



HOW CICLOVÍAS CAN UNFREEZE STREETS

*and open them to equitable
human infrastructure*

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JULY 2014



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CicLAvia brings life to the street in Los Angeles in May 2012. Photo by the author.

Introduction

The invitation to physical activity created through *ciclovías*, or open streets events, makes them a great health promotion tool. Beyond improving the health of individual participants, what are the social effects of these events?

Street interventions offer an opportunity to observe the connections between individual behavior, built environments, and cultural attitudes about how individuals should behave. While many experts have identified the twentieth century development of built environments designed for driving as a deterrent to active transportation behavior, we also face an underdeveloped “human infrastructure” to support travel by other modes. Cultural attitudes toward transportation must also change if we are to see a major shift in how we travel in the United States.

To investigate how the *ciclovía* model can stimulate equitable and sustainable changes in travel behavior, this paper applies the social psychology concept of “unfreezing” habit to an ethnographic study of Los Angeles’ transportation hierarchy. *Ciclovía* organizers should be tracking changes to the built environment along their routes (Lugo 2013). They should also be documenting how the events stimulate the development of human infrastructure that supports equitable active transportation.

An equitable and sustainable street culture supports active transportation both in everyday practice and in planning and policy. This paper draws on the findings of ethnographic research on the bike movement in Los Angeles conducted from January 2008 to February 2011.

Human Infrastructure

Though what happens on a public street may seem to be a response to physical infrastructure, an ethnographic approach to urban space reveals the importance of human infrastructure. This phenomenon can be located in the everyday space of the street, where people negotiate each others' movements as they travel, and in the social networks through which shared ideas circulate.¹

This approach differs from conventional bicycle research, which encourages counting bike users as homogeneous groups and discounting the differences among these users. The reality is that people can use bikes, walk, and ride transit for very different purposes and hold varying attitudes toward using these modes. Two bicycle users might inhabit different social worlds even as they coincide in the street. Investigating what human infrastructure underpins bicycle usage allows for a greater understanding of travel behavior, which is vital to making street plans that serve a diverse range of users.

When focusing on the diversity of human infrastructure occupying the same streets, the challenge of planning becomes a question of power. The social nature of shared spaces mean that we define them differently at the same time; those with the most power get to say what the best or most "right" use of a space is. This does not mean that other uses disappear, but they might become less valued as the dominant way of using a space becomes normalized through individual habit. When this happens, the human infrastructure supporting alternative ways of using a space becomes scarce.

¹ The social network has become a site of focus in public health's Social Network as Activity Promotion (SNAP) model (Rovniak et al. 2013). For example, a recent article suggested using Black women's social networks to promote physical activity (Versey 2014).

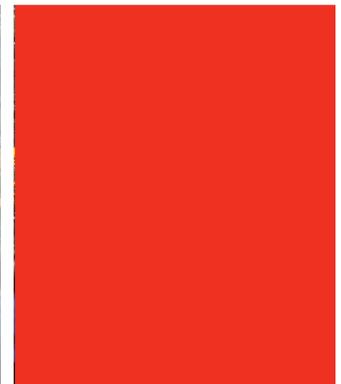
For many years, human infrastructure for transportation bicycling in the United States was concentrated in pockets of alternative urbanism. The group ride Critical Mass that started in San Francisco in 1992 and has since spread to many cities across the globe should be seen as a potent demonstration of human infrastructure for bicycling (Lugo 2012a).

Unfreezing Habit

When a region's human infrastructure supports driving almost exclusively, individuals may unconsciously decide that biking, walking, and using public transit are not viable options. Ciclovías create new opportunities for developing human infrastructure that supports these modes because they disrupt unconscious transportation habits. Creative uses of urban space such as ciclovías take advantage of human infrastructure's flexibility, and encourage street users to "unfreeze" their transportation habits.

Habit is another form of human infrastructure; unfreezing is a way to change it. In a study on methods for encouraging consumer recycling, Dahlstrand and Biel pointed to the need to unfreeze unconscious habit before assuming that individuals would make informed behavior changes because "people may have well established habits that are not easily overcome simply by information aimed at changing attitudes" (1997:588). The authors drew on a 1958 essay by social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who "calls such [habitual] behavior 'frozen.' A successful change includes breaking the habit, 'unfreezing' the behavior, moving to a new level, that is, developing a new behavior, and freezing the behavior on this new level" (1997:589). Building human infrastructure that supports active transportation requires unfreezing the driving habit in the United States.

