



ESSAY

Diversifying Activities in a Shopping District

Reimagining Orchard Road: Putting People On the Street

With declining retail traffic in recent years, Orchard Road faces strong competition as a shoppers' paradise. CLC Fellow **Michael Koh**—who was involved in developing the 2.2 km shopping belt as an urban planner from the 1990s to 2000s—shares ideas on revitalising the district for a diverse group of users beyond just shoppers.

Orchard Road needs a bold rethink. The consensus is clear, judging from discussions in the media on ways to boost the famous boulevard's attractiveness as a shopping destination.

The question then is not whether we need to do so, but how. How can Orchard Road recover its buzz? How can it become inviting and intriguing again—both as a local street, serving the community and residents, and as an international destination, competing with the iconic shopping districts of major global cities?

From July 2016 to April 2017, CLC conducted a joint study of Orchard Road with architectural firm WOHA and the

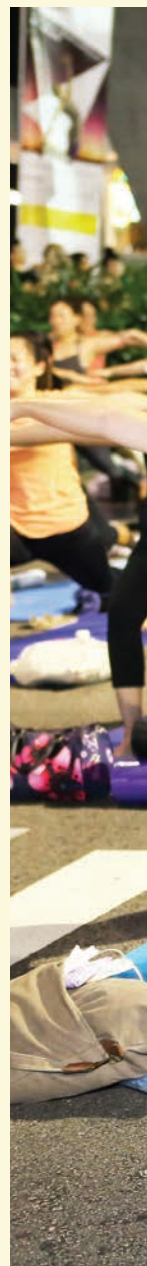
National University of Singapore's School of Design and Environment. The study came up with two big ideas on the way forward.

The first is to implement car-lite measures to open up spaces for visitors on foot, shifting the paradigm from vehicles to people, and from driving to walking. The second is to increase the depth and richness of Orchard Road by connecting it to side lanes and neighbouring precincts, as well as activating existing spaces along the street to enhance the diversity of activities.

Both of these ideas come down to one word: experience.



Michael Koh is a Fellow with the Centre for Liveable Cities. He was the former CEO of the National Heritage Board and the National Art Gallery, and Director of Urban Planning and Design at the Urban Redevelopment Authority.





Participants flooded Orchard Road to practise yoga on one of the Pedestrian Night sessions in 2014.

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community’s wide-ranging interests.”

To be exciting, Orchard Road has to create a new experience that is richer and more vivid for visitors. It is not just about shopping and retail, although that remains important. It also has to be about engaging the community’s wide-ranging interests, and leaving a mark on the visitor in different ways throughout his or her visit.

Car-Lite Measures

Car-lite measures are important because they are often the trigger for bringing people and vibrancy back onto the streets.

This has been true in a number of successful examples, such as Cheonggyecheon Stream in Seoul—where the flyover over a river was removed, and the area around the stream was converted into an urban park—and Times Square-Broadway in New York, where road space was pedestrianised. Oxford Street in London and George Street in Sydney are following suit, with plans to go car-free by 2020, because they have seen the benefits that pedestrianisation brings in higher footfall, increased revenues for shops and a general sense of energy and dynamism.

A full or partial pedestrianisation of stretches of Orchard Road will allow road space to be transformed into public

open spaces such as linear parks, urban squares and event plazas. Traffic calming measures and more pedestrian crossings can also make life more pleasant for those walking along the street. Trial 30-second scramble walks at the junction of Cairnhill Road and Orchard Road took place on weekends and public holidays from 16 December 2017 to 28 January 2018. Organised by the Orchard Road Business Association, the trial may be extended to two other busy junctions if it is successful.

Imagine reclaimed car lanes at Tanglin Road converted into a line of pavilions and pop-up stalls, with playgrounds for children and benches for friends to simply sit and chat. Think about expanding the semi-circular square at Ngee Ann City by reclaiming the road space, to create a focal point for the whole district to host bigger festivals and events.

Or how about a green corridor along the full stretch of Orchard Road for a “Shop in the Park” experience? This walking route could connect Botanic Gardens to Fort Canning, and could even be extended all the way to Marina Bay, via the Singapore River. This pathway could also loop back to Dhoby Ghaut, with continuous sheltered walkways and other improvements to the pedestrian experience.



