

# crazy pedalling in london?

**It's time for a radical change in how we perceive and use our roads, streets and spaces, and in how we invest in transport planning – by giving the streets back to the people who make city life vibrant and lively, say Edwin Loo and Robin Hickman**

Many of us have had the pleasure of travelling to – and even cycling in – cycle-friendly cities such as Amsterdam, Groningen, Delft and Copenhagen. And many of us have wondered why the lessons these cities offer have not been transferred to a city such as London. Segregated routes, direct and legible routes, cycle parking facilities, reduced road traffic speeds and capacities – surely these are all straightforward and relatively inexpensive to implement in almost all cities?

Not so long ago, we seemed to be making some progress. The Mayor's Transport Strategy (various versions: 2001, 2006 and 2010) talked positively about cycling; many reports were commissioned from consultants on the state of cycling in London and how to improve facilities; fairly ambitious targets were adopted for increasing the modal share of cycling; and a cycle hire scheme was implemented. Urban design was seen as important in London and gained much attention as a means of supporting the attractiveness, and ultimately the competitiveness, of the city. London even has a Mayor, in Boris Johnson, who is a cyclist, and hence would surely support some state-of-the-art facilities for cyclists.

But what went wrong? Although Boris Johnson has been re-elected, in the first few months of 2012 cyclists have been indignant that the cycling facilities being developed are not good enough. There is an increasing stream of bloggers and lobby groups (London Cycling Campaign, Londoners on Bikes, and many others), comprising people who actually cycle on London's roads, all shouting that cycling provision is derisory, that major junctions are unsafe, that traffic is favoured above cyclists and pedestrians, and that the famed 'cycle superhighways' are nothing more than expensive blue strips of paint. The Mayor, like most people who are 'new' to transport and city planning, seems to have got stuck on the issue of traffic capacity and its relation with the economy.

The conventional viewpoint here is that if we increase traffic volumes and speed up traffic, then,

by some great leap of faith, the economy will be supported and the city will become more competitive. This is the basis of much of the appraisal system we have in transport planning. It is, however, disputed at best, and hogwash at worst, based on an outmoded transport planning approach developed in the United States from the 1950s onwards, to help justify further road-building. But where are the cities in which road-building has led to a distinct urban fabric and a competitive economy? These seem very few on the ground.

By contrast, cities are much easier to identify where investment in the urban fabric, including in the public realm and cycling facilities, has led to attractive places, and where people and businesses fall over themselves to be located in. Think of Barcelona, Berlin, Copenhagen, Freiburg, Lyon, Paris, San Sebastian, Stockholm, Singapore – in fact, any of the cities we like to take our city breaks in.

In London, pedestrian crossings are being taken out to reduce delays to motor traffic, and junctions are being designed at King's Cross and Bow roundabout, and indeed at all of the major junctions in London; but most of the designs actively create danger for both cyclists and pedestrians. The Chief of Design for the Olympic Park Legacy Company has publicly described cycle parking as 'politically correct' during a meeting of the London Assembly.<sup>1</sup> Even seemingly 'people-friendly' schemes such as pedestrian countdown hide a broader agenda which makes it harder to cross the road. Meanwhile, there are rumours that the Mayor is considering a programme of 'highway capacity improvements' in his new term.

Despite a recent increase in cycling take-up, cycling's modal share remains at a miserable low level in London, stubbornly at around 3% (in Groningen and Delft the corresponding figures both stand at over 35% of trips). The reason for this is not a lack of bicycles, or a lack of training. Together, Londoners own thousands of bikes, yet the vast



## Above

The cycling experience at King's Cross – surely we can do better than this?

majority sit unused in garages and back gardens. Most know how to cycle – it is not too difficult once you have learned. What stops people from using the bicycle as a mode of transport is a (very real) perception of danger – caused by road designs that are targeted at increasing vehicle throughput and flow.

No amount of 'awareness', 'training' or 'publicity' will overcome the basic human instinct of survival when confronted with the terrors of crossing three lanes of fast moving lorries, vans and buses to make a right turn off Blackfriars Bridge. Even Jeremy Clarkson, in one of his recent columns in the *Sunday Times*, noted the sheer delight of people-friendly design in Copenhagen – the ease and pleasure of getting around regardless of mode of transport and the visible lack of safety paraphernalia that blights British cycling.

Yet the Mayor of London variously tells the London Assembly and a Mumsnet webchat that the most effective thing is for cyclists to have 'your wits about you' and 'wear a helmet, be visible, be patient and respectful'.<sup>2</sup> We should demand better from the re-elected Mayor, who would also do well to bear in mind that 16 people lost their lives cycling on London's roads last year, as have hundreds in previous years. And taking an even wider view, internationally there are 1.2 million deaths per annum in road traffic accidents. This is seemingly accepted by society, but surely cannot go on.

Improving conditions for people to enjoy the city – by bicycle and on foot – is not a narrow special interest: it is crucial to ensuring the continued competitiveness and resilience of London's economy and the attractiveness of London as a place to live. It is crucial to its continuing ability to retain residents and businesses, and to attract new visitors and talent. This is no longer – and arguably never has been – an issue of 'technical feasibility', or whether London really can 'afford' to provide for a world-class public realm and liveability. We've been

here before – in protesting against road-widening plans in the 1970s and 1980s, and through years of gathering the evidence, including Jan Gehl's landmark study of urban design in Central London, and thousands of hours spent by consultants examining the barriers to safe and convenient cycling in London. We know what's wrong – and we know how to solve it. Just ask your everyday cyclist.

Road space has to be re-allocated to allow for quality infrastructure to support cycling and walking; motorised traffic has to be slowed down, and in many cases removed. In the long run this benefits everyone – through reduced costs to our health service, through drastic improvements in air quality, through reduced carbon dioxide emissions, through a better urban fabric, and through the sheer pleasure of cycling and walking around London in the fresh air.

Making life easier for motorisation while also aiming for safe and convenient cycling conditions is impossible. It is time for a radical change in how we perceive and use our roads, streets and spaces, and in how we invest in transport planning – by giving the streets back to the people who make city life vibrant and lively. Come on London: let's get our cycling act together.

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## Notes

- 1 Cyclists in the City blog, 14 Mar. 2012. <http://cyclelondoncity.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/olympics-boss-main-traffic-free-cycle.html>
- 2 Mumsnet live webchat, 12 Apr. 2012. [www.mumsnet.com/Talk/mumsnet\\_live\\_events/a1448277-Boris-Johnson-webchat-TODAY-Mon-16-Apr-11-30am-12-30pm](http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/mumsnet_live_events/a1448277-Boris-Johnson-webchat-TODAY-Mon-16-Apr-11-30am-12-30pm); and Cyclists in the City blog, 9 Nov. 2011. <http://cyclelondoncity.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/boris-johnsons-cycle-revolution-i-dont.html>