

Who is 'World Class'? Transportation Justice and Bicycle Policy

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In many U.S. metropolitan areas, bicycle advocates have been breathing sighs of relief as their elected officials join *with* them in fighting for bicycle facilities. No longer a battle between bicyclists and their government, the partnerships have blossomed into more than just bicycle paths. Through two case studies, we explore how politicians are exploiting the growing appeal of bicycle culture for economic development. In Los Angeles an open streets event, CicLAvia, brings together a diverse array of residents but politicians and local business owners celebrate it for its potential to increase downtown development. In Minneapolis, the city government appears to have used a popular off-street bicycle path to 'clean up' areas of town and create prime real estate for luxury apartments. The city's mayor unabashedly connects his dedication to bicycle infrastructure to recruiting the 'creative class' to Minneapolis. In this article we argue that advocates and policymakers who frame bicycle amenities as 'creative class' bait ignore and potentially undermine bicycle mobility by those who do not fit into this desired group of citizens. Furthermore, conflating the practice of bicycling with specific urban development projects designed to accommodate it, limits what can be seen as 'bike friendly' neighbourhoods and manufactures scarcity in what should be a public resource: urban streets.

Keywords: Bicycle infrastructure, creative class, urban development, city government, environmental gentrification

Introduction

I never expected the way we commute to be shaped by class, but it is (Florida 2012: 377).

As the rate of bicycling increases in the United States, creative class guru Richard Florida's words are more relevant than ever. For Florida, the 'creative class', a demographic marked by their desire and privileged ability to live in specific cities regardless of the career opportunities in them, is *the* group destined to ride bicycles in urban spaces. In fact, Florida found that a person's class status impacts bicycle commuting decisions more than weather, population density, and climate. This would seem to explain why places such as Portland, Oregon and Minneapolis, Minnesota—despite their rather unpleasant weather patterns—have some of the highest rates of bicycling in the United States. The many municipal governments listed as clients on Florida's consulting website speak to the influence his assertions exercise in urban policy and planning.¹ Those looking to capitalize on the growing trendiness of urban living may assume that creatives are willing to pay for quality urban spaces; should this profit motive guide where cities invest in public works projects such as bike infrastructure?

Despite the populist intentions of bicycle advocates who imagine that infrastructure projects will make bicycling accessible for more street users, the political salience of this class-inflected vision of bicycling ties a seemingly positive practice to a new cycle in economically driven urban renewal. In this article, we seek to highlight creative class discourses in the rhetoric

¹ A list of government clients can be viewed on the website for Richard Florida's consulting firm, the Creative Class Group: <http://www.creativeclass.com/clients>, accessed 2 September 2013.

and strategy behind infrastructure-oriented bicycle advocacy by focusing on instances where advocates and policymakers in our field sites spoke about bicycle projects in terms of global competition and urban redevelopment. We argue that advocates and policymakers who frame bicycle facilities as amenities that will attract a creative class population ignore and potentially undermine bicycle mobility by those who do not fit into this desired group of citizens. Furthermore, conflating the practice of bicycling with specific urban development projects designed to accommodate it limits what can be seen as ‘bike friendly’ neighbourhoods and manufactures scarcity in what should be a public resource: urban streets. In this way, bicycle advocacy illustrates the trend toward high quality public spaces being sold as luxury amenities.

Because in the U.S. it has been de rigueur for decades to display wealth and success through car ownership, Florida’s creative class gospel did not take hold overnight. A person’s choice in transportation has long been a canvas for displaying class distinction in the U.S., and this in turn has spill-over effects on the public infrastructure associated with a given transportation practice. A case of opposition to bicycle-driven urban renewal could be found in a coastal corner of Los Angeles County in January 2008, when the City of Long Beach (influenced by Florida)² held a public meeting regarding a proposed ‘bicycle boulevard’ on a residential street. Bike boulevards create barriers to motorized traffic on neighbourhood streets parallel to busy arterials, thus allowing bicyclists to stay conveniently close to destinations while avoiding the stress of heavy traffic. Residents filled the room as a city planner and a consultant explained their plans for First Street, a dense residential corridor which connected the city centre to a more exclusive, beach-front enclave containing many large, well-maintained homes considered historic.

After the initial presentation, the homeowners present that night spoke against the designation of their street as a bike route precisely because it would increase bicycle traffic. One elderly white woman, who emphasized that she biked regularly, said that bicyclists would crowd the new route and make tremendous noise. An elderly white man argued that floods of bicyclists would pose a threat to mothers with strollers and ‘people who like to run in the street’. Others claimed the bike boulevard would cause a parking problem due to people driving cars loaded with bicycles to the street. Though none of the First Street homeowners raised an explicit objection to bicycling for transportation, one man worried that an increase in bicyclists would attract thieves who would decide to ‘vacation’ on the street.

