Cyclists' Grass Roots Democracy - The importance of strategic participation

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Pro-cycling movements learn from experiences all over the world, but as conditions change, so do the lessons. Too often, we look only at infrastructure, rather than the people who make change happen.

Same toolbox: different ways to **put it all together in each city**

Dutch

Start with an idea, work together to adapt to our own realities

Chilean

Figure 1. Although the list of cycling-inclusive measures is relatively the same everywhere, priorities vary according to each city culture. Thus, in Santiago, with little green space for children, high walking levels and recyclers with specific needs when it comes to facilities, cycling-inclusivity can (and should) look different.

If we focus too much on the "what", we get trapped in some pretty sterile debates: over compulsory or optional helmet use, cycleways versus road warrior approaches, "wars" against drivers or cyclists, etc. What really matters though, is how we move our issues and priorities onto public agendas, and how we keep them there long enough to see substantial change.

In Europe, shifts toward more sustainable transport modes and cycle-inclusivity took 20-30 years. Keeping an issue in the policy eye for that long is a major challenge. And democracy is crucial, particularly in countries where we're just starting to democratise our own urban planning cultures. What is most crucial about democracy though, is something that many take for granted: civil society, that is, organized citizens, the space where you and me become "we".

Indeed, the "Who" is a central issue for innovation in urban policy. And building (cycling) inclusive cities requires substantial innovation. In fact, it requires a paradigm change, away from automobility (see Beckman and others below), to new, sustainable living systems based on social justice, happiness and environmental benefits for all living species.

The goal: (cycling) inclusive living

Building inclusive cities requires cycling (and walking, and wheelchairing) in every single road facility and public space developed as part of city policy (figure 2). This means roads are redistributed to benefit more people. Cars, ultimately, get crowded out. When it comes to sustainable transport for cities, they're space-hogging, energy-guzzling and inefficient.

Figure 2. (Cycling) inclusive cities are about redistributing roads for multiple uses and in favour of the most efficient, socially just forms of work and transport. Photo: Sagaris Delhi (India).

For better cities, we need to think more about segregating cars, to keep public transit, walkers, cyclists and wheelchair users safe, and give people more room to garden, chat, play ball. Don't confuse long-term goals with the steps we must follow to reach them, though. That can lead to sterile fundamentalism and break down the dialogues necessary to build commitment to change.

Think about long-term goals. Hammer them out and build consensuses with all possible partners. Then figure out what transitional steps are necessary to achieve them. Be careful not to use transitional steps that will block progress further down the road. Taking space away from pedestrians, by building cycle facilities on sidewalks, for example, can lead to a dead end, because ultimately that doesn't change how roads are distributed among needs and users. Using parking lanes for raised (Seville) or at-grade (Vancouver, elsewhere) cycle paths can be very effective however, so don't be dogmatic. Every measure plays out differently in different contexts.

Painting lines on roads, as citizens do in Guadalajara (see Appendix) or city planners do in Brussels (see Appendix) and Toronto (see Appendix) may not be ideal, particularly where speeds and volumes of motorised traffic are rather high. But they can open the way to more cycle users, and therefore more pressure for improvements. Putting them beside parked cars, though, leaving cyclists vulnerable to dooring (Toronto), causes accidents and no-win arguments about blame.

Building (cycling) inclusive cities requires planning to make sure improvements occur in specific periods of time, meet standards and have special budgets to "catch up" and meet targets for boosting walking and cycling. It also requires including the appropriate measures and facilities in all new residential, commercial and other development projects.

Strategies to mobilize ecologies of actors

Cycling inclusivity requires more than just individual tactics: cycle rides, bike to work months, fashionable blogs, lobbying, etc. These need to be combined into long-term strategies that make the most of local opportunities, partnerships, crises and potential.

Figure 3. Santiago's cycling roundtable (2008). Led by the regional government and Ciclistas Unidos de Chile, with support from the Dutch NGO, Interface for Cycling Expertise, the roundtable brought together government staff, cyclists and civil society groups, environmental and neighbourhood leaders, consultants, academics and others interested in moving cycling ahead. See Appendix.

