

Cycling is changing the cities: a review of urban bicycle cultures

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The bicycle – the true Hoverboard of this century

In Robert Zemeckis' very successful movie trilogy 'Back to the Future', Marty McFly travels through time from the year 1985 to the, for him, far-away future of 2015. According to the screenwriter's vision, cars can fly and Marty uses the Hoverboard – a skateboard without wheels – for personal transportation. It's an astonishing moment in the movie when he jumps on the Hoverboard to escape from his enemy Biff.

In the present year 2012, not too removed from the vision of 2015, the Hoverboard and flying cars are far from being reality. There are in fact several kinds of new personal transportation, such as Segways or e-scooters, but none of them is truly successful or compatible with urban travelling.

However, since the 19th century one vehicle has constantly remained on the urban landscape and is more than ever reclaiming the streets: the bicycle. Once the main vehicle on European roads, the bicycle has transformed from an old-fashioned nerdy means of transport to a symbol of the urban future. Riding a bicycle is not only an alternative to a car; it has become a civil society movement within urban development, urban cultures and urban lifestyles.



Fig. 1: Marty McFly on the Hoverboard in Robert Zemeckis' 'Back to the Future Part II'¹

Cyclists are reclaiming the streets

As the car emerged at the beginning of the last century, the spatial allocation of streets and urban areas had to be renegotiated. City streets had to be redefined primarily as ways for motorised traffic. With these new regulations, pedestrian mobility and cycling traffic had to adapt to new cultural norms and restricted and pre-determined paths: *'The 1920s and 1930s were a period when urban space was socially reconstructed for automobility, and also a pivotal moment in the [...] gradual though comprehensive shift away from bicycles and mass*

¹ photo: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/technology/2012/02/mattel-reveals-back-to-the-future-hoverboards-for-sale/> 13 February 2012 (accessed 21 August 2012)

*transit [...]*². These cultural norms, oriented towards a city full of cars, endure to this day. Cars are still seen as the focal point of urban mobility implicating economic growth. As a consequence, public space is unevenly allocated between motorists, pedestrians and cyclists. For example, the Operngasse (a street close to Vienna's city centre) counts 5,000 cyclists a day. In the peak morning hour, 400 cyclists are squeezed into a 2-metre-wide cycle lane while 1,000 cars have 14 metres on five lanes including two parking lanes.³

It's hard to believe but despite these inequalities, bicycle traffic is constantly growing. While cycling has been and still is one of the most popular leisure activities, over the past 15 to 20 years bicycles have become increasingly popular as an everyday means of transport, acquiring growing attractiveness due to traffic congestions, health and environmental issues. Cyclists are reclaiming public space and, in this way, significantly changing urban images. Bicycle-friendly cities co-relate with the quality of urban life. The transport sector is one of the main contributors to climate change; therefore cycling is seen as one important answer to this problem. Municipal administrations have understood that managing road space is not just about the free flow of motorised vehicles. The quality of public space is becoming more and more important, and cities want to improve the environment and also feel responsible for public health. Nowadays strongly emerging cycling cultures all over Europe are thus reclaiming their space, and to negotiate this struggle, cities have to get fit for cycling. Significant examples of how this development changes urban (cycling) cultures can be seen in starter, climber and forerunner cycling cities, such as New York, London, Barcelona, Changwon, Copenhagen, Vienna or Paris. Vienna for example has doubled its share of trips by bicycle from 3% in 2005 to 6% in 2011⁴. A look at Vienna's streets shows clearly that a bicycle culture has evolved. There are more and more cyclists – men and women of any age – in everyday traffic. Paris, too, is well known for its change in mobility through installing the Vélib bicycle sharing system in 2007 with its continuing high demand.⁵ Even in New York cycling is booming – commuter cycling has increased by 26% between 2008 and 2009 and more than doubled since 2005.⁶ Not to mention cycling capitals like Amsterdam and Copenhagen – in Copenhagen, 35% of all commuting and educational trips are done by bicycle.

