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The Bicycle: Rethinking How We Move Around Our Cities
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EDITORIAL

The Bicycle: Rethinking How We Move Around Our Cities

Mohammad Nazarpour

Tehran, the bicycle is a means to transform the urban experience and a way to express citizenship. If you are a woman, it is even more than that; the bicycle is an emancipatory tool to transform lived space and cycling is a practice to represent power and challenge hegemonic socio-political structures from below.

Bicycle is a human-powered vehicle that can play an effective role in addressing complex urban challenges and transforming various aspects of our urban life. It can become an important mode for short trips, while connecting with public transportation for long trips. It alleviates many environmental problems, promotes individual and social community health, improves human relationships and social ties, builds socio-cultural identities with others and places, and plays a leading role in creating human-centered cities. Understanding such a complex nature and the multiple roles of bicycles and cycling practice requires adopting an interdisciplinary perspective and drawing on multiple narratives and lived experiences in this context.

In this issue, our aim was to explore "the bicycle" by developing an interdisciplinary perspective and understanding lived experiences to provide a rich, in-depth, and holistic view of cycling practice. Our goal was to explain the intersection of the bicycle with various environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions that make it a complex object to be discussed from different angles. We are very excited to receive a variety of valuable contributions from a wide range of geographical contexts (USA, Canada, Netherlands, Germany, Spain, India, Australia, England, etc.) which has made multiple perspectives for looking at bicycles. We hope this issue can develop interdisciplinary, human-centered narratives about mobility in our society and beyond. ■

► Cycling is not only a physical movement from A to B, but also a critical bodily practice, a way of life, and a meaningful method of self-presentation. In the Iranian context, a bicycle is a seemingly simple tool, but a complex and intertwined phenomenon with cultural, social, political, and environmental aspects. For someone who rides a bike in

Community Bike Workshops and Bicycle Repair: the Global Picture

There is a global movement to “close the circle” of citizen bicycle use and repair, in community bicycle workshops where people repair their own bikes, or help others, also recycling parts and components. In the process, enthusiasm for cycling is increased, friendships flourish, and in a small way, urban automobility is challenged.

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► Introduction

Across the world, bicycles are being repaired. Millions of them. This is because although a bike frame and most metal components can endure for more than half a century, other components like tyres, inner tubes, brake pads, grips, cables and bearings wear out. In addition, enthusiasts want new models, or more bikes to suit different purposes, abandoning their old ones (Batterbury & Dant, 2019). Children outgrow their bikes, and adults have different requirements as they age. Some bikes are abandoned because owners lack repair skills or money to fix them. Even in the Netherlands and Denmark, the two Western nations with the highest bike modeshare (Ton et al. 2019), there is still a bicycle “waste stream”.

While repair seems to happen everywhere, there are big differences across the world in repair practices, spread across workshops, back yards, shops, and on the streets. At least in



A workshop repair session with the Council, at WeCycle, Australia (2022)

Photographer: JS

Western nations and across some Asian cities, there is always a stock of broken or un-used bikes, exceeding the rate at which they can be repaired by individuals. But across much of Africa, very few bikes are left broken or abandoned: they are useful, and demand is great in “cycling cities” like Ouagadougou and Bamako.

If bicycle repair is a feature of the world’s cities, this is partly because cycling is experiencing a revival as part of the politics of demand for low-carbon modes of transport, which are now deemed an absolute necessity. Globally, even where automobility dominates urban transportation, austerity, inequality and unemployment still push people to seek cheaper options to meet their urban mobility needs. Anger about urban vehicle pollution and dangers, especially noticeable in heavily polluted cities like Tehran and Bangkok (Marks 2020) can push some residents to embrace cycling voluntarily. We argue that given the health benefits from cycling, bikes need to be part of the architecture of a thriving city (OUVEMA 2023). We cannot wait for the mass rollout of high tech mobility solutions like private Electric Vehicles (EVs), and more advanced and efficient public transport.

In this short article we tackle the weight of the bicycle repair task through exploring a global movement to “close the circle” of citizen bicycle use and repair. Not in bike shops, which do a reliable job in most cities across the world where people cycle, but in community-led initiatives called “bike kitchens” or “community bicycle workshops”.

Occupying forgotten spaces in the city

“Community bike workshops” are largely an urban phenomenon. They operate in premises snatched from abandonment, “borrowed” temporarily, set aside by tolerant municipal

authorities, or located in undesirable locations that property developers have not yet targeted for redevelopment. The only requirement is lockability, some storage of tools and bikes, and hopefully electricity. Their “staff” are largely volunteers, activists and community-minded cyclists, sometimes getting limited support from local municipal authorities, donors, or non-profit organisations. They are “edgy” and relatively unregulated members of community economies.

Workshops numbers have grown since the 1990s, and are widespread across Europe and the Americas¹, with many examples elsewhere. The largest concentration is in France, with over 350 of different types. Most of those are networked through “l’Heureux Cyclage”², which coordinates events, logistics, and learning between workshops, and they assist well over 100,000 people yearly (Batterbury et al 2023). WUK in Vienna, established in 1983, may be the world’s oldest CBW.