Figura 4: Building the social imaginary: A cycling-related spectrum

	Cyclist-centred	Community-based
Defining view	Cycling as an end	Cycling as a means
Participants	Cyclists, young, athletic, mostly male	Diverse in age, education, family, incomes
Identity	Urban tribe, tough, "road warrior", macho	Collective, community view, gender aware
Social capital	Bonding (strong shared interests, fellowship)	Bridging diverse: networks, alliances, diverse relationships
Narrative strategy	Must survive the hostile city, "real" cyclists versus others who are not, competitive, aggressive (speeding on sidewalks, etc.)	Inclusive: cycling and walking is healthy, safe, empowering, etc.; multi-modal, ride respectfully; interconnection of all road users
Needs	Tough bike, helmet-wearing (or not — according to local culture), specialized cycling gear: cyclist uses what's available, esp. sporting equipment	Women-friendly, task-friendly, clothing-friendly bikes and accessories sought. Cycling world should adapt to diverse users, particularly women and children
Organizations	Usually ad hoc, de facto rather than elected leadership	Collective styles of leadership, ad hoc groups and legally constituted organizations, with elected leaders, transparency, accountability
Funding	Anathema, except for small amounts raised through selling cycling-related paraphernalia to supporters and fans	Membership fees and external funding to finance increasingly sophisticated programmes; Tendency toward professionalization

This involves mobilising "ecologies of actors" all the way along the cycling spectrum interested politicians, committed technical people (sometimes called "inside activists", Olsson and Hysing), relevant private sector players (retailers, educators, designers, consultants), neighbourhood associations, women's and many other groups. There's a whole spectrum of approaches, attitudes and interests that is necessary to push cycling ahead.

This requires people, organizations, and a wide variety of groups: a dense and diverse ecology of actors. Different styles, profiles, attitudes and strategies can help. So does debate.

Figure 5. Police on bikes supervise student demonstration in Toronto, February 2012. Unlike other actors in the system, citizens can protest, change rules, open eyes and minds to new ways of doing things.
Photo: Sagaris, Toronto (Canada).

What's important is that everyone find their niche and that interactions are based on mutual respect.

Someone has to do the mobilizing and normally this is the job of civil society organizations. That's because most other players are thinking short-term. Planners think in terms of current rules and regulations, politicians are looking for votes, and private players are busy ensuring they can pay the bills and have something left over.

Citizens, however, are different. Citizens dream. Citizens can think about what is desirable and then move the whole system toward making those dreams a reality, protesting, arguing, critiquing, cajoling, proposing and cooperating (figure 5).

In Bellavista

In the Santiago arts neighbourhood of Bellavista, we applied cycling-inclusivity to a major project to recover its main street, Pío Nono, which had turned into a major centre for crime and filth, after years of neglect, reflecting its location between two municipal governments, Providencia and Recoleta. Working with support from local (María Elena Ducci) and international architects (Ricardo Austrich and David Dixon, from Boston), Living City and the neighbourhood associations organized charrettes, workshops, formal exchanges and other activities to build consensus for recovering the street, widening its sidewalks, reducing parking and introducing a short but crucial cycling lane, between the main access to the city and the San Cristobal Hill Metropolitan park.

It took eight long years and endless hours of work, but in 2008 (figures 6), neighbours, the minister of housing, representatives of the two mayors, restaurants and other people gathered to dance and celebrate the opening of the new Pío Nono. This also catalysed the development of the Patio Bellavista (see Appendix), a cycling-friendly centre for restaurants, crafts people and other small businesses, which has become a leader in the local economy and an innovative example to real estate developers interested in improving the city.

Figure 6. Neighbourhood association president, Gerardo Lanzaroti celebrates the inauguration of the new Pio Nono street, with a rousing cueca, Chile's national dance, accompanied by a neighbour.

The one-two rules of the policy cycle

Thinking in terms of ecologies of actors, rather than friends and enemies, good guys and bad guys, is important too. It means understanding that people in different niches within the ecology have different roles. As Chileans say, no point asking the elm tree for pears.

When no one's thinking about building a cycle network, someone has to start. Sometimes these are citizens' groups, like local cycling, walking and neighbourhood groups all over the world. Sometimes these are visionary politicians, as has occurred in many cities. The first one-two rule is that both -- visionary citizens/visionary politicians -- tend to alternate and we need both (figure 7a) over the long term, to pedal forward.

**The one-two dynamic:
maintain the movement**

Civil society pressure

Political leadership

Experts (technical staff, academics, NGOs, operators, others)

Civil society support

Political leadership

Figure 7a. The one-two rules illustrates the way civil society pressure alternates with political leadership, to keep key issues on the policy agenda.