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Minneapolis Open Streets (Alliance for Biking & Walking Photo Library); CicLAvia in Los Angeles (Tafarai Bayne, CicLAvia); Tucson Open Streets (Alliance for Biking & Walking Photo Library); Vancouver Open Streets (Alliance for Biking & Walking Photo Library); CicLAvia (Tafarai Bayne, CicLAvia); CicLAvia (Jeff Miller)



Even if a community values health, this attitude alone may not lead to changes in travel behavior without disrupting street use habits; positive attitudes toward a given activity may not lead to changed behavior because of habit (Verplanken et al. 1994). Though *ciclovías* create temporary rather than permanent changes to a street's built environment, they may still be effective in unfreezing precisely because they disrupt street norms. In a study on the impact of a free bus pass on travel behavior, Fujii and Kitamura found that "temporary structural changes in service levels may also change attitudes toward travel modes or travel habits" (2003:82). After their study period ended, participants who had received a free bus pass used the bus more often than they had previously.

Toward an Equitable Street

Though it is an intervention designed to disrupt individual habit, the *ciclovía* model operates at the social level; the *ciclovía* unfreezes individual habit by disrupting the street. Interventions in public space should be designed equitably, which in this case means creating an event that reflects the cultural values of more than one group. The *ciclovía* should be a melting pot of multicultural mobility. Planners could use *ciclovías* as living, inclusive charrettes if a representative pool of participants attended.

However, encouraging a range of communities to participate in the *ciclovía* can be a challenge. As Hipp et al. (2012) have noted in the case of St. Louis, open street events may not be attended by populations disproportionately impacted by health problems such as obesity, perhaps because these communities do not see the events as intended for them. Even individuals who currently use active transportation may not see themselves as the target population for events like this. Though in urbanist circles we see them as social goods, others may consider walking, biking, and using public transit to be low status options to be abandoned when fortunes improve.

Because we have not valued its importance, human infrastructure that supports active transportation might not be recognized as human capital if it occurs outside of built environments already designed for walking and biking.

Ciclovía organizers should identify what human infrastructure currently exists along their routes, looking not just for pockets of active transportation activism, but for the "invisible riders" (Koeppel 2005) in communities of color. Knowing what human infrastructure already exists matters because the *ciclovía* model should appeal to more than a self-selecting group of participants. People who use active transportation out of economic necessity are often absent from biking and walking advocacy work and will remain so until we reach beyond our comfort zones and learn about what human infrastructure makes their mobilities possible.

Planners should be curious about how marginalized groups make hostile environments work for walking and biking, both from a design standpoint and because their ingenuity has a shelf life. Even if someone cannot afford to own a car, s/he has most likely absorbed the ubiquitous message that car ownership symbolizes success. While bicycling and walking advocates have attempted to use aspirational messaging as well, the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among these professionals often reinforces the divide between those who use active transportation by choice and those who use it out of economic necessity.

