

By MENG YEW CHOONG  
and BRENDA CH'NG  
metro@thestar.com.my

FIFTY-FIVE percent of the world's population live in cities and towns, and this number is growing by the day.

Recognising the importance of cities, the UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme) designates every October (urbanOctober.unhabitat.org) as a month to highlight the importance of urban centres, with the focus on urban sustainability.

Last year was deemed one of the most successful ever Urban October on record, with a total of 61 countries and 107 cities marking World Habitat Day and its equally important counterpart, World Cities Day on Oct 31.

Established in 1978, UN-Habitat is the United Nations programme that was the upshot of the First UN Conference on Human Settlements and Sustainable Urban Development held in Vancouver, Canada, in 1976.

According to UN-Habitat, urbanisation comes with pluses and minuses. While it presents manifold opportunities for economic growth and development, it also comes with demographic, environmental, economic and social challenges.

According to one of the most renowned architects this generation, Jahn Gehl, urban sustainability goes hand-in-hand with a high degree of "walkability," "cyclability" and good integration with public transport rather than an environment that revolves around the automobile.

For more than 40 years, Gehl has helped to transform urban environments all over the world through his extensive research on how people actually use — or potentially use — the spaces where they live and work.

One of the six books he authored, *Cities for People* has been translated into Malay and published here by Universiti Malaya which shows that creating liveable cities is increasingly being taken seriously by Malaysian town planners, administrators and the local councils.

In this book, Gehl makes the argument on why the creation or recreation of cityscapes must be done on a human scale so that cities can truly be human-centric, rather than car-centric as is the case in numerous countries including Malaysia.



George Town's restored Fountain Garden is now a prime attraction, proving that old can be gold.

## Making placemaking commonplace

### UN-Habitat and local NGO aim to help public urban spaces thrive and stay sustainable

#### Sustainable goals

The UN's Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals 11 (SDG11) "to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" naturally places sustainable urbanisation as one of the key priorities when it comes to setting global agendas for development.

The adoption of the new Urban Agenda by the UN in 2016 led many national and local governments to start their journey on the path towards making SDG11 a reality.

However, it is no walk in the park, as the transformative process can only proceed by engaging a broad range of stakeholders, some of whom have competing interests or perspectives, even if on the sur-

face everyone will agree there is a need to create more sustainable cities.

According to UN-Habitat, many cities "lack the capacity to enact this change."

In this regard, ensuring cities have the capacity, capability and tools to address the challenges of urbanisation is now recognised as one of the most pressing global challenge as it has so many repercussions, especially in halting climate change.

Thankfully, many initiatives have been put in place here to get Malaysia up to speed in terms of capacity building and knowledge enhancement, or just simply to raise awareness on the roles of cities in helping the country achieve its SGDs.

All over the world, many cities, are taking charge themselves in terms of implementing measures to curb climate change. One such example is the state of California, which is implementing some tough measures to curb vehicle emissions.

In Malaysia, we can be right proud of hosting the 9th World

Urban Forum in Kuala Lumpur last year.

Earlier this year, Urbanise Malaysia (Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Cities and Community Wellbeing, an outfit under Housing and Local Government Ministry) held the Malaysia Urban Forum 2019, also in Kuala Lumpur.

The event also saw 11 local universities presenting their ideas and urban solutions for Malaysian cities 100 years from now.

#### Turning dead space into lived-in place

When it comes to reclaiming space from motor vehicles, or just making a piece of dead space — such as Kuala Lumpur's Medan Pasar in recent times — alive, more urban planners need to be up to speed with this enterprise called "placemaking."

The contemporary definition of placemaking: "it is a multifaceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces that capitalise on a local community's assets, inspiration and potential,



The addition of a seemingly simple contraption such as swings can lend a simple and understated appeal to a place like Medan Pasar, Kuala Lumpur.



Placemaking may also include arts, whether installations or performances, as part of its appeal, such as this Butoh dance by the Nyoba Kan group at Masjid Jamek LRT station in Kuala Lumpur as part of Arts on the Move, a joint initiative between Think City and Prasarana Malaysia.