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Bicycle-Irrelevant City: Rationalizing Resistance against Road

Bicycling in Singapore

The government commonly dismisses the call for bicycle promotion with the spatial rationale. However, it is precisely the problem of land shortage that requires bicycles to be the solution like in Tokyo, London, New York, Copenhagen and other similar places. Professor Paul Barter who researches on urban transport policy in Singapore describes bicycles as having the same space use efficiency as buses making it a clear option to sustainable transportation. Barter went on to explain how it is easily possible to create room for cycling lanes within the existing traffic lanes and that to build bicycle infrastructure only about 1% of the total land transport budget is required.¹ Studies on health and environmental benefits from cycling are profuse too.^{2 3} If cycling derives numerous benefits, which seemingly outweigh costs, it should be straightforward that the government implements cycling as a mode of transportation but it has not. This paper seeks to explain reasons behind the lack of friendliness and support from the government towards bicycle users, which is seen

¹ Paul A. Barter, personal interview, February 25, 2010

Barter explained that roads in Singapore are commonly three lane roads with 3m in width per lane. If each road could be reduced to 2.5m a bicycle lane of 1.5m can be created

² Andersen, L., Schnor, P., Schroll, M., Hein, H., "All-cause mortality associated with physical activity during leisure time, work, sport, and cycling to work," *Arch Intern. Med.* 160 (2000): 1621-1628.
1628

³ Bassett, D., Pucher, J., Buehler, R., Thompson, D., Crouter, S., "Walking, cycling and obesity rates in Europe, North America, and Australia," *J. Phys. Act. Health* 5(2008): 795-814

from the long period taken to manage cycling issues and the unimportance it holds in the eyes of the government. We argue that the government's support for cycling will remain primarily as a means of recreation and at best as an intra-estate vehicle for short trips within certain areas. We explain the unsupportive attitude through the government's pragmatism and priority and its deem of cycling as reputedly poor and unfitting of Singapore's culture, all working together to maintain the larger urban transport strategies of the Land Transport Authority (LTA). A lack of strong cycling lobby groups and the absence of a critical mass of bicycle users contribute to the current scenario too. The methodology used in our research includes personal interviews, secondary sources, online cycling blogs and forums, parliament debates and our field work to cycling areas in Singapore.

The Bicycle Stage Clash

Upon arrival in Singapore, Washington based Visiting Professor John Richardson solicits responses from local Singaporeans regarding bicycling in Singapore. Despite locals informing him of the bicycle-unfriendly environment Richardson went on to bike around the island. To his surprise he found considerable numbers of people who cycle on this island even though locals have informed him of the unfriendliness.⁴ Singapore is home to the beautiful East Coast Park and Park Connector Network (PCN) but at the same time has not provided bicycle infrastructure beyond that. The following photos present a nicely

⁴ John Richardson, personal interview, 25 Feb 2010

constructed Park Connector juxtaposed with bicycles laying around in Pasir Ris because of the lack of bicycle infrastructure.



It is not uncommon to read news and blogs debating about the rights of bicycle users versus car users and pedestrians. It is illegal to ride a bike on pedestrian footways but it is also

unsafe for bicycles to ride on the roads with motorized vehicles- bicycle users are disliked by pedestrians and unwelcomed by motorists. As of April 2000 foldable bicycles were allowed on MRTs but the price of a foldable bicycle ranges from SGD 500 to SGD 2000, as opposed to normal bicycles that are less that can purchased at less than SGD 100. The latest sign of a more bicycle-embracing approach by the government is the officiating of Tampines as the first cycling town in Singapore. The optimists anticipate a growing trend island wide following Tampines Cycling Town in favour of bicycles users while the pessimists on the other end of the spectrum see otherwise. There is not a consistent verdict on bicycles. Richardson concludes after months of cycling around Singapore that “It’s not so much about whether Singapore is a bicycle-friendly or bicycle-unfriendly city; rather Singapore is a bicycle-irrelevant city.”⁵

