

COMMENTARY



Shaping a car-free zone in Seoul

Image courtesy of Remy Guo and Korea.net / Korean Culture and Information Service via Wikimedia Commons

UNBLOCKING THE JAM: HOW ARE 10 ASIA- PACIFIC CITIES FACING CONGESTION ISSUES HEAD-ON?

As inner-city congestion increases owing to rising populations, life in cities can move at a grindingly slow pace. To tackle the problem, cities often explore a variety of solutions, such as imposing congestion charges and limiting cars on the roads. Through their latest report¹, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) set out to identify how 10 cities in Asia-Pacific of varied development stages and population sizes are developing bold solutions and exciting plans to address this pressing challenge.

BY URBAN LAND INSTITUTE AND CENTRE FOR LIVEABLE CITIES

10 CONSTRUCTION⁺

WHO IS MOVING BETTER?

When we started on the project, a key question was: who is moving better? All cities have developed along different trajectories. Some cities have developed based on compact, pedestrian-friendly models, while others were planned to be car-centric. It was apparent that some cities were moving better than others.

In Asia, cities like Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Suwon, Taipei and Tokyo are ahead of the curve: they are highly committed to shifting away from policies and infrastructure development that prioritise motorised transport. Their successes motivate them to further develop robust systems of sustainable urban mobility.

Other cities such as Bandung, Ho Chi Minh City, Sydney and Yangon were classified as 'emerging'—they recognise the urgency of having sustainable mobility for long-term development. They are in a unique position to learn from other cities and so, with the right planning, can avoid the negative effects of car-dependent mobility.

The report analysed the strategic plans and bold implementation of mobility projects in the following cities:

- Seoul, South Korea
- Shanghai, China
- Singapore
- Suwon, South Korea
- Taipei, Taiwan
- Tokyo, Japan
- Bandung, Indonesia
- Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
- Sydney, Australia
- Yangon, Myanmar

While each of these 10 cities has its own set of problems, they share a common goal: to establish a sustainable mobility system. The benefits of such a system are diverse: reduced congestion and stress, improved quality of the environment, healthier mobility choices and expanded development opportunities, all of which enhance the lives of people, both physically and mentally.

Here are four examples of cities that have made bold changes.

FROM CAR PARKS TO ACTUAL PARKS

Shanghai has followed a trajectory similar to many cities in Asia—as its people got richer, more people wanted the keys to their own cars. Between 2009 and 2014, motor vehicle mileage doubled, and by 2014, car

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ownership in Shanghai alone accounted for more than 10 per cent of the national car population, despite making up just less than 2 per cent of the country's population. Cars dominated Shanghai's 12,000 kilometres of road space, leaving little room for much else.

The Shanghai government had a vision of returning its streets to its people. Through a set of urban development guidelines, the city aimed to transform its streets to become 'Safe, Green, Vigorous and Smart'. This sparked a shift in the city's focus from engineering priorities and road traffic towards the design of open urban spaces and the environment. As a result, Shanghai's spaces became more interactive, accessible and attractive. By deprioritising cars, the streets were made safer and more convenient for people to walk and cycle. Community life and leisure activities flourished in these spaces, and neighbourhoods became cleaner and greener.

THE LION CITY LEADS THE WAY

With a population of 5,607,000 and density levels of 7,796 ppl/km, Singapore is one of the most populated places on earth. A robust system of integrated land use and transport planning has been in action for decades, but the challenge of accommodating a growing population on limited land necessitated a

shift in focus towards more space-efficient modes of transportation. Basically, the city state needed to leave cars behind.

Singapore's solution was to roll out incentives for people to take public transport and embrace new forms of transportation, such as personal mobility devices (PMDs). Folding bikes and PMDs are now allowed on public trains and buses all day, and there are now numerous bike-sharing services. By encouraging its people to embrace their new forms of transport, the city hopes to create an environment that is conducive to sustainable urban transport. Property developers are now required to submit a Walking and Cycling Plan as part of their Development Applications to the government.

The results were impressive: public transport usage now makes up 66 per cent of all peak-hour journeys. A variety of transport forms—including ride-share services and PMDs—are now a common sight on Singapore's roads.