01 Parts of Sydney’s George Street reopened in December 2017, towards its vision of full pedestrianisation.

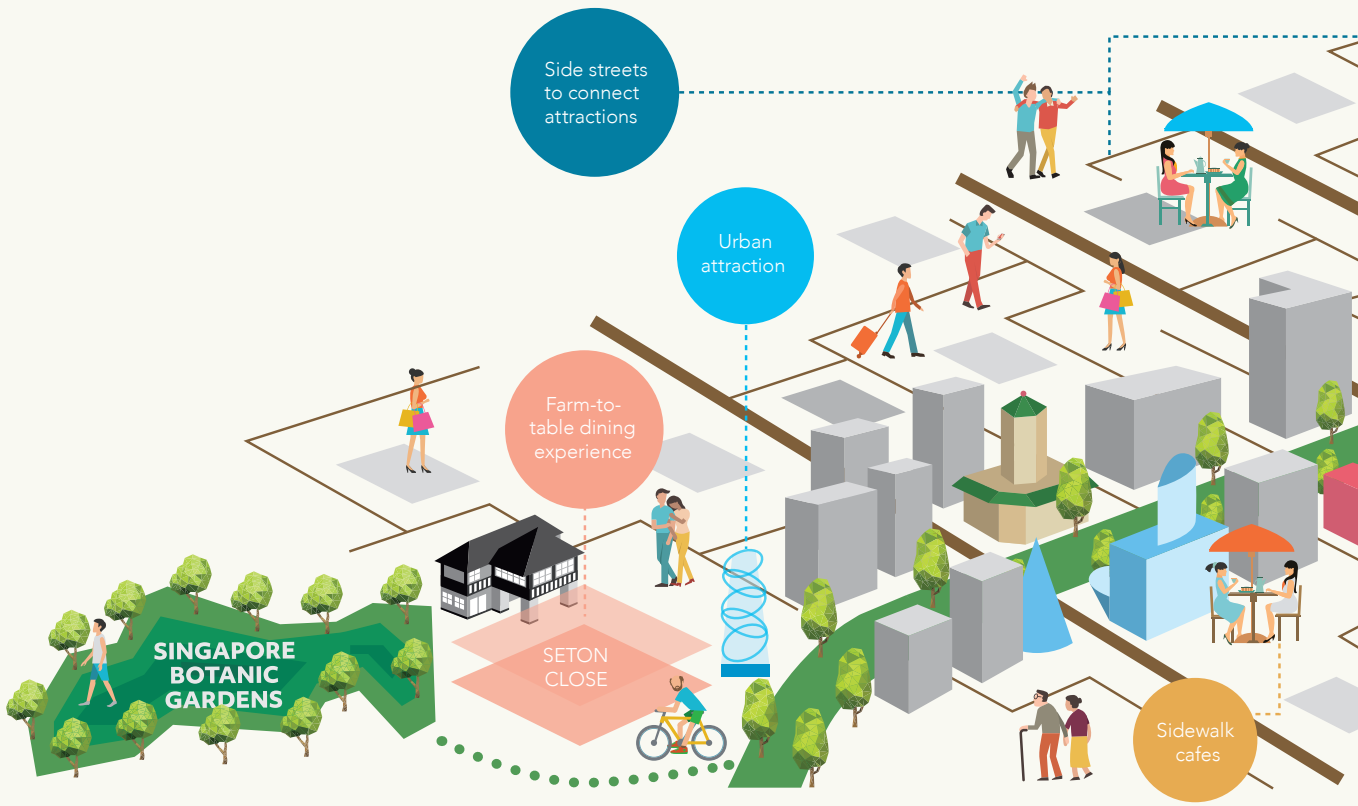
02 Brisbane’s Queen Street has sheltered walkways that provide a pleasant shopping experience throughout the seasons.



