SINGAPORE

From The Straits Times archives: Revitalising Orchard Road

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SINGAPORE - Bye bye cars. From October, a section of Orchard Road - from Orchard ION to Ngee Ann City - turns into a pedestrian-only thoroughfare once a month. The first edition of Pedestrian Night kicks off on Saturday - Oct 4 - evening.

The pedestrianisation of Orchard Road is one of the ways suggested by experts to revitalise Singapore's iconic shopping belt. From The Straits Times archives, we look back on what other ideas have been raised.

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WHAT should Singapore do to revitalise its famous Orchard Road shopping district? Jessica Lim talked to retail, tourism and architecture experts to come up with nine ideas that the Government, developers and retailers should consider.

1. BUILD MORE LINKWAYS AND SKYBRIDGES

ALL the experts interviewed agree the key to revitalising Orchard Road is to make both sides of the road more inter-connected.

“Both sides of the street are quite separate now. If shoppers are at Wisma Atria, they typically stay on that side of the road. What will compel them to cross over?” asks Dr Lynda Wee, adjunct associate professor in retailing at Nanyang Technological University's Nanyang Business School.

Experts say the only successful underground link in Orchard Road now is the one that connects Ion Orchard, Wisma Atria and Ngee Ann City.
Such links are common in key Asian shopping cities like Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong. Not only do they keep shoppers away from the heat, cold or rain, they also offer a convenient and seamless shopping experience. With such infrastructure in place, malls can work better together to complement each other.

"Malls can organise events where shoppers have to pick up items from various malls to qualify for a lucky draw. The malls have to work together for the greater good," suggests Ngee Ann Polytechnic's tourism senior lecturer Michael Chiam.

It is not for want of trying.

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has been dangling subsidies – now as high as $28,700 per sq m – for mall developers to build 12 linkways it feels are necessary for Orchard Road.
But developers are not biting, saying the high costs of tunnelling underground do not justify benefits which, to them, are still intangible. Some add that it may take up to five years to come up with a winning formula for marketing the retail space in the underground links.

They have suggested that the Government offer bigger tax breaks to sweeten the deal.

Dr Wee notes that such reluctance means someone needs to take a harder stand.

“The authorities have to make it such that developers will have a lot to lose if they don't take part,” she says.

2. PEDESTRIANISE, AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME

OF COURSE, the ultimate way to connect both sides of Orchard Road is to pedestrianise the whole street – at least some of the time.

This routinely happens on certain weekends in most major shopping cities, including London and Tokyo. The Wang Fu Jing shopping street in Beijing is permanently pedestrianised.

Mr Gopinath Menon, Nanyang Technological University adjunct associate professor and a retired Land Transport Authority (LTA) planner, believes that the temporary closure of a section of Orchard Road – from Paterson Road to Grange Road – one Sunday a month could work.

He would know, because he was involved in a previous attempt at pedestrianising Orchard Road in 1989.

“It has been done before but now, it's more complicated. There are more cars and a more demanding public,” he says. “Someone has to sit down and really work out the logistics.”
The closure would mean blocking the entrance to malls like Lucky Plaza, for example. Visitors to the Mount Elizabeth Hospital would also have to take a long route in.

A lot of publicity would need to be put out to make the closures known, says Mr Menon. Electronic signs have to be displayed at closure sites, buses re-routed and barriers put up.

The 1989 attempt at closing Orchard Road involved about 30 guards and it took about an hour to re-open the roads.

The guards were there to shoo pedestrians off the street when the roads re-opened and also move barriers aside to let emergency vehicles in.

The closures stopped after several months when fewer events were held and interest waned. Permanent closure, he says, would be a much larger undertaking.
Orchard Road and Orchard Boulevard are both one-way streets that now work as a pair.

Shutting off Orchard Road to motorists would mean having to widen Orchard Boulevard and turn it into a two-way street.

Bideford Road would also have to be turned into a two-way street to allow cars to get to the Paragon shopping mall.

“Grange Road will take a beating and the junction of Orchard Boulevard and Grange Road will be really congested,” predicts Mr Menon.

Grange Road would have to be widened to serve motorists from the west and north that would have to use it to get to the back stretch of Orchard Road.

“It’s quite messy and will need a lot of study. The question is, what is the purpose for a permanent closure? Is it worth it?”

Technology, however, can perhaps aid in planning.

Italian architect-engineer Carlo Ratti, director of the Senseable City Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggests a study of existing usage patterns of the street as well as where shoppers come from.

Methods include the analysis of cellphone network data.

“These analyses could then be used to better understand the effect of possible pedestrianisation on the overall flows of the city,” he says.

“In many cases pedestrianised streets can be implemented with success even in highly congested urban areas, as shown by the pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square in London.”

Telco StarHub is already working with data analysis firms to study pedestrian flow and crowd location, and plans to sell this to organisations like the Orchard Road Business Association.

