

Let the cities move by pedalling

The way urban space is designed has an immediate effect on our quality of life. In Spain there are more than 30,000 premature deaths associated with poor air quality. Let's put bikes on our streets

Samuel Romero Aporta

Changes in and the effects on city mobility are undergoing an evolutionary process. Years ago, lane extensions on the main roads of our cities were supposed to solve traffic problems. Everything would be wonderful: cars would drive without restriction, without anyone slowing them down, and in the meantime, they filled our cities with asphalt. Despite warnings from mobility professionals, the experiment resulted in more cars, traffic jams, pollution and public space devoted to cars. Dietrich Braess, a German mathematician, warned in the late 1960s about this phenomenon known as the Braess paradox, which stipulates that, as the road network expands, the accumulation of individual decisions about the best route to take leads to more congestion. Induced traffic, they call it nowadays; the knowledge of the existence of a new road or an existing road with more capacity provokes a summoning effect on several levels: car users who change their route, users of other modes of transport who decide to try the car because of its supposed speed, new residences in the surroundings of that road which guarantees access to the city centre in a fast and agile way (sic) and new businesses in its surroundings because of its fantastic communication. In a short time, the traffic on this road is worse than before the extension and, as a result, the air quality and the quality of life in the city also worsen.



Cycle lane on Carrer de Manso (Barcelona).

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Thus the readjustment of cities after a process of transformation of urban space to the detriment of the car leads to a similar process of change. Shopkeepers, residents and the mainstream media will be outraged, trumpeting urban chaos, the end of business, endless traffic jams, insecurity, and so many other claims that fade away in advance of a new normality as the weeks go by. This is what is known as dissipated traffic. And later, we will analyse the process and the reasons behind these unfounded premises that proclaim an unbearable city. As a preview, let us think of Valencia, Seville, Barcelona, Berlin, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and many other cities that have decided to transform their mobility by taking giant steps to reduce the space allocated to cars and promote public transport, walking and cycling. There is no choice. Protecting our health is inextricably linked to more sustainable cities. But let us take a step back.

The way cities are designed has a direct impact on our quality of life. So no matter how many New Year's resolutions we make to live healthier lives, if the structure of our streets, squares, neighbourhoods and communities is not right, they will again fall on deaf ears. The way we get around has changed for the worse in recent decades. All the talk of sustainable mobility is about returning to a time when our basic services were a 15-minute walk away, we moved (and were moved) by public transport, and cycling was not just for the weekend outing but a key element of urban mobility. At the beginning of the last century, in the USA, Fordism (a model of

The productive machinery of consumption crushed any aspiration to maintain decent cities. Nine million people a year die from pollution.

production associated with linear manufacturing) began to work on the idea of bringing a vehicle into every home, thus creating a need for consumption in all families and a whole model of capitalist production associated with the private combustion vehicle. To achieve this, Ford needed two essential tools: the media and the transformation of cities. And we already know what happened: car mobility was soon associated with freedom, with the aspirations of a supposedly middle class, making the car an indispensable element in our lives, while at the same time, cities were filled with urban motorways, with large streets full of lanes for cars, giving away our public space and condemning our health. And despite the fact that ecologists, urban planners, engineers and health professionals warned of the terrible consequences of designing cities for the car, the productive machinery of consumption steamrolled over any attempt to maintain decent cities. Today, according to the Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health, 9 million people on our planet die prematurely every year due to pollution. It is, therefore, a real challenge to tackle this scenario from all possible angles and to pay particular attention to air pollution, which is responsible for 75% of these premature deaths. In our country, which is no stranger to this reality, there are more than 30,000 premature deaths linked to poor air quality, the vast majority of which are caused by car combustion engines.

The seriousness of the current scenario calls for action on all fronts: incentives for public transport; urban, productive and industrial redesign to reduce dependence on private cars; and a radical change in the mobility paradigm to focus directly on sustainable mobility. Take the car out of the equation—even electric cars. Let us put bicycles on our roads.

The struggle for public space is one fundamental element in achieving this scenario. This is an enormous challenge because it involves making counter-hegemonic choices. As I argued at the beginning, aggressive capitalism, focused on unlimited growth and consumption, has established the car-centric mobility model as the main form of settlement in our cities. And when resources are limited, it is obvious that it is doomed to fail. However, overturning the current urban model means going down a path littered with stones by the car industry itself, which aims to guarantee a particular model of cities and the interaction between them that allows consumption and

production levels to be maintained. But I think something is crucial: those who defend a car-centred urban model

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today are mortgaging the future of our future generations, condemning their health and ours, and destroying our planet. They are advocating cruelty. Those who condemn the transformation of public space towards a more sustainable way of life, who argue in favour of new traffic jams or longer journeys to our destinations, not to mention the need to inform

themselves and observe the development of many of the cities already mentioned, are direct participants in the destruction of the planet's health and the depletion of its resources.

Today, most cities have embarked on a very positive path, imitating trends already well established in many European cities: taking space away from cars and giving it to pedestrians, public transport and cycling. Focusing on the space allocated to cycling, this distribution of public space is crucial for two fundamental reasons: it creates a pull effect, as it begins to be seen as the only viable option, and it reduces the space available for cars. Very important.

Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Vitoria, San Sebastian, Zaragoza and Valladolid are some Spanish cities that have already begun this transformation. A commitment to sustainable mobility and cycling requires the implementation of a network of cycle lanes that meet the following criteria: that it is complete, continuous, uniform, direct, recognisable, and dense and that it runs along main roads. And this transformation inevitably leads to the transitional period that all these cities have gone through, as previously noted in this text. The transition to a liveable, vibrant and forward-looking city is inseparable from a city without cars or only the essential ones. Nonetheless, this is not a political strategy; however much some smoking mayors may insist on it: it is the only way forward in the face of the ecological crisis and the unhealthiness of the air we breathe.

Surely it is time to look back and see how we moved more than 60 years ago when pedestrians and cyclists occupied a priority space in our cities, which are, after all, our social environment, where we build our lives, relate to each other and associate with each other.

I am left with this paragraph from the National Cycling Strategy:

"The bicycle is not just another means of transport. Its use produces value for society, not only in terms of mobility but also in terms of habitability, health, the environment, equity, sociability, etc. And it benefits those who use it and the rest of the population by freeing up space and reducing air and noise pollution."

What better New Year's resolution?

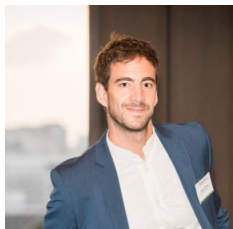
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