

Could Ottawa get Copenhagenized?

By Kate Jaimet



Bicyclists ride in a bike lane in New York, U.S., on Tuesday, June 1, 2010. Global bicycle production is set to outpace growth in automobile production as cities and countries around the world build bike paths and attempt to cut carbon dioxide emissions from transportation. Cities like Los Angeles and New York are following the lead of Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Beijing in expanding bicycle paths and parking, helping to spur demand. The city of New York plans to quadruple its 450 miles of bicycle paths by 2030.

Photograph by: Daniel Acker, Bloomberg

OTTAWA — Architect Jan Gehl has seen Copenhagen transform from a car-clogged metropolis in the 1960s to a city where one-third of commuters travel by bike and 100,000 square metres of downtown traffic space is closed to cars.

His ideas and research over the past 40 years spurred the transformation of the Danish capital and sparked a global movement to make cities more livable.

From June 22 to June 25, urban planners, city leaders and cycling experts will be in Copenhagen for the Velo-city Global 2010 conference, hoping to learn its secrets.

Among them will be National Capital Commission chief executive Marie Lemay, Gatineau mayor Marc Bureau, and Ottawa councillor Jacques Legendre.

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Gehl, who is hosting a reception on the first evening of the conference, says his firm has already helped to apply the lessons learned to cities as diverse as Melbourne and New York — and that they can be applied all around the world.

“In every city, ever, when we started, we were told it may happen in some cosy European city, but it could never happen in Melbourne, never happen in Sydney, never happen in New York, never happen in Seattle, never happen in any other place,” Gehl said in a telephone interview. “In all the places, it started with people saying that. And it ended with, no one could remember who said anything against it ... It becomes a much nicer city and people come to the city in greater numbers because it’s a nicer city, and the businesses benefit from this, and that has been proven beyond doubt.”

Though Gehl’s work looks broadly at public spaces and public life, the focus of the conference will be specifically on cycling. In Ottawa, the proportion of bicycle commuters is a paltry two per cent.

Increasing bike travel in a city begins with a change in attitude, says Mikael Colville-Anderson, a journalist, filmmaker, and founder of the biking fashion website Copenhagencyclechic.com.

In Ottawa, there are 258 kilometres of recreational paths, but not a single downtown bike lane — east-west or north-south — that could take cyclists from Vanier to Westboro, or from the Parliament Buildings to Billings Bridge.

“In the past 40 years, North America has only had bikes marketed as sport and recreation. Nobody can see the bicycle as we see it here in Copenhagen, as the quickest way to get around the city,” said Colville-Anderson.

Prior to the Second World War, the bike had been the most common mode of urban transportation in Copenhagen, he said. But by the 1960s, cars began to squeeze bikes and pedestrians off city streets.

“In the 1970s, there was a whole grassroots movement around the bicycle. People were saying: we want safer streets. We want to be able to ride our bikes to work, like we did 20 years ago,” Mikael said.

Faced with congestion, popular pressure, and the rising price of gasoline during the 1970s oil crisis, city planners dedicated space on the streets to bicycles.

In Copenhagen, the political will was fuelled by research conducted by Gehl and his colleagues at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, starting in the mid-1960s.

The amount of automobile-free space in central Copenhagen has grown from 15,800 square metres in 1962 to 100,000 square metres today. That’s the equivalent of about eight Sparks Streets from Bronson to Elgin, in a metro area with about the same population as Ottawa.

Every year, the city removes two to three per cent of downtown parking and adds more segregated bike lanes.

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“Some people are upset. But we have a clear strategy that we want to limit the numbers of cars in the city,” said Bo Asmus Kjeldgaard, Copenhagen’s mayor for technical and environmental administration (a post roughly akin to a minister, on a city council overseen by a lord mayor). “It is about making the decision and then getting moving.”

Does the political will exist in

Ottawa to go down this route?

While Lemay is keen, Ottawa Mayor Larry O’Brien has said he’s not very interested in cycling, and turned down the invitation by the NCC head to attend the Velo-City conference.

Mayoral candidate Jim Watson said he supports a proposed pilot project for an east-west downtown bike lane. “Both sides have their argument: it’s going to be better for business, it’s going to be worse for business,” Watson said. “Well, let’s roll it out, look at the results objectively, and my hope is that the results will come back that will show the concept of an east-west segregated bike lane is a good idea.”

Candidate Alex Cullen, also in favour of a pilot project, is willing to go further with a vision for Ottawa 10 years down the road:

“I would expect to see at least two, if not more, east-west routes with segregated bike lanes as well as two, if not more, north-south routes with segregated bike lanes,” said Cullen, who is currently the councillor for Bay ward. “And I would like to see at least one clear route for winter cyclists.”

If people are to ride their bikes to work, shopping, to dinner and the theatre, they need a well-connected network of safe bike lanes. The lack of such a network in Ottawa is one of the big reasons why so few people commute by bike, despite the fact 57 per cent of Ottawans describe themselves as cyclists and 70 per cent of households own at least one bike.

“We have a disjointed network as it exists now. It’s not well-connected,” said Alex Culley (not to be confused with Alex Cullen), a planner who works on transportation demand issues with the City of Ottawa.

