

Submission to the Transport Department on Public Engagement of “Study on Enhancing Walkability in Hong Kong” by Civic Exchange

In December 2017, the Transport Department (TD) commenced the 30-month Consultancy Study on Enhancing Walkability in Hong Kong aiming at formulating planning and design standards based on pedestrian-first principles for developing Hong Kong into a more walkable city. In June 2019, TD selected Central as one of the pilot areas to test and showcase the proposed walkability strategy and pedestrian plans.

Civic Exchange strongly supports the Government’s plan to foster a pedestrian-friendly environment for people to commute, connect and enjoy in Central. According to a global survey, Hong Kong residents walk more than the residents of 45 other countries, taking an average of 6,880 steps per day.¹ Hong Kongers walk a lot, whether they are male or female, young or old, of healthy weight or overweight.² Walking plays a crucial and carbon-free role in short trips and last-mile transportation. The Government should seize the opportunity to implement significant improvements to the walking environment in Central in order to deliver a better quality of life.

I. Develop a detailed pedestrian plan for Central

Pedestrian networks should be improved to provide attractive alternatives in addition to financially disincentivising driving. Central essentially functions as Hong Kong’s largest public transport interchange as multiple modes of transportation converge on it, including the MTR, the Airport Express, over 70 bus routes, the tram and ferries to outlying islands and Macau. The future deck on reclaimed land on the waterfront will play a key role in facilitating connections between different modes of transport. The Government should therefore create a detailed pedestrian plan covering above-ground, at-grade and below-ground pedestrian networks to map out pedestrian routes between the MTR, bus, tram and ferry stops. The above ground footbridge network can then be expanded according to the plan by allowing developers to construct footbridges with a land premium waiver, similar to the pilot programme currently being implemented in Kowloon East.³

¹ Althoff et. al, “Large scale physical activity data reveal worldwide activity inequality”, *Nature*, July 2017, 547(7663), pp. 336-339, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5774986/> (accessed 23 May 2019).

² *Ibid.* Of all the countries and territories surveyed, Hong Kong had the lowest level of activity inequality (a coefficient of 22.2, compared to the country with the highest level of activity inequality, Saudi Arabia, with a coefficient of 32.5).

³ Information Services Department, “Premium waived for six footbridges or subways financed by private sector”, 10 April 2019, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201904/10/P2019041000591.htm> (accessed 24 May 2019).

i. Close the gap in last-mile logistics and improve accessibility for all

Walkability within the proposed pilot area in Central is not only an important issue for commuters and visitors, but for the vast number of deliveries and waste collection trips that take place in Central every weekday. These trips are essential, and improved mobility would reduce the amount of circling made by these vehicles by enabling them to unload on main roads and complete deliveries on foot. The Government's pedestrian plan for Central must therefore include **safe hand trolley-accessible routes** to and from unloading zones and refuse collection stations for delivery workers and waste collectors.

Provision of trolley-accessible routes will also benefit those using **wheelchairs and people with prams and wheeled luggage**. Hong Kong is an ageing society. The proportion of those aged 65 and over is projected to reach 31% by 2036, and with this will come an increasing population of people with mild to severe mobility restrictions.⁴ In addition to being a major public transport hub, Central is also a destination for tourists with many hotels and attractions for all ages. Improving wheeled pedestrian accessibility would bring widespread benefits.

II. Walkability is key to building a liveable city

While Hong Kong's rapid economic and population growth made it necessary to prioritise heavy infrastructure, its current level of development requires a shift in focus to building a more liveable city. The streetscape should not only be seen as a piece of infrastructure, but as a **public service that enhances quality of life**.

i. Walkability is crucial for placemaking

Beyond sustainable mobility, walkability is also a crucial element of **placemaking**. Good quality, comfortable and interesting pedestrian environments encourage optional walking in addition to necessary journeys, e.g. exercise, window shopping, social activities. These non-essential activities are a prime indicator of a good quality, people-centric urban environment.⁵

While Central has an extensive and efficient above-ground pedestrian footbridge network, its street-level pavements are frequently congested, ridden with obstacles narrowing the effective footpath width, unattractively and unevenly paved and feature relatively few amenities such as benches or greenery. Pedestrian crossings are inadequate – unsafe jaywalking is common along Des Voeux Road Central. While

⁴ Census and Statistics Department (2017), HKSAR Government, "Hong Kong Population Projections for 2017 to 2066", October 2017, <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp190.jsp?productCode=FA100061> (accessed 29 May 2019).

