we strolled along Legaran Segget, a pedestrian walkway along Sungai Segget that runs through the city centre.

Suffice it to say that we witnessed first-hand the effects of neglect on the environment and health of aquatic animals when urban planning falls short. Old buildings, if not conserved as part of our heritage, should be demolished and redeveloped, and certainly not left to rot.

But I love JB! Where else in Malaysia can one catch the skyline of a First World country and see Legaran Segget at the same time?

The juxtaposition of First World proximity and Third World infrastructure challenges in JB reminded me that we cannot build truly world-class cities while ignoring the communities that need support the most.

The Madani government has an opportunity to pioneer urban reform that improves lives. The RM70 million in rental arrears represents more than just debt. It represents families struggling to survive in an increasingly expensive city. How we respond to that struggle defines the kind of society we want to be. **E**

