

Transforming the Klang river

By Wong King Wai

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The Klang River, meandering 120km through Selangor and Kuala Lumpur towards the Straits of Malacca, has had its glorious days. Once an all-important highway of commerce, years of rapid development have sadly turned the waterway into nothing more than a large ghastly looking, garbage-filled drain devoid of any hint of heritage asset or economic potential.



The water quality of the river is now at Level 4

This is set to change, if all goes well, with a plan of Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim. He is spearheading a move to rehabilitate and develop the Klang River with the objective of raising the state's economic and tourism profile.

The plan, which was a significant feature of Selangor's stimulus package unveiled last year, got off to a rousing start on March 13 with the official launch by Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor.

One may be forgiven for being cynical about the project's success because after much fanfare and hype, the high-profile multi-billion ringgit Kuala Lumpur Linear City never took off.

Featured in that ambitious project, unveiled back in the 1990s, was a mixed development of hotel, retail, office and apartment units, complete with a landscaped park. All these were to have come up atop sections of the Klang River in KL. The project, which necessitated the relocation of squatters, also had a river cleaning and flood mitigation component.

Two-thirds of the Klang River is in Selangor and Khalid knows only too well that it is unrealistic to rehabilitate and develop the entire 80km of the river at one go. So it will be done in sections, beginning with a 21km stretch towards Port Klang which comes under the ambit of the Klang Municipal Council.

Key to the project is that funding will be via private funding initiatives, points out Iliyas Jamil, economic development officer for the Selangor Menteri Besar's office, who is

coordinating the project. In short, although the state is driving the project, the rehabilitation and development cost will be borne by the private sector.

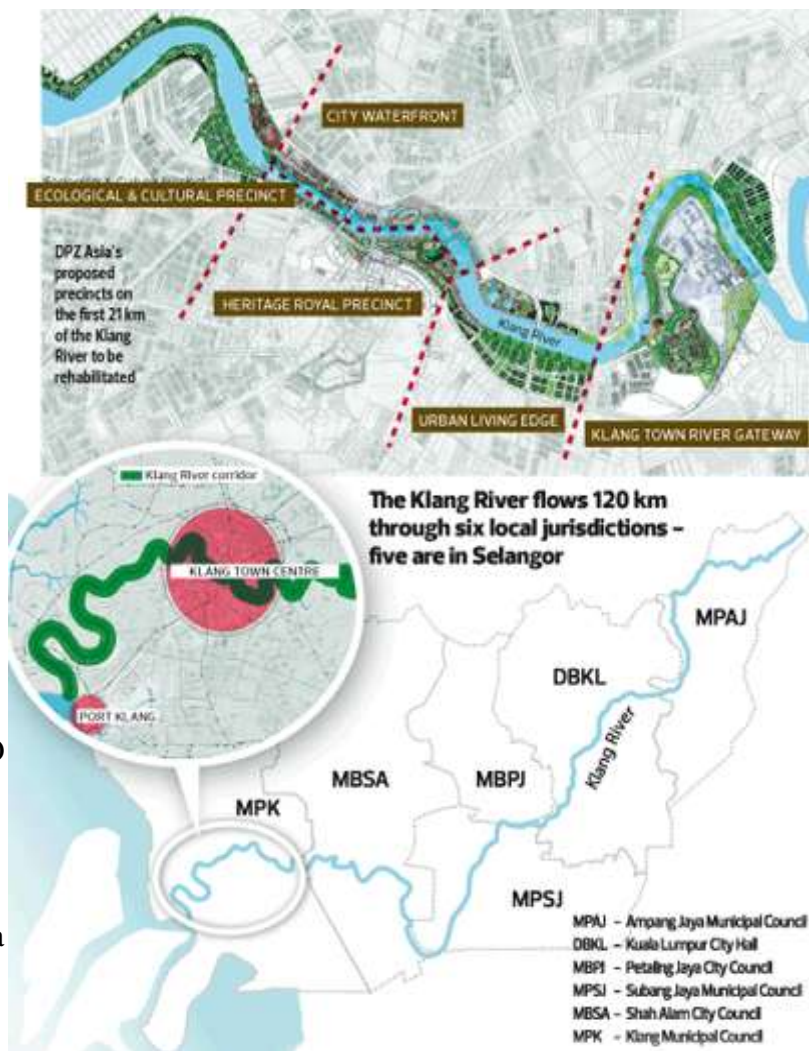
Initial studies, Iliyas tells City & Country, have shown that the development potential of the banks of the 80km of the river in Selangor could ring up a gross development value of RM50 billion over 15 to 20 years and create 150,000 jobs.

Premium product

Properties fronting water generally go down well with the market. Property consultants contacted by City & Country concur that properties on clean bodies of water generally command a premium, as seen in developments with lake, river and beach frontage.