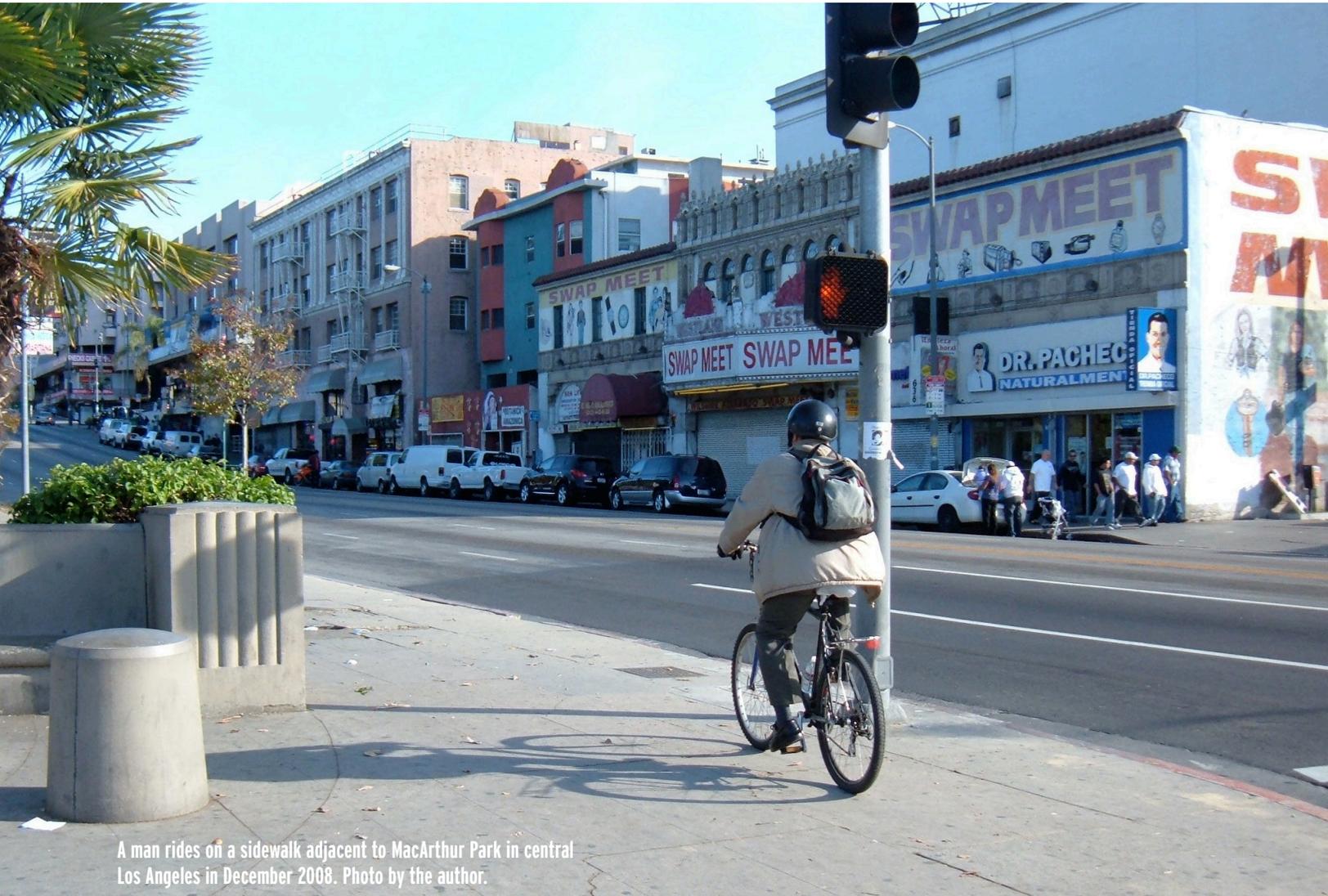
Equitable changes to streets should encompass physical infrastructure and human infrastructure. If promoted in culturally appropriate fashion, the *ciclovía* model creates an ideal space for this dual project because it highlights the reality that streets are multicultural spaces where diverse groups circulate. What place can illustrate this better than Los Angeles?

Case Study: Frozen Los Angeles

I developed the human infrastructure idea while helping to organize CicLAvia in Los Angeles and simultaneously doing outreach with day laborers who used bikes in central L.A.'s MacArthur Park neighborhood. In work by urban ethnographers AbdouMaliq Simone (2009) and Filip De Boeck (2004) on Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, I found descriptions of how people and relationships became infrastructure when official channels and flows were insufficient. Similarly, I saw bike users in central Los Angeles turn sidewalks into trails, riding over the jumbled concrete broken by stubborn ficus tree roots simply because

a rusty-chained mountain bike was the only means they had to get to employment opportunities. Among the self-identified bike activists, making the city work for biking and walking when so many others thought this was impossible was a project shared in offices, bike co-ops, and on group rides.

