

## **Beauty and the Bike**

*Teenage Girls and Urban Mobility Culture*

The cultural dimension to European urban traffic planning has, until now, been regarded as at best marginal to planners' concerns. With an education – and a contemporary practice – grounded in the practical solution to apparently technical problems, urban travel planners have historically had little to do with deeper socio-cultural trends.

But now that urban travel has taken centre stage in a new and radically different kind of production – the battle against global warming – the urgent need to change CO<sub>2</sub> emitting urban travel habits is requiring planners to take account of the cultural climate their apparently technical solutions have spawned. *Beauty and the Bike* is a cultural urban travel project that aims to help urban traffic planners, by looking at one such mobility culture – that of the teenage girl and young woman.

Central to this project are the ways teenage girls choose their travel modes in two European countries, the United Kingdom and Germany. The core production activity of the project is cultural, with a documentary film, portrait photography exhibition and catalogue as key outputs. But its work is also rooted in, and supported by, progressive urban travel planners in Darlington (UK) and Bremen (Germany). Teenage participants in the project live in these two urban areas.

Looking at their lives superficially, they seem similar – with internet and iPods, fashion, first loves, and the stresses of school. But when you look more closely you find an important difference: their choice of travel modes. And the ways and means teenagers are able to get around, shapes their identity and sense of independence. Especially for girls, these are of vital importance for their development. Whilst most of the Bremen girls use their bikes on a daily basis, the Darlingtonians mostly walk, take the bus, or hope for a lift from one of their parents.

Looking at these issues from a climate change perspective, walking and cycling are the most environmentally friendly forms of mobility, especially over short distances. The bicycle has a big plus: It is faster than walking, and without much effort you can increase your mobility range. You can also carry much more on a bike, with a properly equipped bike (panniers or fixed baskets) shopping is possible. And with a bike trailer you can even transport a toddler or crates of beer.

But the urban transport winner in Darlington (and elsewhere) is the car. A car is expensive (buying and maintaining it), it is noisy, produces poisonous emissions, smells badly and takes a lot of public space. Its use requires little physical effort, and therefore contributes to the growing obesity problem in western societies.

Recent studies carried out in Darlington show that the reasons people prefer to use the car are not necessarily rational. Perceptions about speed and economy regularly favour the car over other alternatives, despite consistent evidence to the contrary. Motives for this desire to see things as they are not, lie somewhere else - emotion, status, and last but not least in the massive means that are used by car companies to market cars. In short, to talk about transport and the choice of modes of transport in a comprehensive way (including climate change issues), we need to look at the socio-cultural and socio-psychological contexts in which urban travellers find themselves.

*Beauty and the Bike* aims to document the mobility culture, and particularly the bicycle culture, of an important, future oriented, target group. The project is focussed on girls and young women between 10 and 25 years old, and their attitude towards their travel choice, with the bicycle as the centre of interest.

In many parts of Germany, and not least in Bremen, the bike is an acknowledged means of everyday transport. That does not mean that it is always used as such: The share of 20% of the modal split by the bike in Bremen is indeed high for Germany, but compared to the leading cities of Münster (more than 35%) and Freiburg (26%), it is still not enough. In the UK, the figures are much worse. Typically, the modal share of the bicycle in British towns does not exceed 5%.

These differences in modal split lead to some remarkable cultural differences. In Germany, the Münster police inspector who stars in the country's most famous peak-time television detective series, *Tatort*, gets around town on a basic bicycle. Meanwhile, most Britons perceive cycling as a sport. Helmets and lycra dressing are normal, and in shops bikes are normally sold without any lighting or luggage carriers. Everyday cyclists of the Münster police inspector variety are looked at as slightly weird.

For teenagers the question of their image is crucial. And if cycling is seen as mad or eccentric, it is unlikely to appear attractive. Thus, UK transport statistics show that the already low percentage of British girls who have cycled regularly as a child, stop doing so when they reach puberty.

In Germany such cultural barriers seem much weaker, despite the country having the third highest per capita car ownership in Europe. But even in bicycle-friendly Bremen, these cultural processes are not yet understood, the 20% part in modal split could easily be improved. In Bremen, therefore, *Beauty and the Bike* aims to help better understand why cycling is indeed culturally attractive to teenage girls and young women – and might be made more so as teenagers become adult citizens.

*Beauty and the Bike* will compare cultures of mobility in the northern German city of Bremen, and the northern English market town of

Darlington. Darlington is the only English town that combines the titles „Cycling Demonstration Town“ and „Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town“. With a share of less than 3% of cycling in the modal split these titles might to an outsider seem strange. Rather, they are an indication, despite its characteristically British urban (motorized) travel history, of the town’s commitment to increasing sustainable travel. As a Demonstration Town, Darlington Borough Council receives grants from London to develop a structure for sustainable transport, and especially for cycling.