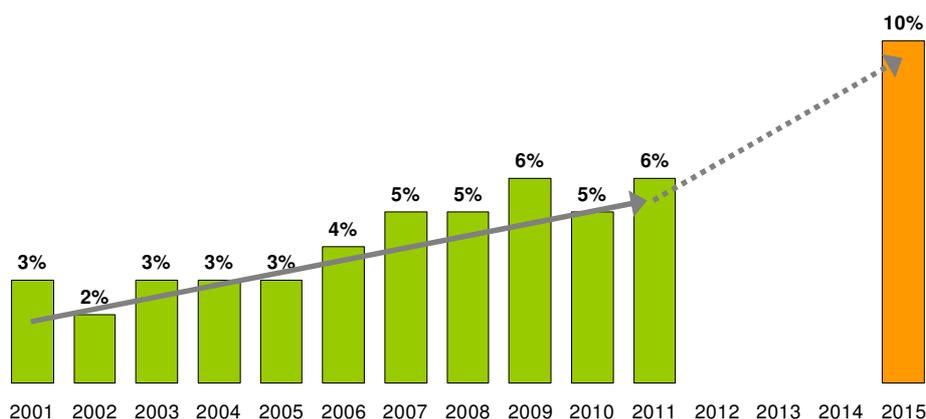


Fig. 2: Development of the share of cycling in Vienna's modal split

² Furness, Zack , 2010: One Less Car. Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility, Temple University Press Philadelphia, p 50.

³ Rosinak & Partner ZT GmbH: Traffic counts 2011 Operngasse/Margaretenstrasse (Vienna).

⁴ City of Vienna 2011: Development of the share of cycling in Vienna's modal split since 2001 until 2015

⁵ Vélib Paris <http://www.velib.paris.fr/> (accessed 10 August 2012)

⁶ City of New York, Department of Transportation: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/bicyclists/bikemain.shtml>

Municipal administrations of cycling cities are currently working on continuously upgrading the main cycle way networks and on developing strategies to get more people to use the bicycle. As a matter of fact, cycling cultures are emerging and spreading everywhere; a city nowadays should not miss this great window of opportunity to strengthen sustainable and smart transport.



Fig. 3: Cycling in Vienna, photos: www.velo-city.com and Michael Szeiler

Cycling cultures and countercultures

The emergence of the car society has been associated with economic development, luxury, freedom, a constant living standard and a prosperous future, which was assumed to lie in technology. The bicycle does not represent these constant attributes, as it is fully dependable on the physical input by its rider and the path he or she wants to go. Of course, a cyclist has to adapt to the cultural norms of the city and to traffic behaviour and rules. Nonetheless, the cyclist could easily break with these norms, ride on a field or suddenly jump off the bike and step inside the nearest coffee shop, without having to spend time searching and paying for a parking space. The bicycle is flexible, spontaneous, free, noiseless and, best of all, cheap. It does not cause economic dependency and makes the cyclist an independent user. The bicycle is a symbol of change, a statement. Thus the bicycle can be considered as a political and provocative choice of transportation: *'it encapsulates a set of complex questions about the role of technology in society, the importance of mobility in everyday life, and the broader struggles over how public spaces are used and disciplined, segmented and unified, celebrated and stolen.'*⁷ Originating in San Francisco in 1992, the Critical Mass movement – a bicycle ride on the last Friday of each month – reclaimed the streets by sending out the message 'We are not blocking the traffic, we are traffic!' Reactions to this ride included several arrests by the police, leading to court judgements. So historically, cycling also became a new political issue. If not before, at least since that moment cycling could be interpreted as a protest and political statement. Critical Masses are now happening on a regular basis in cities all over the world and gather thousands of cyclists.

⁷ Furness, Zack , 2010: One Less Car. Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility, p 10.



