

Look beyond the icing

By Roger Boulter

A cake will look lovely if its icing is lovely – but we only really know what it's like when we bite into it. So we need to look (or rather taste) beyond the icing.

So also with government action affecting cycling: cycling-specific programmes won't give us the results we want if the wider transport planning context is not supportive.

We have unprecedented money going into cycling, unprecedented NZTA staff numbers devoted to cycling, and a public perception radically more positive than the negative stereotypes of yesteryear. Yet things are actually worse for cycling than any time since the old '*Cycling is dangerous!*' message we used to hear 20 years ago.

About 20 years ago, planning for cycling reached a significant turning point. Planners discovered that the only measures that would really help cycling were firstly reducing, and secondly slowing, motorised traffic. Dedicated 'facilities' for cyclists achieved nothing (and sometimes made matters worse) unless these first priorities were tackled.

Before you think that back then we didn't have the newer 'separated' or 'protected' cycleway designs, consider the similarity of the rhetoric.

1980s / early 1990s version: cyclists will be safer away from the motor traffic, and what's more, those who would like to cycle but are intimidated by the motor traffic will be attracted to cycling through quieter roads, or paths away from the road system.

And the mid-2010s version? Remarkably similar, except some different terminology, like "*interested but concerned*", to use Roger Geller's (Portland USA) description of would-be cyclists.

Cycling crashes didn't reduce, and neither did cycling numbers increase, from extensive 1980s and early 1990s provision of 'cycling routes' away from motor traffic. This is what led to the shift, in 1996, to focus on reducing traffic volumes and slowing traffic speeds instead.

Meanwhile, in the mainstream planning world, the highly numerate and computer-driven traffic modelling on which transport planning had been based since the 1960s increased greatly in subtlety and sophistication. In the late 1980s and early 1990s this gave birth to so-called '*integrated transport planning*', but this was in effect a collaboration between roading authorities and public transport authorities, who combined road traffic data with public transport data, while ignoring cycling and walking altogether. Exciting, pioneering and innovative this was indeed; but it remained essentially an inward-looking and pragmatic 'deal' between formerly competing official bureaucracies. Cycling remained in its own separate 'silo', founded on such principles as the "*four E's*" of the seminal 1977 Geelong Bike Plan ("*engineering, education, enforcement and encouragement*").

To this day, planning for walking and cycling has never been fully integrated with mainstream transport planning. Cycling planning—prompted by the 1970s ‘oil shocks’, cycling advocacy movements and the ‘VeloCity’ and ‘ProBike’ conferences—evolved from the Geelong and other plans. Walking had to wait for 1990s champions like Rodney Tolley, for *Walk 21* conferences, for architect-led urban design and for interest in ‘traffic calming’ to remind us that streets have a function as a ‘place’ for people, not just traffic.

Ambitious moves to provide off-road or quiet-road cycle routes gave disappointing results. It was impossible to provide good alternatives. No matter what planners, designers, theorists and politicians say they want to do, pragmatic trade-offs between competing interests determine what gets put on the ground. Today, transport planning still reflects its roots; it’s centred on the needs of cars with ‘alternative modes’ shoehorned in so long as they don’t affect the interests of cars too much.

Now for the good news. The worm has been steadily turning against the car internationally over the past 20 years. Most transport innovations have been about alternatives to the car. We’ve seen major strides in urban rail (heavy, light and trams); inter-city rail (high speed ‘bullet’ trains); planning of urban centres around rail stations; urban growth limits and ‘densification’; restrictions on car use; and—yes—‘separated’ or ‘protected’ cycleways, which make sense only as part of the rest.

It gets better still, because people don’t want to use cars as they used to. In the 1960s, a car (which many did not have) was seen as a status symbol and passport to a better lifestyle. Now, it’s a case of *‘been there, driven that’*. Motor vehicle kilometres travelled have been static or declining since about 2008, and number of teenagers taking driving tests have been declining. Many people now see the car as more of a pain than a passport.

So this is a good time to be pushing cycling. However, the Ministry of Transport has responded to the declining car statistics by focusing on technology (Uber, driverless cars, drones, airships, etc.) as the future—ignoring evidence that people want to walk and cycle more. NZTA still bases its planning around the car, with an ambitious ‘cycleways’ programme incongruously bolted on. This didn’t work in the 1980s and it won’t work today. CAN should not get too close to the enthusiastic talk and seemingly big money (less than small change compared to what cars get) from NZTA’s national cycling team. That’s only the icing. Far more important is what’s inside the cake.

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