⁵ Gehl, J. (2011), *Life Between Buildings*, Washington DC: Island Press.

certain streets have been upgraded with greening and feature paving, heavy traffic and heavy space constraints have made it difficult to provide a high-quality public realm benefitting a central business district of a major world city.

ii. Redistribute space from vehicles to pedestrians

The pilot scheme provides a prime opportunity to **rebalance the distribution of space** away from vehicles and in favour of pedestrians by, for example, widening footpaths, installing traffic calming measures, providing more convenient pedestrian crossing with shorter waiting times and providing amenities such as seating, planting, drinking fountains or free WiFi.

iii. Address street management

One potential stumbling block to improving liveability through pedestrian space expansion is the concern that the resulting spaces will not be well-managed and attract nuisance-causing activities. We therefore strongly urge the government to **update its outdated street management practices and legislation**, especially to better regulate street performers, commercial promotion, noise and the use of amplification equipment in public places. District Councils could be empowered to make local rules and create performance and promotion zones, enabling these issues to be addressed at the district level through local political representation and discussion.

In the short term, the Government should focus on **improving coordination between government departments**, particularly the Hong Kong Police Force and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, through district administration, while providing adequate resources and manpower. This would increase the effectiveness of existing street management practices and the enforcement of existing noise and obstruction ordinances. Judicious application of enforcement could be used to encourage loud performers to congregate in locations where there are no residents to disturb, such as the waterfront.

Civic Exchange supports the Government's proposed plans to create **part-time pedestrian zones** in SoHo to encourage walking. However, to gain community support, these spaces must be well-supervised and managed. The Central District Office should also consider coordinating with PMQ, Tai Kwun, local businesses or other non-profit organisations to organise activity programmes (e.g. art displays, craft stalls, charity booths, children's games, reading rooms, ping pong tables, tai chi classes etc.⁶) for these pedestrian zones so that nuisance-causing activities are not given the opportunity to take over the space.

⁶ As an example, please see street programming on New York City's 34th Street organized by the 34th Street Partnership, a privately-funded business improvement district. 34th Street Partnership, <https://34thstreet.org/programs>, New York City: United States of America, accessed 28 August 2019.

iv. Update road design standards and codes of practice

Creating high-quality pedestrian environments that meet today's needs will also sometimes require departure from existing road design manual guidelines which are inflexible and out-of-date with current research evidence and global best practices. It is hoped that TD's ongoing studies on walkability will result in a substantive **overhaul of existing standards and codes of practice** to enable planners and transport engineers to create people-friendly streetscapes that allow pedestrians and vehicles to coexist safely with one another.

v. Implement Electronic Road Pricing to complement walkability enhancement

It is crucial that transport planning considers holistically the interlinks between different modes of transportation rather than treating each in isolation. On 14 May 2019, Civic Exchange published a position paper and expressed strong support for the Government's proposed electronic road pricing scheme (ERP) in Central. Implementing the scheme will not only bring about improvements to travel time and air quality, it is also a major opportunity to improve walkability in Central as part of a comprehensive mobility system.

Walkability and ERP are mutually reinforcing – the implementation of ERP will necessitate improvements in walkability in order to provide convenient and attractive alternatives to driving, while walkability enhancements will facilitate the successful adoption of ERP.

