

Bikeways for Australian Cities

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Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Jun., 1974), pp. 69-74

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20634630>

Accessed: 16/02/2014 20:42

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## BIKEWAYS FOR AUSTRALIAN CITIES

David F. Smith\*

A writer remarked in the *Melbourne Age*<sup>1</sup> recently “The wheel is turning . . . Bikes are back”.

But are they? What do we mean by back. How will they be used? Will they just be a trendy thing for the environmentalist who wants to shine up his image on week-ends, while he tarnishes it with petrol fumes and profligate energy use during the week? Or will it really be like it used to be?

Those who are old enough—forty, probably forty-five plus—might well describe to our next generation the way it was in the 30s and 40s. Almost all owned bikes—city and country. For many there was little option for certain journeys. Whole families rode together, with infants on carrier chairs. Children rode five or six miles to country school, men rode even more miles to work and women shopped with baskets on the front. Hills were an advantage down, a disadvantage up but no-one ever argued “Bikes are only for flat places like Amsterdam”, or “Melbourne is too hilly for bikes”. A few bikes had gears but most people walked them up steep hills.

Weather was rarely a deterrent, either. Waterproof gear was general, even before plastic and lightweight nylon. One favourite was the cape with thumb loops reaching over the handlebars, another the ex-army ground-sheet.

The roads were not considered unduly dangerous, though cyclists were always part of the road toll, both through running off the road *and* being hit by cars. One rode down King William Street or St Kilda Road or Parramatta Road, occasionally skidding on tram tracks or feeling threatened by a motorist. But the numbers of bikes were such that motorists were used to keeping a look out for cyclists. Imagine pulling up at the Rundle Street lights, half a dozen bikes across the front, a few cars behind! Then there were those great roads, such as Port Road and Anzac Highway in Adelaide, and Royal Parade and Dynon Road in Melbourne, which actually had special bike paths. (The Dynon Road one is still largely intact.)

Bikes were not banned by edict or the cyclists all run over by motorists—they just faded away. Though no definitive work has been written on this aspect of the history of transportation, it is generally assumed that two

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<sup>1</sup> John Larkin “Bicycle wheel is turning full circle”, *The Age*, 9th October, 1973.

“The Australian Quarterly”, Volume 46, No. 2, June, 1974, pp. 69-74.

forces were at work: a physical one—cars were cheap and plentiful, and a social one—cycling was unacceptable at lower and lower socio-economic levels. Directors, executives, foremen then finally men at the bench gave up cycling. Vice-Chancellors, deans, professors, lecturers then finally even students felt a loss of dignity if only supported by two wheels. Cycling faded away and almost disappeared without trace. Paths were dug up, sheds torn down, racks removed, the car reigned supreme. Here and there relics remained: signs like the one over a door of the old city baths in Batman Avenue, Melbourne, reading “Bicycles”: some old men and little old ladies, a few peculiar younger people and those school children not provided with free government buses or not able to persuade their parents to drive them to school, are still bike riders.

#### **A Deliberate Choice?**

If bikes are to be used, will it be a full circle turn—back to the old set-up, bikes all over the roads? Or will it be a deliberately set up system, a deliberate choice stemming from real concern for the environment and people?

The deliberate choice of bikes has a number of supports: the fuel and energy crisis, space and time considerations and health aspects. Thus, for some, use of a bike will be the mark of a true conservationist, for others it will be a utilitarian way of keeping up to a busy schedule and some will simply aim to keep fit.

#### **The Fuel and Energy Crisis**

Until the fuel crisis culminates in rationing or very high prices for motor spirit it is unlikely to have any great effect on cycling. However, as idealism spreads, and/or individuals show a real attempt to set an example in their consumption of resources, the “dignity” gained from this will be psychologically important: Wilson<sup>2</sup> has produced a most interesting study of bicycle technology, underlining their extreme comparative efficiency in energy terms.

#### **Space and Time**

Though the resistance to motorisation has been largely based on its pollution (hence the “solution” of an electric car) space considerations are being stressed more and more—motorways cover huge areas of land and parking, either at home, at work, at the pub or railway station makes monstrous demands. It is no joke to drive to the station and park 400 yards away or to buy high priced land for an institution only to see it gobbled up by parking lots.

