

BY INVITATION

Fewer cars, fewer roads

I have a dream for Singapore

By Kishore Mahbubani

A few weeks ago, on Aug 28, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the famous speech given by Martin Luther King Jr entitled "I have a dream". He said: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."

The goal of his speech was to open the roads to advancement for his fellow black citizens. I too have a dream for my fellow Singaporeans. However, while the goal of his speech was to open the roads to advancement, my goal is to close the roads to advancement for my fellow citizens. The only difference between him and me is that while he was speaking metaphorically, I am speaking literally. We do not need many more physical roads or much more physical road space in Singapore.

One undeniable hard truth of Singapore is that we live in one of the smallest countries in the world. This is also why we have one of the most expensive land costs in the entire world. Apart from Monaco, no other United Nations member state has land as expensive as Singapore has per square foot. Hence, we should value every square foot. Every square foot we give up to road space is a square foot taken away from other valuable uses: pedestrian walkways, bike paths, green parks and so on.

To be fair to our road planners, they are caught in a bind because Singapore is continuing to grow its population of cars. If we expand the number of cars, we have no choice but to expand the amount of roads to carry more cars. So the real solution is to reduce the demand for more cars in Singapore. How do we do this?

The problem here is that a car remains an essential part of the Singapore dream. Yet, if every Singaporean achieves his or her dream, we will get a national nightmare. To prevent this national nightmare from happening, we have created harsh policies to raise prices and reduce the demand for cars.

Status symbols

Paradoxically, the high prices of cars have made them even more desirable as status symbols. This is why luxury brands trump cheap brands in Singapore sales. If the desirability of cars keeps rising, our efforts to curtail car ownership will be as successful as a dog chasing its tail.

So what is the alternative solution? The solution is obvious: Change the Singapore dream!

Yes, almost every Singaporean reading this article will laugh out loud at this suggestion. How can any well-off Singaporean deprive himself of a car? It serves as the most reliable form of transportation as well as a powerful status symbol. The minute you own a car, especially a Mercedes-Benz, BMW or Lexus, your friends know that you have arrived.

But for 10 years of my life, I have actually lived on another even more crowded tiny island where it is not rational to own a car. In fact, it is considered downright stupid to buy and own a car if you live in Manhattan. All this came home clearly to me one evening in Manhattan when I saw the former chairman of Citibank, Mr Walter Wriston, and his wife Kathryn standing on First Avenue with their arms raised and trying to hail a cab.

Clearly, Mr Wriston was then one of the richest men on our planet. He could have easily bought a car in Manhattan. Yet, it just did not make sense.

The eco-system of public transport that Manhattan had created with a combination of subway trains, public buses and readily accessible taxis meant that in a crunch you could get anywhere in Manhattan using public transport.

More significantly, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, another clearly very rich man, used to take a subway train to work in Manhattan.

The former mayor of Colombian capital Bogota, Mr Enrique Penalosa, put it very well when he said: "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation."

I have been to Bogota. When I visited it in 1992, the city was so unsafe that I was given a private bodyguard to walk down its equivalent of Orchard Road. Mr Penalosa transformed the city so much that Latino Fox News described him as "one of the world's pre- eminent minds on making modern cities more liveable."

Mr Penalosa is quoted as saying: "When we talk about car-free cities, we're not talking about some hippie dream. Not only do they exist, but they also are the most successful cities on the planet. The ones where the real estate is the most valuable, the ones that attract most tourists, the most investment, the ones that generate the most creative industries."

There was a time when Singapore's experiments in improving its urban environment would get global attention. Today, it is a man like Mr Penalosa, with bigger dreams than our dreams, who is described by Latino Fox News as a man whose "work and ideas have gained him international attention and a loyal fan base that includes New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg".

Mr Paul Steely White, executive director of New York City's Transportation Alternatives, has also said about New York City that "the way the streets of the greatest city in the world are being used is changing fundamentally... People are beginning to understand that it's entirely possible and really very desirable to lead a life without being tethered to an automobile".

We therefore have to replace the Singapore dream with the Manhattan or Bogota dream.

We have to give up this insane dream of owning a car and replace it with an ecosystem of a public transport system that makes it irrational to own a car.

Singapore's failure

And this is probably one of Singapore's biggest failures in its first 50 years: We have failed to develop a world-class ecosystem of public transport. We do have a good public transport network, but this has not kept pace with the population's expectations, which include a more reliable MRT system with fewer breakdowns, predictable bus services, taxis available in thundery showers, and pools of electric cars for ready rental.

So why did we fail? The answers must be complex. But one fundamental error could be simple. We expected every artery of this ecosystem to be financially viable. The disastrous result of looking at each artery and not looking at the ecosystem as a whole is that while each artery made sense in isolation, the combination did not result in a good ecosystem. Even more dangerously, by looking at each unit in isolation, we did not consider its impact on the island or the nation as a whole.

Let me give a specific example from the area of expanding road space. Many Singaporeans of my generation are still puzzled that the road planners of Singapore destroyed our precious National Library on Stamford Road to build a little tunnel under Fort Canning to save two minutes of driving time. The road planners who designed this tunnel had no idea that they were effectively shooting a bullet through the soul of Singapore by destroying the National Library.

This is why we have to be fair to our road planners. The only key performance indicator (KPI) given to them is to make traffic flow smoothly. With this KPI, it is logical to build more roads or expand road space. Hence, it was perfectly natural for our road planners to announce recently that Clementi Road and the Pan-Island Expressway would be expanded. I am sure many motorists who use that stretch of

road daily will approve. But when do we say that enough is enough?

This is why we need a new dream. Does this mean Singaporeans will stop driving cars?

Absolutely not. My dream is to walk out of my house, use a smart card to pick up an electric car on rent and drive it anywhere I want to. We can replace car ownership with car pools. In fact, other cities have begun trying this. In Vauban, a suburb of Freiburg, Germany, 70 per cent of residents choose to live without private cars due to excellent city planning and a car sharing system. Before you scoff at electric cars, let me tell you that electric cars have faster torque than petrol-driven cars.

In short, we can have an alternative dream for Singapore. Let us dream of an island with fewer cars and fewer roads. It will be closer to being paradise on earth.

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