Those in opposition to bicycling shift easily between references to the leisure class and the lower classes according to what serves their agendas, which in this case was to fight against city-imposed changes in the neighbourhood. According to the Long Beach homeowners, they were not opposed to bicycling in general, or even bicycling on their street: they opposed action

² On the website for the Creative Class Group (see note 1), an organization called Downtown Long Beach Associates is listed as a client. Their website identifies them as speaking for the local business improvement district.

by the city that they did not initiate or control. The bike boulevard had become a symbol of this lack of control. Whether bike infrastructure projects truly have the power to change neighbourhoods, people on both sides of the issue believe that they do.

Now that cities are seeing economic advantages to expanding the ownership of the street to non-motorized transportation, the bicycle, rather than the car, is becoming the more valued form of urban transportation. This shift in values is calling into question what is considered efficient use of the streets. Automobiles have long been understood as the fastest and most efficient way to traverse the city. But now, streets are not being defined by speed and efficiency but by what they signify. A street with a crosswalk and bicycle boulevard now signifies a progressive city, a city that cares about the environment and will invest in alternative transportation. But the question remains: who will benefit from this reinvisioning of the streets?

This article consists of two case studies that draw on the findings of ethnographic research about bicycle advocacy undertaken in two very different U.S. cities, L.A. and Minneapolis, to analyse the shifting meanings of bicycling and its infrastructure in a country where the bicycle has long been a toy for the privileged but a burden for the poor. We here analyse themes gathered through participant-observation; we focus less on the demonstrated effects of bike infrastructure than on the *desired* effects articulated by bike advocates and public officials. We deployed this method through a combination of planning bicycle events, volunteering with bicycle organizations, utilizing the cities' bicycle infrastructure, and interviewing prominent leaders in both city government and bicycle advocacy. The street users' shared opinions and experiences with bicycle infrastructure and its planning offer a different kind of data than bicycle counts and other quantitative measures. We posit that these seemingly immaterial discourses, when joined with bicycling in the minds of the powerful, can have material effect. Our findings have implications for sites beyond the two considered here because wider advocacy networks shape bicycle promotion strategies undertaken in specific cities.

Similar to what sociologist Michel Callon (1998, 2007) has observed about economists 'making' the objective markets they claim to interpret, we heard advocates, policymakers, and others proclaim that investing in bike projects would produce particular cycling bodies. By highlighting the resonance between two cities' approaches to bicycle infrastructure projects, we argue that bike advocates and city officials are in agreement that these changes will attract creative class bicyclists. For bike advocates, encouraging policymakers to exploit the creative class link to bicycling may be seen as a means to an end, since their ostensible goal is to increase the feasibility of bicycle transportation. Bicycling, as a low-cost, low-impact form of mobility, could be seen as an avenue to making sustainable transportation accessible to all. Instead, advocates' embrace of the creative class strategy highlights their lack of attention to questions of environmental justice. Bicycle infrastructure is emerging not merely as a response to growing numbers of bicycling bodies; when formulated as a creative class carrot, it is expected to attract specific new users.

Literature Review

The creative class turn in bicycle advocacy exemplifies the movement's complicated relationship with social justice. Although there is a growing literature exploring the current landscape of bicycle advocacy (Carlsson ed. 2002, Batterbury 2003, Furness 2010, Horton 2006, Mapes 2009), titles such as Jeff Mapes' *Pedaling Revolution* indicate the difficulty of considering both the embattled status of bike advocates as road users and their socioeconomic privilege in the same analysis. The bike movement balances on a fundamental tension between bicycling as an expensive, beloved hobby and bicycling as an affordable mobility option. Bicycle advocates were responsible for some of the earliest improvements to the U.S. road system. Looking to expand the freedom of mobility and new markets promised by mass bicycle transportation, early bicycle advocates such as entrepreneur Alexander Pope and the League of American Wheelmen set in motion the 'good roads' movement that gave birth to the U.S. highway system (Epperson 2010). Then, as cars overtook bicycles in the early 20th century American imagination, traffic engineers transformed U.S. city streets from mixed zones to motorways (Norton 2008).

Since the early 1990s, bike advocates have contested the right of motorized vehicles to dominate city streets. The founding of Critical Mass in San Francisco in 1992 launched an urban social movement around bicyclists' right to streets (Carlsson 2002), and in 1991 Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which opened new federal funding for bicycle and pedestrian street infrastructure (Wray 2008). Following ISTEA, bicycle advocacy organizations focused on political strategy as a means to increase bicycling through infrastructure projects. Following Critical Mass, similar rides sprang up around the world and led to stronger networks of bike users that could be mobilized to support the passage of ordinances and levy funding for infrastructure projects.

