

# Continuing the work to make cities better

BY WONG KING WAI  
city.country@bizedge.com

Think City Sdn Bhd's objective of providing solutions to urban issues has borne much fruit since it was founded in 2009 by managing director Hamdan Abdul Majeed. In an email interview with *City & Country*, he shares what the company has done and the wins it has achieved as well as its involvement in World Cities Day on Oct 31, a day designated by the United Nations to champion inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban development.

"In 2023, Think City has made significant strides in its mission to create liveable and sustainable cities despite the challenges. We've fostered stronger partnerships and community involvement, utilising a community-first, evidence-based approach to tailor solutions to the unique needs of Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru city dwellers as well as our work to connect small towns and cities in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia," says Hamdan.

The ongoing projects that Think City is involved in include the continuous efforts to revitalise downtown KL using the RM15 million allocated under Budget 2023. It has provided the Creative KL Grants Programme and Creative KL Urban Challenge to support innovative projects and solutions to transform the city into a liveable, sustainable and inclusive hub that celebrates arts and culture in all forms. In addition, it organised Pentas Seni Merdeka and Arts on the Move, featuring arts and culture programmes such as traditional arts performances, art installations and workshops.

Then there is the Kita-Untuk-Kita (K2K) programme to alleviate poverty and reverse the social, economic and physical deterioration in public housing schemes. The programme covers 10 public housing settlements in KL and Selangor, which have a total of 50,000 residents.

There is also the Heritage Railway Rejuvenation Programme, which involves a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Transport's Railway Assets Corporation to acknowledge and appreciate the rich railway heritage and promote best practices in placemaking and adaptive reuse of the stations in Klang, Penang and KL.

With the RM10 million in funding granted to Think City in 2022, the Northern Region Archaeotourism Network Programme



Hamdan: We are set on contributing to making cities that are not only sustainable and liveable but also vibrant hubs of cultural and creative expression

(NRAN) was set up to promote culture-based economies in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia by connecting small towns and cities to historical and heritage sites in the country that date back 1.83 million years. The programme was given a boost with the Cultural Economy Catalytic Grants Programme (CECG).

### Monetary support

The recent announcement of Budget 2024 saw Think City receiving an allocation of RM20 million. Hamdan already has plans to put this money to good use.

"With an allocation of RM20 million, Think City will further develop downtown KL as a creative and cultural district, focusing on flagship projects around Masjid Jamek and its surrounding areas. We will deepen our partnerships with the downtown KL community to jointly preserve, innovate and activate the historical city centre," he says.

"Think City, in cooperation with the Penang state government and Aga Khan Trust for Culture, is leading a comprehensive restoration project for Fort Cornwallis, Peninsular Malaysia's largest fort. This initiative is part of the larger North Seafront Improvement Programme and is set to conclude in 2025. Our primary goals are to authentically restore Fort Cornwallis to its historical significance and improve its accessibility and appeal to visitors."

Hamdan also points to the activities carried out under the Penang Nature-Based Climate Adaptation Programme, which was



Think City's Arts on the Move brings traditional arts to urban centres to educate and create awareness



Above: Think City's cultural event Pentas Seni Merdeka offers traditional performances for urbanites to appreciate and savour



Left: To enhance youth engagement, Think City initiated a youth-centric programme to enhance community cohesion and promote a healthy lifestyle



Think City has partnered with the Railway Assets Corporation to acknowledge, appreciate and reuse railway heritage sites through the Heritage Railway Rejuvenation Programme

launched in 2022 by UN-Habitat in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Water, the Department of Irrigation and Drainage, the Penang Island City Council and Think City.

"This programme involves a diversified set of components, addressing both the environmental and social aspects of climate change in Penang's urban areas through nature-based solutions. Think City will focus on inculcating more urban greening measures as well as community-based initiatives in building resilience in anticipation of climate change among public housing and B40 communities, as well as non-governmental organisations through awareness raising and capacity building," he says.

### World Cities Day

World Cities Day will be celebrated on Oct 31 and Think City will acknowledge it by

continuing to bring awareness to its efforts.

"In alignment with this year's theme, 'Financing a Sustainable Urban Future for All', our unwavering commitment is to foster enhanced participation and continuous engagement with the rakyat," says Hamdan.

