

BY IR DR GUE SEE SEW

The way forward with hill-site developments

HILL-SITE developments have been getting a lot of media attention of late. Many views are legitimate but there are also many misconceptions.

In a country with a lot of privately owned lands, development of these lands is to be expected unless the government buys back all the privately owned hill-site lands that have been gazetted for development.

A rational approach is to have stringent controls on the proposed developments of these private lands and a clear policy on details such as type, density, and plinth area.

Some people have the misconception that natural slopes—natural hills or slopes without interference from human activities—are stable and will not slide. During rainy season, slip failures or landslides do occur on natural slopes and hills that have no human presence or activities.

The public are not able to witness most natural slope failures as they are usually in remote locations. Such occurrences are natural landform processes. A natural slope that has been standing for more than 10 years is not necessarily safe. A properly planned, engineered and constructed slope is safer than a natural slope.

Secondly, altitude of the land—that is, height above sea level—has no influence on the safety of slopes, hence should not be used as a criteria for consideration in approving a development. Hill sites with a gentle slope or plateau on high altitude are more stable than steep slopes near the sea at low altitude. Thus, it is the stability of slopes that determines the level of risk rather than altitude.

Soil tests alone do not tell us whether a slope is safe. Rather, soil tests only provide the parameters for engineering analyses. An engineer needs to study the overall slope in a holistic manner and carry out engineering analyses of the slope to determine the Factor of Safety (FOS) for appropriate strengthening and protection works.

Another common misconception is heavy rain causes slope failure—

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this is not correct although it may trigger landslides. Increased rainfall saturates slope materials, raises the groundwater table and thus decreases the FOS of the slope. However, properly engineered slopes should not fail as the slopes should have been designed for the most probable water table during heavy rainfall. The exception is when the actual rainfall is greater than the designed return period of rainfall.

People must also understand that slopes are not maintenance-free but should be regularly maintained by following a maintenance regime, such as clearing clogged drains and patching up localised erosion spots. Poorly maintained slopes may eventually lead to slope failures if unattended for a prolonged period. A properly designed slope that doesn't get maintenance after erosion will also cause landslides.

Abandoned projects with incomplete earthworks, incomplete slope strengthening works, incomplete drainage works and no slope maintenance should include conditions to carry out mitigation measures such as erosion protection, sediment control, and maintenance once the stop-work order is issued.

A safe hill-site development can be achieved with stringent control on

four key processes: planning, design, construction, and maintenance.

The relevant authorities in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang have published their guidelines to make hill-site developments more systematic and organised to ensure safety. However, it is important for state governments to continue improving the guidelines to reflect good practices. It is important that guidelines are transparent and easily understood, systematic, technically sound and based on engineering approach and environmental consciousness.

Local authorities and state governments should develop or refine their planning policy for hill-site development with clearer zoning on type of permissible development, their densities, etc, to ensure a transparent controlled development.

It is important for the authorities to be aware that it is not practical for them to insist on a "flat"

green area or recreation area (for example, football field and flat playground) for a hill-site development as it would cause massive cutting and filling of land to achieve that.

Instead, a different type of green area should be allowed on a sloping ground—for instance, tracks for hill walking, camping sites, and grounds with existing trees or botanical gardens. This would encourage more preservation of existing green, making the development more environment-friendly.

The roles and responsibilities of developers and the local government should also be clearly specified. The qualifications and experiences of contractors and the team involved are also crucial details that ensure proper construction control and compliance with design specifications.

Heavier penalties for non-compliance by stakeholders should be enacted for ease of enforcement. Proper review should be carried out by experienced engineers in the local

government to ensure all design issues are properly addressed. During construction, it is also important for the authorities to see to it that contractors carry out their work properly to ensure safety, and prevent erosion, sediment pollution and flooding.

What we need is for all stakeholders to be committed in terms of safety compliance and environment enhancement, and for the authorities to enforce compliance. With all these in place, a hill-site development could be an attractive place to live and play in.

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Tapping into demand for landed G&G

SINCE the onset of sales previews late last year, RM81 million of RM106 million worth of properties in Mah Sing's M Residence township in Rawang have been taken up. These freehold houses were sold at an average price of RM220 per sq ft. Prices for the double story links start at RM380,000, while the superlinks are tagged at an average RM500,000.

Encouraged by this response, Mah Sing is replicating M Residence Rawang's concept of a gated and guarded (G&G) township in Bangi. Called Southville City, prices for houses here start from RM500,000.

Located off the North-South Highway, between Bandar Baru Bangi



and Bandar Seri Putra, the first phase of this RM2.2 billion project is slated for launch by early next year.

Besides link and semi-detached houses, 30% of the landbank is to be allocated for commercial properties such as cluster

shop offices, boutique corporate offices and a proposed lifestyle mall.

Future landbanking for Mah Sing will in fact focus on township developments, according to its recent release.

Property management app

A WEB application for condo management has been developed by local tech company Leanis Solutions Sdn Bhd. Called HighrisePro, it puts all communications between condo management and residents online.

Residents get to book facilities such as tennis courts and barbecue pit online, without having to go to the management office during office hours. Bulletin announcements can be commented upon by residents, while

matters such as house rules and policies can be discussed on the forum page.

Complaints and requests for maintenance work (for example, dirty hallway, cracks in the gym) may be handled via a ticket tracking system.

"Our focus is on strengthening communications, creating conveniences and streamlining existing management," says Adrian Teh of Leanis Solutions.

Comparable software available on the internet and developed in the US include Appfolio, Simplifyem, and Condo Manager. "These cater very much to the US market where property management is much more matured," says Adrian. "The features they offer are too extensive for the Asian condominium market however."

HighRisePro costs from RM1,250 per month (with support) for individual condominiums.

IN BRIEF

TAMAN EQUINE STUDIO APARTMENTS

TRINITY Group Sdn Bhd will launch the third phase of its Zeva @ Equine South mixed-development tomorrow. Located within Bandar Putra Permai, Zeva's site is close to Taman Equine's Aeon shopping centre and Alice Smith international school. The studio apartments are sized from 454 to 646 sq ft, and are priced from RM 220,000.

"The first and second phases of Zeva, comprising serviced apartments with 881 sq ft onwards, have achieved take-up rates of more than 90% within the first month of their launch," says Trinity Group's founder and managing director Datuk Neoh Soo Keat.

Scheduled to be completed in June 2015, the development's plans boast of a sky deck which was inspired by Chicago's Willis Tower, the highlight of which is a portion with a transparent glass floor jutting vertiginously out.

The development will likely benefit from a new interchange from Jalan Putra Permai to Maju Expressway (which connects directly to Jalan Tun Razak), plans for which have been announced.

RENT INCREASE FOR MSC BOUNDARY OFFICES

SINCE location requirements for MSC Malaysia companies were revised early this year to include non-MSB designated commercial buildings within an approved MSC boundary or Cybercentre, there has been an increase in asking rents for such commercial spaces, says property consultant Knight Frank's 1st Half 2012 Real Estate Highlights report.

Companies that take up this option are required to waive Bill of Guarantee 1—to provide a world-class physical and information infrastructure—but will still enjoy all other nine benefits conferred by the BoG, such as tax exemption of up to 100% for up to 10 years.

Office buildings noted to have increased asking rentals include Mid Valley City's Menara IGB, Centrepoint South and Centrepoint North where they now start from RM5.50 per sq ft.