Considered through the lens of 'transportation justice', the right to bicycle mobility represented by Critical Mass could be undermined by infrastructure-focused advocacy that uses creative class marketing. This article is a preliminary attempt to consider transportation (in)justice's intersections with bicycle policy and planning (see also Hoffmann 2013, Lubitow and Miller 2013, Stehlin 2013). The transportation justice movement and its scholars focus on the intersection of transportation infrastructure, social equality, and civil rights. In a foundational volume on the topic, environmental justice scholars Robert Bullard and Glenn Johnson stated that, 'if a community happens to be poor, inner city, or inhabited by people of colour, chances are it will receive less environmental protection than an affluent, suburban, white community', and this applies to transportation access and amenities as well (1997: 9). Public transportation, reliant on state resources and serving millions of low-income individuals, has been at the centre of this movement; bicycling has not (Lugo 2012). This is perhaps because such a small population uses bicycles as their primary mode of transport³ or because many low-income

³ Official bicycle commuting rates hover around 1 to 3 percent of the population even in cities that have robust bicycle infrastructure.

bicycle users have been overlooked by the professional advocates who lobby for bicycle infrastructure. Transportation justice issues are arising now because more cities are prioritizing the funding of bicycle projects.

Although bicycle infrastructure has entered the discussion only recently, city governments have long known about the purported economic benefits of gentrification, or the process neighbourhoods undergo when middle class people return to inner cities. Academics have been debating the benefits and pitfalls of gentrification for over fifty years. Despite the longevity of research, prominent gentrification scholar Loretta Lees (2008), claims there is a lack of evidence for ‘positive gentrification’, and the trickle-down effect of this middle class mobility remains a myth. Yet cities continue to deploy strategies that recruit and maintain a lucrative middle class population; strategies which are ‘framed around interurban competition, gentrification, middle-class consumption and place-marketing’ (Peck 2005: 740-741). Lees (2012) reaffirms that gentrification can flourish through feeding off of other policies not directly referred to as such, which could include those relating to transportation. The case studies presented here show how gentrifying processes can go hand in hand with the development of ‘world class’ and ‘sustainable’ transportation systems. More specifically, bicycle infrastructure is a prime example of what Melissa Checker (2011) has called ‘environmental gentrification’. Environmental gentrification builds upon the successes of the environmental justice movement and appropriates its language to serve high-end development and displace low-income residents (Checker 2011).

Even if they have not identified with the environmental justice project, upwardly mobile bicyclists have benefited from its focus on urban livability. Advocates for bicycle transportation, as environmental activists, see the bicycle as ‘ideally forming one part of a much wider, new, sustainable, green lifestyle’ (Horton 2006: 51). What they might celebrate as an ecologically-friendly shift to urban living overlaps with environmental gentrification. Florida (2011, 2012) claims that cities where people bike commute are better able to compete in a global economy because ‘today, the terms of competition revolve around a central axis: a nation’s ability to mobilize, attract, and retain human creative talent’ (2005: 3). Thus, Florida’s theory would suggest, creative class bodies are desirable precisely because they bring otherwise untethered economic benefits to businesses and cities.

As Florida’s (2013) predictions materialize in rising rents and changing storefronts, opposition to bicycle infrastructure has emerged from groups with much less socioeconomic power than the aforementioned Long Beach homeowners. In a recent contribution to the study of bicycle gentrification, sociologists Amy Lubitow and Thaddeus R. Miller (2013) reported that the designers and promoters of a bike infrastructure project in North Portland were surprised to find that community members, united in opposition, framed the project as a reflection of systemic racism and gentrification. In leaving implicit the benefits of bicycling, bicycle advocates may find themselves blamed for explicitly unequal effects. As cities move toward

appropriating bicycle infrastructure as a signifier of creative class consumption, many groups remain at the margins.

Case Study 1: Infrastructure as Progress in Los Angeles

The Los Angeles metropolitan area offers insight into the growing desirability of bicycle policy both as a symbol of participation in global sustainability trends and as an economic development strategy to attract a creative class population. In Southern California, transportation infrastructure has long been a means of achieving ‘world-class’ status, from the once-extensive streetcar system to the development of a street plan in the 1920s (Bottles 1987). Today, discourses about the world-class city have a distinctly bicycle bent and political insiders are connecting bike infrastructure with economic redevelopment downtown.

Upon signing a bike parking ordinance in February 2013, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa commented that ‘the city is undergoing a transportation renaissance and we are changing the way Los Angeles moves’.⁴ It is likely that the mayor meant to include in this “transportation renaissance” his vocal support for the popular open street event called CicLAvia, based on the *ciclovía* that started in Bogotá, Colombia in 1974.⁵ CicLAvia creates a temporary car-free space through central Los Angeles neighbourhoods so that people can try biking and walking without the pressures of motorized traffic. The event began in 2010 after two years of grassroots organizing (see Lugo 2013, 2012), and Villaraigosa has made it into a centrepiece of his time in office that ended in 2013. The first event in 2010, which closed 7.5 miles of streets from East L.A. to East Hollywood on Sunday, October 10, had a turnout of about 40,000 people. Since then, there have been biannual CicLAvias with much popular support. The event on April 21, 2013 attracted an estimated 150,000 bicyclists and pedestrians from across the region, which demonstrates a growing popular interest in bicycling. Politicians and advocates have created a shared narrative about cycling that emphasizes its reliance on physical infrastructure projects.