**The one-two rule:
create pros, to offset contras**

Political leadership

Civil society support

Credibility requires
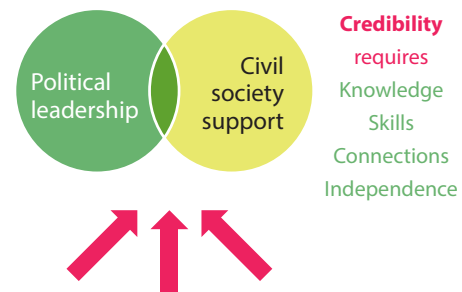Knowledge
Skills
Connections
Independence

Figure 7b. The one - two rules llustrates the importance of both types of actors: political leaders need civil society support when they apply controversial measures.
Source: Author´s elaboration on PhD research (2008 - 2012)

But when pioneering politicians or technical staff dare to act, they need external support. That support isn't credible if it only comes from their own membership, party or pet groups. Thus, they need support from credible, independent citizen organizations. The second one-two rule (figure 7b) is that we've got to build both political will and civil society organizations.

How: The nature of policy change, active citizenship and civil society

Funding and sustainable transport measures depend on public opinion. But most think solely in terms of individual citizens. It's true that each individual makes a difference.

Figure 8. Representatives of the two Bellavista neighbourhood associations, Living City, the mayors of Providencia and Recoleta, and the minister of housing on stage, celebrating the inauguration of the new Pio Nono streets, with wider sidewalks, no on-street parking and a cycle way (24 August 2008). Photograph: Mario López Vieyra.
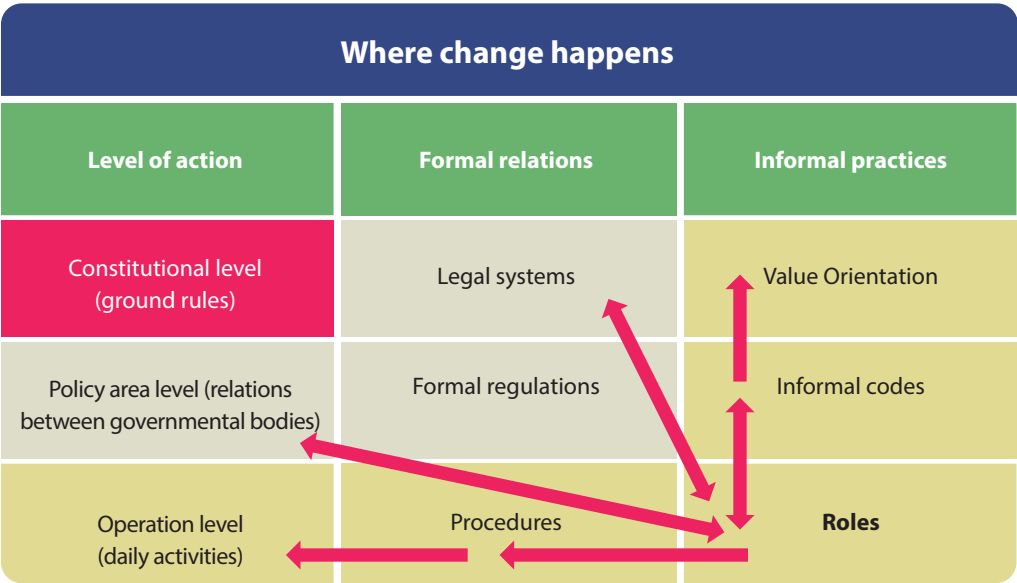
But organizations are the backbone of any social movement, because they accumulate knowledge, experience, networks of contacts and credibility.

Through active participation in planning, pressuring, protesting and proposing, organizations can generate the kinds of fruitful deliberation that make change possible. Just posturing and debating isn't enough. We need real heads-together-over-the-table conversation, that goes beyond dogma. Building this kind of change takes every kind of knowledge available: academic, technical and experiential.

That's because change doesn't happen just because we hold a demonstration, present a well-documented brief, or have a good meeting with a powerful politician. These are tactics. We need strategies that role them all together in a logical, effective way.

