

VIEWPOINT

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# Active Mobility Can Help Cities Bounce Forward



**Southeast Asian cities are realising that active mobility is not just a transportation solution that solves traffic and environmental issues. With community and stakeholder participation, active mobility can boost social resilience and lift economies—much-needed catalysts in the aftermath of the global pandemic.**



## Beyond enabling commuters to walk, cycle or travel using their personal mobility devices, active mobility represents a necessary paradigm shift for cities in the post-pandemic era.



The COVID-19 pandemic gave Southeast Asian cities a glimpse into a more liveable future, as lockdowns cleared skies and brought a rare respite from gridlock and pollutants. Some cities went further, leveraging the lack of road traffic to experiment with car-lite concepts such as turning roads into bicycle lanes.

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Here are three ways that Southeast Asian cities can get on track for a brighter post-pandemic future.

### **Tactical Urbanism—Do More With Less**

Cities can start small with tactical urbanism initiatives. This involves changing existing places and city systems through low-cost, temporary community projects to improve the built environment and effect positive social and economic outcomes.

The low-traffic pandemic environment is the perfect time to change attitudes and behaviours towards active mobility. Although heat and

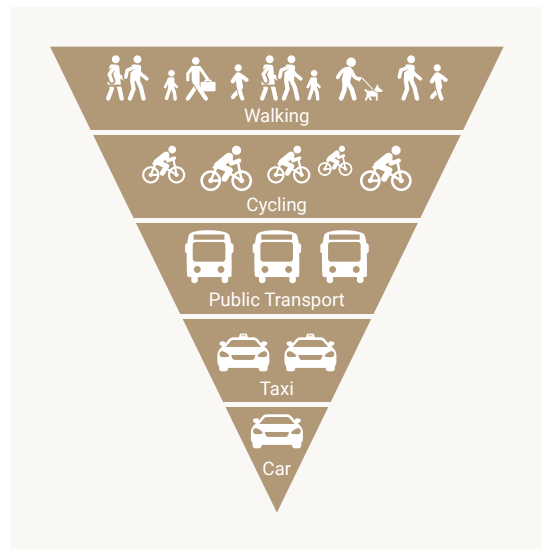
humidity are oft-cited reasons in Southeast Asia for not walking more, a walkability study I led found that Kuala Lumpur and Singapore have dramatically different levels of acceptance to walking. Interventions to pedestrian infrastructure and street design make all the difference in influencing perceptions of walking.

The Jakarta “safe routes” project is a good example. Government agencies, public institutions and local residents collaborated on a temporary road intervention, painting a pedestrian path on shared streets to improve safety and accessibility for pedestrians to get to school, home and a mass transit station. This low-cost pilot successfully changed behaviours—traffic was calmer and 98% of students who walked from their home used the painted path.

There are opportunities to pilot new initiatives and build on existing ones. Jakarta has begun remediating its interwoven canals, which can be turned into active mobility corridors that stitch together disparate neighbourhoods and forge valuable inter-community networks. Ho Chi Minh City can leverage the transformation of a district in Thao Dien from a disused open area into a vibrant arts and entertainment venue in 2012, enhancing the precinct’s attractiveness and walkability.

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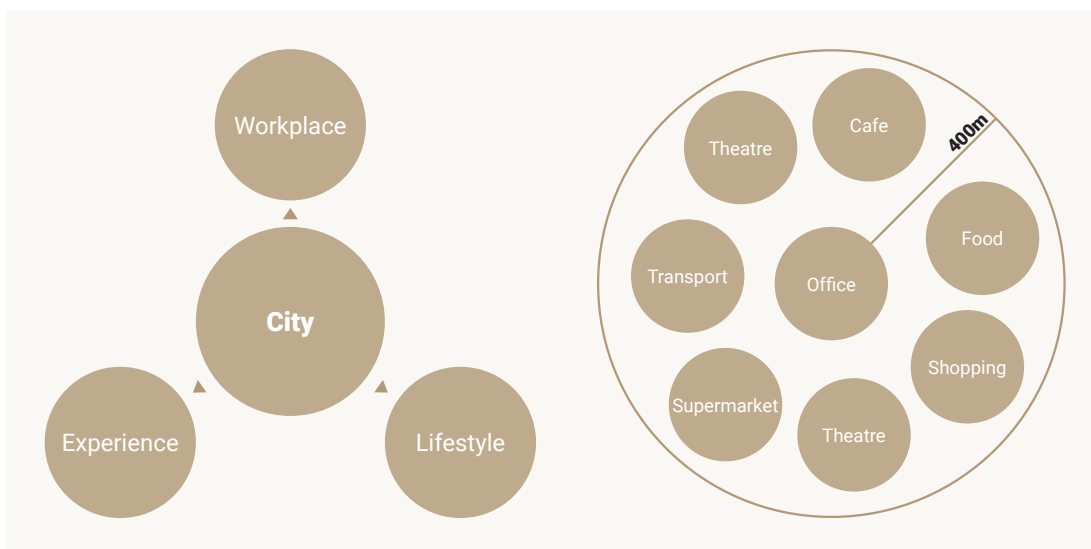
### **Invert the Pyramid—Make Streets, Not Roads**

City planners have long planned roads before considering pedestrians’ and cyclists’ needs. While roads serve a purpose as corridors for movement, these wide swathes of tarmac often create severances within a city.

Streets, on the other hand, have a more diverse function. These are places where social and economic activity occur and deserve priority in urban planning. By prioritising streets, we are putting people and active mobility first and cars second. We must invert the pyramid and make more streets, not roads.

By reconfiguring large sections of road space and car parking lots to be more “street-like”, London has demonstrated the tangible economic effects of elevating the status of pedestrians. Its investment in walking and cycling infrastructure increased retail spend by 30% and rental values by 7.5%. The economic benefits extend to higher property prices, rental yields and more employment opportunities.

Going beyond a people-first approach, Arup’s research has shown that a child-centric approach to urban planning can have highly



positive outcomes. A child's ability to get around independently and safely, play outdoors and connect with nature in an urban environment are considered strong indicators of high liveability standards and better mental and physical well-being for citizens of all ages.

### Neighbourhoods as 'Campuses'

The pandemic compels rethinking of mono-use districts within a city. Due to lockdowns and work-from-home arrangements, businesses in areas such as Central Business Districts have been hit hard by the prolonged decline in human and economic activity.

Yet I have observed that 10-minute "campus-like" neighbourhoods offering a diversity of amenities and experiences within a short walk or cycle from each other have been more resilient during the pandemic.

Singapore's Tanjong Pagar is an example of a successful 10-minute campus neighbourhood. Co-located within this vibrant and walkable district is a mix of hotels, retail and food options, public and private housing, heritage shophouses and skyscrapers—all stitched together by corridors of green spaces, interconnected

footpaths and streets. There is something for everyone, and the diversity of visual and sensorial experiences makes it attractive to stop, shop and walk—in turn, enhancing its resilience to the shock of the pandemic.

Active mobility is not just a transportation issue or a city planner's problem. We've long known about the economic, social, public health and environmental resilience of precincts that prioritise active mobility. We just need to be better coordinators of different disciplines to transform our physical environment and engineer lasting economic, social and environmental change.

While big infrastructural responses work from the top down, we must also start small with tactical urbanism, transcend siloes with a collaborative and ground-up community approach to understand diverse needs, and refocus on people over cars.

Every crisis is an opportunity to outdo our previous successes. In this era of disruptions, let us focus not just on recovery and bouncing back, but also on revolutionising and bouncing forward. 🧠