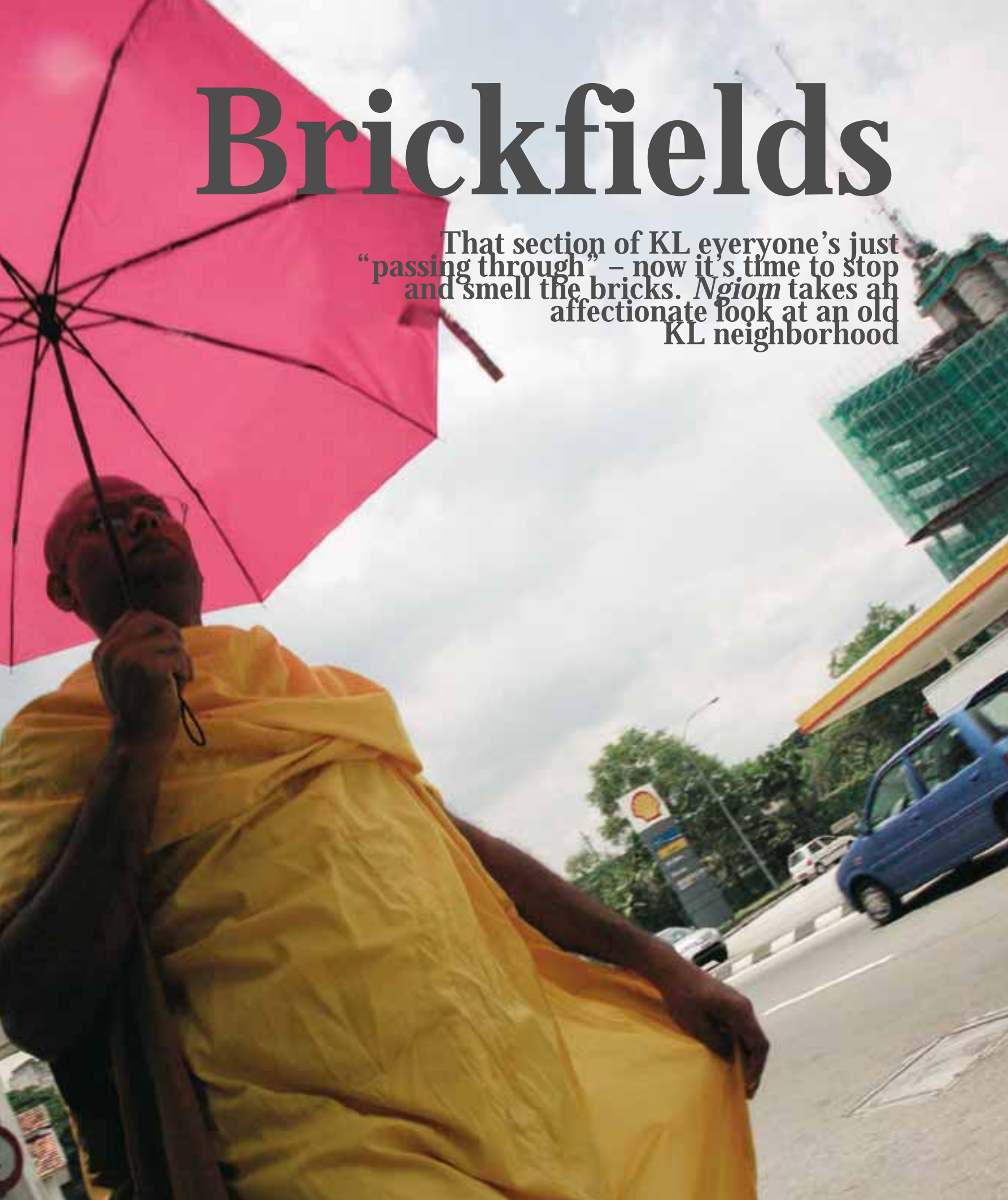


Brickfields

That section of KL everyone's just "passing through" – now it's time to stop and smell the bricks. *Ngiom* takes an affectionate look at an old KL neighborhood



Clockwise from left: Grabbing a spot of shade on Jln. Tun Sambanthan; Shophouses once used to quarter Indian railway employees front an oasis of green; KTM and LRT tracks define borders – and eras.

Cities are more than just agglomerations of people, buildings, and roads. They comprise of neighborhoods, mini-worlds each with its own character, feel, and personality. Like any other large city, Kuala Lumpur is more than the sum of its parts. And Brickfields is one of its neighborhoods rich in history, architecture, culture, and the human pageant.

