CYCLING INQUISITION

Learning from Bogotá: A conversation with Gil Peñalosa

By Klaus

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Gil Peñalosa and his bike in Toronto

Colombia has cycling exports beyond our impressive competitive cyclists. This post is about one such export: Gil Peñalosa, and the ideas he brought to fruition in his native Bogotá. Ideas that transformed the city, while making it a leader in cycling infrastructure, and changing the way that its citizens think about one another.

Today, Bogotá closes over 75 miles of roads every single Sunday (and holiday), allowing 1.3 million people to ride their bikes throughout the city. There are also 185 miles of fully sheltered bikeways throughout the Colombian capital. How did this come to happen in a city like Bogotá? Gil Peñalosa is—by and large—the reason why many of these changes took place. What's perhaps even more impressive is that this transformation occurred during one of the most tempestuous times in the city's history.

By the mid-1990s, Bogotá, Colombia was an incredibly difficult place to live in. As the city's

population grew closer to the ten million mark, and its endless neighborhoods continued to spread into the Andean peaks that surround it, the quality of life in the city dropped precipitously. Crime was rampant, as an overall sense of disdain grew within Bogotá's population.

But in a matter of years, the city changed dramatically. Bogotá lowered its crime rates significantly, delivered much-needed services to its poorest citizens, and improved congestion through an innovative mass-transit system. As this happened, Bogotá's citizens began to take pride in a city they previously loathed.

Today, Gil Peñalosa is the Executive Director of the Canadian non-profit organization 8-80 Cities. 8-80 Cities seeks to create vibrant and healthy communities by focusing on the needs of cyclists and pedestrians through the design of public spaces. In that role, Peñaloza has helped numerous cities around the world learn some very valuable lessons from a seemingly unlikely place: Bogotá, Colombia.

[This interview is available in the current print issue of the magazine Bicycle Times]

Ciclovia on *Carrera Septima*, one of the main North/South corridors in the city. This picture was taken as the Ciclovia was coming to an end, and the number of people began to dwindle.

Growing up in Bogotá during the 1980s, the city was a disorganized and often frightening place. Do you see the city's willingness to accept the bike as a viable method of transportation—and in doing so respecting cyclists—as proof that there's been a fundamental change in how the city operates, and how its citizens think about one another?

I do, without a doubt. I say that because the bicycle is a very egalitarian tool. Yes, one bike can cost fifty dollars while another can cost five thousand. But when you are riding through the city, and people are going places, that doesn't really matter. Riding a bike becomes a common ground, and the person is very visible. The bike can become secondary. You engage with people face to face, you see their eyes, and the interaction becomes very real and very human. Things happen at a human scale.

Cars, on the other hand, are differentiators. They are large, and are not merely used as transportation. If people used cars to get from A to B, and had no other reason for owning one, they would all own Honda Civics. But that's not the case. Cars are status symbols, and they are used to differentiate the owners from one another. By and large, that’s just not the case with a bike.

Another powerful aspect of riding a bike is that public spaces are safer the more they are used. Bikes play a big role in this, but cars don't. This is certainly true for roads where bikes are ridden because they instantly become safer as more and more people use them. Parks become safer if people ride their bikes and walk in them, but not if cars go by them at forty miles an hour. Cars are unable to have that kind of positive effect on their environment because they remove humanity from the equation. Bikes put it back in.

Would you say that applies to Bogotá? That more bike use, and thus more people at a human scale and at a smaller pace, have made the city safer and thus better for its citizens?

I would. Absolutely. It’s far from ideal, but more people walking and cycling and using public spaces have improved safety and quality of life.

Like many Bogotanos, I learned how to ride a bike in the ciclovia.

How did you first become aware of the value of the bicycle, not only as an ideal method of transportation, but also as one that could have a valuable democratizing effect upon cities?

This is something I always thought about, because I've always seen bikes as part of a bigger suite of solutions, which includes the needs of pedestrians, as well as city parks and gathering places. As such, today I am clear about the fact that bikes are not the end, but rather a medium. Bikes are not the end result of any of these initiatives, but they are a way of making cities more equitable and livable. There's some general confusion about bike initiatives, because people see them merely as transportation, something to take people from point A to point B. A goal is to make cities more human, and more equitable and the use of bicycles play a role in the process.

Large cities in wealthy, industrialized nations have had great difficulties in implementing initiatives that Bogotá has not only put in place, but also invented. Things like the Ciclovia, sheltered bikeways, and a car-free day are all impressive undertakings for any city, particularly one in a place that many see as undeveloped and potentially dangerous like Colombia. How did Bogotá come to be a leader in these initiatives?

My sentimental side would like to believe that things—changes that are worthwhile—must grow from the bottom up. But the reality is that cities are often transformed by leaders who are able to change things from the top down, simply because that's where the power lies. That's been the case in New York City, where they have a great commissioner who is willing to lead these changes.