Resistant Responses to Lukewarm Inklings

In the last decade, of the hundred Members of Parliament on average, there are at least two voices that promote bicycling. In a 2003 Parliament debate, Mr Ong Kian Min suggested “a free do-it-yourself mode of transport, ie, cycling.” Ms Irene Ng added that “in Tampines, we are looking at how to build cycling lanes and cycling tracks to connect... but in the end, we still have to seek the approval of the LTA. And there is a lot of red tape involved.” Mr Khaw Boon Wan, Senior Minister of State, resisted their suggestions with

⁵ Ibid.

reasons of land scarcity, underdeveloped reputation for Singapore and mass transport prioritization.⁶ However, the voices in the house have been persistent through the years advocating the use of bicycles and one has notice the gradual change to “lukewarmness” from the government. In January 2010 a discussion to prevent accidents involving cyclists was addressed without the same resistant sentiment in 2003.⁷ On March 1 2010, credit to Ms Irene Ng, Tampines is officially the first cycling town in Singapore that legalizes riding on footpaths.⁸ The next three photos are signs of improved bicycle parking in Tampines and a “Safe Cycling” poster in favour of cycling near the Bukit Batok MRT. Nonetheless, the length of time taken by the government to address the problem in a more formal manner speaks for itself- 7 years since 2003 for one cycling town to be officiated.

⁶ Parliament of Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates Singapore Official Report*, Volume 76, No.7, 15 March 2003

⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs, *Oral Answer to Parliamentary Question on what is being done to prevent accidents involving cyclists*, 12 January 2010, http://app4.mha.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid=MTY1NQ%3d%3d-z16tmKUORTQ%3d

⁸ Tripartite Committee of Tampines Grassroots Organization, Land Transport Authority and Traffic Police, *Press Release On The Cycling On Footways Study In Tampines Town*, 13 December 2009



The dearth of published bicycling data and statistics by the LTA and sparse academic research in this area is also telling of government stance. Paul Barter observes that the LTA seems to have passed on most of the responsibility to National Parks (N Parks) and there is

no bicycle department or designated officer to cycling issues in the LTA. However, the LTA has recently commissioned some academicians in NTU to research on cycling but more specific information is still unobtainable.⁹ About a month ago the LTA organized a focus group discussion about cycling and Teo, one of our interviewees was a participant. He conveyed a sense of disappointment as the focus group was in actuality run by a market research company on behalf of LTA with the main aim of branding LTA. Despite the dismay, the participants did vent out their pro-bicycle opinions. From the focus group discussion, Teo surmised that the LTA is finding it very challenging to embark on a paradigm shift to bicycles as transportation as it still understands cycling as a recreation or to be used in a multi-modal form with trains and buses. All the interviewees we communicated with have seen facility improvements, though minimal, like bicycle parking at MRT stations, foldable bicycles on trains and buses and bicycle safety to warn motorists of cyclists. Also, the LTA Master plan (2008) has shown efforts to accommodate cycling but it assumes cycling only as a recreation and at most a substitute to the feeder bus system.¹⁰

A recent study on bicycle infrastructure, programs and policies to encourage cycling was published. It covered 14 case study cities that have promoted cycling as a means of transportation. The results indicated a positive relationship between government intervention and cycling levels; almost all cities that invested in bicycle infrastructure and cycling

⁹ Paul A. Barter, personal interview, 25 February 2010, 2010

¹⁰ Tze Yin, "Towards A Better Ride: Measuring the latent demand for cycling in Singapore" (MSc diss., London School of Economics, 2009), 4

initiatives saw large increases in numbers of bicycle users. It also concluded that public policy has a crucial role in encouraging bicycling.¹¹ Singapore has a history of well enforced and rather impactful campaigning efforts in achieving national good since the 1960s, for example campaigns like the Keep Singapore Clean, Two Is Enough, Speak Mandarin, Save Water and National Courtesy to name a few. This country is not lacking in its ability to make change, in this case to promote the use of bicycles, rather the determining impetus lies in the importance and priority of bicycles.

