

I Want to Ride My Bicycle: Urban Planning and the Danish Concept of 'Hygge'

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Indian cities are in crisis. Spend any length of time in a large city there and you will notice the overcrowding, the power and water shortages and, during monsoon, the streets that transform into stinking, litter-strewn rivers. At times, these cities can be almost unbearable to live in. Little wonder then that the concept of 'smart cities' is taking hold among policy makers, however [fundamentally flawed or cynical](#) the strategy to implement the notion seems to be.

And, not least of course, there is the horrendous traffic chaos and congestion, the choking pollution and the increasing number of massive concrete flyovers: monstrosities that have taken their place among so many other architectural monstrosities that blight the typical Indian city.

A couple of years back, Delhi introduced a policy whereby vehicles with certain registration numbers were allowed on the road only on designated days to try to cut down on traffic congestion and pollution. However, it failed to solve the underlying problem that stems from a model of 'development' that associates a ([wholly unnecessary](#)) push for urbanisation and car ownership with progress.



Road congestion in India (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Despite the problems, the greater the urban sprawl and the more road building that takes place, the happier will be the real estate, construction and car manufacturing sectors. That's not idle speculation: the documentary '[How Big Oil Conquered the World](#)' describes how the car and oil industry criminally conspired to undermine public transport systems in US cities in order to get the population and urban planners hooked on the car.

As long as urban planning focuses on the car and wrong-headed notions of 'development' governed by the needs and profits of powerful players are prioritised, Indian cities will not only continue to sprawl ever outwards and be defined by traffic congestion and air and noise pollution (and related health problems), but residents will carry on experiencing an ever-worsening decline in their quality of life.

It is unfortunate that just as some cities in the West are beginning to realise the folly of widening and building ever more roads and jamming cities with cars, Indian planners have carried on regardless by blighting the urban landscape with huge concrete flyovers and expressways which divide and destroy communities.

A recent New York Times [article](#) noted that Los Angeles has decided against adding lanes to a freeway. Planners are finally waking up to the fact that adding extra lanes merely means more cars, more pollution and journey times increasing.

The writers note that as soon as you build a highway or add lanes to a freeway, cars show up to fill the available capacity (known as [induced traffic demand](#)). They conclude that urban planners and motorists impose costs on us all in terms of degraded public space and serious health risks: for example, recent [research](#) shows that a congestion charge in Stockholm reduced pollution and sharply cut asthma attacks in children.

Smart thinking in Copenhagen

If there is one city that seems to be on the right track, it is Copenhagen. The city indicates that cycling should be the foundation for sustainable transport strategies and is key to making cities clean, green and livable. Copenhagen's urban transport solution gives space to cars but more importantly to bicycles, pedestrians and public transport.

Back in the early 1970s, Copenhagen was just as traffic-clogged as anywhere. Now it has around 400 km of cycle paths. The city's 2017 Annual Bicycle Report confirms that cycling is the preferred mode of transport for the city's inhabitants. Each day, some 62% of Copenhageners use their bikes to go to work or school/college.

Copenhagen has in recent years been voted the 'best city for cyclists' and the 'world's most livable city'. Throughout the world, there is now a desire to improve public health and combat climate change. As a result, Copenhagen's renowned cycle-friendly policies are serving as a template for some of the world's most congested cities.

Aside from health and environmental considerations, an effective urban transport policy should be democratic. Unlike cars, even the poorest segments of society can gain access a bicycle. The bicycle is indeed democratic, not just for those who cycle but also for the rest of the population who too often impacted by planning blight, pollution and the colonisation of urban space as a result of planning that privileges car users ahead of everyone else.

However, the bicycle is only truly democratic when spatial segregation is limited and bike

lanes and appropriate cycle-friendly infrastructure exist to properly connect all areas. Inspired by Copenhagen, Mexico City's bicycle strategy is attempting to address this issue through a comprehensive cycle path network, which aims to create mobility through areas that have been closed off due to previous planning strategies.