For example, commentators have referenced these high participation numbers when arguing that L.A. will build its numbers of bike commuters only with physical infrastructure in place. In a post on *The Atlantic* website, Conor Friedersdorf mentioned that he had attended the April 2013 CicLAvia, and commented that, ‘seeing the masses out on bikes hinted at how a safe system of bike lanes could improve Los Angeles’.⁶ In April 2012, when local sustainable transportation website *Los Angeles Streetsblog* asked candidates in the city's mayoral race to

⁴ ‘With All Eyes on L.A., Villaraigosa Signs New Bike Parking Ordinance’, published online in the *Los Angeles Streetsblog* (1 February 2013) <http://la.streetsblog.org/2013/02/01/with-all-eyes-on-l-a-villaraigosa-signs-new-bike-parking-ordinance/>, accessed 7 August 2013.

⁵ Co-author Lugo helped organize CicLAvia during her dissertation fieldwork. Any uncited claims are fieldwork observations.

⁶ ‘The Paranoid Style in Bicycle Politics: A Bicoastal Freak-Out’, published online in *The Atlantic* (4 June 2013) <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/06/the-paranoid-style-of-bicycle-politics-a-bicoastal-freak-out/276514/>, accessed 6 August 2013.

comment on CicLAvia, Candidate Kevin James said he was impressed by ‘the sheer size of the crowd, which...speaks volumes about the number of Angelenos willing to use their bicycles more often as their primary mode of transportation *if the City were more bike-friendly*’ (emphasis ours).⁷ In the same piece, City Councilmember Jan Perry situated the event within a larger bicycle policy framework, noting that, ‘while these initiatives are not as fun as CicLAvia, they are certainly important as Los Angeles develops into a mature city with sophisticated transportation networks that focus on means other than the automobile’. With these remarks, candidates framed bicycling as a part of L.A.’s future, but focused less on CicLAvia’s social space and more on its role in galvanizing support for infrastructure projects. The city government’s participation in and response to CicLAvia indicates a surprisingly friendly relationship with bicycle advocacy.⁸

The candidate who won the spring 2013 mayoral election, Eric Garcetti, also voiced support for CicLAvia during his campaign.⁹ Clearly he meant to capture the urban bicycle voter, a constituency that has been gaining prominence in cities such as Portland, Minneapolis, and L.A. where political candidates are measured on a ‘bike-friendly’ scale. For example, in February 2013, the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition (LACBC) posted an interview with then-Councilmember Garcetti on their website that asked, ‘Are you bike-friendly?’¹⁰ Garcetti’s responses reassured bicycling voters that, ‘as Mayor, I will approach cycling as a key part of our city’s transportation system...A focus on safety not only protects cyclists, it encourages more people to start cycling’. The LACBC interview also referenced the idea of ‘interested but concerned’ bicyclists. This phrase came from the Portland Bureau of Transportation’s influential typology of cyclists that divides people into categories based on whether they do or do not bike.¹¹ This typology has been used to make a case for infrastructure as a means to move people from ‘interested but concerned’ to the next category, ‘enthused and confident’. This typology and seemingly inclusive terms like ‘safety’ strip people of their socioeconomic indicators, leaving unasked the question of which communities will move forward in this continuum of concern and confidence.

⁷ ‘Beutner, Garcetti, James, Perry and Greuel on CicLAvia’, published online in the *Los Angeles Streetsblog* (18 April 2012) <http://la.streetsblog.org/2012/04/18/beutner-garcetti-james-perry-and-greuel-on-ciclavia/>, accessed 7 August 2013.

⁸ For a thorough discussion of the historically tenuous relationship between bicycle advocates and local municipalities, see ‘Critical Mass and the Functions to the (Bikeable) City’ (Furness 2010).

⁹ Garcetti had also been an early political supporter of the event.

¹⁰ ‘Are You Bike-Friendly? Eric Garcetti Responds’, published online in the *Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition* (6 February 2013) <http://lacbc.wordpress.com/2013/02/06/are-you-bike-friendly-eric-garcetti-responds/>, accessed 7 August 2013.

¹¹ ‘Four Types of Transportation Cyclists’, published in the *Portland Bureau of Transportation*, <http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/158497>, accessed 7 August 2013.

