

From highways to High Streets

Singapore's city roads are great to drive on, with many multi-lane, one-way arterial roads. They should be turned back to pedestrian-friendly, two-way roads that house shops and cafes, like the High Streets of the United Kingdom.

Jaspal Singh

For *The Straits Times*

Covid-19 has brought home the urgency for innovative thinking on a nationwide, transformative scale.

However, the pandemic is but one imperative underlying this urgency. We are at the point where global trends and disruptions are threatening to create the mother of all perfect storms.

The greatest of these threats is global warming. We must change our ways as we are minutes from midnight when life on earth will no longer be like it has been since human civilisation began 70,000 years ago.

To its credit, Temasek has for over a year thoughtfully used its premises to gently urge Singaporeans to help slow climate change.

Two sobering messages hit you from the billboards flanking Temasek's entrance at Dhoby Ghaut – first, that Singapore's coolest month now is as warm as the hottest month in the 1970s; and second, that more than half of all land transport emissions in Singapore are from private cars and taxis.

We cannot stop people from travelling as they go about their daily lives. So the challenge is to bring about a sea change in the behaviour of car-owning Singaporeans to embrace public transport as their default mode of transport.

In particular, the bus system, which offers superb point-to-point connectivity, and which the Government continues to subsidise to the tune of millions annually since deciding some years ago to bring it on a par with London's bus system, widely regarded as best-in-class.

When I first heard the word "innovation" some 40 years ago, I mistook it as fancy management-speak for creativity. Subsequently, I learnt it can also mean doing the same thing differently to achieve some larger objective, as well as doing something "the old way", if it serves a new purpose. So it is with our road design and bus system.

A WORLD-CLASS BUS SYSTEM

I was fortunate to be involved with the London Bus system for many years when I went there in 2004 to look after ComfortDelGro's extensive investments in bus, coach, taxi, private-hire and engineering operations across the United Kingdom and Ireland, and which include London's

second-largest bus operation.

Having now returned home and being an avid bus user – yes, the diesel's gotten into my blood – I can honestly say the Singapore bus system today is easily the equal of that in London.

More than 1,000 new buses have been added, giving it the capacity it sorely lacked to cope with peak-hour demand and provide a service as reliable as that in London.

It may sound prosaic but there is a fundamental truth herein that Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan, who was once health minister, must have intuitively known as he went about fixing the bus system: Just as hospital bed availability must exceed peak bed requirement for any national healthcare system to cope with a pandemic, so must bus availability exceed the peak-hour vehicle requirement if a national bus system is not to collapse.

So it is not the absence of a world-class, fully air-conditioned bus system that deters car owners from making the switch. Perhaps it is pride. Or more likely ignorance, for they may not know what is available and how buses today can serve their needs comfortably, reliably and at minimal cost. Mothers with babies in prams and those who are infirm may not know that buses can "kneel" to allow step-less kerbside boarding. They also come with wheelchair ramps and sufficiently wide doors to cater to their needs.

A DRIVER'S DREAM CITY

In my view, car owners are not drawn to buses partly because our roads are a dream to drive on. Our road network and the roads themselves are designed to let cars speed up through traffic. Never mind that the roads were originally meant to provide easy, convenient access to shops, leisure outlets, hotels and homes on either side for people going there, be it by car, taxi, bus or on foot.

That's why most main roads in the city centre and urban areas have been turned into one-way arterials, with four or five lanes. There are too few pedestrian crossings, for these slow down traffic. Just think of Orchard Road, Robinson Road and Shenton Way. We also take much pride in the traffic speed improvements. Based on latest published statistics, average speed on arterial roads increased by 16 per cent, from 25kmh to 29kmh between 2004 and 2014. They're probably higher today.

Designed as highways, our roads are heaven on earth for car owners. The road network is not designed to encourage bus usage. I should



know, for when I was in the Ministry of Transport, I was party to the removal of a few bus lanes that were thought to be "under-utilised" and thus released to improve traffic flow.

A fundamental truth that dawned on me in the UK is that bus lanes are the bus equivalent of railway tracks for trains.

I have never heard anyone complain that railway tracks are under-utilised because you do not see trains stacked up bumper to bumper. Which also explains why bus lanes on some roads in central London, like Marylebone Road, are in force 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

While inner-city highways make for dream driving, the real problem is their being one-way. This subconsciously suppresses any intuitive inclination a car owner might have to use the bus.