A Vicious Cycle: The Government and the People

To further extend our argument, we assert that cycling has not even reached a nascent stage because of a two way vicious cycle reinforcement- the government does not support safer cycling environments causing people to shy away, which in turn causes the government to conclude that the number of bicycle users do not justify the call for attention. Today, cyclists make up only approximately 1% of road users¹² but this excludes the 1.2 million non-residents, many of whom are bicycle users but they are blue collar foreign labour who are unlikely to affect public policy because of their sheer numbers. More importantly is to first explain the government's ill favour towards cycling, which we argue, is still prevalent despite the recent improvements to a lukewarm attitude. Even though spoken in 2003, Khaw

¹¹ John Pucher, Jennifer Dill and Susan Handy, "Infrastructure, programs, and policies to increase bicycling: An international review" *Preventive Medicine* 50 (2010): 106–125

¹² Paul A. Barter, personal interview, 25 February 2010

Boon Wan's parliament debate reply to bicycles as a means of transportation still holds in essence.

“But we are practical people... When we manage mass transport policies to move large number of commuters in the most efficient way, we have to give priority, not to bicycles, but to MRT and buses... Yes, in cities, like Beijing, Hanoi, you will see on TV thousands of cyclists and, because of that, they set aside special bicycle lanes. That is because they are at a stage of economic development where, for the masses, bicycles, in most cases, are still the most affordable. I do not think Singapore is in that situation. We have already gone past that stage... So this progressive switch from bicycles to buses and MRTs for the masses, you can see it all over the world and is closely correlated with GDP growth.”¹³

Mr Khaw's response has many loopholes as he had obviously left out Western countries and Japan that are strong promoters of cycling even as GDP growth continues. Other assumed statements made in that reply have also been proven inaccurate through the years, for example, he claimed that roads are relatively safe for bicycle users. His assumed safety for bicycle users on roads has also been toppled by increasing bike accidents. In the first nine months of 2009, there were 420 accidents involving cyclists some of which were

¹³ Parliament of Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates Singapore Official Report*, Volume 76, No.7, March 15, 2003

fatal.¹⁴ Therefore, we argue that beyond limited land use, the government's snail speed response to bicycles is explained by Singapore's pragmatism and priority as well as its reputation and culture.

Pragmatism and Priority

Singapore is a nation that frames itself as pragmatic and economically driven in all aspects. This is recognized in the vision of Land Transport Policy; "The Ministry's land transport policy planning aims to develop a quality land transport system – one that is integrated, efficient, affordable, with smooth-flowing traffic and which will meet the people's needs and support economic and environmental goals".¹⁵ An economically driven policy making process requires bicycles to produce economic benefits so that the new policy can be presented in similar terms. The economic output of bicycles is much lower than that of cars. Selling, repairing, producing or even developing bicycle related technology will probably not contribute substantially to Singapore's economy. A small bicycle vendor as seen in the photo will not generate revenue like car dealers on Alexandra Road.

¹⁴Ministry of Home Affairs, *Oral Answer to Parliamentary Question on what is being done to prevent accidents involving cyclists*, 12 January 2010, http://app4.mha.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid=MTY1NQ%3d%3d-z16tmKUORTQ%3d

¹⁵ Ministry of Transport, <http://app.mot.gov.sg/default.asp>



Several years ago, the LTA tried to register each bicycle on the island to collect revenue but for practical reasons this attempt eventually diminished.¹⁶ It was obvious that there was a mismatch between administrative cost and benefits from bicycle generated revenue. On the contrary, the deployment of Certificate of Entitlement (COE) and Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) systems are an economic and urban planning success; they reduce congestion and regulate number of vehicles as well as produce considerable revenue to the city. In 2009, SGD 1 992 662 520 was generated as premium based on the annual quota of 18471 cars in category B with each car contributing about SGD 10788. The LTA has currently set its annual growth rate for quota at 1.5% and the contributing price as of Jan

¹⁶ Ministry of Home Affairs, *Oral Answer to Parliamentary Question on bicycle thefts*, 19 September 05, http://app4.mha.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid=MTY1NQ%3d%3d-z16tmKUORTQ%3d

2010 is SGD 19190 per car; the registration fee per car is usually 25% of the import price.¹⁷ It is unimaginable for bicycles to amount to the same levels of revenue and to be subjected to an ERP or COE system. Even if that were the scenario, bicycles can easily avoid the ERP gantries by choosing smaller lanes and footpaths. Enforcing such a regulation will be a waste of the police force resource. In fact, currently the rules regarding cycling on footpaths are not strictly enforced by the police because it is not an issue in priority.

