

Turning Dead Spaces into Dynamic Places for Entrepreneurship

From Static Spaces to Entrepreneurial Launchpad

As cities develop, space and rental constraints are pushing entrepreneurs to look beyond conventional spaces. In Singapore, incubation spaces for technology and innovation are often located within Institutes of Higher Learning; however, these tend to lack variation. Moreover, due to land scarcity in Singapore — the island state spans just 720 square kilometres with a resident population of 5.6 million — there are few cheap alternatives for entrepreneurs. To resolve this gap, the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) explored the use of spaces under flyovers and viaducts.

Under the Thomson Flyover

Under the Thomson Flyover, also in the central region, a special multi-purpose recreational space can be found. Since 2012, avid amateur soccer players have utilised a futsal park of international standards — all for a small fee. This innovative use of space was helped by a local investment company that submitted a small rental bid of S\$5,888 a month to develop the futsal



Offside at Thomson Flyover. Source: Urban Redevelopment Authority

complex. Separately, an additional S\$500,000 was spent on building the complex, called Offside, which comprises four pitches. Within four weeks, sports enthusiasts had access to the facilities. Since then, amid growing enthusiasm for the sport, the pitches have enjoyed good demand.

Offside has become a community place for sports enthusiasts. It is not uncommon for strangers of different ages, ethnicities and skill levels to partake in a friendly game of futsal. Football academies have also come to use the pitch on a regular basis, which make up to 20 to 25% of the revenue.

The innovative use of space under the Thomson Flyover unlocks the hidden value of dead spaces — sterile pockets of land that result from infrastructural development. These dead spaces are often found under viaducts, bridges and flyovers or tunnels. There are more than 100 flyovers and viaducts in Singapore, which equate to approximately 60 hectares of land. Activating these sterile spaces at a low cost could encourage entrepreneurs to test out new and sometimes unconventional ideas in the heart of the land scarce city.

Supporting Entrepreneurship: Duct Tape Party

This idea has grown in Singapore, and is increasingly attractive to social entrepreneurs and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). In January 2017, the Local People, a start-up firm that runs small-scale artisan markets, organised “Duct Tape Party” under the bridge of the West Coast Highway along Clementi Road. The event featured 30 market stalls where visitors could take part in various fun activities such as attending free film screenings, getting a tattoo, making a new suit, and even donating to charity organisations. This initiative was the fruit of a 21-day public consultation by the SLA for ways to optimise viaduct lands.



The majority of people consulted endorsed SLA’s plans to use the viaduct under West Coast Highway. Instead of Not-In-My-Back-Yard (NIMBY), citizens are increasingly saying “Yes-In-My-Back-Yard”, or YIMBY for short. Yimbyism is driven by the people’s desire for good urban design and diverse land use, whilst respecting the environment and is grounded by sound understanding of the costs of development.

Previously, interim uses of land were intended for land and properties to be used in their original state, as they await redevelopment. However, dead spaces do not fall neatly into this category. Many prospective tenants, such as entrepreneurs, need basic structural improvements such as electricity and shelter. For these reasons, SLA, who oversees interim uses of such spaces, sought to match the needs of the tenants through customisation. The space under the West Coast Highway was fitted with a “Plug and Go” concept of electricity at a very competitive rate. SLA had also brought in modular structures to shelter tenants from the elements of weather.

Conclusion

In many cases where alternative land uses are considered, the main concern of city governments is safety. Land under flyovers and viaducts are sensitive nodes that are vulnerable to fire incidents or land encroachment. Hence, some cities have imposed a blanket rule on disallowing the use of land under viaducts, which led to many static spaces.

With minimum infrastructural investment, city governments can better use these spaces. Not only do city governments benefit from economies of scale, part of these costs could be recovered through collecting rent.



Nanlal D. Mehta Garden in Mumbai. Source: C4N India



Taman Film in Bandung Source: Dian Mardiana

Many cities have started re-thinking static spaces. In 2011, the residents of Matunga displaced gamblers and drug addicts who congregated under the Tulpule Flyover to redevelop the space. Residents formed the civil group, 'One Matunga', to crowd-source funds for redevelopment and round-the-clock private security. After acquiring approvals from various government authorities, One Matunga transformed the empty space into a lush pathway for commuters¹.

In New York City, some developers have created a submerged, subterranean park² in the space under the sidewalks; in Bandung, Mayor Ridwan Kamil has converted a former slum underneath the Pasupati Flyover into an outdoor cinema for residents and visitors to watch movies at no cost; in Hong Kong, Los Angeles and Baltimore, alleys behind thoroughfares³ are turned into retail hubs and community gathering places.

Social value is created by activating these spaces for more social uses that may take the form of place-making, building up social capital and promoting a healthy lifestyle. In-depth implementation considerations could also include the types of use for spaces in relation to the volume of traffic in the area.

As cities develop, opportunities abound in re-thinking the use of sterile pockets of infrastructural land, such as areas beneath viaducts, bridges and flyovers or spaces in tunnels, as potentially dynamic spaces rather than static ones. These also create affordable sites for incubating and test-bedding new ideas, hence expanding not just our spatial capacity, but also the limits of our entrepreneurial imagination.

Footnotes:

¹ <http://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/the-secret-garden-unexpected-beauty-beneath-this-mumbai-flyover-1421254>

² http://www.citylab.com/navigator/2016/07/low-line-nyc-city-approval/491378/?utm_source=eb

³ http://www.citylab.com/cityfixer/2016/07/a-new-life-for-urban-alleys/491207/?utm_source=eb

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