Interestingly, whilst planning the project, the aim was to take Darlington’s twin town Mülheim an der Ruhr as the German reference town. But as we looked more closely, we realized that Mülheim, though it belongs to the Nordrhein-Westfalen association of bike friendly cities (Fahrradfreundliche Städte), hardly offers better conditions for everyday cyclists than Darlington. The share of cycling of the modal split is hardly more than 5%, and the physical conditions for everyday cycling are remarkably similar to those in Mülheim’s partner town in England. The infrastructure shows that Mülheim (like Darlington) is trying to improve conditions for cyclists, but it seems that knowledge of the needs of the everyday cyclist is lacking. Mülheim cycle routes are defined by signage rather than cycling infrastructure. They often vanish into general motor traffic conditions. The confusion between the cyclist as a pseudo-pedestrian and a pseudo-motorist, as in the UK, results in frequent stopping and starting for the cyclist.

That shows that the development of cycling is not simply tied to the general transport culture of a country, an opinion that is widely held in Britain that inhibits pro-cycling urban planning, but is also dependent on local measures and the vision of local urban transport planners. This is why the results of this project are also interesting in other European urban areas.

Bremen’s definition as a cycling friendly city in Germany derives from this local urban travel vision, and the way this is applied to the development of cycling infrastructure. Talking to some girls, we were also listening to critical voices, especially complaining about the poor condition of some cycle paths. But we noted that cycle paths are spread all over Bremen, and it was clear that the girls looked at their bikes as their most important means of transport, a view that is reflected in the everyday street life. Understanding this vision, and the way in which its application has a cultural impact, is a crucial component of our project.

Between summer 2008 and 2009, *Beauty and the Bike* documents the differences between travel customs in Bremen and Darlington, with the aim to produce a 40 minute film, a photo exhibition and a catalogue. Girls and young women between 10 and 25 from each place are invited to participate. They will work with the film crew and two photographers, aiming for the development of self portraits to show their own view of

mobility, coolness and fun. We want them to show how they get around in town, how they want to be seen, and how they can or could realize cool transport on a bike, how much fun they have when they cycle, and how liberating a means of transport can be that allows the girls to be mobile without public transport or their parents' cars.

For most of the Bremen teenagers this is very straight-forward. They know already how to look cool on a bike and about the advantages of cycling. But for most of the Darlingtonian girls this is somewhat new, a work of drama rather than fact. Cycling is looked at as uncool, the cyclists they see generally wear helmets and funny plastic clothes, and cycling is considered dangerous in Darlington. There are few completely off-road cycle routes, and on roads motorists are given considerable priority in the design of traffic management. Consequently a cyclist needs an enormous amount of self-confidence towards the car driver, a nearly macho like conduct which girls normally do not have. Not surprisingly, the majority of cyclists are men. Given these two strong cultural contexts – sport and masculinity – it is no wonder that cycling proves so culturally unattractive to British teenage girls.

As British children start to attend school, they are typically accompanied on the journey by their parents, either walking or in the car. Paradoxically, the main reason cited is the danger caused by motorists. As they normally have to share and negotiate these busy roads, a bicycle is rarely looked at as an alternative. Even so, Darlington is experiencing significant success in encouraging younger school-children to cycle to school (the town has two officers dedicated to encouraging more school cycling) - at least until they reach puberty.

Another aim of our project is therefore to organize an exchange of the two groups. While we are shooting the film and taking the pictures, the girls get acquainted with their counterparts via the internet, where they will communicate on a web site created exclusively for the project. In April and July 2009 some of the girls on both sides will travel to the other town to experience first hand how the other side's bicycle culture looks like, and how mobility feels on the other side of the project. Of course all this shall be documented by the project.

To support a culture of gentle cycling some girls from Darlington have founded a club in February 2009, aiming to initiate a scheme of sharing bicycles as it is done in many European countries. "Velodarlo" has bought City Bikes and Dutch Bikes with the support of the European Union (Youth in Action) and Darlington's Youth Opportunity Fund "The Dosh". Darlington Borough Council are also supporting the project by providing two Dutch Bikes. Like everything else, Velodarlo will be documented in our project *Beauty and the Bike*.

In late autumn/beginning of the winter of 2009 there will be two film premieres and exhibition openings – one in each town. All participants will be invited to at least one of the premieres and openings.

*Beauty and the Bike* is produced by Darlington Media Group with the support of Darlington Borough Council. The project is produced with the cooperation of Bremerhaven based group Dokument@r, Darlington Cycling Campaign, Gymnasium Obervieland in Bremen, Gewitterziegen Bremen, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Bremen and Kulturzentrum Schlachthof Medienwerkstatt Bremen.

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We plan to offer the film and the exhibition to other European communities as training material. By providing a bilingual film, exhibition and catalogue in two of the leading European languages, German and English, we believe that the results can be used in most European countries.

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