What made it hard to bike in Los Angeles was not simply the built environment; it was the disdain with which drivers treated people traveling outside of cars. Historically, this disdain related to race. L.A.'s ethnic diversity was long seen as social pollution, one of the main things to be avoided by moving out to new suburbs. White flight and driving culture expanded and became



A man rides on a sidewalk adjacent to MacArthur Park in central Los Angeles in December 2008. Photo by the author.

habitual together in Los Angeles. In 1926, while the city was deciding where to site what is now Union Station, the Examiner newspaper asked that, “if there is ever to be a union station...let it at least not be located between Chinatown and Little Mexico.’ Which would the public prefer, the paper asked, a ‘depot in [the] Chinese district, or no more grade crossings?’” (quoted in Bottles 1987:151). Removing the streetcars from surface streets in order to allow more private cars to circulate was important, but not at the cost of spending city money on a new facility adjacent to ethnic enclaves.

Because of tremendous population growth, the 1920s were a crucial period that shaped L.A.’s transportation landscape. L.A. residents adopted driving first in the country, due to the distances between homes and work and as a reaction to perceived corruption in the streetcar companies (Bottles 1987). Those who could afford to purchase cars could travel where and when they pleased, without being beholden to a timetable or crammed into a hot space with many other bodies. As traveling in cars became a mark of distinction, traveling outside of cars became a mark of difference.

Ridership on the streetcars went down and with declining profits the condition of the cars deteriorated. The demise of Los Angeles’ extensive streetcar system in the mid twentieth century created a sharp divide between those who could afford to drive and those who could not, a difference that continues to resonate today (Hutchinson 2000).

Over time, as the white population grew in suburbs and communities of color grew in the central city, Los Angeles’ transportation inequities

became a site for social justice struggles, and by the time I was working with bike activists in L.A., the Bus Riders Union had been fighting for transit justice in the city for well over a decade. Still, in May 2010, I heard an official at the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) characterize L.A.’s informal transportation hierarchy this way:

CAR bus bike walking

He did not claim this was an ideal state of affairs, but simply indisputable local fact. Even visitors who use other modes of transport at home show their familiarity with the region’s travel expectations by navigating Los Angeles inside a car. I heard New York filmmaker Bill Morrison comment on this prior to the debut of his film about Los Angeles, *Dystopia*, at Walt Disney Concert Hall in January 2008. He rented a car at the airport, he explained, because he knew the norms of Los Angeles. Morrison’s film, which played on an established trope of Los Angeles as a hellscape, similarly expressed that he “got” the city.

Human infrastructure is a concept designed to account for our desire to conform to social norms even as we navigate built environments individually. The possibilities we find in a given place do not simply come from our observations of that place; they come from other kinds of cues and values. Because it has been an established norm for a long time that streets are primarily channels for the flow of motorized traffic (Norton 2008), there has been a tendency to overlook the social in the street. Enter the *ciclovía*.

Ciclovía as Postcolonial Protest

Like many people, I first learned about Bogotá, Colombia's ciclovía from the Streetfilm on the subject that Clarence Eckerson posted online in late 2007. The following summer I secured fieldwork funding to visit Bogotá. Through an L.A. connection, I met someone who suggested that I speak with Jaime Ortíz, who worked for the mayor. This is how I came to see the ciclovía as an intervention disrupting habitual uses of social space.

As part of the PRO-CICLA group that also included Fernando Caro Restrepo and Rodrigo Castaño Valencia, Ortíz founded the ciclovía in 1974, having returned to Bogotá from his undergraduate studies at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He saw the event as an

outgrowth of his participation in 1960s counterculture. When I asked him about this over email in May 2013, Ortíz explained that “in the center [of PRO-CICLA], the bicycle was the symbol and the Ciclovía was the instrument we came up with, to open the debate on urban processes and urban form in Colombia in the seventies. Urban safety, betterment of public space, community health and recreation, generation of urban consciousness, development of social integration, etc., were also aims of the event, today proven as end results of the process.”

As countless protesters have attested, streets can be used to demonstrate beliefs about social inequality beyond the street. The ciclovía accesses this potent social demonstration element



A parade during ciclovía in Bogotá, Colombia, August 2008. Photo by the author.

of street space without asking participants to take on an identity as protesters, which makes them more inclusive than countercultural phenomena such as Critical Mass (Lugo 2012a).

