

Pedestrians First? Making Singapore More Pedestrian Friendly

Leong Wen Shan



“Given the rapidly ageing population, will there be enough hands available in the future to help the elderly navigate the obstacles created to facilitate vehicle movements?”

Bruno Wildermuth

With today’s strong attention to cycling and walking, how are we creating safe and comfortable spaces for cyclists and pedestrians? What are some areas of transport planning that need to change for a car-lite future in Singapore?

On 28 June, the CLC invited two transport experts to share their insights on “Making Singapore More Pedestrian Friendly”.

The session was moderated by Jeremy Yap, Deputy Chief Executive for Public Transport, Policy & Planning at the Land Transport Authority of Singapore (LTA).



Creating Safer Roads for Pedestrians and Cyclists

“Pedestrians move themselves with their own power ... everyone else moves with a vehicle. Therefore the pedestrian should have the priority.” This was Bruno Wildermuth’s rationale for prioritising pedestrians in transport planning. The principal consultant and owner of Wildermuth Consulting hails from Zurich and was a planner for Singapore’s MRT system in the late 1980s.

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Mr Wildermuth, who would later join the MRT Corporation, said in those days, different state authorities such as the Housing & Development Board had to be convinced to make pedestrian passages to train stations safe and convenient. It was really about “getting your customer safely to your business.”

The challenge remains, however, in actual site planning and engineering. Mr Gopinath Menon, Senior Research Fellow at the School of Civil & Environmental Engineering, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, believed “we always want the shortest path to cross the road... but it is not so easy to make the most convenient path the safest path.”

Mr Menon, who has 43 years’ experience in Singapore’s urban traffic management, described how the government was first pushed to act when pedestrian accidents hit an all-time high of 132 fatalities in 1976.

By implementing pedestrian crossing rules, creating zebra crossings, upgrading “5-foot ways” and providing footpaths for all new roads — this figure fell to 70 in 1991, 45 in 2009 and 47 in 2016.

Safety for an Ageing Population

However, what is worrying is that there have been more fatalities involving elderly persons.

Mr Menon shared more figures. In 2016, among the 47 pedestrian fatalities, 28 were elderly persons aged 65 years and older. Among the total 1,112 who were involved in pedestrian accidents, 273 were elderly.

For now, there are “silver” zones for crossings, and the elderly may tap for time extensions while crossing at a light. Other improvements include adding escalators and lifts for overhead bridges, and creating ramps in public places like hospitals. The LTA should also reconsider the use of slip roads, which can be dangerous to pedestrians as well as cyclists.

Nonetheless, Mr Wildermuth questioned, “Given the rapidly ageing population, will there be enough hands available in the future to help the elderly navigate the obstacles created to facilitate vehicles movements?” Clearly, Singapore needs a new approach, he added. What has been a city for cars must be put back to the people.

More Public Transport, Fewer Cars

Panel moderator Jeremy Yap pointed to LTA's paradigm shift in focusing on public transport, walking and cycling, and described the investments made in each mode. For instance, over the last five years, no less than a thousand buses have been introduced on Singapore roads. New modes of transport such as personal mobility devices are also evolving in terms of use and familiarisation.

Looking at Singapore's car ownership per capita, which ranks 94th worldwide, some wondered why transport policy has favoured cars so much. Mr Wildermuth said that while car ownership was low in Singapore, car usage was the highest in the world. Due to the sunk-cost effect, car owners who have paid a significant fee for the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) would try to extract maximum utility from their cars, driving even for short distances that could otherwise be easily completed by public transport.

Mr Yap added that in terms of vehicle policy, perhaps the country “didn't take the opportunity to curb ownership early.” This stayed at 3 per cent for some time, which may imply that fees for usage and road pricing could have been stiffer, he added. Perhaps the COE should also include aggressive measures in charging for usage and mileage.



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Mr Menon said: “There is pride of [car] ownership ... [it’s] more about a lifestyle. Some of these factors are working against a culture of car-lite.” This was evident in how the Saturday newspapers would devote an entire section to cars, he said.

A Question of Road Culture?

Road culture as a factor in adopting cycling and walking was raised. Compared to other cities, such as those in Japan, why do Singapore road users seldom give way? Was it a question of values and social norms?

In addition to sharp infrastructure planning, Mr Yap said, “There needs to be education, [and we] need to share.” Engineering solutions could address site issues, and if that falls short, enforcement such as fines and other deterrents may be applied. However, not all behaviour should be controlled via regulation. Public education, such as the Road Safety Council, also play an important role in reminding us that everyone is responsible for their own safety, and the safety of others.

About the Speakers



SPEAKER

Bruno Wildermuth

Principal Consultant and Owner
Wildermuth Consulting

Born in Zurich, Switzerland, Mr Wildermuth obtained a Masters of City and Regional Planning at the University of California. Joining the then leading Transport Planning Company Wilbur Smith and Associates, the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) planning project brought him to Singapore where he was the key planner for the initial MRT system. He subsequently joined the MRT Corporation, introduced the integrated TransitLink Farecard system and founded his own transport ticketing consulting company.



SPEAKER

Gopinath Menon

Senior Research Fellow
School of Civil & Environmental Engineering,
Nanyang Technological University of Singapore (NTU)

Mr Menon has 43 years of experience covering urban traffic management, traffic impact analysis, traffic signal control, bus priority, pedestrian management, road safety engineering/audits, road congestion pricing (demand management), car park planning, expressway monitoring and intelligent transport systems. He was effectively the Chief Transportation Engineer of Singapore from 1991 to 2001, when he was working with the Public Works Department and the Land Transport Authority.

About the Speakers



MODERATOR

Jeremy Yap

Deputy Chief Executive,
Public Transport, Policy & Planning
Land Transport Authority of Singapore (LTA)

Mr Yap oversees land transport policy, planning and public transport operations, as well as active mobility in LTA. An Advocate and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Singapore and a lawyer by training, he has spent over 3 years in the Ministry of Transport of Singapore overseeing land transport policy matters. Mr Yap is also the current chair of the Organising Authorities Committee in the International Association for Public Transport (UITP).

About CLC

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