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Zuraida aims to redefine public housing

Part of the new KPKT minister's plan will also include higher participation of women in the industry

by P PREM KUMAR & AFIQ AZIZ

FOR a century and a half, women have been proving their passion and talent for design and architecture in a male-dominated profession.

It is a paradox that even in the 21st century, architecture can still be a challenging career path for women as gender inequality continues to be among the main issues.

However, there are female architects who are constantly challenging the male dominion within the profession, while making a profound impact on the entire landscape of the construction world.

In Malaysia, while the more sophisticated market is being satisfied by the more "elite" team of designers and developers, affordable housing — particularly homes with quality space for the healthy development of families — remains a concern.

Newly-minted Housing and Local Government (KPKT) Minister Zuraida Kamaruddin wants to address just that, and in the longer run, put her stamp on the creation of a better public housing sector in the country.

Speaking to *The Malaysian Reserve* in an exclusive interview, Zuraida — the first woman to be in charge of the ministry — spelled out her plans for the housing sector and other aspects related to the ministry.

She aspires to offer Malaysians hope in appreciating the real meaning of home ownership within the affordable housing segment — which simply means essential space is not only safe and conducive, but also offers programmes that could empower the society with knowledge, while helping them upgrade their standard of living.

Part of her plan would also include higher participation of women in the industry.

"Let the women design the home, because we will look in detail what needs to be there for family development," she said.

Raised and educated in Singapore, Zuraida said public housing projects in the country, particularly in the Klang Valley, have certainly "evolved".

However, instead of offering a promising environment, she said many of the projects are deemed "unliveable" as healthy development of youths and families seems to have been denied.

Unexpected Entry into KPKT

Zuraida, 60, has always been a champion of women's rights in the country.

As Ampang MP for the last two terms, she has been vocal on issues pertaining to women and their role in the the betterment of Malaysia.

A social science graduate from the National University of Singapore, Zuraida said she was indeed surprised with her appointment as the KPKT minister.

"I was thinking that I would be given the Women and Family Development Ministry.

"To tell the truth, I was surprised that a core ministry such as this was given to me. But after thinking about it, I understood that I can play a larger role in uplifting the women's role, as home is where the women develop their family," she said.

According to Zuraida, women's input in building homes would allow architects to design better products, with priority given to all angles including the kitchen.

"I do not only aim to build the house, but (also) how the house would be comfortable to a family," she added.

Before ministerial duties, Zuraida had been very active in Institut Wanita Berdaya — an organisation formed two years ago by the Selangor

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Pic by Muhd Amin Nahanul

Zuraida says the ministry is also looking at how Singapore's public housing model can be incorporated within the local context

state government, aimed at forming progressive policies to allow participation of more women in nation building. Zuraida took over the ministerial job from Barisan Nasional's Tan Sri Noh Omar.

Women to Empower Local Govt

According to Zuraida, "when you move a woman, you move the nation".

In order to provide an "ideal" house to Malaysians — especially for the bottom 40% (B40) group — Zuraida said it is crucial to increase women's participation from the top at the federal level, down to positions in the local councils.

Currently, women make up 14% of councillors in the local government bodies nationwide, with Selangor displaying the highest number at 22%.

Zuraida aims to have a minimum of 30% of women representatives at local municipalities that directly report to her ministry.

She also highlighted the lack of women-friendly facilities at public and private buildings in the country, which are under the purview of local bodies.

"We have to incorporate facilities like childcare centres and nursing rooms for women's convenience," she added.

As per Pakatan Harapan's election manifesto to reintroduce local government elections, Zuraida said she is now studying a few models utilised in several countries.

"I am studying a few models from other countries that could be best used here.

"Probably, we will be having a hybrid of these models. We can design our own, and before I implement that, I have to really commit to the empowerment programme to educate people on their responsibility to elect the

local representatives too," she said.

The local election proposal would need parliamentary approval and if it takes place, it will be conducted by the Election Commission.