The ERP scheme is currently perceived as a tax meant to punish vehicle owners rather than as a measure that will benefit the vast majority of commuters and visitors to Central. The public discussion is currently focused on the obvious negative impacts on a small group of clearly-defined people, although **only 10 per cent of Hong Kong's journeys are by private vehicles**, while the positive impacts are broadly dispersed and poorly understood.⁷

The Government's public information campaign and its briefings to District Councilors and Legislators need to articulate how the money raised by ERP will be used to provide tangible benefits to non-drivers and to make improvements to the urban environment directly benefiting those living and working in Central. Pedestrian planning should also encourage drivers to park outside of the ERP zone and walk to their destinations, instead of providing more car parking within the zone, which would only attract more vehicles.

In sum, TD needs to look at these pedestrian-friendly transportation measures as complements to each other, to build a more liveable Hong Kong.

⁷ Transport Department, "Public Transport Strategy Study", June 2017, https://www.td.gov.hk/filemanager/en/publication/ptss_final_report_eng.pdf

III. Build public buy-in

While the pilot scheme is sound from health, environmental economics and planning perspectives, the benefits of walkability are not currently broadly understood by the public or by local decision-makers. The Government could increase public buy-in in the following ways.

i. Educate the public on the benefits of walkability

The scheme should be accompanied by an extensive **public information campaign**, as there is a need for broader public education on the health, environmental and social benefits of walkability. Although Hong Kongers walk more than the residents of many other countries, walking is taken for granted and seen mainly in utilitarian terms. Education can be done through large-scale experiential events such as World Car Free Day, which is promoted by the United Nations Environment Programme and held in numerous cities around the world on 22 September each year.⁸ Hong Kong's participation in an annual car-free day would enable the public to enjoy the benefits of vehicle-free streets first-hand. The event should be supported by a public education and engagement campaign, implemented at both **community and city levels**, e.g. "walk with your neighbours", family walks, town hall discussions and essay and drawing contests for students.

However, as mentioned above, such events should be rolled out carefully with sufficient management and programming to create positive experiences rather than magnets for further complaints.

IV. Take pride in Hong Kong's accomplishments and build on a strong base

Due to its topography and unique pattern of urban development, **Hong Kong has managed to create one of the world's most efficient public transportation networks**. The city is already very walkable in many ways, as evidenced by Hong Kongers' walking habits. There is much to be proud of. This is an excellent base on which to build a people-first mobility strategy with a high-quality public realm. Nevertheless, making further improvements will require changes that will require overcoming a conservative, risk-averse mindset.

Any change in the status quo will inevitably draw some resistance until people become used to the new normal. Yet the avoidance of all complaints is an unrealistic goal. It would prioritise the interests of those who find the change disruptive over those who

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme, "World Car-Free Day on 22 September a great opportunity to reduce air pollution", 21 September 2018, <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/world-car-free-day-22-september-great-opportunity-reduce-air-pollution> (accessed 24 May 2019).

are already enduring the negative impacts of current conditions. **We argue that improvements in the pedestrian environment would, on balance, generate more public benefits than drawbacks.** The alternative to change is not the indefinite retention of the status quo, it is change by default. If the transport planning of Hong Kong remains unchanged and private vehicle ownership continues to grow at 3 to 4 per cent a year, traffic congestion, air pollution and environmental quality will continue to deteriorate and Hong Kong will only move further away from becoming a green and smart city. Bold action is called for.

Summary of recommendations

- Create a comprehensive walking plan for Central, including interchange routes between public transport modes.
- Improve the efficiency of last-mile logistics by planning safe, trolley-accessible walking routes for delivery people and waste collectors.
- Improve accessibility for users of wheelchairs, prams and wheeled luggage simultaneously.
- Raise the quality of the pedestrian environment to build a liveable city.
- Address street management problems through better coordination between government departments.
- Update road design standards to facilitate better pedestrian-friendly planning and design.
- Implement Electronic Road Pricing to complement walkability enhancement
- Conduct extensive public education on the benefits of walkability by holding car-free days or smaller scale local experiments.