

Velo-City Vancouver, BC June 26-30 2012

Notes from Eli Goldberg 6/30/12

I'm on the train back from a week at the Velo-City conference in Vancouver, on creating cities where everyone can bike.

The conference was nothing short of overwhelming, with about 12-14 hr/day of programming, and many time slots having 3-5 different sessions running concurrently. I'm sure Robin and Merlin (who also attended) have different perspectives on the event, since we all attended different programming.

Although there was so much that was provocative at the conference, here's what comes to mind the most strongly. I'm hoping Robin & Merlin can correct me if anything here clashes with their recollections.

Sorry if this is stream-of-consciousness --- I'm just typing what's in my head and going to sleep!

*** Our presentation was very well received**

Although only about 40-50 people attended, the nature of the conference meant that the attendees were typically folks who were highly influential in their community. e.g. we got great feedback from Leah Shahum who runs the 12,000 member San Francisco Bike Coalition, the bike managers for Sydney Australia, and Winnipeg Canada, and countless other folks who didn't follow up with us directly. The SFBC also blogged about our presentation on their website.

The message of advocating for bicycling by authentically helping communities advocate together for livable streets (with bicycling as one component, but not our end goal) resonated strongly with communities struggling to get traction on what is ultimately a minority issue.

Also, in the closing ceremony, I want to call out that Nancy Olewiler (who chairs TransLink) listed off a small number of cities whose stories inspired people during the weekend -- Seattle was on her list!

*** 8-80/AAA (All-Ages & Abilities) is the new normal ---- no one wants to be the city that keeps plowing taxpayer money into Windows 3.1 when everyone else is buying iPhones.**

It really blew me away the extent to which 8-80/separated/AAA is the new normal. The approach that has characterized Seattle's past development (sharrows on high-speed roads & narrow bike lanes in door zones) was not discussed at all, other than in passing or critically as a futureless relic of prior thinking.

I can't count the number of presentations that included Roger Geller's segmentation model (or some variant thereof) and focused on meeting the needs of the 40%. On the rare times North American city bike managers described building a non-separated arterial facility, they included a caveat for why they were still building a non-separated facility (e.g. "our plan needs to be updated" or "we generally don't believe in building further non-separated facilities, but it made sense on this one street".)

My take from the presentations was that buffered bike lanes are the new baseline of what is acceptable in a progressive city, and where a separated facility isn't possible. e.g. when Vancouver city staffers described their downtown arterial bike lanes on streets like Burrard, it seemed very clear that the speakers considered this category of infrastructure obsolete and inappropriate for future investment. Specifically, the Burrard arterial bike lane was described as something appropriate for "10 years ago" and "We won't do this again. It's not all ages and abilities". It felt to me that Vancouver is shifting towards a relatively small set of new but high-quality infrastructure in the next few years.

Gil Peñalosa had a great narrative on how he sees the approach of settling for infrastructure that doesn't serve everyone backfiring on bike advocates -- very applicable to Seattle and I'd love to share the full video:

"[You] have got to have a network of protected bikeways. Please, do not settle for painting lines on the pavement... They say 'Gil, you don't know where we're coming from, we are so far behind that this is such a major step'. With all due respect, this is a step backwards. [...]"

Because when [very few people use them], or you get 50 cyclists a day, then the car owners are going to say 'we're being squished and nobody is using those bike lanes, so let's get rid of them.' And then it will be almost impossible to put it afterwards.

The most difficult thing to do politically is to get the space. Once you get city council to approve, make it work. And the painted line is not enough. It's not enough in Vancouver, it's not enough anywhere in the world. It DOES NOT WORK."

From hearing this same message again and again from bike planners from Australia, Canada, North America, and all over Europe - I have a lot more of a sense of confidence that we are correct in urging Seattle to focus (and as exclusively as possible) on facilities that are open to everyone. A focus on building facilities for everyone is not a cutting-edge or even innovative idea - it's nothing more than just catching up with what our peer cities are already doing worldwide.

*** Gil Peñalosa's keynote**

Gil Peñalosa's keynote was easily the most inspiring thing I've ever heard about bicycling in my life. I won't even try to summarize it -- but will see if there's any way to get a video, or just find a good YouTube equivalent from a prior speaking engagement. This is seriously something that our city leaders need to see.

We should also probably be following his 8-80 Cities project <<http://www.8-80cities.org/>> - at the end of the day, I think what many Greenways advocates are looking for is to make Seattle into a true 8-80 city, with Greenways as the starting point.

*** We should be working more with the Vancouver advocates and city staff**

We learn so much from Portland, but we should also be networking with and learning from Vancouver. In many ways, they're 3-5 years ahead of us - and we can learn a lot from them. For example, they just completed their first high-quality separated bike facilities downtown - something Seattle wants to do - and learned the hard way how to reach out to the business community (by not doing it adequately and having to clean up the mess afterwards.)

Prior missteps (specifically getting a separated bike facility on Burrard without adequate mechanisms to prevent congestion, and which led to massive traffic jams in the first few days) have pushed back pieces of their network by 15 years. (the memory of the prior failure was so deep that there were 3 traffic helicopters covering the second attempt of the Burrard Bridge bike lane project.) If you do a high-profile separated project that backfires, you take it off the table of reconsideration for several political generations.