After Garcetti was elected mayor, L.A. bike advocate and LACBC board member Ted Rogers published an op-ed about the significance of Garcetti's win, commenting that, 'L.A. has made great progress on bicycling and transportation issues in recent years. Hopefully, that will continue under the new leadership, and the City of Angels will proudly take its place as the world-class city it can and should be. It's our job to work with them to make sure it does'.¹² This comment defines bike advocacy as a project of building political will. The association of transportation infrastructure with progress is not new, and Rogers' stated goal of making L.A. a 'world-class city' echoes an earlier era in transportation development when city elites fought to redesign streets for automotive traffic (Bottles 1987).

In a 1922 report, the Automobile Club of Southern California predicted that with a traffic plan designed to prioritize private cars, 'the City of Los Angeles will be enabled to fulfil its destiny as a great world metropolis' (quoted in Bottles 1987:100-101). The streetcar network was a roadblock to progress, and, crucially, so was L.A.'s cultural diversity. In 1926, the *Examiner* newspaper asked that, 'if there is ever to be a union station...let it at least not be located between Chinatown and Little Mexico'. Which would the public prefer, the paper asked, a 'depot in [the] Chinese district, or no more grade crossings?' (quoted in Bottles 1987:151). Traffic congestion was preferable to infrastructure located near places inhabited by undesirable groups. The decades that followed, when L.A. became the world-class car city it is known as today, did not challenge this spatialized racism; it had the effect of making people who could not afford to drive into social pariahs (Hutchinson 2000). It is worth considering whether the emphasis on global competitiveness will lead to improved quality of life for the multiethnic communities who inhabit central Los Angeles.

Tellingly, in February 2012 the CicLAvia organization won a 'downtowners of distinction' award, which the *Los Angeles Downtown News* gives to projects seen as improving the business climate of the area; it is clear that the downtown development community sees CicLAvia as a tool to bring consumers into an urban core that has been undergoing large-scale urban renewal projects since the mid twentieth century.¹³ L.A. politicians argue that only permanent infrastructure will make the city bike-friendly. This invokes community action such as CicLAvia as positive, but a mere precursor to the more important business of developing the built environment.

Although politicians and advocates increasingly share a vision of bicycle infrastructure as a viable form of urban transportation, the Long Beach case detailed earlier in this article showed

¹² 'What Does Yesterday's Election Mean for L.A. Transportation Issues?', published online in the *Los Angeles Streetsblog* (22 May 2013) <http://la.streetsblog.org/2013/05/22/what-does-yesterdays-election-mean-for-l-a-transportation-issues/>, accessed 7 August 2013.

¹³ "Downtowners of Distinction Awards Honor Arts District Condo Complex." published online in the *Los Angeles Downtown News* (24 February 2012) http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/downtowners-of-distinction-awards-honor-arts-district-condo-complex/article_56bb27ce-5f3d-11e1-84ec-0019bb2963f4.html, accessed 7 August 2013.

that neighbourhood residents have not always been in favour of such projects for reasons that go beyond the practice of bicycling itself. In the context of the ‘world-class’ vision of bicycling that politicians and advocates share, residents who argue against bicycle facilities can be dismissed as backward thinkers, out of touch with today’s transportation lifestyles. Our narrative moves now to Minneapolis, where bicycle infrastructure’s potential to catalyse neighbourhood change has been taken on as a city project.

Case Study 2: Mission Accomplished in Minneapolis

This case study presents evidence that bike advocates and policymakers see rewards in bicycle infrastructure beyond the promotion of environmentally-friendly lifestyles. Minneapolis, like L.A., is relatively new to the collection of U.S. cities committed to building ‘world-class’ transportation infrastructure. Because it has in recent years devoted considerable resources to bicycle infrastructure (Friedman 2011), Minneapolis shows what some of the bicycle discourses budding in L.A. might look like in full bloom. In this section, we set an interview with Minneapolis’ mayor, R.T. Rybak alongside an analysis of how a bicycle project has changed social life in the space it occupies in order to question whether displacement resulting from bike infrastructure is an unintended effect. The language used by Minneapolis bicycle advocates and city officials, including Rybak, echoes almost exactly the bicycle discourses articulated by officials in Los Angeles. We see this miming not as a coincidence, but rather as an indication that city governments’ support for bicycle projects is a nationwide trend that will bring up questions of transportation justice in bicycle policy and planning.

Being a bicyclist in Minneapolis is relatively easy. The city has posted bicycle route signage that encourages and directs bicyclists to ride on streets with bike lanes, or on the bicycle boulevards to be found in some neighbourhoods. Between April and October, people can opt to rent a bicycle from a city-wide bike share program, Nice Ride.¹⁴ Bicycle advocates and city officials are constantly proposing new bicycle infrastructure plans, which are tracked and promoted by the volunteer-run Minneapolis Bicycle Coalition. Many bike commuters view the Midtown Greenway as the centrepiece of Minneapolis’s alternative transit accomplishments.