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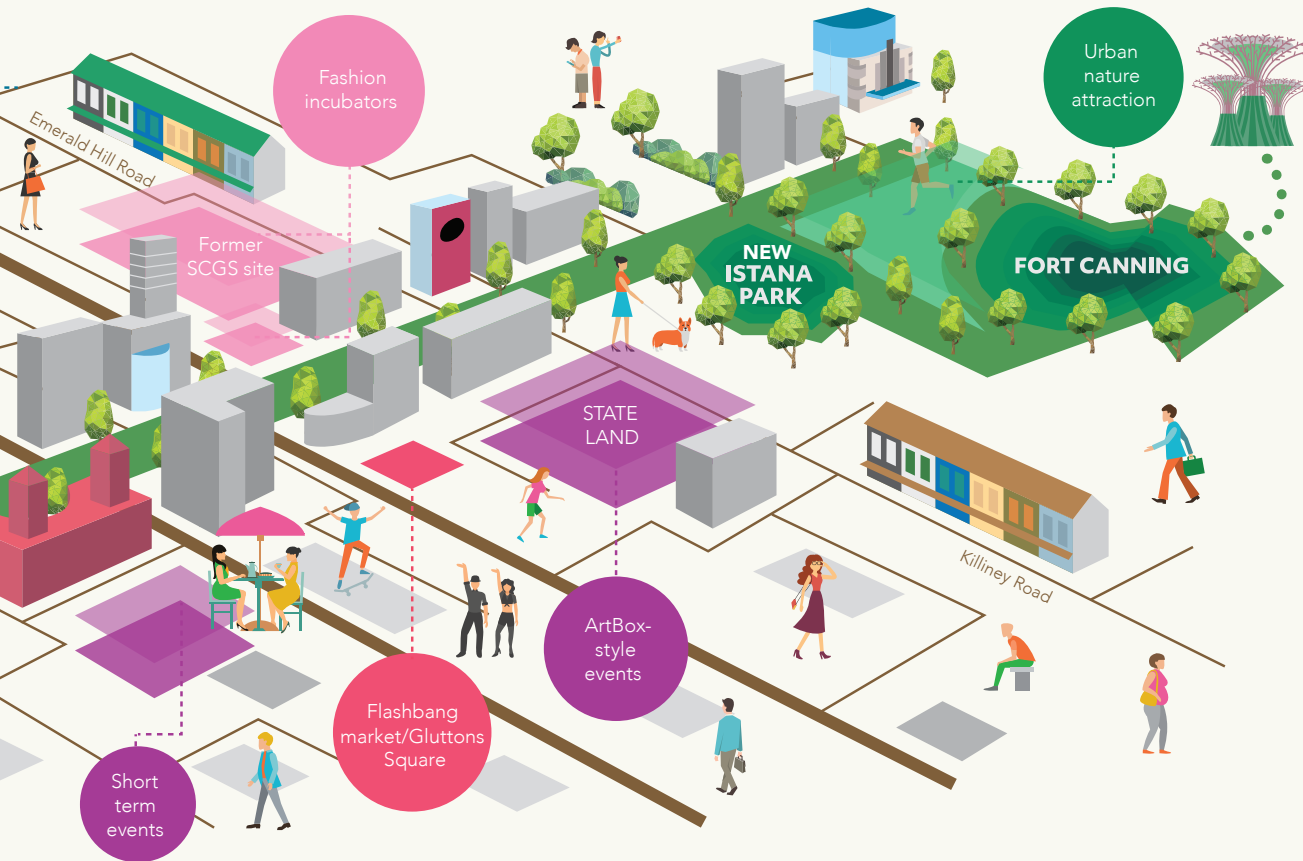
Orchard Road can be positioned as a flagship project for Singapore’s national car-lite vision, exemplifying the benefits of a more sustainable environment.

Beyond pedestrianisation, work also needs to be done to make the walking experience more pleasant in the hot and humid weather. This can be achieved through greenery, overhead shelters, fans or cool air blowers as well as pavilions and rest stops.

Will the pedestrianisation—even partially—of Orchard Road lead to traffic jams? This is a valid concern. The CLC study examined this issue and found some mitigating

factors. Through traffic can be diverted to other alternative roads leading to or from the Downtown Core, and these roads can be upgraded or redesigned to cope with the increased traffic. Local and rear service access roads are already present, making most existing developments along Orchard Road reachable from side or rear streets. Mitigating strategies that tap these side streets can be further studied through modelling studies.

Non-car options can also be enhanced. Two more MRT stations at Orchard and Orchard Boulevard will be part of the new Thomson-East Coast line, which will result in a total of two major lines and five stations serving the district. We can also introduce bicycle lanes, or take inspiration from Sydney’s George Street, which is completing an electric, wire-free tram service along the street to supplement post-pedestrianisation travel options. Zhuzhou in China is also test-bedding a cost-efficient, trackless tram system.



Considered holistically, Orchard Road can be positioned as a flagship project for Singapore's national car-lite vision, exemplifying the benefits of a more sustainable environment and attractive, non-car mobility options.

The implicit principle of going car-lite is that roads should ultimately be seen as assets belonging to the city and all of its residents, not just to car owners. Therefore, if and when it serves the public interest, the city should have the courage to reclaim the road—or parts of it—for use by people on foot, not cars.

Boosting Depth and Richness

One main issue identified in the joint study is that Orchard Road faces a structural issue of being a one-way corridor that offers little diversity, in terms of side street offerings and depth of experience. Other than Emerald Hill with its roadside eateries at Somerset,

there are few side streets that encourage secondary exploration.

In other cities, side streets in major visitor areas have resulted in longer visitor stays and better engagement. The diversity of Melbourne's side lanes and rich texture of local shops along the side streets at Tokyo's Omotesando allow for serendipitous discoveries and interesting diversions.