It sounds easy, but of course it's not. Change is multi-dimensional. Figure 9a shows the different spaces where change must take place for a new policy like cycling inclusivity to really take hold. Usually it's easiest to start with informal practices: how does your city plan transport, public space, walking and cycling facilities? Is this located in one department, or spread out over half a dozen national ministries and 52 municipalities (as happens in Santiago)?

Where change happens: Leverage points

Where change happens

Level of action	Formal relations	Informal practices
Constitutional level (ground rules)	Legal systems	Value Orientation
Policy area level (relations between governmental bodies)	Formal regulations	Informal codes
Operation level (daily activities)	Procedures	**Roles**

De Jong et al The theory and Practice of Institutional Transformation

Figure 9a. Where change happens. Based on De Jong et al. 1997. Normally it is easiest to start by changing informal practices, particularly roles, and then move into formal procedures and regulations. Constitutional, legal and other areas usually take the most effort to change, although there are some exceptions.

Figure 9b shows how both social movements and citizens' organizations are needed to generate new ways of building city transport systems and permanent change.
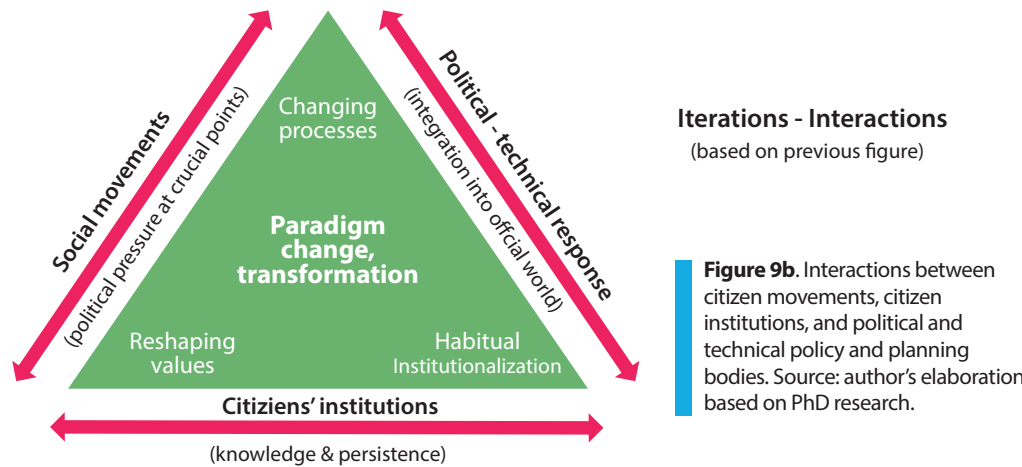
Social movements (political pressure at crucial points)

Political - technical response (integration into official world)

Changing processes

Paradigm change, transformation

Reshaping values

Habitual Institutionalization

Citiziens' institutions
(knowledge & persistence)

Iterations - Interactions
(based on previous figure)

Figure 9b. Interactions between citizen movements, citizen institutions, and political and technical policy and planning bodies. Source: author's elaboration, based on PhD research.

