

1. Crossed Perspectives



Urban cycling

Between Dave Horton (Sociologue)
And David Dansky (Formateur/Formatrice)

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Cycling is moving up the agenda of town and city planners across Europe, given its benefits as a healthy, highly sustainable mode of transport. But how can it best be developed in today's car-dominated urban environment? FVM talks to two British cycling experts, Dave Horton and David Dansky, about the key issues.

01. Why does cycling in cities matter?



Dave Horton

Cities should be civilised places but are mostly trashed by cars, and car-based lifestyles that destroy health and fitness. The bicycle is a simple and elegant solution – a vehicle with extraordinary power to do good, including restore civic life, health and fitness. Were cities across the globe to replace cars with bicycles it'd be a giant step towards a fairer, greener and happier planet. Some city authorities are remembering or learning for the first time about the bicycle's potential, but still too few. Even where urban cycling is encouraged, it's cycling-to-work initiatives that tends to get prioritised. Cycling to and from work should only account for a small portion of the bicycle's contribution to urban renaissance – bicycles of different kinds that cater for different abilities could and ought to become the normal way for people of whatever age to make most of their urban journeys. Life, and the world as we know it would be transformed!



D. D

Dave is right. Catering to bicycles of all kinds, for different functions and for a variety of journeys in our cities, would transform our urban spaces. We must also consider the function of streets, which are not solely for transit. Local high streets, for instance, should be pleasant for everyone. Separating modes in such areas may be detrimental to the sense of place.



David Dansky

The benefits of cycling for both individuals and society are clear. Extending the question to the value of active travelling by encouraging walking and cycling will provide a perspective of how our urban spaces should look and feel. While many northern European countries have designed cities with a coherent cycling network (bike paths) and priority cycling legislation (strict liability), the UK has created a network that prioritizes driving, resulting in the marginalization of both walkers and cyclists. In many UK towns, car parking is considered a right; walkers are herded like sheep in pens to cross roads, city centres are choked by fast ring-roads and risky driver behaviour is tolerated even if it results in injury and death. Cities where walking and cycling are made easier and more pleasant (and driving harder and less pleasant) are places where people want to live, hang out, shop and interact with other people. When people feel more connected with their neighbourhoods and each other, they will also be happier and healthier!



D. H

I know we're both cycling advocates, but I find it remarkable that there's such consensus around the huge benefits of cycling. Yet, it remains so persistently, almost aggressively marginalised across the world. This hints at policies with regard to cycling that are hidden as much by us activists (in our attempts to work with rather than against city authorities) as by politicians and policy-makers' intent (despite rhetoric to the contrary) on keeping the car king.

02. In a city/town environment, should cycling be encouraged by providing dedicated spaces for cyclists, or by teaching people to share the existing space?



Dave Horton

Cycling should be encouraged in many different but inter-connected ways. Imagine a cycling system with all components pointing toward cycling and making it easy (much as today a car system makes driving normal). This cycling system is in a nascent stage everywhere and needs to be developed in favour of the (outdated) car system, but this is an ongoing process. People (cyclists and drivers) should be taught how to deal with existing conditions for cyclists, even as those conditions are adapted and gradually revisited for cycling (for example, by making driving slower, more expensive and more difficult). However, for now, a large majority of people simply won't cycle in the conditions that prevail across most towns and cities. Understandably – they're scared. So to accelerate the shift from car-oriented to a bicycle-oriented lifestyle, we need to provide high-quality, permanent, dedicated spaces for cycling along large, busy road arteries that, for now, are full of cars, trucks and buses. These roads are important cycling routes but people are afraid to use them.



D. D

People who don't ride perceive cycling as more risky than it is in reality. This perception is often confirmed when cycling advocates suggest using 'danger' as a tool. For example, sharing a bus lane with buses along a shopping high street may be considered scary. However, bus drivers sensitized to cyclists can help ensure that bus lanes are low risk areas for riders. For roads are genuinely unpleasant to ride on, separating cyclists with high-quality infrastructure (and giving riders priority at junctions) may be the best solution.



