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Using virtual reality to get more people to cycle



Researchers Mohsen Nazemi (left) and Jonas Kupferschmid will get feedback from Bike to the Future participants.
PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

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Donning a pair of virtual reality (VR) goggles and pedalling on a stationary bicycle in Lim Liak Street, Ms Pamela Cheng, 19, "cycled" around the perimeter of Tiong Bahru market.

But it was not the usual roads the university undergraduate was familiar with. Rather, in two minutes, she found herself "cruising down" a cycling path along Kim Cheng Street, and "riding" through a new pedestrianised area which was formerly Seng Poh Road - both in Tiong Bahru.

Ms Cheng was one of 150 people who yesterday tested out a bicycle simulator put together by the Future Cities Laboratory research institute, which is using VR to learn how street design can encourage more to cycle in Singapore.

Ms Cheng said of her experience: "I didn't feel comfortable 'cycling' on the roads with cars. It felt safer on the cycling tracks but I was also concerned about the elderly and children around me."

The laboratory's Bike to the Future project was officially launched in a carpark space at Lim Liak Street yesterday, the same spot where the VR cyclists would begin their virtual rides. It ran as part of PARK(ing) Day 2016, a worldwide movement in which parking spaces are temporarily converted into activity spaces. Around Singapore, 78 carpark spaces were transformed yesterday into spaces for skits, games and art.

Dr Alexander Erath, project leader of the engaging mobility group at Future Cities Laboratory, said one of the reasons Tiong Bahru was chosen was because the old estate held potential for a redesign.

Three different scenarios were designed - one where cyclists shared the road with cars, but had priority; another with dedicated cycling lanes; and the last, a new car-free space named Tiong Bahru Square.

Dr Erath said that using VR can help gather public feedback, which can be given to the planning authorities when they design streets. The public can next try out Bike to the Future on Oct 5, from 9am to 7pm, at the Archifest Pavilion at Raffles Place Park.