Figure 10 – Particpatory Mapping workshop 2008

Mapping your ecology of actors

A strategy for cycling-inclusivity has to locate all these actors and figure out how to approach them. The Dutch created a very useful matrix for this purpose (figure 11a). As we did in Santiago, you can identify where people are today (figure 11b, and also where you would like them to be (figure 11c). In Santiago we discovered that once we'd identified key actors and goals, positions shifted very quickly (within a year) to the positioning we sought.
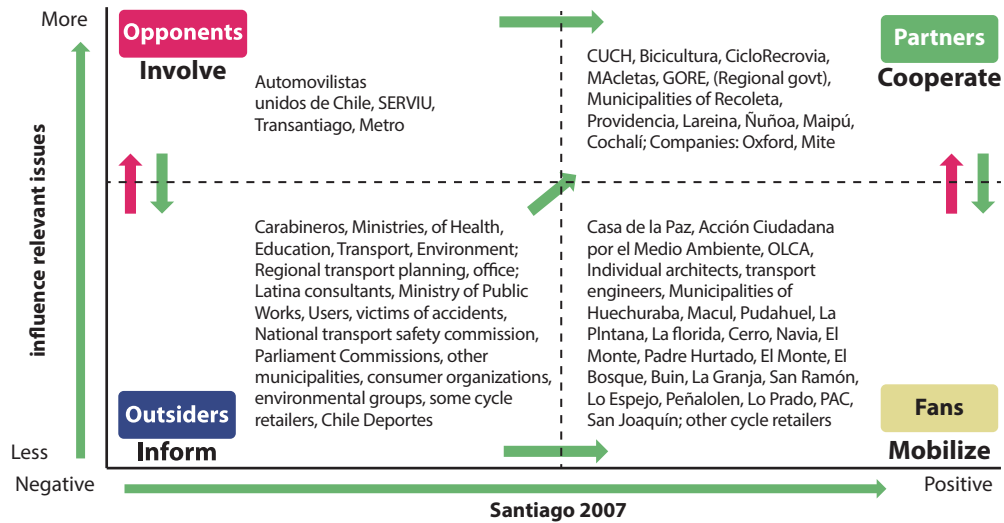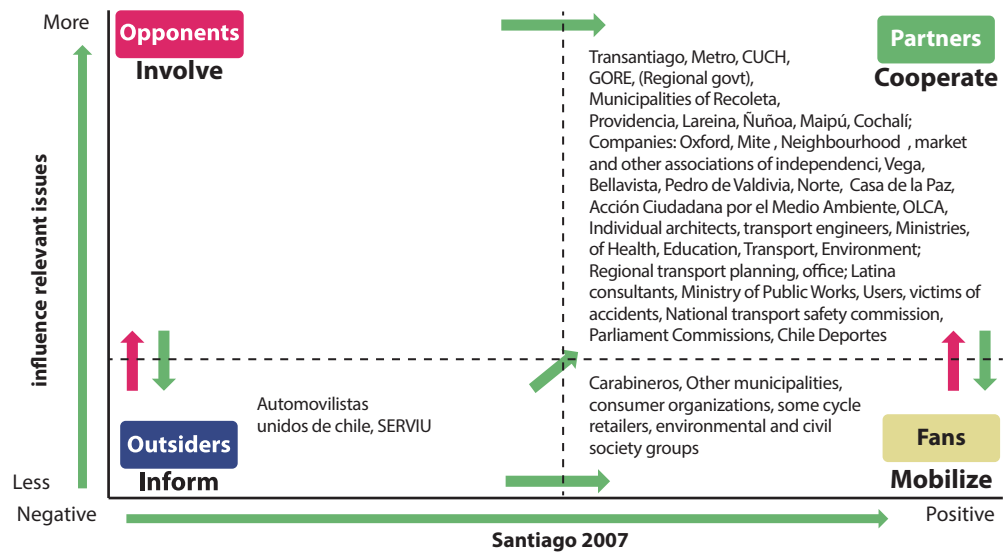

Figure 11a. A matrix for mapping your ecology of actors, developed by the Dutch province, Brabant, and used by Tom Godefrooij in cycle-planning training sessions (Santiago).

Figure 11b. Shows the initial mapping for Santiago.

Figure 11c. Shows our desired map, largely achieved in 2008 with the Cycling Master Plan Roundtable.

The key to a good strategy is to understand that we need to play many chords at the same time. Often citizen groups approach only friendly politicians. Or they only talk with a few technical staff or planners (figure 12a). But what's really important is to bring them all together (figure 12b) and talk to them in a coordinated way. This improves the information available, opens up decision-making to public scrutiny, and helps generate win-win rather than win-lose dynamics.

Variegated collection of organizations that constitute the state (Evans 2002)

(some) Private interests

Political actors

Technical staff

(closed) Elite

Excluded (Majority)

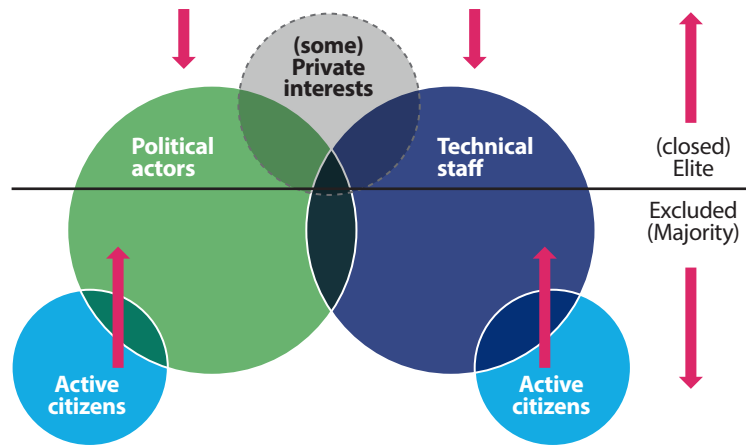**Active citizens**

Active citizens

Figure 12a. Typical approaches to power have citizens focusing on political actors or technical staff separately, leaving room for misunderstandings, false information, manipulation and other barriers.