Players in the community economy

In workshops, the human infrastructure of cycling develops and is nurtured. People can come in and fix their own bikes and learn these practical skills by doing so. In other types of workshops, donated bikes repaired by the volunteers themselves are offered freely or cheaply to people who need them, as a community service. Donated or scavenged bikes are re-used creatively and cheaply, avoiding too much new consumption. While the work can be fun, the major goal is extending the useful life of bicycles and components using second-hand and some new components, and they are part of the community economy, as we will explain (Cameron & Isaac, 2022).

Workshops are important in pushing greater demand for transitions to lower emissions and healthier mobility options, or at least demonstrating those options to those wedded to the car. They are “Foregrounding the importance of care, maintenance, and repair” and this is “a step in challenging teleological progressive shiny ideals of innovation” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 210).

Financial turnover is usually modest in community economies. Members who attend workshops usually pay for their own repairs. Worldwide, our surveys have found the majority of workshops operate with an unpaid part-time workforce, although in some countries like France, government employment schemes financially support some paid employees who are learning a new trade. In most cases, therefore, volunteers want to participate, as part of “mutual aid” and learning a new skill, finding convivial ways of working together and resolving technical repair problems in a supportive way (Batterbury et al, 2023).

Helping people in need

By supporting the community through bike workshops, city managers can harvest community energies, support low-carbon travel, and build goodwill. Workshops are generally a collective space where people from all backgrounds, ages, and skills can come together to learn and enjoy the art of bike repair: combining a personal sense of achievement with shared activities and values (Batterbury and Dant, 2019).

In order to build a strong foundation for a workshop, a strong mentality of togetherness, inclusivity, and belonging is needed, directed by rules of good behaviour and respect for others. The significance of community led initiatives means that friends and family alike join together to make a difference for each other and others, cutting across politics, gender, class, and culture. There is little need for competition between bike fixers. The simple tools and activities encourage conviviality (Illich, 1973). The goals of individual workshops vary, but all of them try to see more bikes working and on the streets. According to Achievement Goal Theory, achievement goals are future-oriented and are viewed as “cognitive representations



The Mount Roskill Bike Kitchen , New Zealand

Source: ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz

of desired outcomes ... direct behavior in specific ways that differ through how competence is conceptualized by the individual" (Chazan, 2022). Giving opportunities for good practice and experience to learn a new set of skills, keeping bikes on the road, allows for communities to grow stronger and work better together, simultaneously doing something good for humanity.

Our own volunteering has been at WeCycle in Melbourne, Australia (Batterbury et al, 2023). Melbourne is a fairly flat city of almost 5 million people, Despite having decent public transport, bikes are handy for shorter trips, commuting for work, and for filling in gaps in the public transport network. This small social enterprise fixes and delivers bikes for people in need. It has operated since 2017 in an inner suburb. The majority of bike recipients are referred to us by social care agencies who pass on requests for bikes from families and individuals. Our prime clients are fleeing conflicts in the Middle East, and arrive with very few possessions or support networks. Bikes are helpful to them, for fitness or commuting to schools and jobs. We believe that the bikes we give are being used.

We operate from a small building owned by the local municipal council, and it is a convivial if slightly chaotic space where disassembled parts, tools, and bikes in progress are stored. The budget is small; major costs are insurance and parts that cannot be recycled, like brake pads, grips, chains and cables. We can sometimes have some costs covered by community grants, or by selling a few unwanted bikes at modest prices. All labour is carried out by a diverse group of 4-9 volunteers working once or twice a week. The work is largely "convivial" (Illich, 1973): we use simple tools, learn from each other, and try to remain supportive and helpful without

too many rules and regulations. WeCycle delivers more than 180 bikes a year to refugees or asylum seekers across the city. Other Melbourne workshops do similar work, making the combined efforts a substantial contribution to welfare and sustainable transport needs. Connecting recipients with their bikes sometimes involves a car, given Melbourne's large size, and communicating with newly arrived migrants who speak little English can difficult... Once a month, WeCycle volunteers also check and sometimes fix bikes for local residents as part of a scheme for the public, with Council support.

Conclusion

In a bicycle-friendly city, it is common consensus that installing cycle lanes, bike parking and safety measures are the task of urban planners, requiring money and government approvals. In some car-dominated cities, this task has hardly begun. But self-repair of bikes with Illich's "convivial tools" (1973), and riding, fall outside the control of planners and governments, and are embedded

in communities. In affluent cities, workshops help to decarbonise transport, and reconnect riders with their machines. For poorer households, they perform an essential task, allowing cheaper options for keeping bikes on the roads, recycling second-hand parts and minimising financial outlay. In all cases, community bike workshops challenge the convention and the frustrations of urban automobility. ■

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1. Such as "Bike!Bike!?" <http://en.bikebike.org>
 2. For more information, visit this link: <https://www.heureux-cyclage.org/?lang=en>.

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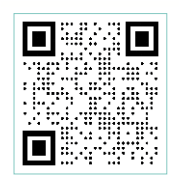
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