

Booming Brickfields and Bangsar

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It's a melting pot of history and culture but will the future be kind to this thriving urban neighbourhood?

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I've always loved Brickfields. I once had the honour to share some digs with several self-professed underground musicians; we rented a few apartments in Brickfields. Some of them felt such affinity for the place that they coined our little community the Republik of Brickfields and went on to form a band with that name too.

We used to take pride in our old walk-up apartment block having probably the most balconies out of all the apartments in the country. Our three-bedroom unit had no less than four balconies to hang out on! Great for watching street traffic, such as filmmaker/activist Hishamuddin Rais whistling as he walked from his apartment in Seputeh to his office in Bangsar Utama.

Urban legend had it that this apartment block was designed by (now Dato' Seri) Samy Vellu when he was starting out as a draughtsman. And when you walked that street you tried not to catch a whiff of frangipani, as the Malay graveyard was just behind. As they say, if you smell frangipani, you might have company!



Where else but Brickfields do you have six spiritual houses representing the country's major religions clustered around the same street, appropriately named Jalan Berhala? These include the Lutheran Church, Buddhist Maha Vihara temple, Sri Kandaswamy temple, Church of the Lady of Fatima, Surau Brickfields and San Jiau Tang Chinese temple.

I used to eat nasi goreng Cina with beer at the old Pines restaurant though today the Pines restaurant is no more. It has been demolished to build a new block of shop-offices, as developed by DBKL and MRCB.

Indeed many changes are afoot in Brickfields and the lands neighbouring Jalan Bangsar. What would you expect from a strategic location, sandwiched between two huge centres of gravity: KL Sentral, and Midvalley-KL Eco City?

Two big projects in the pipeline are on the parcels that once held the Unilever factory as well as the Public Health Institute. These would add two more commercial centres to this already compact location.

The 20-acre Unilever parcel between Jalan Bangsar and Jalan Maarof is owned by Pelaburan Hartanah Bhd (PHB). PHB submitted a masterplan to DBKL to develop the parcel into a high-end integrated commercial mixed development. MRCB has been tipped as the likely developer but PHB is keeping mum on this.



The Public Health Institute land off Jalan Bangsar, meanwhile, was acquired by SP Setia as part of a land swap in return for building a replacement facility in the developer's township in Setia Alam, north of Shah Alam.

These 50 acres of beautiful elevated land are located between Bangsar Utama and the colonial-era bungalows of Federal Hill. Called Setia Federal Hill, the project is reported to be a mixed development comprising luxury residential apartments, offices, performing arts centre, and retail mall. It is planned to be launched next year, said president and CEO Tan Sri Liew Kee Sin recently.



Aloft KL Sentral hotel will open on Mar 22.

KL Sentral itself will see several projects taking shape over the next few years. These include Aloft Hotel (a “fresh and fun” brand under the Starwood stable) due to open on Mar 22, Nu Sentral mall which will finally connect the Monorail station to the LRT station, 1 Sentrum office tower next to it, as well as 348 Sentral which will house Shell as well as the Ascott Sentral serviced apartments.

Just across the road, Bank Rakyat’s Twin Towers, on the corner of Jalan Bangsar and Jalan Travers, is very close to completion. It offers about 1.3mil sq ft of office space to be taken up mainly by Bank Rakyat itself.

On KL Sentral's northern side, projects under construction include the new headquarters for CIMB investment bank, the St Regis hotel and apartments, Q Sentral office tower, as well as Sentral Residences.

LRT and KL Monorail owner Syarikat Prasarana Negara Bhd is also due to announce the develop of its two-acre land parcel near its Tun Sambanthan monorail station where there is currently an abandoned building.

The hotly debated redevelopment of the old Brickfields police station, meanwhile, is the result of a land swap deal between City Hall and lesser known property developer, Syarikat Primamuda Holdings Sdn Bhd. Proposals include a 34-storey block of service apartments, and two office blocks.

The Establishment KL

Another project less connected with the government and due to launch soon is The Establishment KL. Located on Jalan Ang Seng and Jalan Ang Seng 3 in Brickfields, this project entails a 41-storey building with over 600 apartments, together with a hotel.

The Establishment is the maiden project of Keystone Developments (whose owners can be traced to the construction industry in Malaysia and Singapore).



Artist's impression of an Alila hotel room in The Establishment.

This freehold project will feature small apartments ranging in size from nearly 500 sq ft to about 900 sq ft, and priced from over RM400,000 (at about RM900 per sq ft). No car parking spaces are included for the price.

The project's key feature is that it is directly connected by a pedestrian bridge to the Bangsar LRT station stations. According to a source close to the project, it already has a development order for the bridge.

The hotel in the project is tipped to be run by Singapore-incorporated Alila Hotels and Resorts. Alila's Bali hotels are said to boast of room rates that are one of the highest on the island, and has hosted celebrities such as Justin Bieber and Hugh Jackman.

Even though its Bangsar LRT connection is touted, The Establishment is very much located on the Brickfields side. "The surroundings for the project may be not the prettiest but its developers are hoping that it may be one of the catalysts for this area," says the source.

Indeed, it looks as if it will only be a matter of time before Brickfields is populated with stylish new developments that reflect its posh Bangsar neighbours.

Of course, several have voiced concerns that these new developments would push traffic congestion to uncomfortable levels. The area does benefit from a wealth of transit stations, such as KL Sentral and the Bangsar and Abdullah Hukum LRT stations. In fact, according to SP Setia's plans for KL Eco City, the developer will build an extra train station at the Abdullah Hukum LRT station to accommodate a stop for the KTM Komuter service that runs to Petaling Jaya and Klang.

Many say however, that taking just the existing LRT and other stations into consideration, these haven't significantly eased traffic congestion in the area.

Also, even though Brickfields is somewhat rough round the edges, its history makes it unique. Besides being the place where bricks were produced for the shanty town that once made up Kuala Lumpur to its wealth of religious houses, Brickfields is also home to various historic organisations, eg Malaysian Association for the Blind, YMCA, Methodist College and the Kuala Lumpur Girl Guide's Association.



One relic from the old days, for example, are the rows of early government houses, known as "100 Quarters". Sadly, these buildings, together with the football field that used to be the site for festive markets, are slated to be redeveloped by MRCB as part of a privatisation exchange plan.

Of course, many of these projects are owned by the government or being developed by government linked companies, so industry watchers speculate that not much progress will be made on them until after the general elections.

In the meantime, it is exciting to see the entrance of slick and glossy places for us to look cool and sexy in, from patisseries and wellness lawns to world-class offices and white marbled bathrooms. But besides the history, there's an air of freewheeling vibrancy to Brickfields, and it would be a pity if these, together with any fields or temples, were to be lost in this process.