

# **What about Traffic Calming in Latin America?**

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The streets speak several languages. The geometric design of one road with two lanes says that is possible to drive 60 km/h in a residential zone, however, a vertical sign will tell you that this is a 30 km/h. Car drivers in my country enjoy the chance to choose between both languages. They normally do not understand more than one language at one time. They just go too fast to think too much.

People who live on the same residential street do not understand either why children can not play next to their houses and why is necessary to travel far away to do so. TC is therefore about creating a language compatible with all needs in the city. We need to define priorities and determine which social functions should go first and where is the right place to do so.

European TC helped to face a clear contradiction: a high population density with a high rate of car ownership.

In Latin America, generally speaking, we do not yet have dense cities. We have a horizontal growing. The population square kilometer is still low and if we compare the number of vehicles per capita there is no way to talk about high densities.

What we have is a great concentration of motorized vehicles in few cities.

This situation is possible because our street design is very generous giving space for cars and a low priority toward public transport and human scales modes of transportation.

Is in this context that we have some examples of TC with our own features. A closed street is one of them.

Social extremes in Peru have closed streets. In rich towns a fence does not allow strangers in residential streets. In poor areas, the people on Sundays close the street so they can play and have fun together.

These TC examples are spontaneous and they do not imply great physical changes on the street.

But these are only examples, since most areas in our cities can not afford a closed street since they are used for releasing congestion, allowing in coming and fast traffic in what is supposed to be 30km/h area. Besides, a closed street is forbidden by law.

The present situation has disturbed a minimal functionality in our street network and has created additional problems concerning personal safety and social violence.

The traditional hierarchy has not been possible since it calls for heavy investment and needs a technical approach that is not available. So our governments prefer to invest in specific traffic saturated junctions, without a long term strategy to change prevalent modal split or to create conditions which makes possible another kind of traffic. The main problem is that most of this infrastructure interventions take away pedestrians and cyclist, reinforcing the prevalent motorized trend.

While the “first wave” of TC dealt with keeping car use under control in residential areas, a “second wave” should focus more on the relations between environmental technology at local level and urban space. This relation is specially relevant in Latin America.

The megacities in Latin America are following an unsustainable path.

While our governments are starting huge projects to bring water from long distances we are not doing too much

to use better the water we use at home or to use it again in our gardens. Since this consumer pattern has been only possible when a fraction of the citizen enjoy it, is imperative to change it. Simply in this way, there will not be enough water for all.

The same with food supplies. Our growing cities are literally “eating” outskirts and countryside areas. Every new year the trucks are travelling more to bring the same food. Local production can be encouraged with a network of local shops, those which need better environments and whose main customers live around the corner.

So working on TC issues means in Latin America, more than recovering some functionality for a street network, it is also a great opportunity to help the process of incorporating new environmental technology at local levels and to develop stronger social networks in our towns and cities. This new environmental technology requires also good levels of coordination. It is well known that TC helps with a positive social environment for such initiatives, so it works as a ground base to reshape our cities, specially in Latin America, where we still need a critical mass of biker and friendlier streets for pedestrians.

In this context, is possible to think in this neighborhoods where the new designs make space for kitchen gardens, which are not only a hobby but also a necessary tool to help local economies to face growing demands for food with lesser financial resources. These designs are incompatible with higher traffic volumes.

Maybe we will need then a new name, because “traffic calming” will be not good enough. But before we have to get there. Then we could think about names.