

## Debate:

Should pedestrian guard rails be removed in urban areas to make streets more 'dangerous' and pedestrians and drivers more careful, thereby reducing accidents?

### Yes



**Ben Hamilton-Baillie**  
Urban design and movement consultant

Pedestrian guardrails encapsulate the worst aspects of conventional urban traffic engineering. Guardrails represent separation, segregation and control. By contrast, successful streets and public spaces spring from integration, freedom of action and human interaction.

The increasing political, popular and professional consensus to remove or avoid the use of guardrails stems from many sources. Firstly, they form an ugly, expensive and clumsy addition in our cluttered streetscapes. Secondly, they demean the intelligence of pedestrians, limiting their choices and freedom of movement. Thirdly, and most significantly, they would appear to reduce safety.

High profile regeneration schemes such as in Kensington High Street have recorded significant reductions in pedestrian injuries after

removing guardrailing (reductions of around 64% for pedestrians and 44% for all users over five years, compared to a London-wide reduction of 22% and 18% over the same period). The findings reflect observations that guardrails designed to constrain and control human behaviour may be counter productive.

Why are they so dangerous? Because they increase perceptions of safety. By isolating pedestrians from traffic, and drivers from pedestrians, both assume they are less at risk. Drivers assume they have the road to themselves, and pedestrians have less interaction with traffic. Risk, and the benefits it brings in helping us to understand and adapt behaviour to our surroundings, is an essential foundation of safety. Guardrails divorce us from the necessity to resolve the relationship between pedestrians and drivers.

Removing guardrails may well improve safety by making streets feel slightly more dangerous. But the issue goes deeper. Streets that respect the intelligence and judgement of individuals are streets that promote civility. And civilised streets may be safer streets.

### No



**Dr Douglas Stewart**  
Consultant, Stewart Design

This motion does not stand up to scrutiny. The most publicised guardrail removal was in Kensington High Street. But although other major changes reduced casualties, more occurred where guardrails had been removed.

To avoid causing casualties, it would be preferable to first examine the effect of installing the guardrails. If accident records reveal a reduction, then more would be expected if guardrails were removed. This would be irresponsible.

Unfortunately, the proponents of 'naked streets' appear not to have made such a check. In their zeal to tidy streets they have thrown out baby with the bathwater.

At this point I should disclose that I am the inventor of 'Visirail', which gained the first IHT Road Safety Award in 1981, and its successor 'Visiflex'. My paper 'A Fresh Vision for Pedestrian Guardrails' (ICE Journal, August 2007) discusses

the history and performance of guardrails, particularly high visibility designs. These provide casualty reductions of about 80%, primarily by preventing diagonal crossing, shown to be a crucial factor in most pedestrian accidents.

Hence removing guardrails would increase casualties by up to 400%, depending on type of guardrail. This is supported by the remarkable accident record of a site where Visirail was erected, removed in error, then re-erected (ICE web discussion).

Why does risk compensation, as proposed by the motion, not prevent such increases? For it to operate there must be awareness of risk. But removing guardrails is seldom perceived as creating a hazard so pedestrians become less careful, not more. Without the guidance of guardrails they tend to cross diagonally, so accidents proliferate.

Those planning 'naked streets' have, however, another priority - amenity. They want to eliminate old, unsightly, obscuring guardrails. To do so without increasing casualties is easy - just upgrade with improved guardrails. Amenity will be enhanced, and safety transformed.

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## Working life:

### Raymond Cook



**Job title** - Associate director, MVA Asia

**Terms of reference** - To seek, secure and manage traffic and

transport studies throughout Asia, plus a wide range of business development activities.

**Suitability for the job** - I have been involved in a wide range of transportation positions for 25 years, from a traffic technician with Essex County Council to national safety engineer in New Zealand, and now back in Hong Kong.

**Where based** - Hong Kong

**Transport to work** - MTR (mass transit railway) - the best and

most reliable transport system on Earth, in my view.

**Top of in-tray** - A major transport study in Manila and rail property studies in Hong Kong.

**Bottom of in-tray** - Invites to cocktail parties.

**Best aspect of job** - The ability to work in different places, on challenging projects and with talented people.

**Worst aspect** - Being away from the family, even if only for a few days.

**What is the most important transport issue today?**

In Asia, it is a mix of congestion causing pollution and lack of support for road safety initiatives, which both need to be addressed more fully.

**How do you relax?** - I enjoy swimming during the summer and in winter, I relax by hiking and taking my two young sons to 'mini-rugby'.

**Ambition** - To promote safety engineering throughout Asia.