Let me explain. If you are a car owner living in a housing estate or a suburban area,

sense of a convenient, reliable, cheap and comfortable alternative is front-of-mind, would you not be much more willing to leave your car at home and take the bus?

Another inadvertent and sad outcome of our pursuit of one-way roads is that it has made highways out of what would otherwise be "High Streets", common in the UK and Europe, that is, two-way streets with shops, restaurants and chic street-side cafeterias on either side, for easy access by people arriving there by bus, MRT, car, bicycle or on foot.

Singaporeans who have visited London will know the vibrant "High Street" shopping experience that Oxford Street, Regent Street and Piccadilly offer.

All of these are two-way streets, with two, maybe three lanes in each direction, and buses plying on bus lanes in both directions. In fact, Oxford Street, iconic for shopping, is "buses and taxis only" for much of its length, much to the delight of shoppers and merchants.

ASOLUTION FOR ORCHARD ROAD?

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) are now studying how to revitalise Orchard Road into a world-class "High Street", like Oxford Street in London. Many good suggestions have been raised, like confining it to public transport or pedestrianising it.

I hope the URA and STB will consider making it a two-way "High Street" as the first step towards a more progressive solution, like confining it fully or partially to public transport. But I would think long and hard about pedestrianising it, for that could be a step too far, especially in our weather – remember, our coolest month today is as warm as the hottest month in the 1970s. You don't want to risk shoppers and other leisure-seekers taking their custom elsewhere.

Whatever decision is finally taken on the future of Orchard Road, we can rest assured it would be the right one, based on detailed traffic modelling studies and extensive consultation with all stakeholders.

Orchard Road should be the start and not the end of a "Highways to High Streets" initiative to transform parts of our city-state to their original intent, as pleasant places for people to reach safely and easily to relax and enjoy.

Orchard Boulevard is another exciting candidate for this initiative. Made two-way and narrowed, it could become a boulevard more than just in name, with plenty of shady, kerbside parking spaces for the convenience of those who need, or feel the need, to drive to the Orchard Road area, and make generous contributions to state coffers in parking fees for the privilege.

Would congestion be an issue if Orchard Road is made two-way and Orchard Boulevard narrowed?

Maybe, but I doubt it, for another fundamental truth in transportation is that congestion is

self-limiting, as motorists tend to find their way around it – seniors like me will remember when congestion pricing was first introduced in 1975, congestion fled from the Restricted Zone as motorists shifted to ring roads and adjusted their driving patterns.

The idea of turning inner-city "Highways to High Streets" did not come to me as an epiphany. Rather, I saw a similar transformation in London, where, for the longest time, Baker Street and Gloucester Place were a one-way pair, each four or five lanes wide and separated by 90m or so.

Last year, both were converted to two-way streets. And what a difference this has made. Both sides of Baker Street are now conveniently accessible by bus, which still enjoy the benefit of a bus lane in each direction. Baker Street is now proudly a "High Street", similar to Oxford Street.

But this was not the first transformation of its kind. A few years earlier, Pall Mall (in St James') was similarly converted to two-way. Even as an occasional motorist, I was heartened by that move as it has improved traffic circulation in the area.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that our planners erred in the past making our streets wider, one-way and free-flowing. They were merely serving past imperatives, like the need to reduce congestion and travel times, enabling more widespread car ownership and delivering value for the costly privilege of car ownership.

Times have changed and new imperatives have arisen, like the need to rejuvenate roadside shopping and entertainment, and doing our bit to save the planet by making roads more bus-friendly to nudge people to take public transport.

Also, Singapore finally has a world-class public transport system, both bus and rail. As a nation, we need to respond innovatively in our behaviour and do justice to our accomplishments.

There is nothing wrong with restoring "highways" that were once "High Streets" back to their former role, and using buses even if we can now afford to own a car.

I believe our skies will turn bluer again, and bring us closer as we enjoy one another's company in the bus.

For I recall the late Mr Sim Kee Boon, my first boss in the civil service, who taught me another fundamental truth a long time ago: "There are no new ideas in the Middle Kingdom; the trick lies in identifying an idea whose time has come."

He was probably quoting ancient Chinese rulers, but I think it applies equally to modern Singapore.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

Jaspal Singh is a former civil servant who spent 14 years in London as CEO ComfortDelGro (UK and Ireland) after leaving the civil service in 2004. He is currently Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.