Empowering Public Housing Community

The National Affordable Housing Council (NAHC), an idea mooted by Zuraida, is expected to be established by August.

The council is expected to group all existing affordable housing programmes conducted by several companies and agencies under one roof.

NAHC will be the home for Syarikat Perumahan Negara Bhd, the Public Servant Housing Programme, the Federal Territories Affordable Homes Programme and the 1Malaysia People's Housing Programme.

She said the agencies will be included in NAHC one by one. Proper detailed due diligence is expected to be conducted on each of the agencies, including the objectives, financial implications and performance.

The council will also focus on the B40 group, with projects that could be directly beneficial to the low- and medium-income earners.

Zuraida said all the projects under NAHC will be classified in two categories — low-cost and middle-cost sector.

The council will then undertake necessary steps to educate the people in the public housing programmes, on how to take care of their properties with direct supervision of the council.

Zuraida said the Joint Management Body (JMB) in low-cost People's Housing Projects (PPR) will no longer be solely managed by the residents.

The government, via state governments, will directly manage the PPR

units with the assistance of the local residents.

She is proposing to assign ministry officials to oversee the PPR management system. In their capacity, the officials are also expected to organise training and public awareness programmes for the JMB committee.

"Only then we will be able to make them more disciplined, more civic-minded, and then making the living environment more liveable," she said.

The JMBs would comprise people from the municipal bodies and local residents, who would address issues pertaining to cleanliness and safety effectively.

"It is not fair to ask the low-income earners to manage the whole community living in a particular housing area. They do not have the capacity," Zuraida added.

Malaysia's PPR versus Singapore's HDB

Having spent significant years in Singapore, Zuraida said the ministry could study the island republic's public housing model, or famously known as the Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats.

She said the ministry is looking at how Singapore's public housing model can be incorporated within the local context.

"When I was young, I saw the SIT (Singapore Improvement Trust) flats which were very good enough. The houses then were spacious with a corridor.

"Whereas if you see our PPR, it is claustrophobic and dirty. So, if it could be applied 40 or 50 years ago in Singapore, why can't we apply it now?" Zuraida said.

She added that one of the factors attributed to the decent SIT (now

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HDB) flats is the controlling mechanism by the agency which also involves engagement with the local community.

Redevelopment of Highland Towers' Site

The Highland Towers, which made headlines 25 years ago as the address for a deadly landslide tragedy that killed 48 residents, is situated right smack in Zuraida's Ampang constituency.

As she serves the Ampang voters (this being her third term), Zuraida aims to redevelop the site and utilise the entire nine-acre (3.6ha) site.

According to her, the Highland Towers project is now a hub for illegal activities with some criminals using it as a hideout.

People are also afraid to get close to the Highland Towers ruins, claiming the area to be haunted and dangerous.

One of the three towers in the then high-end condominium in Ulu Klang collapsed in December 1993 — resulting in an official death tally of 48 — due to continuous rainfall for two weeks.

While one tower collapsed, hundreds were forced to abandon their homes in the two other blocks, fearing similar incidents. The two towers stand tall till today.

It is rather opportune for Zuraida to be named the KPKT minister, as she had also been fighting for redevelopment of the site for the past five years.

Now more empowered, she recently formed a special committee comprising 10 government agencies to conduct a detailed study on the matter.

She said the committee has also identified 111 out of the 138 Highland Towers unit owners. The team is now locating the remaining unit owners for consent to allow the buildings to be demolished and make way for a redevelopment there.

She said the ministry will be working with the landowner, Regal Field Development Sdn Bhd, for the redevelopment.

There is also a possibility for the project to be a joint venture between the ministry and Regal Field.

Zuraida said the ministry is aware of the land slope risk in developing a high impact project on the nine-acre prime land, as highlighted by the Mineral and Geoscience Department.

"I am aware of the fear and risks, but I did not say I am going to consider building only houses there. If houses cannot be built, we could consider building parks or even a sports complex there.

"It could be any development, but the important issue is that the land must be capitalised, or it will be a waste," she said.

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