Cycle Space

Steven Fleming

During the recent Archifest Forum 2012, Singapore Architect caught up with Steven Fleming, Senior Lecturer at the University of Tasmania and author of the book Cycle Space, on his thoughts on implementing cycling in Singapore. Fleming's interest in the interaction between cycling, architecture, and urban design first spawned his successful blog, CycleSpace.com, notably combining his interests with his profession. Having practised architecture in Singapore in the 1990s, Fleming shares his observations on what it would take for a cycling culture to arise in our city, as well as architects' historical role in envisioning cities with new modes of transport.

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Could you tell us more about your work?

My regular day job is an architectural educator. I teach design history and theory at the University of Tasmania. My research area is the nexus between cycling, architecture, and urban design. In my observation, cycling is as exciting to architects now as driving was to architects in the 1950s. In the 1950s, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius imagined buildings and houses with everyone driving. Strangely enough, 30 years later, everybody was. Architects helped to make that vision happen. The next big thing for avant-garde architectural thinkers was the fascination with walking in the 1960s, although I don’t think they ever managed to build truly walkable cities. It was a nice idea, but they didn’t achieve it. Cycling is both like walking and driving: it’s having the best of both worlds. Many cities are trying to shrink cities to a scale we can manage and think about, and cycling can help with that.

How do you see cycling transforming a city, for example Singapore, where you lived and worked in the 1990s?

At the present moment, Singapore is too heavily invested in driving. Apart from driving, people fall back on the MRT. Now, the MRT in this country is a brilliant state of the-art subway system, but there are some problems though. One of the main problems is that it causes a society to live shorter and be less healthy. For instance, there are childhood obesity issues in this country. Statistics show that a city that relies on bicycle transport more heavily will live longer on average. One study shows that life expectancy is up to seven years longer. City dwellers who cycle are also fitter and have less health problems associated with sedentary lifestyles.

Also, people don’t talk to each other on the train. Whereas where we see cycling taking off in the world, cycling is becoming a great social bridge. Most Dutch people admit to having flirted when out cycling. The bike is an expression of your personality: it lets you ride side by side, ask for directions, and admire each other’s bike. It fosters chance interactions and opportunity for three to four extra coffee breaks during the day—that’s actually the basis of a knowledge-based economy. Singaporean education promotes interdisciplinary courses at universities to allow people to cross-fertilise their ideas.

Cycle space, or cities with spaces that encourage people to cycle, such as New York, Portland, and Minneapolis, are in fact spaces where people are going to meet and share ideas and enterprises.

What is it about bikes or cycling that promotes this interaction?

The fact that you have greater mobility. I’ve shown a diagram (at the Archifest forum) that shows that you can go from Tampines, the suburbs of Singapore, to Orchard Road in half an hour on a bicycle! Singapore is a really small country; it only seems big because you’re all stuck in traffic. If you open routes up for bicycle transportation, you will be able to cover great distances. You don’t have to look for parking lots, or transfer to trains. It quickens things, and you can get more done in a day.

What is your message to architects in your envisioning of a cycle-city?

In Singapore, the lack of bike infrastructure is not a road engineering problem. In Singapore’s case it’s a very wet island, which is covered in waterways. Currently, that is mostly seen as drainage infrastructure. But if you look at waterways as bike route networks, providing shade like in a garden setting, we can capitalise on the natural beauty of water features and unlock these spaces. That’s one thing architects can do in this city: think strategically and step up to take on a grand envisioning of cities. Architects can do now with the bike what Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius did with cars in the 1920s.

If you look at the number of ways Le Corbusier celebrated the car, houses like Villa Savoye made grand gestures towards driving as though everyone
would arrive by car. With Gabriel Voisin’s sponsorship, Le Corbusier envisioned the rebuilding of Paris, where everyone lived in high-rise buildings and drove cars around. He designed cars himself, and photographed buildings with cars out the front.

19. So you’re saying that Le Corbusier generated architecture inspired by a lifestyle built around a driving culture, and architects can do the same with envisioning bike culture?

