KL residents reeling from rise in home-run businesses

Unregulated commercial enterprises bring congestion, loud disturbances and health hazards to more neighbourhoods

By BAVANI M and SHALINI RAVINDRAN
metro@thestar.com.my
Photos: ART CHEN/The Star





(Above and left) In May, DBKL carried out enforcement in Taman Batu View where houses were used as warehouses to store wholesale goods. — Courtesy of DBKL

ACROSS Kuala Lumpur, residential streets are steadily losing their quiet suburban character and taking on the feel of commercial zones.

Take a trip down almost any residential street today and the change is hard to miss. Delivery lorries park across driveways, hand-painted signs hang from front gates, and a steady stream of cars arrives day and night.

In fact, turning a house into a business no longer requires a shopfront – just a CCTV camera, an electric gate, a smartphone and a QR code.

From restaurants and cafes to childcare centres, short-term rentals and wholesale warehouses, residential properties are rapidly being repurposed.

Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) says small-scale commercial activities can be allowed in residential areas, provided they meet planning rules and secure approval (*see sidebar*).

But residents argue that the situation has gone far beyond the occasional home business, leaving planners and enforcement officers with this question: at what point does a house stop being a home?

Complaints about businesses operating from residential properties have tripled in recent years, with new cases being reported almost daily.

Seputeh Residents' Representative Council (MPPWP) Zone 6 chairman Alvin T. Ariaratnam said the trend accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when lower rents and utility charges made homes an attractive alternative to commercial premises.

"What may have started as a practical solution during the pandemic has since evolved into a much bigger problem," he said.

Residents face a daily barrage of disruption, with complaints centring on noise, gridlocked roads, double-parked cars, mounting rubbish and bitter disputes between neighbours.

Alvin pointed to a case in Taman OUG where a residential house was turned into a temple, forcing nearby families to live with endless noise, thick incense smoke and looming fire hazards.

Although the operators claimed prayers took place only occasionally, council inspections and video evidence proved the property was operating as a full-time place of worship.

The dispute was eventually handed over to DBKL to take enforcement action.

Behind many of these cases is a simple shift in who actually lived in the house.

In several affected neighbourhoods, original owners have long since moved out, letting out their properties to tenants who live in a single room while turning every remaining square metre, be it the porch, garage or spare bedrooms, into commercial spaces.

Others treat these homes purely as investment vehicles: existing business owners buy up residential properties with sole intent to convert them, while absentee landlords lease entire houses to third parties running everything from kindergartens to wholesale storage.

Without an owner on site – and with no personal stake



A corner-lot house in a Kuala Lumpur neighbourhood believed to be used as a fruit storage and distribution facility.