They also have extensive experience with their version of Greenways ("local street bikeways"), and have had to grow from some of the same learning experiences as SDOT. As one of their engineers noted, there's a lot more to a successful offstreet bikeway than flipped stop-signs (or traffic circles), sharrow markers, and new signage. It really does take on-street changes to make the street into a true 30 kph zone that's welcoming to cyclists: these are the most contentious and uncomfortable changes, but they're the ones that make the difference between a true 8-80 street, versus just going through the motions and cutting a ribbon.

I'm thinking of trying to organize an informal networking trip in September - or next summer - to meet with the advocates I met from HUB and the city staff members (who seemed to be thinking along many of the same lines we are: public health, age/gender inclusivity, etc, and have lots of experience there that we don't).

*** Language: All Ages & Abilities (not low-stress) and mode-neutrality are becoming dominant language**

I rarely (never?) heard "low-stress" to describe a bikeway during the conference. The predominant phrase was AAA (All Ages & Abilities), which instead describes the desired human outcome.

Related to that is getting away from the idea of talking about people who ride should as a separate population. The amazing Leah Shahum - who led San Francisco's bicycle coalition through an order of magnitude of membership increases, and a new focus on inclusive community cycling - said (with a bit of paraphrasing):

"I'm not a 'bicyclist'. [At SFBC], we avoid using this word as much as possible. I'm a person who rides a bike. I eat yogurt, but that doesn't make me a 'yogurt-eater'. I wear shoes - but I'm not a 'shoe-wearer'... I don't use the images we use from 10 years ago. It's not what decision-makers respond to."

They also have accumulated a lot of experience of how to tell the story of the value of investing in AAA infrastructure to a vehicular cycling audience (a large portion of their membership).

* **TONS of data and ammo that can help us**

I used to think that between Bob, Dylan and the rest of us that we knew pretty much all the stats and data available to make our case. Wow, was I wrong!

A few starting points:

- International Transport Forum is working on a 'safe systems' approach to cycling. Paper is coming out in September, but their preliminary findings are at: <http://www.internationaltransportforum.org/Pub/pdf/12Cycle-Safety.pdf>

- Jennifer Dill at PSU just finished an incredible paper in which she validated Roger Geller's model (distribution of each cyclist type), and then put together a picture of the the facility types that each member of Geller's segmentation model were comfortable with, as well as data on their values, age, gender, childhood bicycling experience, etc [~19 minutes per participant]. (BTW, childhood experience riding a bike significantly correlated with adult cycling comfort.)

I *believe* she said that the Bike Boulevard/Greenway was the facility that 'interested but concerned' were most comfortable with, but it was a sidenote. We need to get this research, especially with the BMP planning going on. Would have to have a 'reading group' to discuss this one - it was just brimming with relevant insight.

- Translink's regional cycling strategy - "Cycling for Everyone": http://www.translink.ca/~media/documents/cycling/regional_cycling_strategy/cycling%20for%20everyone.ashx

Marisa Espinosa from Translink had an incredible set of stats in her presentation, but I'm not seeing them all in the above paper. Start with pages 20-21 on market research by segment (again using Geller's model) on barriers to cycling. As we work towards Greenways that are not just bike facilities but beautiful public spaces, note that the aesthetic appeal of a route was the #2 positive factor that they identified in picking a route.

I should reach out to her to request the preso (she literally had a line of people queued up after the panel ended.)

* **Gender equity is a repeated metric/stat**

Lots of cities are tracking and citing improvements to gender equity as a measure of a type's facility success, including Vancouver on their separated lanes and local street bikeways. Seattle really should be tracking this too. ;-)

BTW, Vancouver's greenways had by far the most equitable gender split: 32% on separated bike

facilities downtown, versus 40% on the neighborhood bikeways.

*** We are not behind Europe - we're just behind a handful of European countries**

Most European cities are at just 1-6% bicycle mode share, which is in the same ballpark as Seattle and our American peer cities like San Francisco and Portland. There is no reason our cities can't catch up to Holland and Denmark any faster than French or Austrian cities.

*** Cities don't want to be #1 - they want to be #2**

Part of the intentional appeal of the Green Lane Project is that it means the 6 cities developing separated facilities are doing it together as a peer group. No city has to worry about going in alone and risk being a failure alone.

Cities want to do things other cities have already done and shown to be successful - but they want to hit the sweet spot of doing it early enough that it's still seen as an innovator, and not as a laggard.

Our city's new focus on low-stress bike facilities fits perfectly into this sweet spot: we're not proposing anything Portland or Vancouver hasn't done successfully for years, but it's still a fairly small club of cities.

*** Kids**

A big focus was on making kid-friendly cycling cities, and establishing why cities have to be kid-friendly places to be successful (including independent freedom of mobility for kids, but not limited to it.)

There was some really powerful, transformative stuff here. It would take an e-mail at least as long as this one to fully cover what was discussed on this topic. I'm hoping Robin may be inspired to type some stuff out - or someone else may have blogged it?

*** Closing thought**

If you thought bike advocacy was hard in Seattle, consider that in Uganda they have to content with the superstition that young girls can lose their virginity by riding a bicycle. (!)