When the LTA planned its urban transport strategy it did not account for bicycles in the equation and its strategy has been to transport masses in the fastest way possible. They assumed that as Singapore grows economically, people will forgo their bicycles and adopt higher end transport.¹⁸ The road design in Singapore prioritizes cars and buses leaving bicycles with no legal rights or space. Also in their rationale, bicycles will slower down traffic and increase congestion, which is contrary to the aims of the LTA. On average, cars in Singapore travel faster than cars in comparable cities, at an approximate speed of 40-45kph and have quicker traffic lights in favour of motorists to deliberately reduce congestion.¹⁹ Bicycles on the road will most probably reduce the speed of the traffic as motorists look out for them. In addition, their justification against bicycles is perhaps that by increasing bicycles the LTA expects the number of cars to remain the same because those who can

¹⁷ Land Transport Authority, *Cost (S\$) For Cars Registered in JAN 2010*, http://www.onemotoring.com.sg/publish/onemotoring/en/lta_information_guidelines/buy_a_new_vehicle/car_cost.MainPar.0047.File.tmp/Car_Cost_Update.pdf

¹⁸ Paul A. Barter, personal interview, 25 February 2010

¹⁹ Alan Altshuler, personal interview, 1 March 2010

afford cars will probably maintain the status quo; bicycles instead will become a competitor to public transportation for the lower middle income class, increasing congestion problems. Given the scarcity of land, priority has gone to motorized vehicles. As seen in this photo, bicycles were not accounted for in land transportation as they have no parking space, giving priority to motorized vehicles.



Lacklustre Reputation and Unfitting Culture

The bicycle adverse sentiment cannot be explained only in pragmatic and economic terms. The neglect and resistant sentiments by the government can be explicitly expressed in the words of Mr Khaw Boon Wan in the 2003 Parliament debate quoted above. The image of an “undeveloped” country caused the lack of will and motivation to revert (from the perspective of the government) back to non-motorized transport. It is commonly agreed

among Singaporeans that the car is a symbol of status; bicycles are far from fetching the same glamour. In bicycle friendly cities, cyclists are seen as environmentalist but in Singapore they are treated as “quasi-criminals” who disturb pedestrians and disrupt traffic flow. The government too contributes in creating motor-vehicles as a representation of the affluent state because of the high cost incurred to purchase and maintain a car.

It is befitting to categorize different kinds of bicycle users into three main groups to further illustrate the argument. The largest of the three is what we regard as the “Pragmatic Users”- blue collar foreign workers as well as Singapore senior citizens who cycle around their estate. The next is the “Middle Class Users” who may cycle to work once in awhile and participate in recreational biking over the weekends. Finally is the “High end Recreational Users” who invest dearly into their bikes. The fear of an underdeveloped image is further enhanced today by the proliferating numbers of the first category- unskilled foreign workers, who have chosen bicycles as their practical means of transportation. The image of Caucasian-high-skilled-talents riding to work or on Pulau Ubin on weekends would be much favoured as opposed to blue collar foreign workers cycling along Nicole Highway every morning.



Top: Cycling on Pulau Ubin on a Saturday

Bottom: Caucasian cycles on a foldable bike to the shop with his son





Top: Blue Collar Foreign Workers Cycling to the factories

Bottom: Bicycles parked outside the living quarters of Blue Collar Foreign Workers



Even though many cities in Europe, The United States and Australia have integrated cycling into society, Singapore is more aware of falling into the less developed stereotype of neighbouring countries like Vietnam or China. Promoting bicycles will also “mess up” the

city, opposing Singapore's patriarchal and authoritarian style of structured and neat roads.

Bicycles are left lying around back lanes, side roads and foreign workers quarters.



