

Food for thought
ALAN TONG

stabiz@thestar.com.my



The sign of an advanced city

"THE sign of an advanced city is not when the poor have their own cars, but it is when the rich use public transportation."

I was struck by this comment made by the renowned placemaking expert Gil Penalosa, when he shared his views at the World Class Sustainable Cities (WCSC) 2017 Conference in Kuala Lumpur last August.

His remark has nicely summed up the beauty and importance of public transportation and sustainable mobility in moving a nation forward.

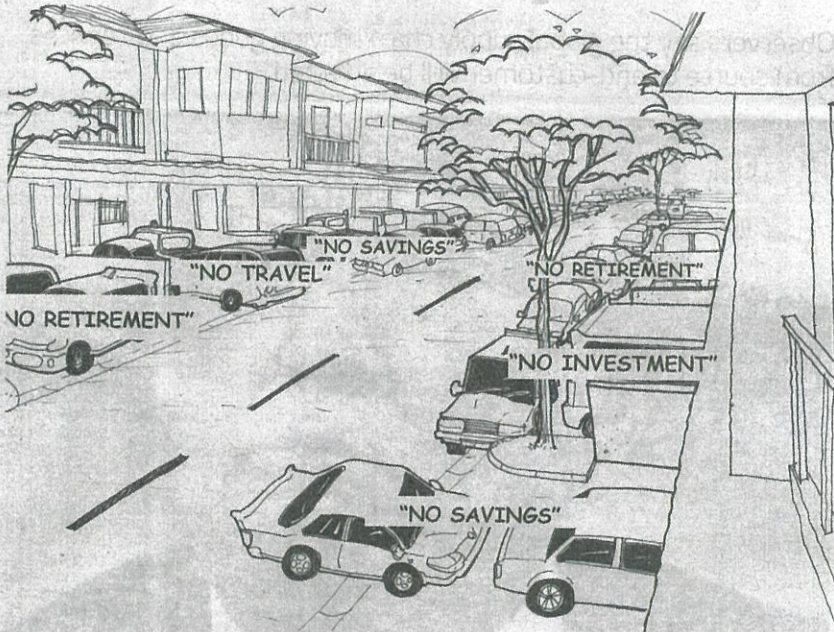
Take a look at some of the advanced cities around the world, such as New York, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, London, Seoul, Sydney, Hong Kong and Singapore. Their public transportation system offers easy, safe, convenient and economical ways of travelling around the cities. It is common to see people commute using public transport in those cities regardless of their social status.

Prior to his presentation at WCSC, Penalosa walked around Kuala Lumpur to explore several neighbourhoods and incorporated photos into his presentation.

There were various congested roads shown in the photos. Cars were seen parked all over the place in front of houses and public roads, making it difficult for the public to move around.

"Visiting the neighbourhoods of Kuala Lumpur, I see two to three cars in front of each house. I believe they can't be saving much for their retirement and don't even have enough to take long holidays!" Penalosa commented in his presentation.

Penalosa has a relevant point to make. When I mentioned we should first secure a house before buying a car in my previous arti-



cles, there was feedback saying that they can't do without a car in Kuala Lumpur and some of our major cities. On the other hand, we actually can't do with a car, as it makes people poorer.

As I have always shared, we have been spending too much on depreciating items such as cars instead of appreciating assets, such as houses and other long-term investments. It is common to see youngsters or fresh graduates immediately commit to a car when they get a job.

Car loan instalments, petrol and maintenance costs can easily take

up 50% or more of their salary, leaving them with very little income for savings or investing in a house and other assets.

Solution

A well-planned public transportation system can be a solution to that situation.

Public transport should offer a convenient and economical way of travelling around a city. Kuala Lumpur should move towards this goal with more MRT lines and the availability of ride-sharing services, such as Uber, Grab, etc.

motor vehicles accounted for 14.6% of our total household debts. If we can reduce our dependence on private vehicles, imagine the savings we can put towards our investment and retirement.

The government should consider cooling off measures on car loans and credit card spending, to encourage people to use public transportation and to be in a healthy financial condition for retirement.

The tax income generated from car sales can be channelled to build more public transport infrastructure. It will help to increase our public transportation modal share from around 25% currently, to 40% by the year 2030, as targeted by the Land Public Transport Commission.

In fact, we should increase this target. In other vibrant cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore, public transportation modal shares are about 90% and 67% respectively.

Investing in public transportation infrastructure equates to investing in quality life, which ultimately supports economic development.

Imagine a day when all of us can easily travel to work or for leisure in Kuala Lumpur by using public transport just like other advanced cities in the world. We will have much more time and money to save for more meaningful events, and increase the overall happiness of the people.

As long as the authorities set the direction right by putting in the right systems, this can be a reality and not just a dream.

Datuk Alan Tong has over 50 years of experience in property development. He is also the group chairman of Bukit Kiara Properties. For feedback, please email feedback@fiabci-asiapacific.com.