David Dansky

I live in the London borough of Hackney, where more people ride or walk to work than drive. There is very little dedicated space for cycling here. However, the borough authorities have worked with local people to create a 20mph network and reduce the space for driving. So it's pleasant to walk and cycle there. Within this network, key nodes have been designed to create people-friendly places, with widened pavements, trees and benches. Infrastructure is important. So is training in cycle skills, which has been offered to adults and school pupils for over 10 years. Improving people's skills enables them to ride on trafficked roads. With training, people ride more often and further. Many of these people also drive, and thus understand how to avoid intimidating cyclists. Hackney has also trained local drivers in sharing roads with cyclists and taught people to look out for one another. Places in which people share the same space and move at roughly the same speed feel better for everyone, including walkers.



D. H

The long-term goal is to create towns and cities that are completely free of speeding, motorised traffic and the ugly and dangerous monopolisation of the precious space it breeds. That goal is easier to achieve in some parts of the city than others. So yes, while some of inner London is becoming more cycle-friendly, most of London is not. The maximum speed limit on urban roads should be 30kmh (or 20mph); until then, we need dedicated spaces for cycling on big roads where people are afraid to cycle.

03. Would you give the same advice for developing cycling in peri-urban and suburban areas?



Dave Horton

Yes. The cycling push is coming from the world's most prestigious cities (Paris, New York and London), which are slowly being re-designed for cycling. But if cycling is to fulfil its democratic potential, there's the danger that cycling will become easier for rich people in gentrified inner cities that are reinvented around liveability, whilst becoming harder for others – those priced out the city and forced to travel greater distances. If cycling isn't to become elitist, people need good cycling facilities and skills too! Indeed, training and dedicated spaces for cycling are necessary everywhere; the case for dedicated space has less to do with the degree of urbanism than with specific roads that deter cycling. Trip distances increase in peri-urban and suburban areas. However, as the Netherlands proves, this isn't fatal to cycling. What is fatal are hostile roads. Outside the city there's more space to properly cater to cycling on them. As for education, learning about cyclists' needs should be compulsory in driver training, and learning how to cycle part of every child's education.



D. D

There needs to be a raft of measures to create mass cycling wherever people are. Short-term, easy wins include soft measures like training and positive cycle promotion, speed reduction and infrastructure tweaks. Drivers can be trained (and forced) to grant space to cyclists, while riders can learn how to claim their rightful space. Medium-term measures will involve taking space from drivers and making our streets great places for everyone.



David Dansky

The hinterlands that lie at the edges of many dense urban spaces in Europe are often places where cities locate functions they don't want downtown, such as airports, landfill and sewage sites and roads and motorways that connect urban spaces. Large tracts of land may be claimed for these uses. The journey from town to these places is often longer, and perhaps less easy or pleasant for cyclists. Ideally, a public transit system would be designed to get people and their bikes to locations in the hinterlands. A cycle network would enable people to ride from the transport hub to their desired destination. By recognising that inter-urban roads go through these areas, there is a stronger case – and more space – for justifying a separate, parallel cycle route. Cycle skills training is likewise relevant, as there will undoubtedly be places where different modes will cross and interact. That's why we train cyclists and drivers.



D. H

Yes, inter-modality is important for long journeys, so widespread bicycle use (privately-owned or rented) should exist (and planned for) at train, tram and bus stops. Cycling enhances the range and upkeep of public transport. But we shouldn't assume that long trips are uncyclable; in fact, such journeys boost activity, health and fitness levels (and could also be made by e-bike). Nor should we assume that suburban trips are necessarily longer; many are in fact short. Driver and cyclist training, and quality (possibly dedicated) spaces for cycling are the keys.



Dave Horton

Sociologue

A cycling consultant and writer, Dave Horton received his PhD in 2002 from Lancaster University, where he was also a researcher until 2012. He organised the first Cycling and Society Symposium at Lancaster's Centre for Mobilities Research and has a cycling and sustainability blog at: thinkingaboutcycling.wordpress.com/



David Dansky

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David Dansky is the head of training and development at Cycle Training UK, a not-for-profit cooperative that works with schools, organizations and individuals. A former teacher, he is also a director of The Association of Bikeability Schemes and is often interviewed by the British media about safe cycling.

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