20. Exactly. Jørge Ingels from BIG has begun that bike architecture culture. He’s teamed up with bike manufacturers, and photographs himself arriving at buildings and openings on bike. His designed buildings with bike access. In essence, he’s creating a bike culture—a whole lifestyle—to such a way that how we design is impacted by our lifestyles of cycling. Architects really can help create that vision. We are the visionaries of our time. We create images that imagine what the good life might be like in 20 years time.

21. It’s an interesting and original thesis to make the connection between cycling, architecture, and urban design. How did you step into this?

22. I’ve been an avid cyclist all my life, I was very lucky that student poverty saved me from car ownership, and got me into the habit of cycling. For the last 20 years I’ve been in bike racing and touring. When I go into cities, I take a folding bike. It’s just who I am. Being an architectural theorist as well, the two just came together in my mind, and I started my blog, Cycle Space.

23. What’s your hometown like, and how does it promote cycling culture?

24. I live in a small city called Launceston in Tasmania, Australia. I moved there because my hobby is sport cycling. We cycle into snow and on slopes; it’s exciting and dangerous and I like it. But the city does not have congestion issues, like in Singapore. That’s why I think Singapore will be into urban cycling much faster, because you need it here. Where I come from, they don’t need it. The way you need it here, for transport. In Singapore, 5.5 million people are all trying to squeeze into a few trains and roads, and it just doesn’t work. Without cycling as an option, we end up with an incredibly taxed public transport system that is not good for physical or mental health.

Also, it’s very hard in a mechanized city with typically sedentary lifestyles to control weight, but with cycling, your metabolism increases 16 times compared to sitting here. By investing in bicycle infrastructure, you’re actually reducing medical costs later on. Just as a starting point, you have void decks under HDB flats which allow room for wheeled individual bike parking. The HDB flats could also be retrofitted with bike storage spaces nearer the apartment. End-of-trip facilities at the work destination, bike parking and shower facilities in public spaces. There are wonderful and plausible things you could do. Even for CEOs, the most prestigious way to arrive at work should be by bike—to be able to ride on a $20,000 bike and step out freshly laundered in a suit. Most Singaporeans will get about as sweaty on a bike as a walk from home to train, and then from the MRT to work. If you have good shaded infrastructure, it promises it’s cooler.

25. In Singapore’s context, in addition to the lack of cycling infrastructure, what are the other issues that hinder cycling culture?

26. If you build the infrastructure, they will come. In Singapore you need to first build good infrastructure that makes cycling possible. An average person with average fitness in Holland and Denmark rides 20 kilometres per hour. If you let that person keep riding without stopping, they can cover the island in half an hour. So it becomes a faster mode of transport. Because most Singaporeans only see sports cyclists, there’s a perception that the journey is going to be hot, sweaty, and energetic. But cycling 20 kilometres per hour sitting upright in the breeze, with shade overhead, is far more comfortable than walking. To deal with the problem of perception, I think we need to set up some tests. Find some space down waterfront and safe routes for people to cycle on good bikes, and ask them how they found it. At the moment, I think the problem is that people accept cycling as it is, as they see it. This is where we need architects and researchers to rise up and say this is what it could be.

Tell us more about your first book. Cycle Space.

It’s the first book, really, to draw the connection between cycling, architecture, and urban design. It’s good that the Dutch think that I’ve got something to say about cycling, because the whole world looks to Holland to see what we can learn from them in terms of cycling. Drivers there like cyclists and vote for politicians at every turn; the rest of the world is not like that. So we constantly try to see if we can emulate what Holland has. In Holland, however, drivers are tame and would give way to cyclists. In other parts of the world, it might be better to find a separate layer of the city where cycling infrastructure may be inserted. That’s why I used the term Cycle Space. As cyclists, we see the city differently, because sensible cyclists would find routes that are separate from cars.

Well, do keep us posted if you do decide to conduct cycling tours around Singapore! It would be interesting to see cycling culture take off here.

Yes, I do think Singapore is the one city where you can do it, it’s a country that has the best track record for change management, because of the government’s resources. The government can, if it makes a decision, make changes and bring things into Singapore on a large scale. If Singapore catches on to this vision, and takes steps to make that happen, it can race ahead of USA and Australia and other countries to make it happen.