Located south of the Mississippi River, the Greenway system is a 5.5 mile network of off-street bike paths that runs parallel to major city streets and sits in a former railroad corridor. The Greenway is impressive in quality and efficiency, not least because few U.S. cities have bike paths that allow one to travel for miles in high-density areas without the need to interact with vehicle traffic. On any given day, a diverse collection of Greenway users fill the space; diversity

¹⁴ When Nice Ride launched, the primary locations were downtown and in the Uptown neighbourhood. Uptown is predominantly upwardly mobile and already with an active bicycle culture. Residents in North Minneapolis, an area of the city with the highest unemployment rate and concentration of people of colour, had to pressure Nice Ride to install stations in their neighbourhoods (Williams 2010). Nice Ride and Mayor Rybak both cited funding issues for the initial lack of stations in North Minneapolis.

that includes ethnicity, class, and chosen type of mobility (i.e. jogging, walking or bicycling). Because of its range of users, the Greenway appears to be a welcoming zone for diverse groups rather than an obvious attempt at environmental gentrification. However, bicycle paths such as the Greenway have the potential to ‘clean up’ blighted areas of a city by attracting desirable users and improving the physical conditions through mechanisms such as community gardens and murals.

The Greenway project introduced significant changes to a space that had been used primarily by marginal figures. Longtime Minneapolis resident and avid bicyclist Spencer Haugh recalled the scene peopling the corridor before the Greenway construction as composed of ‘urchins and hooligans. And graffiti writers. And awesomeness. I like the Greenway, but it makes me sad. It was a five mile long art gallery’ (personal communication, July 11, 2011). The tall brick walls and overgrown bushes created a hideaway and an autonomous space on the now-removed train tracks.¹⁵ Accessing the corridor was easy, and it connected with poorer areas of town. However, the space was not used in ways that would be sanctioned by a city government or by all city residents. On their website, the Midtown Greenway Coalition describes the corridor as a once ‘trash-filled trench that was a disgrace to our city’.¹⁶ While the marginal inhabitants were largely left alone, a plan was taking place that would quickly oust them.

In 2009, two years after the Greenway was completed, the Minneapolis police had a visible presence along the secluded path as the city focused on removing criminal elements from the space. Participant-observation undertaken there in 2009 and 2010 showed that police officers tended to target Greenway users who fit a particular racial and class profile. The police could be seen talking to men, usually American Indians, who spent time relaxing under the bridges along the Greenway. Though these men sometimes openly drank alcohol, they kept to themselves and did not harass other Greenway users. The adjacent Phillips neighbourhood had a vibrant American Indian community including a Native community centre and art gallery. Sometime after the police intervention, these American Indian men disappeared from the Greenway. These men's bicycles indicated that they were using the Greenway for transportation, ostensibly an appropriate way to inhabit the space. It would seem, however, that through construction of the Greenway the city laid claim to communal space that had been inhabited by marginal populations and cleared for use by a more ‘civil’ group of citizens. It was a ‘disgrace to the city’ for some, but a place to sleep and socialize for others. Marked for removal, people who used to hang out on the tracks learned they were no longer going to be left alone.

Far from leaving aside the question of who would use the Greenway, the city policed what users would be present. This was not incidental displacement; it was a strategic

¹⁵ Perhaps ironically, the public transportation system in Minneapolis is now talking with community members about putting in a streetcar system on the Greenway (Midtown Corridor Alternatives Analysis, <http://www.metrotransit.org/midtown-corridor>).

¹⁶ Midtown Greenway Coalition website, midtowngreenway.org, accessed 3 September 2013.

construction of a space designed to be used by a specific group. There is more at stake than cleaning up a blighted area for community use; the City of Minneapolis wants the creative class and their disposable incomes to make a home in this urban space, and they are using bicycle infrastructure as an attractor. The use of the Greenway by low-income residents detracts from the effectiveness of this strategy.

The selective interest in particular bicycling bodies the city displayed through policing the Midtown Greenway is echoed through Mayor Rybak's vision of the city's bicycle culture. Like Mayor Villaraigosa in Los Angeles, Rybak has recently garnered popular support for his commitment to bicycling. Rybak was responsible for creating a bicycle coordinator position in the city government, something he has portrayed as an anomaly.¹⁷ He also rallied to bring the Nice Ride bike share program to Minneapolis, and serves on that organization's board of directors. Bike share programs are popular in Europe but were not present in the U.S. on a large scale until Nice Ride. This rather hip mayor has openly portrayed Minneapolis's bicycle culture as a recruitment tool for the creative class, explaining that, 'our very public bike culture has been an enormous asset in attracting talented people here. Not just in the bike fields but in advertising, in financial services, the arts, politics'.¹⁸ Rybak also located economic potential in bike infrastructure, proclaiming Minneapolis to be a frontrunner in re-envisioning the cityscape. In his own words said, 'It's completely clear to me that we're in a midst of a total revolution in the way we get around. Most public governments haven't quite gotten anywhere nearly where the public is at on this. We [the city government] have. So, I recognize that congestion is up, global warming, gas prices, all add to the fact that we're reinventing the American city that's going to be much more pedestrian and bike-oriented'.

