FOR many Malaysians, Madrid is not as familiar as London or Paris. However, if plans by the Madrid City Council were to be successful, the city will be a topic of everyday conversation, like Beijing. It is bidding for the 2016 Olympic Games.

The city has a population of about 3.2 million. However, like all major cities, the functional metropolitan area covers a larger territory, thus making Madrid more populated than it actually is.

The origin of the city was a modest fortress settlement, known as Ville de Madrid, founded by Mohamad I in about 852 to protect the Kingdom of Toledo, now a world famous heritage city about a half hour train ride from Madrid. In 1085, the settlement was captured by Alfonso VI. It became the national capital in 1561. In view of Madrid’s numerous heritage buildings, monuments and museums, the city was named as the European Capital of Culture in 1992.

Apart from the cultural built environment, Madrid can boast of its natural amenities. It has the highest percentage of trees per inhabitant of any capital city in Europe. Perhaps more importantly, there are plans to replace motorised roads with more squares and pedestrian malls.

Madrid City Council has 57 councillors including a mayor and three deputies. As of 2007, it has about 36,000 employees and an annual budget of about €5.8 billion (RM26 billion). The council has a relatively huge budget because it has more responsibilities than those given to local authorities in Malaysia. For instance, besides municipal services, such as solid waste management, street lighting and development control, the council is also responsible for a police force, fire brigades and public transport.

For Malaysians, who look to the West for leadership in local democracy, it is interesting to note that Madrid held its first democratic municipal elections only in 1979, after the restoration of King Juan Carlos I in 1975. In contrast, the people of George Town were allowed to vote in 1956 for their municipal councillors, when Malaya was still a British colony.

There have been no local elections in Malaysia for the past 40 years or so. While Malaysians are being denied the right to vote for their councillors and mayors, Madrid, with an elected city council, has gone ahead to facilitate more robust citizen participation in the workings of the council.

For instance, Madrid City Council has established the City Steering Council made up of representatives from social groups, professional bodies, universities and experts in various public policy areas and local government. The only equivalent in Malaysia is the Penang Local Government Forum. But unlike the forum, Madrid’s steering council can
issue reports on strategic planning and major urban projects. It can also issue reports on social, cultural, financial and environmental development of the city.

On the socio-economic front, Madrid has stepped up its internationalisation policy. More specifically, the city council has adopted a pro-growth international strategy aimed at strengthening the city’s competitiveness in the global economy. It has set up Madrid Global as its internationalisation arm and one of its ambitious activities is to harness both private and public stakeholders to bid for the 2016 Olympic Games.

As part of the efforts to project the global city image, Madrid Global, together with the Singapore-based Asia Europe Foundation, was host to the First Asia Europe Urban Young Leaders Dialogue in Madrid from Nov 10 to 16. About 45 young leaders from 29 countries in Europe and Asia, including Malaysia, were in the city to discuss urban issues and what they like to see in the development of their cities. For a group of people with diverse academic backgrounds and careers, the youths were clear on what they want: sustainable development, eradication of prejudice and safe cities.

The participants were shown the best of Madrid, fine dining, museums and heritage conservation. As host, the city council could not have shown a more appropriate “symbol” of the city’s greatness than to take the participants to the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium to witness the skills and popularity of Spain’s premier football team – Real Madrid.

Unfortunately, the home team lost to a Third Division team in the King’s Cup competition. The host was disappointed, but according to Ignacio Niño Pérez, the chief executive officer of Madrid Global, it was probably good for the foreign participants in the dialogue as they had the opportunity to witness a historic episode in Spanish football.

With such a positive outlook, there is no doubt that Madrid will achieve its dreams of becoming a fully global city.

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