3. IMPROVE TRAFFIC

IN THE short term, experts note that Orchard Road has to do something about its heavy vehicle traffic. The Government has to cater to motorists’ needs, meaning less space for pedestrians.

Apart from the main road itself, stretches like Bideford Road by Paragon, the section of Grange Road behind "Scape, and Orchard Link and Orchard Turn behind Ngee Ann City are perennially choked.

Mr Kelvin Foo, director of traffic and transport consultancy TTS Group, believes the solution to the congestion problem is to cut the number of cars driving in. “Parking prices should go up and the availability of parking spaces should go down. If there is no parking, people won’t drive there.”

He notes that such moves are harsh but effective. Parking on shopping streets like Oxford Street in London is notoriously difficult to find and typically costs more than $10 an hour.

He also suggests extending Electronic Road Pricing hours so fewer cars will use the Orchard Road area as a thoroughfare en route to their final destinations.

Shopping malls can also play their part in encouraging shoppers to leave their cars at home.

“They can give discounts or rebates to shoppers who show that they have taken public transport to town. Ez-link cards could be tapped for that,” he says.

But to entice shoppers to leave cars at home, public transport along the stretch needs to be stepped up, says Mr Nick Fellows, managing director of transport consultancy Vertix Asia-Pacific.
“What is lacking is dedicated feeder bus services just for the Orchard Road area,” he says. He suggests an Orchard Road-branded bus service that would be iconic of the shopping street, to complement existing public bus routes.

The traffic issue is a difficult one to solve, he says, and agrees with Mr Foo that the aim needs to be to remove as much traffic as possible from Orchard Road, not just to keep it moving.

“Building flyovers or widening roads would not be a long-term solution. That would just encourage more traffic to enter the area.”

4. HAVE MORE FLAGSHIP, ICONIC STORES

EXPERTS like Dr Lynda Wee of the Nanyang Business School say that with brands and malls proliferating in almost every city globally, the biggest cities are moving towards “experience shopping”.

This means looking beyond traditional mall-based retailing and attracting big brands to open up “category killers” here.

These stores can often be destinations in themselves. Tokyo’s Ginza has a seven-storey building showcasing all of Sony’s electronic gadgets and gizmos.

The city’s Harajuku district has Kiddy Land, a five-storey building selling toys. Even a standalone Office Depot outlet would bring in the crowds, say experts.

Orchard Road also needs more standout flagship stores, like the beautiful glass pavilion store opened recently by Louis Vuitton at Marina Bay Sands, they say.
Tokyo’s Prada store in Aoyama is a shimmering quilted glass lantern. The Ann Demeulemeester store in Seoul’s Gangnam district is cloaked in greenery, and the Lucien Pellat-Finet store in Osaka is covered in wooden honeycomb structures which meander throughout the store and are used as a retail display system.

“In comparison, shops on Orchard Road are still very transactional,” says Dr Wee.

“Flagship stores like Abercrombie & Fitch and Louis Vuitton here make the street more exciting. There should be more iconic shops and better retail designs.”

To do that, experts say urban planning guidelines must be relaxed. Must every plot of land be developed into a multi-brand mall to maximise its selling price?

Singapore must also be marketed more vigorously. “To attract brands to set up here, we need to position ourselves as a gateway a bit better. We have to woo the brands,” Dr Wee says.
5. HAVE MORE EVENTS ON SIDEWALKS

MANY of the experts suggest more street-level events like bands, bazaars and fashion shows.

“If people see a crowd on the other side of the road, they will cross over to take a look. We have wide pedestrian sidewalks on Orchard Road, but we're not utilising them,” says Mr Chiam, suggesting the Government should further relax its rules on busking.

Others suggest more activities on the street – small-scale concerts and buskers, for instance. Some also suggest water-playgrounds on the top floors of malls (such as the one in VivoCity).

Mr Ty Tabing, executive director of non-profit group Singapore River One, says that more organic, ground-up programming would be a treat for visitors.
“The challenge would be curating the offerings,” he says. “There needs to be some sort of plan as to how these programmes are thematically presented.”

While adding more street-level activities may further congest sidewalks, Mr Tabing says it would energise the precinct. “I think congestion on Orchard Road is kind of nice. The energy there is palpable. It’s a good thing.”

6. START THEMATIC SIDE STREETS AND MALLS

OTHER experts suggest looking into developing Orchard Road’s side roads – Emerald Hill Road, Emerald Link, Killiney Road and Devonshire Road – into bustling streets with small label stores and home-grown designers.

“I think we must remember that international brands are available in every major city. What can we offer to tourists that cannot be found anywhere else?” asked Mr Jeffrey Tay, creative director of modernAge, a fashion design and events company.