Here Rybak seamlessly conflates the need to foster sustainable transportation with a drive to compete with other city governments, and speaks proudly about his administration keeping up with public demand for a less car-centric city. For example, Minneapolis now consistently ranks as a top bicycling city in America (Friedman 2011). Rybak also echoes Villaraigosa's 'transportation renaissance' vision when he remarks that we are in midst of a 'total revolution' in moving through the city. These sentiments also reflect that 'sustainability' messaging can be a convenient shield to deflect criticism about utilizing bicycle infrastructure to promote economic growth in specific industries. This sustainability messaging is successful in part because of the threat climate change has on large cities and the political identity connected to the concern. Florida argues that the 'Creative Age' has ushered in new respect for livable and sustainable cities because 'the quest for clean and green is powered by the same underlying ethos that drives the Creative Economy' (2012: x). Both agendas value conserving resources, whether they are

¹⁷ This job position created controversy in Minneapolis because Rybak had recently laid off ten firefighters, citing budget issues (Roper 2011).

¹⁸ All quotes from R.T. Rybak come from personal communication with Melody Hoffmann on May 20, 2012.

natural or human.

Rybak is invested in bicycle infrastructure because making it easy to use this ‘clean and green’ form of mobility is desirable to the creative class. He said, ‘The key to economic growth is attracting talent. Especially in the creative field, talent is very mobile. [Our bicycle infrastructure] has attracted this wide swath of people to get something they can’t find in a freeway-oriented place like Houston. Even in a city with a great reputation like Austin, for attracting cutting edge talent, they are not even in the same league as Minneapolis on bike culture. That gives us a huge competitive advantage’.

Rybak made a direct link between building bicycle infrastructure and competing with other U.S. cities for creative talent. The ‘total revolution’ in sustainable city living is connected to economic competition with other U.S. cities; if the goal is to be the most ‘green’ city, then Minneapolis is certainly in the running. Rybak’s support for bicycle infrastructure allows him to build up his environmental credentials and simultaneously use these credentials as a sales pitch for why Minneapolis is hip and eco-friendly, and thus a great place for the creative class.

Through urban developments such as the Greenway and the luxury apartment buildings cropping up along the bicycle path, Minneapolis appears to be emerging as the blueprint in recruiting the creative class, and the interview with Rybak echoed many of Florida’s pitches about the creative class lifestyle. For example, Florida discussed what he calls ‘horizontal hypermobility’, meaning that the creative class workers hop around to different companies and cities in search of what they want, often dismissing potential for promotions within a company. Florida (2002) cites Austin, Texas as an example of a city that has recruited a lot of creative talent via strategic recruitment. And Rybak sees Austin as a rival but believes Minneapolis is in a different ‘league’ in attracting creative people, thus beating out Austin in recruitment. Meanwhile, the reality of gentrification looms. For example, Debra Stone of the volunteer-run Twin Cities Greenways board warned of the gentrification potential of a new greenway in North Minneapolis, a part of the city with a high percentage of underemployed people of colour:

We see the gentrification happening right now. I mean North Minneapolis is very close, it’s an ideal situation for downtown Minneapolis so it definitely is a concern for residents up in the North side and I think rightly so... research shows that with bikes and Greenways, neighbourhoods become safer. They certainly would become more appealing, especially as being so close to downtown. [But] who has the jobs downtowns? Not people of colour.¹⁹

The placement of bicycle infrastructure and the economic benefits that are predicted to

¹⁹ To be clear, there are plenty of people of colour who *do* work downtown—as janitors, food workers at the stadiums, construction workers, and bus drivers. But interestingly Debra’s comment suggests that these workers are not the ones coveted by the supporters of the North Minneapolis Greenway project. Here Debra seems to be referring to the creative class sector of labour that is largely void of people of colour.

follow make a case that bicycling in the U.S. deserves more critical attention and analysis.²⁰

Conclusion

Our research findings in both L.A. and Minneapolis suggest that city politicians and bicycle advocates increasingly see eye to eye on bicycle infrastructure. At first glance, this relationship does not challenge the promise of bicycle mobility; working through public infrastructure to expand bicycling to more people would seem ideal. However, in Minneapolis we saw how politicians have turned their support for bicycle advocacy into a strategy to recruit the creative class. In Los Angeles, bicycle projects are being endowed with a ‘world-class’ symbolism that has a troubling history.

