Merancang Bandar Ber'jiwa'

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River of Life masterplan

Planning for city with soul

THE River of Life project is bound to revitalise and transform the Klang and Gombak rivers along the 10.7km stretch within the city centre.

Significantly, Kuala Lumpur is the Malay name for a confluence where two muddy rivers meet.

A much earlier proposal to rehabilitate the rivers and exploit their economic value was invested under the KL Linear City project, which did not take off.

Would it be a tall order now to transform these rivers into iconic waterfronts on par with waterways in cities like Amsterdam, London, Melbourne and Paris by 2020?

Perhaps a reality check is in order. What we have are two small rivers, no wider than a canal. On dry days, it would be difficult to row a small boat over some shallow parts. Moreover, the river is treated as open sewage by those lacking in civic consciousness.

Inevitably, rain falls at regular intervals, washing away dust and debris and swelling the rivers after a downpour. Until the SMART tunnel project was completed, flooding was a common occurrence.

The colour of the Klang river has remained dark yellow, much like our famous teh tarik, from the time it was discovered in Ampang in 1857 that led to the founding of Kuala Lumpur.

The International Masterplanning Competition that attracted 23 bids with five shortlisted for voting by the public will ensure the success of the river beautification and development.

However, the river cleaning component may prove to be as challenging as maintaining a first world infrastructure in our third world mentality. It will have to start with the rivers upstream by educating the people and controlling the industries.

It would also be meaningless to showcase pristine water within the city but allow the river to remain at its present deplorable condition downstream. As such, the State government and local authorities should act in tandem to upgrade the entire length of the Klang River.

The river can come to life with dukes and activities such as river cruises, motorised barges and houseboats for tourists. The riverbanks should be paved for walking, jogging and cycling.

Marathon runners can run here instead of on city roads, disrupting traffic. With some imagination instead of money, any local authority can create a huge media buzz by making good use of rivers that run through their jurisdiction.

On stretches with little economic value, the riverbanks can be planted with Banyan trees. These unique trees have roots sprouting from their branches and upon reaching the ground, would grow into solid trunks.

As such, the branches can be led to grow sideways, running parallel to the river. It is Nature in reverse. Planting the first tree and announcing to the world it will eventually be spread over a kilometre would generate great interest.

Over the past few decades, I have enjoyed watching the majestic rain trees at the Taiping Lake Gardens with their huge branches arching across the road, almost touching the lake. This glorious image is etched permanently in my mind, deep in my soul.

We should carry on replanting trees to green our earth. It is also time to plant our love and history on selected riverbanks by planting 'family trees'. For an appropriate fee, a person can pay and plant a tree that will grow for a few hundred years.

Every place is unique with its own history and memories when it comes alive. However, if local history is sidelined and contributions that made Kuala Lumpur what it is today are whitewashed, the city will be effectively neutered.

Whether the project is the River of Life or City of Life, we vote goes to the master planner that incorporates soul. People and nature enrich lives more than anything else.

YS Chan

VIBRANT WATERFRONT: The proposed river beautification project area