Fig. 4: Critical Mass in Budapest⁸ and Vienna⁹

In the media and political discourse, cyclists are very often perceived as a ‘counterculture’. This opinion has strongly developed since the evolvement of bicycle advocates in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the United States, also due to the oil crisis in the 1970s and as a forced incentive to rethink mobility. Bicycle activists are not just riding the bicycle, but intensively emphasise the subtext of bicycles in the city: *‘The bicycle is [...] a source of self-empowerment and pleasure, a pedagogical machine, a vehicle for community building, a symbol of resistance against the automobile and oil industries, and a tool for technological, spatial, and cultural critique’*¹⁰. From the creation of freaky bikes, bike kitchens and critical mass movements, cargo bikes, cycle chic¹¹ to messenger culture, the whole range of urban bike culture and bicycle enthusiasm is a part of urban development and neighbourhood activism. Hipsters, Mamils¹², alternative consumers, businesspeople riding in suits or casual riders are claiming their way through the cities on streets and bike paths. Their presence goes even beyond the active engagement of cycling advocacy: cycling is an essential part of their way of living or their everyday commute. For them, cycling is not necessarily a statement and, by that, they truly make cycling a political and societal issue. Even lifestyle magazines and dailies feature cycling as an interesting topic on their covers; many shop displays use bicycles as decoration elements. At a certain point, urban administrations and policies are getting connected to and interested in not only the bicycle as a means of transport but mainly in the people riding bikes and the different cycling cultures.

Since then, the bicycle’s struggles to reclaim the streets and the political arena are nourished by the fear that the bicycle as a political instrument might shatter the institutionalised dominance of car culture and thus provoke and symbolise change. Consequently, not only transportation planners, city advocates or editors of glossy magazines but also car lobbies and global investors are using the bicycle for their marketing strategies, probably in an attempt to demonstrate or green-wash their responsibility for our living environment. This evolution might be seen as a real admission of the fact that bicycles are making urban life more dynamic and enjoyable – not to mention sustainable.

⁸ Photo: <http://criticalmass.hu> (2012-08-10/10 August 2012)

⁹ Photo: <http://www.criticalmass.at> (2012-08-10/10 August 2012)

¹⁰ Furness, Zack , 2010: One Less Car. *Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility*, p 9.

¹¹ The term ‘cycle chic’ is nowadays associated with Mikael Colville-Andersen’s cycle chic blog picturing people in stylish everyday-clothes riding a bicycle. The cycle chic movement, starting in Copenhagen, has now spread to all over the world.

¹² Mamils = Middle-aged men in Lycra



Fig. 4: Chanel and Samsung using the bicycle for product placement (photos by Andrea Weninger)

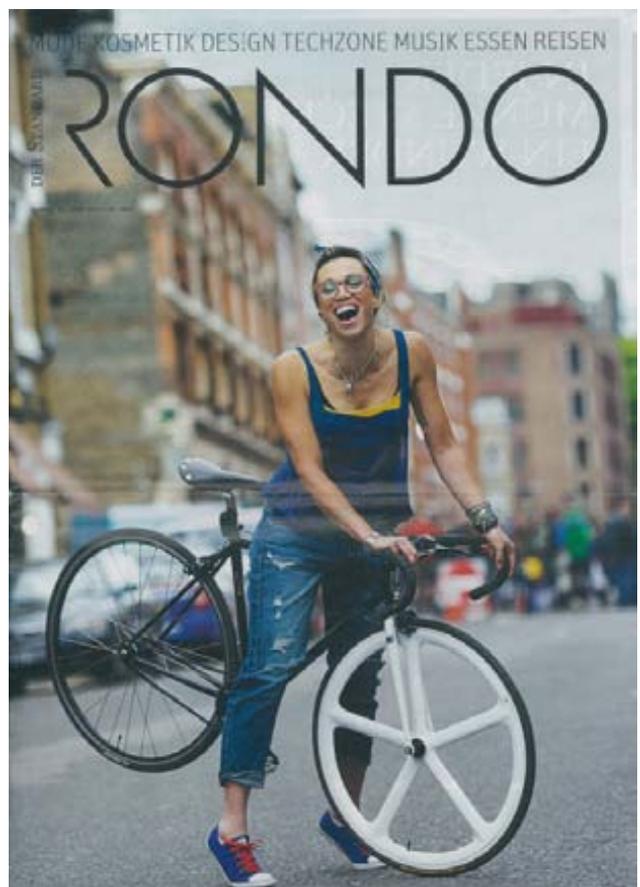


Fig. 5: Bicycle-related cover photos of the feminist magazine Anschläge and Rondo (supplement to Der Standard) in 2012