KGV-Lambert Smith Hampton (Malaysia) director Anthony Chua says: “In general, all developments with lake and beach frontage do well, and if river frontage has clean water, it should be able to fetch a premium.”

Henry Butcher Marketing COO Tang Chee Meng points to numerous highly prestigious waterfront projects overseas. Waterfront residential properties, he adds, command a premium while certain retail properties such as food and beverage outlets will also do well.



Khong & Jaafar managing director Elvin Fernandez says it is almost a universal axiom that properties fronting clean bodies of water do well. He says that depending on the water quality and the view, the values of high-end waterfront residential properties can go up as much as 20% to 50%.

Proposed master plan

The Klang River rehabilitation and development project master plan is being fine tuned. Kamal Ariffin Zaharin tells City & Country an inventory of a 50m border on both sides of the 21km stretch of river shows that some 20 tracts are suitable for beautification, development or redevelopment. Kamal is director of DPZ Asia, an architectural and planning firm headquartered in the US.

The multiple-award winning architect is the master planner, while three other companies — TSS-Mako Engineering, GJA Engineering & Construction and Wessex Water I-Bhd Consortium — have been chosen for the rehabilitation and development of the river.

The three were among 37 firms that responded to an advertisement placed by the state government seeking proposals. Of the 37, only 12 firms submitted proposals.

Currently, the water in the Klang River measures Level 4, and the state government aspires to raise the quality to Level 2, clean enough to swim in.

Genesis of the project

DPZ Asia's Kamal, 44, studied architecture in the University of Miami, Florida. He spent many years abroad, working on projects in the US, the Philippines, Australia, Vietnam and China. He has won nine international planning competitions, including designs for China's waterfront cities in Haikou and Dalian, Taiyuan — the capital city of Shanxi province — and an airport city in Chongqing.

Kamal is excited at the thought of a vibrant riverscape. His vast experience has taught him that a series of discoveries and storytelling are important in planning a project such as this. He believes one must bring variety to an area so it is not uniform and sterile.

He proposes the river in the Klang city area be divided into precincts that will set the tone and ambience along the 21km stretch of the river. These precincts could be loosely classified as ecological and cultural, city centre and heritage areas.

A river has to have many characteristics that will allow people to experience the city in a new way, Kamal says, adding that more details will emerge with the finalisation and approval of the plan.

At this point, what is clear is that the Klang River will indeed have a fair chance to recapture its past glory.

Rivers brought back to life

The rehabilitation and beautification of rivers has proved to benefit both the economy and the environment. One of the most talked-about success stories in the world is the 5.84km Cheonggyecheon River project in Seoul, South Korea, which cost 386 billion won (RM927 million).

Once an unsightly and smelly river, it was completely roofed by a highway in the 1960s to ease growing traffic congestion and to hide it from public view.

In 2002, Seoul's elected major Lee Myung-Bak decided to bring the river back to life. The massive operation required numerous meetings with the small and medium businesses that would be affected by the rehabilitation exercise, explaining to them the benefits of the project. Special equipment was used to demolish the highway to ensure minimal noise pollution. Not only that, some 96% of the highway's concrete and asphalt were recycled. As a result, the municipal council had to improve the public transport system to ensure that traffic congestion was kept to a minimum. Traffic management was improved, using various methods such as one-way street systems, bus-only lanes, downtown shuttle buses and increased subway capacity.

The Cheonggyecheon River does not have a source, so about 120,000 tonnes of underground water and water from the Han River are pumped into it daily. With the project completed in 2005, tourism improved. In 2008, it was recorded that 75.5 million people visited the area. About 18.1 million, or 24%, were foreigners. Property prices have also increased 30% to 50% in areas along the river depending on the location.

In Malaysia, the about RM300 million rehabilitation of the Melaka River has enhanced property values and increased the number of tourists to the historic city.

Leo Kee Wah, property consultant and senior executive of valuation and real estate at Henry Butcher Malaysia (Malacca), says properties that ranged from 200 to 5,000 sq ft in the old town area, like Jonker Street, Heeren Street and Lorong Hang Jebat, were valued at RM300,000 to RM400,000 before the river was rehabilitated. Values have since increased to RM800,000 and more. "Melaka has attracted a lot of investors due to the increase in tourists," says Leo. Many of the restaurants along the river have renovated the back of the buildings to look like the front to take advantage of the waterfront, which does not smell anymore.

Another property consultant who declined to be named says the commercial and residential properties along the river, which range from 1,000 to 5,000 sq ft in size or more, were valued at around RM200,000 to RM1 million before the rehabilitation project. Values have since jumped to between RM500,000 and as much as RM3 million. While there wasn't much activity on the rubbish-filled river, now, tourists can take a river cruise and see the highlights of Melaka's heritage, when it was a key port of the peninsula.

The vibrancy of the historic city, and that of Seoul, has shown that the rehabilitation of rivers can translate into value-added propositions for both real estate and tourism. — By Wong King Wai