Reknowing the Bicycle; Renewing its Space

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- Respond To This Article

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Different forms of transport have always had different effects on the cityscape, landscape, nationscape and airscape. Modes of moving from A to B have consumed, manipulated and divided this space, often requiring other activities to operate around it. This division is seen most obviously in roads and their effect on community (see for example The Castle), but also in other scapes such as the control of airspace, through flight paths which has had a marked effect on, for example, the migratory flight paths of birds. With the adoption of new transport technologies, scapes are manipulated to accommodate the needs of this technology. The bicycle is an interesting example of a technology, which in its popularity last century began to affect the architecture of the landscape, before the automobile left its indelible imprint. With the disenchantment with cars in the Western world, it is interesting to ponder on the effect that bicycles are now having with the resurgence of their popularity. At this point, it must be noted that this is a purely Western orientated study and it would be worthwhile comparing these spatial effects to the scapes in a highly cycle-dominated country such as China.

The popularity of bicycles peaked in the 1880-90s (Bardou et al. 7). This craze was partly due to the attraction of the technology, but also due to an associated sense of freedom and escape. This attitude to the bicycle is expressed in H.G. Wells's novella, Wheels of Chance (based in 1895) where the main character, a draper called Mr Hoopdriver, undertakes a cycling tour of the south coast of England. Freedom takes on two meanings -- firstly, Mr Hoopdriver finds a sense of freedom in being able to escape from his mundane life and travel the long distances solo in a shorter time. He also observes another type of freedom in the form of the Young Lady in Grey who is also on a cycling tour. Mr Hoopdriver is shocked to see a woman exerting herself physically and wearing pants, yet realises that there is no question of women cycling side saddle wearing a skirt. It seems that in this form of transport, the emancipation of women progresses a little further. This freedom led to the enormous popularity of bicycles and as a result, bicycle organisations began to petition for the improvement and expansion of roads which were in a poor state due to the use of horses (Fink 8). And so bicycles began to impose their needs on the landscape and with the expansion of road networks, the landscape was altered markedly. Interestingly enough, these roadworks were one factor which led to the bicycle's demise in popularity and the accelerated manufacture of cars (Bardou et al. 9).

At the time that roads were being improved, farmers in the United States were becoming distressed by the railway's monopolised power over mass transport. Due to the improved roads, the agricultural industry pushed towards using these roads for transporting produce. A number of automobiles had been designed and tested since Leonardo da Vinci first sketched the idea. 1860-90 had seen a number of reasonable size steam engines which had reasonable power/weight ratio, and an electric car, invented by William Morrison (US) in 1890, had a running time of 13 hours at 14 mph (Fink 9). However, it was the internal combustion engine that revolutionised this form of transport, and it did not take long before the utopia was conceived. Not only could cars move faster than a horse and cart, they were originally deemed cleaner and healthier, according to an 1899 article from the Scientific American:

The improvement in city conditions by the general adoption of the motorcar can hardly be overestimated. Streets clean, dustless and odourless, with light rubber tired vehicles moving swiftly and noiselessly over the smooth expanse, would eliminate a greater part of the nervousness, distraction, and strain of modern metropolitan life. (Conyngton 19660)

There existed some initial resistance to the introduction of cars. Pedestrians, horse owners and cyclists began to feel that their road space was being impinged upon and speed laws were introduced to attempt to counteract the fanaticism (Fink 25). However, little could be done to dissuade the masses about the benefits of the car.

Given the car's enormous popularity and the spatial needs of this vehicle, it is interesting to consider the architectural changes to the city and landscapes necessary to account for the requirements of the car. As the rail trucks needed tracks, so too the cars needed roads. Already existing roads in cities were altered significantly and in particular, enormous amounts of money were injected into building highways to link major cities. Examples of these projects are the now defunct Highway Trust Fund in the United States and the Pacific Highway system in Australia. These roads have always been built with great opposition from people whose homes or land were rezoned for use by governing bodies. The consumption and division of established city scapes to accommodate for the cars' needs has severely altered the spatial priorities. Leavitt (1970) suggests that previously cohesive neighbourhoods have become socially and spatially divided as a result. Small corner stores have closed down due to bypasses, neighbours cannot visit each other on foot due to uncrossable motorways, animals are killed as a result of normal routes being intersected by highways, and the airscape has become dominated by the engine fumes especially in places such as Mexico City.

On a larger scale, it may be suggested that cars has had scape-altered effects on a national and transnational level. The rise of the use of motorised transport can be considered in conjunction with the growing popularity of communication systems, more specifically at this time, the telephone.
Both the car and the telephone have changed the perception of space between previously distant neighbours. Travelling time and communication time have decreased as a result of the use of these devices, resulting in a greater unification of the nation state. The negative corollary to this is the disintegration of these nation states through war. The use of cars and the expanded and improved highway systems had devastating effects in World War II. The increased mobilisation of soldiers and weaponry increased the efficiency of destruction, resulting in razed city and landscapes and a shift in national borders and nation space.

Thus the demands of cars have altered these scapes and subsequently dictate the use of this space. It may be suggested that the car no longer is a tool for humans, but tends to control human activity within the space it dominates. People must use a bypass to drive further for a loaf of bread which was previously bought from the corner shop now closed from a lack of business due to the same bypass. Commuters in Mexico City are forced back into cars to escape the hazardous chemicals now dominating this space. This almost master/servant relationship over space allocation in the land, city and airscapes led to the disenchantment with cars which began in the 70s. One of the results of this disenchantment was to reconsider the bicycle as an alternate, less impinging form of transport.

It has taken a number of decades but, in terms of space and scapes, an interesting phenomenon is occurring with the resurgence of the popularity of bicycles in the Western world. Cycling advocate groups are highlighting the advantages of this mode of transport. Cycling is no longer discussed in the 1890 discourses of freedom and adventure, but in terms of the environment and health. The environmental rhetoric, in particular, can be framed in terms of space. For example, it may be suggested that bicycles do not tend to permeate the airscape to the degree that cars do. It is through these types of discourses that advocate groups have been arguing for the right to take back some of the space that cars have since subsumed. A struggle exists over this space. For example, in many European cities, bicycle lanes on the far left of the road (between the footpath and carlanes) have been drawn on many intra-urban roads. In Amsterdam, vehicle access is colour coded, with bikeways being marked by red bricks (Poindexter). The cityscape is not altered as a result, but challenges to the space already filled by cars are made. In Australian capital cities, these bikelanes are less successful. Many of these bike lanes exist where car parking is permitted and a line of parked cars potentially subsumes this designated space, such that it no longer exists. Thus many cyclists resort to using pathways, some specific to cyclists, others shared with pedestrians. Other innovations from the Netherlands, which have perpetuated this challenge to the car's control of space, are traffic lights with special signals for bicycles and right-of-way laws which include specific give way to cyclists rules (Poindexter). These practices question the dominion of cars in travelling spaces and go towards changing this transport paradigm. As natural resources are depleted further and little progress is made on green cars, bicycles may again find their niche. It will be interesting to see another architectural evolution of the city, land, air and nationscapes as this space changes to accommodate another shift in transport trends.

References


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