

# REINVENTING THE WHEEL

I had the “honour” a while back of taking to the skies in the Singapore Flyer. As the tallest observation wheel in the world (for now) ascended through the clouds and driving rain, I was greeted by a grey outlook of the construction site that will be the Marina Bay Integrated Resort directly in front, Raffles Place beyond it, and container ships to the left. Not the most enchanting vision regardless of the weather conditions. This got me thinking what George W Ferris – the American civil engineer who built the original Ferris wheel for the 1893 Chicago World Fair – would have thought of his invention.

Even by modern standards, Ferris’s original was no slouch: for 50 cents apiece, nearly 1,500 passengers at a time could ascend to 264 feet. Compare that with the Flyer, which charges 840 passengers around S\$30 a go for a 37-minute ride.

Before the recent renaissance, times were tough on Ferris wheels, especially in the United States and Europe. According to Norman Anderson, a retired professor at North Carolina State University who wrote the book “Ferris Wheels: An Illustrated History,” neither Disneyland (which opened in 1955) nor Walt Disney World (1971) bothered to include one. And as increasingly spectacular theme park rides set the tone in the 1970s and Eighties, traditional attractions like Ferris wheels and carousels fell out of favour.

“Almost every carnival and state fair, even the church bazaars, had a Ferris wheel,” Anderson said. “But the problem is that the things are so well-built they last forever, so there wasn’t a lot of economic encouragement to build new ones.”

Dennis L Speigel, president of International Theme Park Services, a consultant in Cincinnati agreed. “They became somewhat passé in the mid-70s,” he said. “Nobody was putting them in anymore, and we didn’t see any activity there until really the success of the London Eye.” Since then, he said, the boom has been “similar to what happened in the roller coaster industry, when steel roller coasters started getting higher and higher. Now the wheels are getting larger and larger in diameter, and I’m not sure where it’s going to end.”

But then again, size isn’t everything (so we hear). The call of nature is another barrier to height. “The biggest constraint is the amount of time people need to be away from the toilet,” Roy Vocking, vice president of Ride Trade International, a company based in Liechtenstein that builds amusement rides, said.

In North America, the first next-generation observation wheel is the 175-foot Niagara SkyWheel, which opened on the Canadian side of the Niagara Falls.

“At the end of the day, it all comes down to location,” Vocking said. “If you have the location and an interesting iconic attraction which will enable you to have a bird’s-eye view of the area, success is almost guaranteed.

Which leads me to wonder how that can possibly apply to Singapore... □



**Geraint Price**  
Editor



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