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Enrique Peñalosa: What makes a good city?

In the three years that Enrique Peñalosa was Mayor of Colombian capital Bogotá (1998-2001), he oversaw a revolution in the city's transport system. He was able to reduce car use and focus public funds on busways, cycling and walking facilities, particularly in Bogotá's poorer areas. In early February, at a Brisbane seminar hosted by PedBikeTrans and Griffith University, as part of a speaking tour organised by the Australian Bicycle Council, Peñalosa discussed how transport policy can create environmentally and socially sustainable cities.

He observed that the prominence of cars in our cities is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to that, streets were for people. These days, however, if you scream, 'Watch out! A car!' to a three year-old child, Peñalosa said, "Anywhere in the world the child will jump in terror - and with good reason, because there are more than 200,000 children killed by cars every year in the world." He then posed the critical question, "Is this the best we can do?"

Cars represent problems to urban quality of life, irrespective of the issue of car pollution, Peñalosa emphasised. However, reducing car use requires more than money. Governments must resist the temptation to build more roads and highways, as their leadership in reducing space for cars, forces behaviour change. "It is government that determines, explicitly or implicitly, how much the car will be used."

When designing a good city, once people's basic needs are met, Peñalosa believes there are three major elements that are required for human happiness. Firstly, to be with other people, secondly, to walk (he sees riding a bicycle as just a more efficient way of walking), and thirdly, conditions that allow poorer citizens to feel equal and included. Reducing space for cars in the city is critical for achieving each of these elements.

"The least of the least that a democracy should provide its citizens, is a way to walk safely without getting killed," Peñalosa urged. "We need to walk, the same way a fish needs to swim, a bird needs to fly or a deer needs to run - just to feel well."

It is important to create a city in which people want to be outdoors, where they have attractive nearby destinations to walk to, allowing them to see and interact with others in the street. Peñalosa believes that while sidewalks (or footpaths) are useful for getting from A to B, they have been incorrectly perceived as relatives of streets. "They are for playing, for talking, for kissing," he said. "They really are relatives of parks or plazas."

Peñalosa explained that the same type of city is created whether striving for quality of life and environmental sustainability, or social justice. For example, providing excellent infrastructure for walking and cycling contributes to improving quality of life and environmental sustainability, but was also crucial for addressing social inequality in Bogotá, in part by changing the self-perception of the poorer citizens.

“[Bikeways have] totally transformed people’s attitudes towards themselves, their self-respect,” Peñalosa said. “It’s a symbol that shows that people are important. Somebody on a \$30 bicycle is equally important as somebody in a \$30,000 car.”

Peñalosa revitalised the notion that cities should be places where people can be happy and find enjoyment. “Every detail in a city should show that human beings are sacred,” he said. In addition to being places where rich and poor people are integrated as equals in public locations, he concluded, “A good city is one where a child on a bicycle, or even a tricycle, can safely go anywhere.”

PedBikeTrans is an independent group of transport professionals promoting excellence in active transport planning www.pedbiketrans.asn.au

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