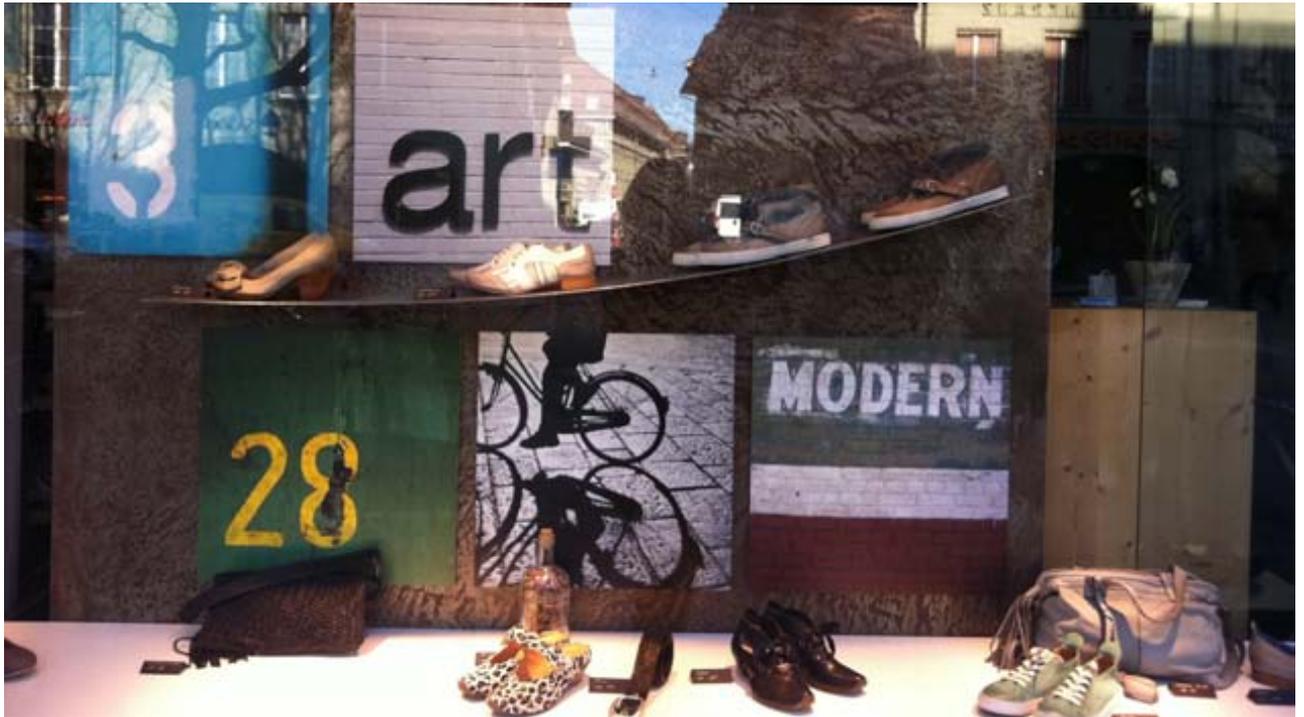


Fig. 6: Shoe shop display and optician using the bicycle as an advertising theme, photos by Andrea Weninger, Matthias Schmidt

Future mobility

The everyday commuter has to be initially encouraged to ride the bike – with or without being accompanied by a statement, because transport is essential for our everyday life. Transport planning has always concentrated on large-scale projects and investments. Assuming shrinking public investments in the future, the most effective types of infrastructure are those for sustainable transport, often small-scale and at low cost. Considering sustainability not as stagnation but as change, cycling can become one of the main topics for cities all over the world, since more than 50% of the world's population live in cities. Besides, over two thirds of the world's population live in countries, including all high-income and most middle-income countries, where overweight and obesity kill more people than underweight.¹³ The bicycle can

¹³ WHO World Health Organization (2012): Fact sheet obesity and overweight.

be part of a new urban development including a high-quality improvement of public life and public space. Emerging cycling cultures all over the world show us that the time has come. So what would be Marty McFly's means of transport in 'Back to the Future Part IV'? – Yes, the bicycle.

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