City officials speak to the need for infrastructure such as bicycle paths in order to increase the number of bicyclists, while also claiming that these projects can encourage job growth in the creative industries, increase property values, and make the city a desirable place to live for the creative class. These messages are tailored to those with capital to invest, those with the social mobility to relocate to a city or neighbourhood based on its street design, and those who agree that public investment should spur private development. In none of these categories can we locate the existing inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods who will be impacted by street changes. Bike advocates, arguing that bike projects will increase property values, set their sights on converting sticklers like the Long Beach homeowners. People of colour who do not commute to jobs in downtown Minneapolis do not need to be enrolled in the project. The future vision of a ‘world class’ bike city erases the current and potential bike users who do not fit into this economic development model for bike infrastructure.

Increasingly, politicians are dismissing opposition to bike infrastructure as backward thinking, giving power to the world-class discourse presented by bicycle advocates. At a panel on bikes and economics held in July 2013 at the Portland Art Museum, U.S. Congressman Earl Blumenauer, long praised by the bike movement for leadership on bicycle issues, emphasized that bike infrastructure is a property amenity. Following that line of thinking, people like the Long Beach homeowners were seemingly confused about the purpose of bike infrastructure, getting too caught up in their race and class-based vision of bicycling to see the larger shift toward bike infrastructure as a symbol of the good life. Their fears are unfounded, according to journalist Jeff Mapes (2009), who reported a rise in property values in Davis, California the U.S. city that has done the most to normalize cycling. According to Mapes, potential residents noted this infrastructure as a reason for moving to Davis, which would seem to confirm Richard Florida’s assertion that bike infrastructure can be an attractor. Does making bike infrastructure profitable increase bicycle mobility? In recent years, bicycling in Davis has decreased at the

²⁰ In some cases, the outcome has already been measured. A study done by the Center for Transportation Studies (CTS) at the University of Minnesota found that Nice Ride users in Minneapolis spend an average of \$150,000 at businesses near Nice Ride stations over one season (CTS, July 2012).

same time that property values have gone up, Mapes reported.

What about opposition to bike infrastructure that comes not from politically empowered homeowners in a historic district, but from communities of colour concerned about a new era in urban renewal? Will their concerns be dismissed as backwards as well? The unstated necessity of global competitiveness implied by the drive to develop ‘world-class’ bicycle networks, an L.A. theme echoed at that Portland panel, has less to do with the bike as a cheap mode of transport than with its recognized ability to ‘attract talent, the best and the brightest’, as Blumenauer put it. Similarly, advocates from Indianapolis at the League of American Bicyclists' National Bike Summit in D.C. in March 2013 talked about using bike infrastructure to attract ‘creative’ workers. These words imply that public infrastructure does more than address the mobility problems of existing inhabitants.

It is significant that the vehicle now considered world-class is the bicycle rather than the private car, but will a bicycle infrastructure network prove to be more equitable than the highway system has been? Given its embeddedness in neoliberal urbanism, it is likely that bicycle infrastructure intended as sustainability marketing will be a gain for some and a loss for others—likely a loss for people of colour and the working class. In Minneapolis, we saw these populations being sidelined in two ways: one, bicycle facilities such as the Midtown Greenway clearing a previously marginal space of homeless and nomadic people; and two, advocates discussing bicycle infrastructure plans as intended economic stimuli, *not* to support people interested in bicycling. Under these conditions, the bicycle becomes a rolling signifier of environmental friendliness and bourgeois leisure, doing economic work that has little to do with progressive bicycle politics such as increased mobility for *all* people regardless of class position. As geographer John Stehlin (2013) has argued, it is the image of Copenhagen in particular that motivates the adoption of European bike infrastructure designs in U.S. cities. It is not the actual practice that matters, but rather the image of the practice as a commodity, as Mapes (2009) saw in Davis. The use of bike infrastructure is no longer the driving force in its political adoption; even an unused bike lane can produce value for property owners and developers. The thousands of bodies at CicLAvia may be a step forward not for bicycle advocacy but for downtown development, if condo conversions and bike lanes continue to go hand in hand.

When figures such as Blumenauer and Rybak portray talent as some self-evident good that generates value, they obscure the fact that as policymakers they decide what spaces should and should not see public investment. Cycling may produce cultural capital through its association with the imagined creative class, but a capitalist class mobilizes this into economic development. Those who embrace environmental gentrification predict a space where only those who plan to capitalize on urban property have a right to the city. Using bike infrastructure to attract desirable people to cities hungry for consumer-driven revitalization frames existing urban residents as undesirable, unproductive, even as those residents must be kept around as service workers.

Finally, the ‘world-class’ transportation infrastructure discourse implies that bicycling is limited to particular spaces. While bicyclists may see bicycle infrastructure as a populist good because shared streets are dominated by motorists, the creative class strategy may not secure greater access to bicycle mobility for all. If lobbying for bike infrastructure continues to be justified through the ‘world-class’ discourse, people biking out of economic necessity will continue to be marginal within the bike movement while low-income families will be driven farther and farther from eco-chic districts. Bike advocates should be aware of the unjust implications of selling cycling. Bicycling’s potential to make change is surely greater than its potential for profit.

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