

Traffic Calming and the Politics of Speed

John Dowlin
Bicycle Coalition Philadelphia, USA

For those of us who live in speed societies – most of us in Europe & North America where high speeds make transportation socially destructive – traffic calming is too important to be left to traffic engineers. The larger constituency for “calmando trafico” are the urbanists, new & old alike, who are at work on community greening projects, smoke-free environments, and innumerable campaigns to make our towns & cities more livable. At the heart of this larger constituency are the parents for whom all urban planning begins with kids. Make a street, a school, a city, or a nation child friendly and it will then, by extension, be friendly for all of us. With every endeavour, therefore, start with kids!

Conclusions in progress.

The following draft conclusions- points for debate – I intend to share with friends & colleagues at Velo Mondial, to be further developed with fresh European input.

“Velossance”

Facilitate a rediscovery and remarketing of auto(self)mobility to the extent that we redefine the bicycle as an autovehicle, a mature technology capable of mature speeds. “Any sufficiently advanced technology,” writes Arthur Clarke, “is indistinguishable from magic.” Bicycles are indeed magical, and perhaps should be redefined as aerovehicles. “The bicycle lifted the wheel onto the plane of aerodynamic balance, and not too indirectly created the aeroplane. It was no accident that the Wright brothers were bicycle mechanics, or that early aeroplanes seemed in some ways like bicycles.” (Marshall McLuhan, Wheel, Bicycle & Aeroplane)

Kids to the rescue!

Extend the U.S. (& European?) school zone speed limit(s) of 15mph to all residential streets if not city-wide, expanding the child zone to protect others. In the U.S., 15mph is the well established, undisputed speed limit for a school zone; shouldn't it also be for our neighbourhoods? Extending the school zone speed limit city-wide salutes the reach of American logic.

Political trade-offs

To introduce and politically protect city-wide “slow ways”, allow an increase of speeds on all depressed & elevated expressways, providing “designated bloodshed corridors” for those who insist on high, immature speeds. Technological maturity permits a variety of political choices and cultures.

Trans-Atlantic Campaign

While the metric system is not likely to be soon adopted in the U.S., Europe's “Tempo 30(k)” campaign for slower, safer speeds could be adopted as a global model, 18mph being the appropriate, mature speed for a small planet and potentially an effective guideline for the World Bank's transportation funding.

Mature Design/Registration

How is it possible to enforce mature speeds? If a community, city or region chose to act on its convictions, it might look more closely at the design of illegal speeds. Most cars are designed for speeds that outrageously exceed all legal speed limits. Should they be registered? Any state in the United States could calm/civilise its traffic simply by refusing to register any vehicle capable of a specific speed. Perhaps individual cities should adopt this initiative, taking charge of vehicular registration and thereby creating a market for slower, maturer city cars. “Smart” streets, neighbourhoods and cities deserve smarter vehicles...

Mature Capitalism

Facilitate a rediscovery of first principles and mature technology. While the allure of high, immature speeds deceives passengers into accepting promises made by an industry that produces capital intensive traffic, this same industry can be won over by a “butterfly technology” that liberates its consumers, restoring an autonomy previously enjoyed when passengers travelled under their own power. Like forthcoming plastic cars, this change is well underway. “We are not just a car company.” says Tomas Zauber of BMW North America. “We are a mobility company, Our customers like the idea of having a bike that they can fold down and fit into the trunk.”

Mobility vs. Access If stores, schools, recreational facilities, and places of employment were closer to home, i.e. accessible, who’d need so much mobility? Private motor vehicles create a need for more mobility, creating distances for all while shrinking them for only a few. “Most people believe the alternative to cars is better transit,” writes Alan Durning, “- in truth, it’s better neighbourhoods.”