"This dedication extends to ensuring that the funding mechanisms underpinning our flagship projects and initiatives are not only sustainable but also inclusive and centred around the needs and aspirations of the rakyat. This approach empowers them to instigate impactful change and elevate the overall quality of urban living.

"Elevating our advocacy efforts to promote increased collaboration between the public and private sectors for the financing and management of urban projects and solutions is of paramount importance too.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 16

# Upholding rich cultural heritage with determination and verve

## FROM PAGE 14

We are intensifying these efforts, particularly within our flagship programmes like the Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District, aiming to foster a holistic, community-driven approach.”

He adds that Think City will continue to forge close collaborations with its stakeholders to achieve a sustainable urban future for all.

## Creating liveable city spaces

Think City is focused on providing solutions to urban issues that plague cities as urbanisation grows. One of the initiatives is to create sustainable and liveable public housing in the city so as to develop a more vibrant cityscape and sustainable lifestyle for its residents.

“Think City has been involved in a variety of research and interventions over a decade surrounding housing and residential communities in Malaysia, primarily through its extensive research and intervention efforts spanning over a decade. Our involvement in public housing initiatives began in 2016, with a notable project in Program Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) Kota Damansara. In this instance, we took an underutilised space and reimagined it as a communal area, with a primary goal of fostering social cohesion and improving the quality of life for residents,” says Hamdan.

“The Right to the City (R2C) is an overarching platform that forms the foundation for our efforts in improving public housing, where Think City collaborates with experts and practitioners to develop and implement effective policy recommendations aimed at enhancing public housing and strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities.

“From the learnings of R2C as well as on-the-ground research and engagements, the K2K initiative was designed and has been particularly instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by public housing communities, focusing on four critical areas — community empowerment, community co-management, improved income generation and policy reform. It was conceived to help people weather the pandemic storm and has evolved into a more extensive, long-



The restoration work on Fort Cornwallis is a collaboration between Think City, the Penang government and Aga Khan Trust for Culture

term effort, with support from private and non-profit organisations.”

To further enhance this initiative, certain programmes were launched against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. There was the “K2K INDAH” study, which looked at aspects such as childhood nutrition, quality of life and governance in more than 200 households. The “K2K Aktif Bersama” a health and well-being programme designed to address various needs during the pandemic, including mental health consultations, entrepreneurship support and grant writing workshops. It also fostered community engagement through activities such as walking groups and composting workshops.

There was also the “Bakul K2K” pilot programme, which provided access to affordable fresh produce while promoting the R2C programme’s principles of inclusivity and equitable access to resources.

Hamdan points to the equipping and empowering of community leaders to take

charge and responsibility in driving change in their communities. To enhance youth engagement, Think City initiated a youth-centric programme led by dedicated coaches, further enhancing community cohesion and promoting healthy and active lifestyles.

## Long-term view

When Think City was formed, it realised that changing mindsets would take time, and while it has achieved significant milestones, the transformation journey is ongoing. Hamdan explains that as 75% of Malaysians reside in urban environments, the prosperity of the nation will be determined by how cities and towns perform “in achieving global socioeconomic competitiveness, resiliency and high quality of life”.

He says Think City is committed to accelerating its efforts in driving urban rejuvenation nationwide to deepen its work in existing networks in the peninsula and to explore opportunities in Borneo alongside efforts to rejuvenate important cultural sites.

“The momentum extends as we broaden our initiatives to rejuvenate essential heritage assets across various cities and towns in Malaysia. This includes revitalising local heritage and cultural offerings, thereby boosting local economies through culture-focused economic development while extending nature-based climate adaptation programmes across other cities in Malaysia, preparing them for future challenges,” says Hamdan.

He adds that on the international front, Think City will expand its network and nurture existing partnerships such as with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, UN-Habitat and ICCN (Indonesia Creative Cities Network). It will also continue projects like restoring historical heritage in Hyderabad, India.

“As we forge ahead, we are set on contributing to making cities that are not only sustainable and liveable but also vibrant hubs of cultural and creative expression, resonating with global urban development and sustainable goals,” says Hamdan. ■