

Oh, those Germans: “Either do or do not, there is not try”

I’m glad it was Axel who (*Roundabout*, September 2016) alluded to Germans and efficiency. I never know how racial stereotype jokes go down, especially from someone like me who, despite over 20 years in New Zealand, will always be saddled with a middle-class English accent.

Axel Wilke was referring to a German guide on roundabout design, saying that there is actually no difference in German between “*roundabout*” and “*cycle-friendly roundabout*”.

I’ve known that for longer than I’ve been in New Zealand. In my own article in September’s *Roundabout*, I referred to the late 1980s/ early 1990s UK *Cycle Routes Demonstration Project*. Besides cycle route planning, the UK Government at this time also engaged in a significant amount of research into roundabout design. A wide range of trials were held around the country into various permutations of cycle lanes on roundabouts, cycle paths off roundabouts, stop lines on roundabouts ,etc, etc. They all failed miserably except for “*Continental Design Geometry*” which – guess what – bears a striking resemblance to what Axel was talking about. The UK Government proceeded to endorse this type of design as a Jolly Good Thing, and the rest is history.

The engineer who had led the research explained to me at the time that all the failed trials had required cyclists to modify their behaviour to fit in with the motor traffic. The “*Continental Design Geometry*” (which I gather in New Zealand tends to be called European design) in contrast required motor traffic behaviour to be modified to take account of the presence of cyclists. Cycle lanes on roundabouts mostly failed because motorists ignored them, but with European design they were forced to slow down and take more care (through increased deflection, bringing other traffic more centrally into the field of vision, and so on).

This does beg some questions. Firstly, if the right way to design roundabouts has been known for so long, why is it that someone reading Axel’s article might think the design is something new? Or in other words – why do we fail to act on findings which are manifestly common sense?

I said the UK Government endorsed this design as a Jolly Good Thing. I did not say that they redesigned or modified their roundabouts. They didn’t (much). Why not?

Axel pointed out that the German roundabout design guide was quite short, in contrast to an Austroads guide on the subject that was much longer. That German efficiency again; why waste paper and ink?

And the German efficiency comes through again in the fact that – shock, horror – they seem to have actually taken their own advice in how their roundabouts are actually built.

This remind me of a scene in Star Wars where Jedi Master Yoda tells Luke Skywalker to extract his crashed spacecraft from a swamp by using the power of “*The Force*”. “*I’ll try*” says Luke. “*No!*” replies Yoda, “*Either do, or do not – there is not ‘try’*”.

(Which begs a further question: was Yoda German? Well, I know enough German to know that in subordinate clauses, the verb goes to the end of the sentence. Thus, for example, if we had a German word order, "*I know that Axel knows German*" would become "*I know that Axel German knows*". So is Yoda German? I my case rest – hmm?, hmm?).

So do we non-Germans (or non-Yoda's) beat about the bush producing long documents rather than just doing what needs to be done? Regrettably, I have to say that I think we do.

So why? One reason I think is an issue which, to my mind, gets to the heart of what good transport planning is all about. We tend to treat each transport mode as distinct from each other not only in our planning, but in our implementation programming too. Not only do we think in discrete silos, we allocate our implementation budgets that way too. So, for example, the question "*how do we best help cyclists?*" too often gets a kind-of automatic answer "*build cycling facilities!*".

Here's the twist: European roundabout design has nothing to do with cycling facilities. It is mainstream road design, implemented on a 'just do it' basis through mainstream roading programmes. So when you next see some gushingly enthusiastic statement or press release about the latest pink cycleway or whatever, ask how the roundabouts, other intersections, mid-blocks, etc, on the rest of the nearby road system are designed (regardless of whether they are on so-called 'cycle routes'). And whether cyclists need to wait for allocation of funding through a 'cycleways programme' before what should be routine cycle-friendly aspects of road design are 'just done'.

I don't need to wait for Axel to translate what I'm sure is a lovely German roundabout design guide. This type of advice has been around for a long time. The bigger issue is not the absence of knowledge, but whether we act on it or not. Rather than multiply yet more paper, I'd suggest that the need is to just build the bally things. As routine, matter of course. All over the place, not just along 'cycleways'. And don't raise questions of cost, or traffic efficiency. Those Germans, who seem more pre-occupied with efficiency than most of us, would have surely thought of those questions, too.