"All this (Bogotá's) pedestrian infrastructure shows respect for human dignity. We're telling people, 'You are important'" Enrique Peñalosa

Within the context of a city like Bogotá, that mentality certainly makes sense. It takes a great deal of vision, and the power to implement it, when you're talking about launching something like a car-free day.

It does. When my brother Enrique Peñalosa [Mayor of Bogotá, 1998-2001] first introduced the idea of having a car-free day, no one was talking about the topic of cars, or alternatives in transportation. He introduced that theme by talking about having a car-free day. It got people talking about the problems that the city was facing.

Similarly, when I worked with Antanas Mockus [Mayor, 1995-1997] , the topic of the ciclovia was not discussed. We had about ten kilometers, and only a few thousand people using the ciclovia. I have to admit that I became obsessed with the subject, and within two years I had over a 62 miles (121 kilometers) of ciclovia in the city. We went from having a few thousand users, to having over a million users every Sunday, and every holiday. We built an infrastructure, and a reproducible model that can be used all over the world.

So this idea of a ciclovia, of letting people use the street for fun and fitness, became something that cities all over the world took up, and it all came out of Bogotá. But it wasn't anything that the city was talking about; it was introduced into the discourse.

"We cannot continue to deceive ourselves thinking that to paint a little line on a road is a bike way. A bicycle way that is not safe for an 8-year old is not a bicycle way" Enrique Peñalosa

Part of the changes that you put into place was that the ciclovia finally arrived to poor

neighborhoods in Bogotá, which had never been the case before.

Right. We not only grew the system of the ciclovia, but we did so in a way that would integrate the city in a system. That's what the ciclovia does; it integrates and unites the city and its citizens. It takes you to vastly different neighborhoods; it brings the young and the old, the poor and the rich together. They all get together to do the same thing at the same time. This is no small feat, when you consider how often we engage and spend time with those who are unlike us. In Bogotá, you will find the wealthiest owners and presidents of the most prestigious companies with their families, running into their workers who make minimum wage, who will also be with their families at the ciclovia.

In Bogotá, the gap between these people is great, but that's the case in other cities as well. But through the ciclovia, they are in the same place, doing the same thing. These are people who don't live in the same neighborhoods, their kids don't attend the same schools, they don't shop in the same stores, and they don't eat in the same restaurants. But they are in the ciclovia together. One can have an imported bike that is three thousand dollars, while the other has one that is thirty dollars…so be it. They are both having the same fun with their family, and they stop and chat. It's a rare activity that can allow this integration to happen. The ciclovia becomes an exercise in social integration; it is much more than cycling, walking and skating.

Map of sheltered bikeway system in Bogota. Note connectivity between routes.

When you talk about the social value of the ciclovia, I can't help but think about the bike trails that are common in North American cities. These are often in suburban neighborhoods. They go from nowhere to nowhere, and are not inclusive in any way, nor do they serve the purpose of potentially getting their users to any place in particular. Similarly, many cities seem selective about which neighborhoods get to have bike lanes or sheltered bike routes. The needs of poor, and often minority populations, are very seldom taken into account.

This is certainly a problem. You'll often find that the best places for recreation and the amenities

that allow for best transportation are in the wealthiest neighborhoods, but not in the places where they are most needed, that usually means poorer neighborhoods. People start to make excuses, and I've encountered this. They may not want a route, for example, to be connected to an area because it's poor, or because it's a primarily black neighborhood. The reality is that these bike routes, parks and things like the ciclovia should connect people, but also connect places that people want and need to go to.

So as much as I like small neighborhood parks, they are usually limited to people in that immediate area. But if you have a long bike path, it can start to cut through numerous neighborhoods, and all kinds of city areas. It can also get you to a destination. This is a big part of making something like this useful, but also of helping bring people together. Connecting people and places.

In Bogotá, the poorest neighborhoods are serviced by the bike routes that were put into place during your time working there. This is hugely important, since people in poor neighborhoods need bikes not only as a form of entertainment and fitness, but also as a way of getting around, while wealthier populations may have more options. Was this taken into consideration when planning out these routes?

Certainly, but this is something that could be said of all cities in all countries. Similarly, keep in mind that it costs thousands of dollars to maintain a car, and it only costs more the longer you own a car. There's people in wealthy nations who barely have enough to feed a whole family, not enough to take a small vacation, but they have one or more cars. They end up working just to pay for their car. So these concerns are universal.

"A bikeway is a symbol that shows that a citizen on a $30 bicycle is equally important as a citizen on a $30,000 car." Enrique Peñaloza

Sadly, many cities seem to be wasting time and effort into putting a single bike lane here, one there, and they seem to just go where there was room for it, rather than where they were needed.