Fortunately, there is much potential to increase the depth of offerings at Orchard Road. In the Somerset area, there is Killiney Road, an attractive side street currently disconnected from Orchard Road. A way of connecting the two could be by activating vacant state land between the two roads, opposite ComCentre. Imagine this as a permanent site for a creative market similar to Bangkok's popular ArtBox, which attracted massive crowds in its April 2017 Singapore debut.



- 01 Takeshita Street just off Omotesando in Tokyo gives pedestrians more reason to stay in the shopping district.
- 02 Transformation of the old Singapore Chinese Girls' School site can follow Hong Kong's adaptive reuse of the former Police Married Quarters into a creative hub.

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The existing surface carpark behind Orchard Building at Grange Road hosted the Flashbang market over the festive period in December 2017, and can also be used as an event space to host reintroductions of the former “Gluttons Square”—a popular street dining venue back in the 1970s that was located in a neighbouring site.

Parcellation of other vacant state land near Orchard Road into smaller lots for temporary uses can similarly draw crowds. This could add a layer of alternative start-up type activities—with priority given to experimental and experiential concepts. For example, the state land behind Ngee Ann City can be used for an experiential attraction on a short term basis.

JTC Corporation, Singapore Tourism Board and SPRING Singapore recently announced plans for Design Orchard to be built at the junction of Cairnhill Road and Orchard Road. Slated to complete in late 2018, the development will feature a retail showcase for more than 60 local brands, an incubation space for designers and a rooftop event space. This concept can be further reinforced by developing a fashion incubator at the former Singapore Chinese Girls’ School (SCGS) site at the nearby Emerald Hill Road, when the current lease expires. Access into the former SCGS site will allow visitors to stroll into the historic premises and wander farther afield, into Emerald Hill, and finally completing the loop back to Orchard Road.



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Together these experiences can expand the depth of activities, give the street a sense of identity and authenticity, and rejuvenate the experiential quality of Orchard Road.

Along Orchard Road, more can be done to increase the diversity of activities, by creatively adapting, reusing and redeveloping existing spaces. For example, the current black and white bungalows at Seton Close can be converted into farm-to-table restaurants, offering a new dining experience at the start of Orchard Road.

A new nature attraction can also be introduced at the two vacant land parcels in Dhoby Ghaut. This can take the form of an urban zoo or aviary, similar to Wild Life Sydney Zoo, located at the heart of Darling Harbour. With a proposed link bridge to Fort Canning, this can form a cluster of nature-themed attractions in the area.

At the other end of Orchard Road, at the nexus of Tanglin and Orchard, another urban attraction can be developed to attract crowds. It could take the form of an amusement ride such as the “Halo” free fall tower proposed for New York City’s Penn Station, or signature architectural forms such as the urban folly or convertible culture centre at Hudson Yards, also from New York.

More sidewalk cafes can be introduced in spaces between buildings, such as that between Ion Orchard and Wisma Atria, between Wisma Atria and Ngee Ann City, and between Tangs Plaza and Lucky Plaza.

03 Hosting creative markets like Artbox could draw crowds to Orchard Road.

04 Sidewalk cafes provide welcome spaces for shoppers to sit and people-watch.

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Working Together and Testbedding for Success

None of these changes have to happen overnight. They can be testbedded to observe how people adapt to the changes and be subsequently adjusted for greater effectiveness, just like New York City did before the permanent road closures in the Times Square area.

For example, the car-lite measures can be done over a month-long pilot period. The stretch of Orchard Road between Orchard MRT station and Bideford Road, for instance, can be closed beyond just one-night closures previously done as part of Pedestrian Night on Orchard Road in the 2015 and 2016 pilots, and be supported with proper programming and events. The month-long test would be more realistic and give residents and visitors a better sense of the benefits or inconveniences of the change. The extended pilot will allow for data-gathering and analysis on how the traffic copes, as well as changes in visitors' profiles, behaviour and retail expenditure during the pilot.

The bottom line is: Orchard Road must change to remain attractive in the face of competition from global shopping destinations, local suburban malls and online retailers.

The government has been working closely with stakeholders on this. A Ministerial Steering Committee jointly led by the Ministries of Trade and Industry, National Development, and Transport was set up in September 2017 to study how to rejuvenate Orchard Road. A public call for tender proposals for a business study on the street by the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Singapore Tourism Board was also done in December 2017. With a common vision and an integrated plan that includes input from the private sector, Singapore can grasp the opportunity to turn Orchard Road's current challenges into an opportunity to reimagine a street for everyone. 

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The Suzin, *Year 4 student*

Zachary Kho, *Year 4 student*

01 An artist's impression of Design Singapore, due to be built by end of 2018.

02 A cross-section studio drawing of the possible future of the area at the beginning of Orchard Road at Tanglin.