By comparison, bikes use minute spaces. One *can* ride to the train, parking virtually on the platform, so that for those living up to a mile from the station the bike may be quicker. For movement on a campus, or campus-like factory, where the person may make several moves during the day, a car becomes hopeless and a bike ideal.

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2 S. S. Wilson, “Bicycle Technology”, “Scientific American”, March, 1973.

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Where considerable costs are involved in providing parking for employees or students, encouragement of bike riding would be worthwhile—such incentives as covered sheds, bike parks close in, internal paths, etc. It would be interesting to study a typical suburban railway station/shopping complex. Railways use land and spend money on car parks. Councils use vast areas, losing rates. Shopkeepers lose customers when there is nowhere to park because the commuters use all the spaces. And rate-payers pay more because councils have less rateable land and spend money on sealing parking lots. It is likely that providing bikeways and bike parks at railway stations could be very good economics for suburban councils.

Similar space/cost studies of new universities such as Monash could be revealing, too. Excellent central bike parking and bikeways might be good business if it saved 1,000 car spaces and the attendant roads. This paving would make a lot of 5 feet bikeway!

As congestion has slowed down motor traffic, time studies have shown that bicycles are the fastest means of transport from some middle suburbs of Melbourne, such as Caulfield.<sup>3</sup>

As part of the move to bikes, space and time studies must be made. Bikeways may *save* money, not cost money.

### **Health and Recreation**

There is no doubt that cycling is a healthy activity and on these grounds many should use bikes instead of cars, weaving their exercise into their normal routine instead of desperately trying to find time for jogging or squash.

Recreation implies deliberately going for a ride, rather than the riding being incidental. Recreational riding involves different destinations, or no destination at all, and is ideally through areas of interest or beauty. The waterways of a city like Melbourne might well provide wonderful recreational riding.

### **Obligate Riders?**

The one group that have always used bikes to a greater or lesser degree are the school children. In cities this had declined, some would say from the increasing laziness of children but others stress the indulgence and/or anxiety of parents for children's safety. The second car is justified for shopping *and* taking the children to school as witness the traffic chaos around many schools at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

As cycling has become unsafe and unacceptable we have deprived children of their independence and taken some of the fun out of life. Some brave or foolish ones still ride: some have died. This group *needs* bikeways, it cannot really do without them. Children cannot drive cars and do not pay rates or taxes, but they have a right to life and freedom.

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<sup>3</sup> "Royalauto", R.A.C.V., Victoria, July, 1973.

### **The Need for Bikeways**

The wheel will not turn full circle. Traffic is too complicated and dangerous to return to the old mixture of cars and bikes. And bikes will be used in different ways e.g. to reach railway and bus stations, with the main journey by train or bus rather than riding all the way.

Bikes will only really come into wide use if bikeways are provided, if planners and engineers get down to the business of setting up a system. Traffic counts and feasibility studies will not help: cyclists will follow the provision of a system, not precede it, as does the motor car. Bikeways must be provided almost in faith and some errors are bound to be made. It may be possible to predict usage in some cases near schools and colleges, but where the "dignity" factor must be worn down as for railway stations in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, who knows?

### **Land Resources**

Most cities have considerable amounts of corridor land that could be used for bikeways. In Melbourne, except very close to the centre, the railways retain their original land still fenced with a decrepit five-rail wire fence presumably to keep out stray cows. The land between the tracks and the fence is often an elongated rubbish heap, a wilderness broken by a ploughed fire-break. A five-foot wide bikeway would double as a fire-break and save the plough costs. With a chain mesh fence near the tracks, some levelling and planting of native trees and shrubs (treatment rather like that given to motorways) railway verges could become a very pleasant place to ride—and train passengers might welcome the improvement in aspect, too. A simple sign "Walk" or "Ride" could overcome the problem of railway stations.

Power line easements, gas and water easements and creek banks are ideal. Aerial photographs of most suburbs reveal very great possibilities.

If any new motorways are built they should include a fenced lane for bikes. In some non residential areas one side could be a footpath, the other a bikeway. In other cases streets could become "one-way" with a double line protecting half of the road for cycle lanes.

The basic aim of the system should be to service educational institutions, recreation areas (especially swimming pools) and railway stations, with links to recreational trails.