Right, and that's because people talk about a bike lane, or a bikeway. No. They should speak about a network, a system of bikeways and bike lanes. Plural. You can't have a bike lane that goes from nowhere to nowhere. It won't be used. Imagine if the mayor of a city put up one goal post and one end zone, and then complained that it wasn't being used by the football team. Two years later, they could put in the first few yards, and then some more yards. Of course it won't work, and it won't get used, it's not complete or usable for the activity. So cities will put in two bike lanes, which are one mile each. Then they'll stop putting more in, because they'll simply say that they don't have a "bike culture", and that no one is using them. Well, you didn't build a system that people could use, of course it wasn't used. Connectivity is critical in order to have positive results.

In Bogotá, we created a network of bike routes. We were a city that lacked the "bike culture" that many talk about. But when we built a network that people could use, that connected them to the places they had to go to, we went from having 28,000 people using a bike as a way of getting around, to over 350,000. So today, for every four cars in Bogota, we have one riding a bike. That becomes a substantial and important part of the population that has to be accounted for, and cared for. This has happened in other cities as well. In Seville, Spain, four years ago almost no one used a bike as their method of transportation. It was .2%. They built 100 miles of bikeways, separate from car traffic and separate from pedestrians in three years. As a result, they now have 6.6% of the people using bikes. Now they want to get to 15% by 2015. And a big part of this is connected points where people originate from, to places they are going to. It's that simple.

Additionally, it's worth mentioning that in many North American cities, the things that are passing as bike lanes are nothing more than a white stripe of paint on the road. That's vastly different from the fully sheltered bikeways that are the norm in Bogotá. Do you think that bike lanes as they are implemented in the United States are of some value as a

first step, or should they be rejected in hopes that we'll get proper solutions from the start?

You have to get the real solution, and not settle for paint on the road. The reality is that if you paint a line on the road, you'll only get a few more people using that route. So again, you'll fall into the same problem that I mentioned before. Few people will use it, and the city will say that they don't have a “bike culture”, that no one is using it, so they won't invest in more bike lanes.

I saw this exact thing happen in Orlando, Florida. They put in a bike lane, which was nothing more than paint on the road, along a six-lane road. The cars there were going 45 to 50 miles an hour. Those who fought to have that line of paint put in told the city that the number of users would go from 100 to 1,000. The reality is that it went up to only 150, and the politicians said, "It didn't work." But of course it didn't! All that was separating people on their bikes from cars going 50 miles per hour was a line on the ground. So better solutions are needed. And in residential neighborhoods, we need to lower the speed limits. All streets in neighborhoods should have a maximum speed of 20 mph; 20 is plenty. This allows people to safely exit their cars when they park, people can cross the street with their babies and their dogs. But in larger routes, we need bike lanes that have a physical border separating cyclists from traffic and from pedestrians. These three modes of transportation differ in speed, and can't be expected to work seamlessly together in the exact same environment. The idea of a bike lane that is nothing more than white paint on the road is disrespect to cyclists and to all citizens.

Then I must ask you, what is your opinion regarding the lack of sidewalks in so many American neighborhoods. Is this not a statement that the city is making about the value of certain citizens who can't afford a car, those who take public transportation, or maybe even the elderly who can no longer drive?

Absolutely. In the last ten years, 47,700 pedestrians have been killed in the United States by cars and 679,000 pedestrians have been injured. These are numbers from the Department of Transportation. So one has to ask, how is it possible that neighborhoods are still being planned out without sidewalks?

So the message—in a negative sense—to those who walk is clear.

It is. And at the same time, the United States has an obesity problem that is costing taxpayers billions and billions, along with environmental issues that are now becoming more known. But all this aside, how can cities not care for their citizens, and allow pedestrians to be killed and injured?

Keeping in mind that change often comes from the top down, what can we as citizens do in order to bring solutions to those obstacles to the forefront?

The biggest obstacle is a political matter. It's not a financial problem. It's also not a technical problem. The budgets that cities have for roadways, and to make things better for cars are huge. It takes very little money to improve things for cyclists. If a city doesn't know how to build appropriate bikeways, it's very simple and easy to find someone who does. So as a citizen, you have to speak about this subject if no one in your city has put this topic on the table. You have to write newspapers, you have to start blogs, you have to call in to radio stations, and you have to go to public meetings.

Politicians are sometimes afraid to lead, but if they see that the public wants and needs something, they'll listen. Similarly, these things have now been tried out in numerous cities of all sizes around the world. So politicians can be shown that these initiatives work, and that will help ease their fear about change.

But really, at the end of the day, citizens have to become involved. They have to understand that a spaceship from Mars won't magically land in their city, and build this infrastructure overnight. It just won’t happen. ▮

http://www.cyclinginquisition.com/2012/05/learning-from-bogota-conversation-with.html