Ortíz also spoke about the postcolonial significance of a transportation idea from South America taking hold in the United States. Colombia followed American highway designs, approximating modernity through automobile infrastructure. But now, Americans were looking to Colombia for alternatives. He sketched me a map of the world that showed what he called the “global center” (as opposed to “global south”) as the “unión de naciones asoleadas” (Union of Sunlit Nations).

Instead of us sending car culture to Colombia via highway engineering, as had been the trend, they were sending a carfree event north; or rather, as Ortíz put it, we were the “provincianos,” and they were “universalizing” us. Has this message about challenging power been muted as ciclovía organizers in the United States have focused on open streets as spaces for individual health?

Following my meeting with Ortíz, I returned to Los Angeles in September 2008 and with others started the organizing process that resulted in the first CicLAvia in October 2010. As I have argued elsewhere (Lugo 2013, 2012b), our efforts with CicLAvia benefited tremendously from L.A.’s endemic diversity, which ensured that the human infrastructure for bicycling there had ties beyond the “pastime for white folks” scope that limits bike advocacy in other parts of the country. CicLAvia’s orientation toward the unique character of bicycling in L.A. greatly aided its success and has contributed to investment in bicycle improvements for existing low-income users. It seems indisputable that CicLAvia has contributed to the development of new ideas about using streets in Los Angeles, and this is what unfreezing should mean.



During CicLAvia in May 2012, people take over the street on the other side of MacArthur Park. Photo by the author.

Steps Toward an Equitable Ciclovía

The ciclovía is particularly well-suited as an intervention in spaces like Los Angeles, where the human infrastructure for driving is so effective at keeping people in their cars, but CicLAvia’s ongoing success owes much to its’ organizers awareness that a human infrastructure for active transportation existed there, too. How can other organizers replicate this?

Here are some human infrastructure indicators to keep in mind when planning an equitable ciclovía.

- » Learn about who is currently biking and walking. Are most people who get around in these ways doing so by choice, or out of economic necessity?
- » Learn about negative images of walking and biking in different communities.

» Even people who want to promote health might hold some stereotypes that make it difficult to see themselves reflected in active transportation.

» Example: Read responses from surveys on this topic with community leaders in Seattle’s diverse Rainier Valley at seattle-bikejustice.com.

» Have a qualitative researcher report on the current state of street culture. What is the dominant hierarchy of transportation in the surrounding area? This can be determined from media representations, historical records, and observation of street behavior.

» Example: The Bicultures Research Network is a group of scholars who investigate bicycling’s social and cultural worlds, using qualitative research methods such as interviewing and observation. Learn more at bicultures.org.

» It is important to give existing forms of bicycling and walking a place in your efforts, especially if they do not match aspirational images of active transportation. Are there existing community-based organizations or clubs that can help develop culturally appropriate design and promotion for your event?

» Learn about the organized human infrastructure for promoting bicycling, i.e. the local bike movement. Has a local bicycle advocacy organization established ties with diverse bicycle users in your area?

» Example: In April 2013, I convened a group of bike movement participants to create a timeline of important moments in Los Angeles that can be seen at labikemvmt.org.

» How elastic are your intersections? To determine this, observe whether street users are compliant with red lights. Do drivers stop before the painted line at an intersection, or do they push into the intersection after the light has turned red and before it has turned green? Which travel modes take precedence? Do your observations differ significantly from what legal statutes would suggest? Does compliance differ significantly across pedestrians, bicycle users, drivers, and others? The purpose of this exercise is to document expectations in current street culture.

» Example: Further discussion of this topic and visualizations can be found at urbanadonia.com/2014/05/street-ethnography-how-elastic-are-your.html.

Conclusion

This paper used ethnographic research on bicycling in Los Angeles to articulate the concept of human infrastructure as an avenue for unfreezing transportation habits. Human infrastructure that supports active transportation can be an important outcome of open street events. If this is to be an equitable outcome, partnering with diverse groups in developing promotions and routes for *ciclovías* should be standard practice. Using mixed methods to document changes will allow organizers to connect their events with larger social trends and demonstrate the sustainable impact of temporary street closures.

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