For cities to fully embrace the bicycle, city planners must stop thinking like motorists or capitulating to the influence of powerful automobile lobby groups and plan for the needs of cyclists. In Denmark, for example, the Copenhagen-Albertslund route is the first of a planned network that will comprise 26 Cycle Super Highways, covering a total of 300 km. The network is predicted to reduce public expenditure by €40.3 million annually thanks to improved health.

Consider that in [Europe 50% of most city land](#) is dedicated to streets and roads, parking, service stations, driveways, signals and traffic signs. And yet the average European car is parked for 92% of the time. Of the other 8% of time, 1.5% is spent looking for a parking space, 1% in congestion and just 5% is spent driving. There are 30,000 deaths per year on European roads and four times as many disabling injuries. Consider too that an average European car has five seats but on average carries 1.5 persons per journey.

In Copenhagen, city planners tend to give an adequate proportion of road space to cyclists – proper cycle lanes with curbs that separate cycling space from car space; cycle lanes that are usually also sufficiently wide. After all, why should cars hog so much road space when the majority of road users are cyclists?

In the article '[The Arrogance of Space](#)' (by Copenhagenize Design Co), it says:

"We have a tendency to give cities human character traits when we describe them. It's a friendly city. A dynamic city. A boring city. Perhaps then a city can be arrogant. Arrogant, for example, with its distribution of space."

For too long the arrogance of car-obsessed urban planners has degraded our health and our quality of life. But when you have good-quality public transport and the opportunity to cycle thanks to appropriate infrastructure, there is no need to hand over excess space to cars and produce endless open concrete sprawl for car parks.

Walk (or cycle) around Copenhagen and you will immediately appreciate there is much less traffic noise and pollution compared with other cities. It is indeed a spatially "friendly city" and less "arrogant city". It is also less hectic and more tranquil than many other cities and – taking things even further – arguably more community oriented.

The slow life

Of course, community-oriented living isn't just due to transport strategies. The municipality encourages outdoor living by offering open-access communal table tennis tables, basketball facilities, kids parks, landscaped parkland and lakes. Despite the usually cold weather, many Copenhageners congregate on the streets and city benches to socialise and embrace the concept of 'hygge', [probably best defined as](#): a conscious appreciation, a certain slowness, and the ability to recognise and enjoy the present. Get to know the city and you will soon realise that hygge isn't just a cliché – it is real.

The key word in that definition is 'slowness' because from there we arrive at the concept of

‘slow living’.

Writing in 1973, activist and writer [Ivan Illich stated](#):

“The use of the bicycle... allows people to create a new relationship between their life-space and their life-time, between their territory and the pulse of their being, without destroying their inherited balance... In contrast, the accelerating individual capsule [the car] enabled societies to engage in a ritual of progressively paralyzing speed.”

Modern culture is an advocate of speed, epitomised by car worship. Cars, speed and high-energy living have become essentials fact of living. In the process, our communities have become disjointed and dispersed. We have sacrificed ‘slow living’ – in terms of intimacy, friendship and neighbourliness – for a more impersonal way of accelerated living.

However, bicycles offer a cheap, sustainable means of transport. The bicycle is also emblematic of a different form of urban planning based on more intimate social relations and localisation. Where is the need for the car if work, school or healthcare facilities are close by? Less need for ugly flyovers or six lane highways that rip up communities in their path. Getting from A to B would not require a race against the clock on the highway that cuts through a series of localities that are never to be visited, never to be regarded as anything but an inconvenience to be passed through.

Instead, how about an enjoyable walk or cycle ride through an urban environment defined by community and intimacy? An environment free from traffic pollution or noise and where ‘neighbourhood’ has not been deadened and stripped of its intimacy, local stores and facilities.

Many cities could learn much from Denmark’s attitude towards the bicycle and urban planning. After all, ‘smart cities’ call for smart thinking.

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The author has spent many years in India and many months in Copenhagen. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research.

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