When Kuala Lumpur was centered on no more than a few high streets, Brickfields defined the western fringe of Kuala Lumpur. Brickfields Road then, now renamed Jalan Tun Sambanthan, was the detour that would eventually lead on to the port town of Klang – a whole day's travel away. More than a century ago, bricks were indeed made in fields of bricks at Brickfields; but it was the railway

yards that would later bring in a large population and provide employment for the early Indian settlers. The railway yard, together with the railway quarters have since given way to what is now the Sentral development that includes Sentral Station, the Hilton Kuala Lumpur Hotel and luxury condominiums. Jalan Tun Sambanthan has become the divide between the gentrified parts and the remaining "rough edges" of Brickfields.





Clockwise from top left: Iconic Chinese temple on Jalan Thambipillay; Hindu temple on Jalan Scott; Surau built for civil servants near KTM headquarters; Zion Church on Jalan Sultan Abdul Samad.



Clockwise from top left: Masseur; Flower vendor; Dance instruction at Temple of Fine Arts.

It is the rough, downtown side of Brickfields, the other side where the new monorail station aptly plants itself that is of interest here. There is also no safer, more colorful, compassionate, and friendlier hamlet of Kuala Lumpur than this alternative side of town. It is here that the privately funded center for the blind is located, and everywhere around Brickfields, the blind mix effortlessly with the rest of the local population, maneuvering around slow-moving traffic, stepping deftly alongside storm-water drains, pausing to have *teh-tarik* (populist Malay tea) along the sidewalks, as if the blind too watched the world go by. They no longer weave baskets for a living; instead many now

have work places to go to in the many reflexology and massage centers. Brickfields has indeed become the center for blind massage. Tourists and locals sit in wait at the lobbies of these establishments while the aroma of massage oils drifts to the streets to mingle with the scent of the incense from the nearby Taoist temple and the smoke and smells from deep-fried food that emanates from open-air Chinese restaurants.



There is no lack of companionship and refuge in Brickfields. The iconic Chinese temple at Jalan Thambipillay is situated at the heart of downtown Brickfields. Hindu ashrams and temples are found at various locations, notably the Vivekananda Ashram. And some of the city's oldest Christian churches, notably The Zion Church on Jalan Sultan Abdul Samad, still stand invitingly, with their new coats of paint, the whiteness of which contrasts with the exuberant hues of the temples. Places of worship, along with shoplots and the old rows of terrace houses make up much of the physical order of Brickfields; but it is the streams of life that provide the nonphysical order – the continuous flow of human activity, its crests and troughs, its ebb and flow, its vibrance and variety.

Another Brickfields landmark, the four-story YMCA building has been offering constructive outlets and educational programs for both young and old, locals and foreigners. The Temple of Fine Arts provides a teaching base and an avenue for Indian artistic expression, primarily in the form of Indian dance. Elsewhere, food stalls sprout to life in the evenings and the clubs that thrive at the edge are heard expelling loud sensual music for the workingmen. There is no shortage of various types of restaurants, offering northern and southern Indian, Chinese and Malay cuisine, all within walking distance. The legendary banana leaf rice with palate-challenging curry is remembered by generations of office workers who have been making regular pilgrimages during lunch hours.



While Jalan Thambipillay exemplifies an edge of excess, excitement beneath a nondescript urban structure, Jalan Scott, at the eastern edge of Brickfields has just sprung a new art gallery amidst old, preserved Chinese townhouses, and a new Hindu temple at the end of the road. Another new Hindu temple at the edge of the new highway in front of the new gallery creates a tension and tolerance that is almost surreal, a contrast less likely to be found – or allowed – in more gentrified parts of the city.

The seamless layering of multi-ethnicity is probably the most appealing and unchanging aspect of Brickfields. Indeed it is an aspect that is so seamless that it does not even form part of conversation. The ubiquitous presence of the blind exemplifies the soul of Brickfields, where appearances count for nothing. It is content, the generous heart of men and women the appreciation of companionship and the chance to live fully that makes living worthwhile. While Brickfields is changing as elsewhere in Kuala Lumpur, evinced by the continuous screeching presence of cranes from construction activities one feels that underneath it all, it retains its neighborhood essence and remains a bastion of tolerance and diversity. 🧑🏻‍🦯 🧑🏻‍🦯



Top: Methodist Girls' School and grounds front Sentral development behind; below: Night scene next to KL Monorail terminus.