Tokyo’s “Cat Street”, lined with edgy streetwear stores, and Takeshita-dori, with its array of youth stores, are both offshoots of the Harajuku shopping district.

London’s Carnaby Street, off the main Oxford Street, is pedestrianised and home to a large number of independent fashion boutiques.

Mr Tay suggests weekend farmers’ markets and thematic bazaars on these side streets, with retail space opened up for local designers. Some ideas: A bazaar that sells locally designed T-shirts only, or hand-made jewellery.

“The problem is that in Singapore there are regulations when it comes to using side streets for commercial purposes. That has to change,” he adds. He suggests that the Government work hand-in-hand with established local brands to come up with ideas.

Dr Wee says there are some Orchard Road malls which have the potential to exploit niche demand, such as the streetwear focus in Far East Plaza. Lucky Plaza, for instance, could house more Filipino brands and cuisines, she suggests.

These malls should then be better marketed as interesting alternative shopping destinations.

7. BUILD A PARK BEHIND NGEE ANN CITY

THE Marina Bay precinct is successful largely because it has many non-shopping attractions like Gardens by the Bay, museums, nightclubs and a casino.

Experts say Orchard Road needs to go beyond just shopping to bump up visitorship.

Orba has suggested that the authorities develop a park in the 2ha plot of state land behind Ngee Ann City. Currently, the hilly plot is vacant, with bus stops on each side. The park could also provide a solution to the bird problem plaguing retailers and shoppers in the Somerset area farther up the street. Birds could roost in the park instead.

It is a possible solution, says ecologist Yong Ding Li, but he cautions against expecting a quick fix. “It would take at least a decade for newly grown trees to reach a size that is suitable for roosting,” he says.

But a park may not have the Government’s backing.

The woodland has been zoned for residential use in the URA’s Master Plan 2008, suggesting that it may be earmarked for private residences.

SLP International research head Nicholas Mak estimates that the plot of land could be worth over a billion dollars if sold to a developer, and is sceptical that the Government would turn it into a park.

“It’s not the highest and best use for the site, and it goes against the Government’s zoning plans;” he says.

“There are not many parcels of land left in Orchard Road similar to this. This makes it more valuable.”

8 BRING BACK NIGHTSPOTS, HOLD MORE NIGHT EVENTS
IN THE 1980s and 1990s, Orchard Road was home to many high-profile clubs and nightspots, including China Black in Pacific Plaza, Sparks in Ngee Ann City and Bar None in Marriott Hotel. Safra also opened a club-cum-lounge in the building where H&M is currently housed.

Today, most of these places are gone.

There are some bars – such as Tab in Orchard Parade Hotel, Club Neverland in Orchard Plaza, KPO at Killiney Road, Balaclava in Ion Orchard and Brix at the basement of Grand Hyatt – but they do not attract enough of the same crowds.

“I wouldn’t consider them to be destinations,” says Mr Tay.

“Mall developers and retailers need to work together. Think more late-night movies, outdoor shows, mainstream bars and nightspots.

“There should be a concentrated hot-spot area for the night economy amid mid-range malls. These malls will then get sufficient traffic at night.”

This way, mall developers may even be able to eventually make it mandatory for their tenants to open late.

At the Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands, all retailers open until 11pm from Sunday to Thursday, and until midnight on Fridays and Saturdays.

The programme has been in place since The Shoppes opened in 2010, and involves all of its more than 300 tenants. The Shoppes has since seen an increased number of visitors after 10pm, with this period contributing 10 per cent to daily sales.

9. TREAT ORCHARD ROAD AS A NATIONAL ASSET

WHILE many of the buildings on Singapore’s premier shopping street are privately owned, Orchard Road is too critical to Singapore’s attractiveness as a destination to be left entirely to the whims of the market.

Private developers, naturally, focus on their own projects and it is not their role to think bigger and more strategically about how their mall fits into the wider scheme of things.

Efforts by the private sector-led Orchard Road Business Association (Orba) have been patchy, largely as it is a loose affiliation of private firms, each with its own interests and ideas, and bottom lines to worry about.

“I think the many less-than-successful attempts at injecting life into Orchard Road were because of the diverse agendas and objectives among the stakeholders,” says Ngee Ann Polytechnic’s Mr Chiam.

“It could also be the lack of a common vision.”

There are plans by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to turn Orba into a formal place management entity. The place management project will probably be co-funded by the Government and the private sector, and findings will be shared at a later date, says the STB.

But for something as important as making Singapore a destination of choice, a laissez-faire approach might not be best.

Government agencies charged with overseeing tourism, hotel development, foreign investment, as well as keeping Singapore an attractive place to be for Singaporeans, will have to work harder to coordinate their efforts.

A clear steer from one lead government agency would help, especially if it has the resources and clout to make things happen. Otherwise, plans for the street will continue to be piecemeal, without exploiting the full potential of this national asset.

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