However, the government is in favour of promoting cycling as a recreation and visible signs of improvement like the PCN are in continuous progress. This is compatible with Singapore's desire to attract more skilled workers into the elite ranks of society. Nonetheless, the PCN has room for improvement.

“I think the park connectors are a great idea, although sometimes we wonder who the developers consulted when planning the connectors, or what the reasons behind the lay-out are, because no cyclist would want to push their bike across an overhead bridge or an underground passageway, or across sections that intersect with pedestrian pathways. When I get to the overhead bridge that links Tampines and Pasir Ris Park Connectors, I see old men, middle-aged women, and whole families riding across the bridge, blithely ignoring the defaced \$1000 fine sign. It's a design that invites people to commit an offence, but without fear because nobody ever seems to bother to do any enforcement, and at any rate enforcement would have been crazy because whoever gets a fine would probably get really angry because of the perceived unfairness of it.”²⁰

²⁰ Athena Han, personal interview, 25 February 2010

Besides the inconvenience of carrying bicycles onto overhead bridges and cyclist ignoring signboards, rules are not properly enforced because people walk on bicycle lanes and bicycles cycle on pedestrian paths.





It is likely that investment into the PCN will continue. We argue, therefore, that the government fears the reputation of underdeveloped with the use of bicycles as a means of

transportation but are supportive of recreational bicycle facilities that create an image of middle class and international talent biking over the weekends.

The other side of the vicious cycle is the insignificant number of bicycle users. Professor Sivasothi, an avid cyclist and lobbyist, sometimes recommends against riding a bike as transport for amateur bicycle users. From experience, it requires skill and focus to keep safe on roads especially in the East of Singapore. Bicycle technology has also transformed sophisticatedly over time, even when bicycle users dwindled through the 1980s and today many are not aware of how to choose a suitable kind of bike. To add, many adults today did not grow up learning to ride and to pick it up now seems impractical.²¹ These are basic skills and knowledge that prevent proliferation of bicycle users, among other reasons. Bicycle theft poses another threat to potential bicycle users. A news breaking headline that attracted much attention in January of 2010 was the report of English cyclist Greg Browning who pedalled nearly 30,000km from London to Sydney but lost his bike to theft in broad daylight in Orchard Road.²² The Singapore Police Force Crime Situation 2009 saw increases in cases in 2008 and within this Crime Class were bicycle theft.²³ In 2005, a Community Safety and Security Project (CSSP) launched the “Lock your ride, Mark your bike” initiative to reduce bicycle theft at the Pasir Ris estate.²⁴ Anecdotally, the increase of bicycle theft is

²¹ Sivasothi, personal interview 26 February 2010

²² Tessa Wong, “Cyclist hits S’pore roadblock,” *The Straits Times*, 29 January 2010

²³ Singapore Police Force, *Crime Situation Statistics*, http://www.spf.gov.sg/stats/stats2009_overall_crime.htm

²⁴ Community Safety and Security Program, [Pasir Ris East & West CCCs - Lock Your Ride, Mark Your Bike](#),

positively related to the rising of steel prices. The pragmatic mind is unlikely to risk losing their bike even though cycling may appeal in other aspects. A recent study which surveyed for the demand of bicycles in Singapore has found a similar pattern- unable to detect if the lack of bicycle facilities or the lack of bicycle users is the cause of the small demand- a chicken and egg issue.²⁵

Lobby Groups: Challenges and Weaknesses

The voice of cyclists is relatively weak in Singapore, partially because few civil society organizations express their demand in a united, influential and coherent way, and partially because there is not a critical mass of bicycle users yet. The Singapore Amateur Cycling Association (SACA) is a quiet lobbyist and has had its website under construction since August 2009²⁶. The Safe Cycling Task Force is the other organized movement but appears more advisory than advocacy.²⁷ Besides pro-cycling discussion blogs,²⁸ other organizations and movements like Bike-Aid, Ride of Silence, Pedal Ubin and NTU round island cycling, among other groups, do create awareness, however, much more needs to be done.