Variegated collection of organizations that constitute the state (Evans 2002)

Environment

(some) Private interests

Political actors

Technical staff

Active citizens
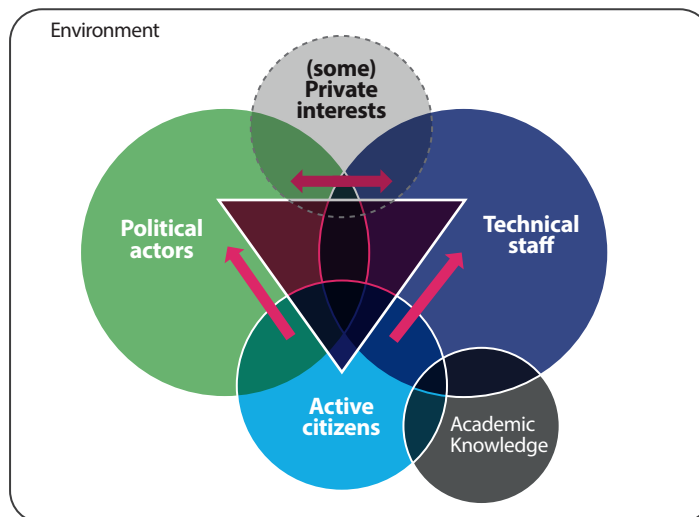
Academic Knowledge

Figure 12b. Generating working groups, roundtables and other participatory instances makes action by political leaders, technical staff and citizens more visible, which reinforces all-way relationships there by improving transparency and effectiveness.

It's very hard for a single organization to play this role: hence the importance of diverse civil society actors. In Santiago, after years of bitter conflict, six pro-cycling groups formed Ciclistas Unidos de Chile. Thus, one group, Bicicultura, does mostly cycling promotion through its annual festival, and considerable lobbying. Another, Ciclorecreovia, organises open (car-free) streets in different neighbourhoods. Macletas, with support from Living City, organizes a women's cycling school. Living City has become expert on technical standards and processes for cycle-inclusion.

To make these networks function well, sometimes we exercise leadership, and sometimes we follow. Together, good leadership and good followship build strong, resilient organizations. Horizontal participatory processes, where citizens run sessions, organize events and otherwise share power (and responsibility) with government are essential: they build capacity, credibility, but also the independent citizen voices necessary for innovation and winning public opinion.

What and Who

A cycling master plan is essential and it can't just be a declaration of good intentions: Portland, Madrid and other cities offer interesting examples. At the very least, it requires a proposed network, a participatory process, a permanent advisory board with a majority of citizens chosen by citizens' groups themselves, a permanent staff unit and ongoing training, including site visits and participation in key conferences, such as the European Cycling Federation's Velo-City. The plan also has to include funding and specific deadlines for completing new facilities. It should also contemplate cycle training, through formal and non-formal education systems (public health instances are ideal), and funding for diverse, citizen-led initiatives. For an excellent overview of the steps and issues involved, there is an excellent handbook developed by international experts, with support from the German development agency (GIZ) and the Dutch NGO Interface for Cycling expertise (Godefrooij, Pardo et al. 2009).

Final reflections

After you've been doing this for a while, you notice that the list of measures for cycling-inclusivity is pretty standard (Godefrooij et al. 2009). But every city adapts and applies the list differently. Building cycle-friendly streets is good everywhere, it's true. But how the same measures play out locally is always different.

This is because each place has its own history, culture and people, and they all come together differently within the urban planning system. But if you're not careful, a lot of people get left out, often the ones most relevant to change. Just copying what someone did somewhere else is never enough.

Redistributing road space by giving parking to wastepickers in Delhi, for example, can transform lives and build equality and social justice. Making cycle lanes wide enough for recyclers in Santiago or Lima is every bit as important. We can't just copy the "best" standards for somewhere else. Everything has to be adapted to the specific local culture. Mumford said every great city is a collective work of art. That's exactly what building (cycling) inclusive cities is all about.

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