He said cyclists often have to travel on busy roads to cover the gaps between one bike path and another. “I think these sort of gaps can be fairly daunting to your average cyclist.”

By contrast, Copenhagen’s 350 kilometres of segregated bike paths criss-cross the city. On some major roads, the traffic lights are synchronized so that a cyclist travelling at 20 km/h will pass through a wave of green lights. And the bike lanes are the first things cleared of snow.

“We know from 40 years of best practice, if you put in separate infrastructure people will ride. They’re safer and they feel safer,” said Colville-Anderson.

In Ottawa, city staff are holding public consultations on a pilot project for a segregated, east-west bike route across downtown. Their highest-ranked option is Somerset Street.

But business groups are strongly opposed.

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“All of a sudden they want to take parking away from Chinatown and all across Somerset with vague claims that it’s good for business,” said Preston Street BIA executive director Lori Mellor. “Copenhagen is a very different city from Ottawa. It’s not a city of suburbs. We’re so geographically spread out. It has a rapid-transit system that goes underground. And gas is \$4 a litre in Copenhagen, not 93 cents. My small businesses cannot force this kind of a change on our customers.”

But cyclists and cycling advocates have also been coming out to the public consultations this month, and Culley said public opinion is beginning to favour such initiatives.

“Now people are seeing how it works in Montreal and in Europe. They’re saying let’s try it out. See if it works.”

Derek Crain, chairman of the Somerset Village BIA, is against a cycling lane on Somerset in part because he believes cyclists will conflict with the area’s main clientele, pedestrians. “Bicycles are assertive traffic. There’s a lot of very fast cyclists,” he said. “We have a pedestrian environment and that’s what we want. Pedestrians are shoppers. Cyclists aren’t.”

It’s true many cyclists in North America are lycra-clad urban road warriors, said Colville-Anderson. But that’s because they are the only ones hardened enough to brave the unwelcoming city streets.

Once segregated bike lanes are established, ordinary people will start to use them, Colville-Anderson said.

“If you’re sitting stuck in traffic and these guys in the separate lane — men in suits, girls in dresses — they’re passing you, (you’ll think) I’ve got that old Schwinn in the garage. I’m going to try that,” he said.

As to the concern that cyclists won’t be good shoppers because they can’t carry large loads on their bikes, Colville-Anderson said studies in Copenhagen have shown that cyclists are actually better shoppers, because they pick up small loads and return to shops frequently, ultimately buying more than people who shop by car.

Cycling is only part of the picture as cities seek to become “Copenhagenized,” says Gehl. When his firm is hired to advise a city — as they will soon be doing in Montreal — they look at what positive public spaces already exist, and how to build on them.

“From a time where the traffic engineer was God, we are passing into a new situation where there’s much more focus on people, on the wellbeing of people, and on public life in the city,” he said. “The wind is blowing from new directions and cities are being more and more wise. Around the world there are so many cities who have done this turn-around to a people-friendly, sustainable, and healthy city.”

Questions & Answers

The Citizen’s Kate Jaimet conducted an interview by e-mail with Bo Asmus Kjeldgaard, the Copenhagen city politician in charge of the city’s bicycle infrastructure. This is an edited version of the exchange.

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Q: I read that 37 per cent of people in Copenhagen cycle to work or school, and that the city aims to increase that to 50 per cent. Why is it so important for the city to promote and increase cycling?

A: Cycling is by far the easiest way to get around in the city. It is the fastest way, a bicycle doesn't pollute, it makes no noise and it is healthy for commuters. We also want our city to be the first carbon-neutral capital in the world in 2025 and transport and traffic plays an enormous role. We want to reduce the amount of cars in our city and thereby reduce the amount of carbon.

Q: Do people cycle in from the suburbs, or is most of the cycling in and around downtown?

A: Some people use their bikes to get in from the suburbs, but not as many as we would like. Therefore we are developing new bicycle routes from the suburbs to the heart of the city. These routes are separated from other traffic forms and are exclusively for bicycles. We also try to combine cycling and public transportation. For instance by letting passengers bring their bike on the train for free.

Q: How expensive is it to build the cycling infrastructure?

A: It cost quite a bit to build the infrastructure but it is worth the investment. By staking on making it attractive to bikes we benefit from a healthier, more fit population and a city with less pollution than in other similar cities where cars are given the priority.

Q: In Ottawa, people argue that putting in bike lanes will mean taking away parking spaces. I understand that Copenhagen has been reducing downtown parking by about three per cent each year.

How do you do that? Aren't people upset?

A: Yes, some people are upset. But we have a clear strategy that we want to limit the numbers of cars in the city. Not least when it comes to reducing commuting by car. One of the means to fulfill this ambition is to limit the number of parking spaces, but at the same time making public transportation as well as biking infrastructure an actual alternative.

Q: In Ottawa, the city government wants to try out a bike track across downtown but the business associations are fighting against it. Did the city of Copenhagen face the same arguments and how did you overcome them?

A: Bikes and the need for investment in biking infrastructure are generally accepted by businesses. First of all, fewer cars limits congestion, making it easier for workmen to reach their destination. Furthermore, bikers have the same spending power as motorists. In Copenhagen biking is not seen as a sign of a lack of status. Actually, it is very common to see businessmen riding their bikes wearing suits.