<http://app1.cssp.org.sg/index.aspx?id=30#Y06-top>

²⁵ Tse Yin, "Towards A Better Ride: Measuring the latent demand for cycling in Singapore" (MSc diss., London School of Economics, 2009), 4

²⁶ Singapore Amateur Cycling Association, <http://www.cycling.org.sg/?cat=1>

²⁷ Tze Yin, "Towards A Better Ride: Measuring the latent demand for cycling in Singapore" (MSc diss., London School of Economics, 2009), 22

²⁸ Paul A. Barter, personal interview, February 25, 2010 and Chu Wa, email message, February 29, 2010

There are many civil society groups in Europe and America that lobby for cycling rights. In Washington for example, besides civil society groups, big companies that require documents to be couriered by bikes quickly each day lobby for bicycle rights and have much voice in a full democracy that is reliant on big corporation like America.²⁹ Singaporeans are commonly known for their political apathy and to form lobby groups for cycling is not as natural as others in full democratic regimes. They may not know how to organize civil society groups and how to effectively lobby. Public participation is generally low and only a handful of cases like the demolition of the National Library, Chek Jawa and construction of Fort Canning Tunnel have summoned public voice.

The largest of the three cycling categories, the Pragmatic Users, in specific the blue collar foreign workers are educated on safe cycling³⁰ but they are unlikely to have their requests attended to. Non-residents are not allowed to participate in lobbying efforts and the senior citizens who ride are not a prime group that form the PAP constituency. Once again the recreational cyclists, the younger middle class Singaporeans and expatriates, are the ones who will carry weight. Most importantly, the Singaporeans in this category are voters and the expatriates are Singapore's target group to lure into the city. This is one justification to the resources invested in recreational cycling as opposed to road cycling; at least until stronger lobby groups are organized.

²⁹ Personal communication with John Richardson on Feb 25, 2010

³⁰ Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. "Foreign Workers are Educated on Safe Cycling," *Asia One News*, Dec 28, 2009 <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Mailbox/Story/A1Story20091228-188345.html>

Overall Strategy and Attitude

All of which has been discussed prior to this fits into the LTA's main urban transport strategy. Firstly, bicycling does not fit in with LTA's philosophy which according to Paul Barter,³¹ focuses on bringing large numbers of people to their destination efficiently with the MRT and bus systems branded as the "People Centred Land Transport system". Thus, even though in terms of space and energy efficiency cycling fits the bill it does not fit the overall philosophy. Also, as discussed above, the government's focus has been to reduce congestion and smooth out traffic flow and promoting cycling will counter this strategy. Biking as a recreation or even within short distances of an estate does not interrupt with the overall strategy as would cycling as a means of transportation island wide. This explains the officiating of Tampines as a cycling town and the advancement of PCN. Some shortcomings of the PCN were addressed above and a bicycle user from Tampines also commented on the lack of support of the government there. "So you can call Tampines a cycling town, but it's a town full of poorly behaved cyclists. I know LTA tried to educate, but it sure looks like that hasn't worked very well."³² In sum, we argue that bicycles are not a priority to the government and in this category recreational cycling and to some extent intra estate cycling will receive government support. As for the pragmatic road cyclists, we suppose the

³¹ Paul A. Barter, personal interview, February 25, 2010

³² Athena Han, personal interview, February 27, 2010

government will not intervene and continue to let safety risks threaten with the hopes that bicycles, like this one left on the road, may in time diminish.



Concluding Remarks

This paper does not dismiss the progress and improvements of government attitude and actions towards cycling in recent years however it does argue and explain the reasons behind the reluctance to fully embrace bicycles as the answer to a healthier population and more a sustainable transportation plan. Pragmatism and prioritization as well as reputation and culture have placed bicycles at best on PCN or within an estate. For bicycles to become a part of society like it is in The Netherlands, UK, Germany, Denmark or France a critical mass of bicycle users need to emerge together with stronger lobby groups as well as the

government's realization that cycling is an answer to sustainable transportation in Singapore.

In this generation of leaders and in the foreseeable future, cycling will not receive government support for island wide implementation as a means of transportation- until Singapore decides to be a bicycle-relevant city.