



A New Kampung Baharu With The Old Charm.

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Someone said that Kampung Baharu is indeed unique. It's where you can buy a Ferrari as well as a songkok. In fact, it's not unusual for the songkok-wearing Ferrari owner to park his car next to one of Kampung Baharu's famed nasi lemak stalls while he savours the quintessential Malaysian dish.

Only in Kampung Baharu will you find a wooden kampong house, complete with dishevelled front yard, snuggling up to a modern multi-storey office of shiny steel and glass. Only in Kampung Baharu will you get a whiff of black pepper steak mingled with bakso while a lass in skinny jeans chows down next to an old man in sarong and ketayap at one of the many stalls that are strung out along its little roads.

But if Kampung Baharu is so unique and dear to Malaysians, especially Malays living in Kuala Lumpur, then why should it make way for development?

The proposed development of Kampung Baharu has been mooted for decades. Strategically located in the heart of the city and with close proximity to Kuala Lumpur City Centre

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(KLCC), it's a developer's ultimate dream.

The launch of the KL City Plan 2020 plan by Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), with a special volume devoted to Kampong Baharu, is proof of the government's earnestness this time round.

If the plan is accepted and gazetted, Kampong Baharu will be transformed into a commercial area, tourist and cultural centre and a primary urban residential area by 2020.

Will history and tradition be swept away in the name of commerce and progress? Or would culture and collective memory be preserved or reincarnated? At this point, we should set out just exactly what is at stake.

Currently, Kampong Baharu is divided into two areas. One is the Malay Agriculture Settlement (MAS) and the other are non-MAS. The MAS has a land size of 225 acres while the non-MAS area is 153 acres. The non-MAS area comprises of Chow Kit, Dang Wangi, Sultan Ismail, Kampong Sungai Bharu and the PKNS flats.

However, would-be developers should be aware of another issue involving the administration of the MAS land in Kampong Baharu. It is supposedly still under the Selangor state government land code as stipulated in the Selangor Government Gazette no. 50, dated 18 January 1951.

An interesting point to note is that Kelab Sultan Sulaiman, a special club for Malays established in 1909, still belongs to the Selangor state government.

And recently, as if to underscore its rights, Selangor Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, said he would form a team of town and country planning experts as well as provide RM50,000 to research various issues concerning the development of the land.

This was not taken kindly by the Federal Territory Ministry, who in turn had told him to stay out of Kampong Baharu.

We wait for Khalid's rejoinder.

But in the meantime...

While the big boys begin to battle, what about the people of Kampong Baharu? The big question: Are they ready for change?

Azizah Salleh is passionate about her kampong. She grew up here, still lives in the family compound and is custodian of the family home since her mother passed away. However, she notes that her family is receptive to development, especially if it benefits the future generations.

"We can build low rise apartments for our family members to live in. And sell or rent out some of the units for income. We love this house but in the future it may not be practical to live here, like this," explains Azizah, gesturing to the house.

Azizah's niece, Sharida Shariff, a young mother of two, moved out after she married. She doesn't rule out the possibility of going back to Kampong Baharu one day, "It doesn't matter whether this place changes or remains the same. I don't mind going back. What's important is the legacy and it's also conveniently located in the middle of KL."

Similarly, Mohd Rashidi Abu Bakar, 38, has left home for several years now. He's happy living in Banting but Kampong Baharu is still close to his heart. "Due to the high cost of living in the city, I'd rather remain where I'm now. But it's not impossible for me to go back."

If there's something that Rashidi wishes for, which is echoed by many of the younger generation, is better living conditions in Kampong Baharu. Those living conditions go beyond Starbucks or air-conditioned supermarkets to essential necessities like safety.

"My parents felt it was safe for me to go to the pasar malam by myself when I was little but I will not allow my children to do so today," says another young lady who grew up with strong roots in Kampong Baharu, but has also since moved away.

Even so, change is difficult especially if it involves the delicate matter of harta pusaka. It is a subject that has to be tread carefully especially among family members.

The Honorary Secretary of the Malay Agriculture Settlement (MAS) Administrative Board, Shamsuri Suradi knows well the problems of trying to change the landscape of Kampong Baharu.

"I am not against development but I think we first have to settle the issues of harta pusaka. There's no point talking about development if we are still fighting among ourselves and cannot come to an agreement," he says.

Nevertheless, Shamsuri cannot deny his nostalgia for Kampong Baharu. "Personally I would like this kampong to remain as it is. But we must clean up the place and make it more organised. It is so haphazard now."

Having Your Cake and Eating It Too... A Sustainable Future for Kampong Baharu?

If DBKL aspires to turn Kampong Baharu into a showcase kampong, it should consider the suggestion by Dr Christopher Teh Boon Sung of University Putra Malaysia to create a sustainable development, including bringing back agriculture to the area.

Says Dr Teh, "Kampong Baru is seen by many as symbolic of Malay lifestyle and culture so why not keep it that way? Instead of having new buildings, it can be planned as the green hub in the city for urban agriculture. Incentives can be given to its residents who utilise their lands for agriculture.

"Even rooftops of current buildings (and vacant areas) can be used for planting food. That way, Kampong Baharu residents need not fear that their lands will be taken away and KL can be an exemplary world class city of having a large area dedicated to urban agriculture for city food consumption. Kampong Baharu can continue to attract tourists with its agriculture landscape within a city."

Dr Teh cites Cuba and Singapore as good examples of urban agriculture practice, mainly using hydroponics.

But will the new generation let their elders decide on the future?

At the dialogues which were organised at Kampong Baharu by Titiwangsa MP, Dr Lo' Lo' Ghazali, and another at DBKL, the Kampong Baharu residents and landowners present were mainly senior citizens.

All were obviously unhappy with the plans for their kampong but for different reasons. Some wanted the status quo to remain. While others were for development if the returns are good. Yet others expressed their wish for a Kampung Baru

Development Corporation to be established with capable residents who are industry professionals governing the township.

Judging by the sentiments, it will be a tough battle for DBKL and the developers to change the kampong. It'll also be a daunting task for the landowners to get everyone to be on the same page.

But as Dr Lo' Lo' says, "We have to move with the times. We can't avoid progress but let it not be at the expense of the kampong people. We hope to reach a win-win situation."

The deadline for the residents' feedback is August 31 – an important day for the country and now, for Kampong Baharu as well. 