HOW ONE TRANSIT MALL CHANGED SEOUL

In Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, the population quadrupled in four decades while the number of cars grew a massive fiftyfold. In Yonsei-ro, a popular commercial street in Sinchon district where several major universities



Leaving cars behind in Singapore

Image courtesy of Centre for Liveable Cities and Urban Land Institute



Humanising the streets in Shanghai

Image courtesy of Richard Schneider via Flickr

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are found, the average travel speed in 2013 was only 10 km/h—far slower than the average of 25 km/h on Seoul's main roads. Pedestrians were also confined to narrow sidewalks, causing unsafe crowding in the streets.

To combat this situation, the Seoul Metropolitan Government implemented two car-free days on Yonsei-ro, during which data was collected to help planners fully analyse the impact of vehicle restrictions. The results showed that vehicles travelling north to south were successfully redirected across nearby

roads, but a detour had to be identified for vehicles going in the opposite direction. After a lengthy consultative process, Yonsei-ro was transformed into Seoul's first public transportation-only zone, benefitting all stakeholders.

A transit mall was completed in January 2014, and the benefits were clear almost immediately—traffic accidents fell by 34 per cent just six months after the mall was opened, and there was an 11-per cent increase in the number of visitors using

public transport. The transit mall also experienced clear financial benefits. The number of shoppers in Sinchon increased by 29 per cent from 2013, resulting in a rise of 4 per cent in total revenues. This pedestrian-friendly solution helped to prevent worsening congestion within the area surrounding the transit mall, showing that traffic impact need not be a deal-breaker.

HILLS TO CLIMB IN BANDUNG

The city of Bandung is the capital of West Java province in Indonesia and the country's

third largest city. The major issue affecting congestion was that only 20 per cent of the Greater Bandung population were using public transport facilities. The city's hilly topography also limited mobility options for residents while vendors lined the streets in the shopping district of Jalan Cihampelas, causing traffic chaos.

City planners needed to provide infrastructure to support businesses and promote a safe environment for shoppers. They came up with an innovative Skywalk to relocate street vendors and provide an accessible and safe shopping space for visitors in the city centre. The elevated deck opened in February 2017 and allowed visitors to walk from the nearby zoo to Jalan Cihampelas without having to enter the congested city centre. At the same time, a centralised car park was constructed outside the city centre to discourage driving into Jalan Cihampelas.

The area described seems like a very different place today. Pedestrians can now stroll freely and safely on the skywalk, away from traffic. The 450-metre-long elevated deck has space for close to 200 street vendors offering food and a wide array of goods. For the future, there is a bolder plan to build Bandung Skywalk, a series of bridges and skywalks across the city, creating better connectivity over the hilly

terrain. The administration recognised that urban mobility extends beyond moving people around by machines or cars—it is also beneficial to offer people a range of travel options. The Skywalk plan essentially focuses on walking as the more attractive option, by allowing people to walk safely in the city without having to cross busy traffic intersections.

LESSONS TO LEARN

What can other cities learn from these examples? Essentially, healthy practices lie at the heart of thriving cities. It is clear that the way we shape and connect our spaces have far-reaching impacts on our communities and can empower real societal change. Aside from the challenge of altering established infrastructure, the greater difficulty lies in changing urban cultures and mindsets. With the will of the people and the local governments, as the 10 cities show, change can come more quickly than you might think. Our hearts can race either from stress triggered by traffic congestions or from invigorating active mobility—and the choice is ours to make. **C**

¹*Urban Mobility: 10 Cities Leading the Way in Asia-Pacific is the fourth publication in a series that aims to champion a sustainable and healthy future, by inspiring citizens, city leaders and professionals to develop solutions to their own cities' challenges, while being mindful of their unique resources, capabilities and needs.*

URBAN LAND INSTITUTE

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a non-profit education and research institute supported by its members. Its mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. Established in 1936, the institute has almost 40,000 members worldwide representing all aspects of land use and development disciplines.

CENTRE FOR LIVEABLE CITIES

Set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) has as its mission "to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities". CLC's work spans four main areas—Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms, and Advisory. Through these activities, CLC hopes to provide urban leaders and practitioners with the knowledge and support needed to make our cities better.



Walking the talk in Bandung

Image courtesy of Nathalia Diana Pitaloka and Alchetron