Some mapping of routes in the Melbourne metropolitan area has been done, aiming to serve both longer distance recreational needs, and short distance commuters to school or railway station. One major trail could easily cross Melbourne from south east to north west. It would follow the railway line from Glen Waverley to Burnley, the Yarra River upstream to Merri Creek, then along Merri Creek to the northern suburbs and open country. It crosses a number of power line easements and railway lines which could provide cross links.

On a more local basis the Melbourne suburban city of Waverley has been looked at in detail. A network could easily be established based on

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four east west corridors: the railway line (part of the major trail above), a power-line easement, a freeway reservation and a creek—and three north south corridors: Dandenong Creek, a freeway reservation (Route 7) and a gas pipe line easement. This grid would directly serve no less than 6 secondary schools and the main swimming complex, and run within a few hundred yards of a Teachers' College and a University.

Because bikes are relatively light "vehicles" the track could vary according to soil type, terrain and traffic, from formed earth to cement stabilised earth, to cinders, to gravel, to tarred gravel. The last would be the most expensive, at about ten thousand dollars a mile, the first very cheap indeed.

### **Implementation**

The task of the actual creation of a bikeways system faces enormous—daunting—difficulties. These are both financial, organisational and engineering.

### **Financial Problems**

Though there are some cases (as suggested above) where it may pay to provide bikeracks, bikeways and even bikes, the necessary studies have not been carried out and may not be. The agencies concerned—especially councils—have no real incentive to sponsor them and transport economists usually tackle simpler problems with much more straight forward cost/benefit values.

Secondly there are no taxes or registration fees on bikes (fortunately!) and no specific funds like petrol tax. Society as a whole, or whole units of it such as suburban council areas, will have to pay. And those who pay most—the motorised adults—will benefit least, while those who benefit most—the children—will pay least.

### **Engineering Obstacles**

Though the engineering obstacles will, in fact, be minor compared with those overcome in road making to people not committed to providing bikeways, they will appear as major. Many will arise from discontinuities in the land corridors—railway stations, level crossings and rail bridges; marshes, road bridges, culverts, and freeway exits; and interruptions to the line of gas and water easements. But the planners must recognize that cyclists will at first be pleased to have an imperfect path, as long as it is a safe one, away from the traffic, or at least separated from it. Cyclists, like motorists, must be treated as responsible people before they will become so and a bikeway code developed. For instance, as suggested above, the sign "Walk" must become important in passing through railway stations, or along sections of shared footpath. Swing gates and apertures can also be used. As usage increases bikeways could be upgraded, with lightweight bridges slung alongside railway or road bridges.

Planning may well be done by community groups. In a seminar on the recreational use of the Westernport region, Victoria, it was suggested that students from the local (Frankston) Teachers College might do this work.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> David F. Smith "Hiking, Biking and Surviving", Proceedings of Westernport Regional Planning Authority Seminar on Recreation, Mornington, 24th March, 1973.

Since that time as an exercise with the Lecturer in Recreation, students of the Monash Teachers College have planned a recreational bikeway along 8 miles of creek bank in their area. As the College is actually in the city of Waverley, I have suggested that they should plan a system for the whole city in detail. This is both attractive as an example of student involvement in the community and also provides an interesting interdisciplinary study—account must be taken of demographic data and age cohorts, local community facilities such as schools, pools and scout halls; social attitudes and likelihood of change; traffic patterns, topography and soil type, winter/summer variations and scenic attractiveness.

#### **Organisational and Administrative Problems**

The notion of single purpose use of land is deeply embedded in Australian society. Thus railway land is not often utilised for other activities, power line easements grow blackberries and other weeds and other reservations remain a wilderness. "Keep out" signs are partly effective—but children sometimes claim their own. To push for, plan, and construct a system of bikeways will usually involve relating to a number of agencies with varying willingness to help. The task is a daunting one. Only city councils, already relating to most of these agencies can really do the job but they are already gaining new functions faster than finance and have little incentive to become involved. To complicate further, these corridors are often the actual boundaries between councils, hence their 'no man's land' appearance.

#### **Necessary Moves**

Though the implementation of these schemes must depend more on faith than on feasibility studies, some studies should be initiated to study the place of bikes and bikeways in transportation and recreation, as well as the planning work as suggested for Monash Teachers College. Institutions such as Universities might well look at the economics of car parking as against bike racks and bikeways. Railways and councils might look at this, too.

But the focus must be on the children of the community and their freedom, mobility and safety. Only a selfish society can go on building motorways and deny its children these bikeways.