

Shared Space – would it work in Los Angeles?

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There is a growing enthusiasm amongst European transport planners for “shared space”. It is an intriguing idea pioneered by Hans Monderman, a highway engineer in Friesland. He removed almost all the traffic lights, pedestrian barriers, stop signs and other road markings that had been assumed to be essential for the safe movement of traffic.

For traditional highway engineers his idea was anathema. Since the advent of the car they have planned on the assumption that car drivers are selfish, stupid, obedient automatons who had to be protected from their own stupidity, and that pedestrians and cyclists were vulnerable, stupid, obedient automatons who had to be protected from cars – and their own stupidity. Hence the ideal street was one in which the selfish-stupid were completely segregated from the vulnerable-stupid, as on the American freeway or European motorway where pedestrians and cyclists are forbidden. Where segregation was not possible, in residential suburbs and older urban areas, their compromise solution was the ugly jumble of electronic signals, stop signs, barriers and road markings that now characterise most urban environments.

Monderman observed those using the streets for which he was responsible and concluded that they were not stupid, nor did they obey the rules and barriers that assumed that they were, nor, on the whole, did they behave selfishly. Pedestrians, he noticed, were nature’s Pythagoreans – always preferring the hypotenuse to the other two sides of the triangle. Given half a chance they did not march to the designated crossing point and cross at right angles to the traffic; if they spotted a gap in the traffic they opted for the diagonal route of least effort. And motorists did not selfishly insist on their right of way at the cost of mowing down pedestrians.

Monderman decided that those for whom he was planning were vigilant, responsive and responsible. He deliberately injected uncertainty into the street environment about who had the right of way. The results were transformative. Traditional highway engineers have never been concerned with aesthetics. Their job was to move traffic safely and efficiently. They dealt not with people but PCUs (passenger car units). The removal of the signals, signs and barriers that were the tools of their trade not only greatly improved the appearance of the streetscape but, by elevating the status of the pedestrian and cyclist relative to that of the motorist, made them more convivial as well.

Motorists no longer blasted their way through intersections because they had a green light; they noticed, and negotiated their right of way with, pedestrians. And accident statistics were no longer considered the sole criterion of whether a road was safe or dangerous. It was now realised that many streets had good accident records not because they were safe, but because they were so dangerous that children were forbidden to cross them, old people were afraid to cross them, and fit adults crossed them quickly and carefully. The good accident records were being purchased at the cost of community severance; people on one side of the road no longer knew their neighbours on the other.

Another surprising finding was that on many roads travel times decreased. The removal of traffic lights reduced the time that cars spent waiting at red lights when nothing was coming in the other direction.

Would such ideas work in Los Angeles?

Certainly not on the freeways. Nor in the car-dependent suburbs with no sidewalks or pedestrians or cyclists.

Measured by their attractiveness to American tourists, the most desirable parts of Europe are the centres of the old cities where shared space has evolved in the context of growing numbers of cars and severely limited space for driving and parking. Here, because of lack of space, the application of heritage conservation constraints, or benign neglect, one can observe what happens naturally when pedestrians and cars are left to sort things out on their own. Other environments, perhaps more familiar to most Americans, where such deferential behaviour by motorists can also be observed are supermarket car parks and campsites.

However in Europe, as in America, naturally occurring exemplars of the shared-space principle are under threat. Britain's car population increased last year by over 800,000 – enough to fill a new car park stretching from London to Edinburgh 9 lanes wide. All these extra cars can only be accommodated in car-dependent, car-dominated, suburbs. Europe is following America's lead. Everywhere car ownership is increasing and suburbs are sprawling.

Application of the shared space idea in which pedestrians, cyclists and cars all mingle in a spirit of reciprocity is only possible if there are enough pedestrians and cyclists – and a small enough number of cars: central Copenhagen, old Amsterdam and parts of Paris are good examples. But currently such islands of civilization, beloved by American tourists, are surrounded by rising seas of car dependence.

Perhaps, with a growing appreciation of their attractiveness as places in which to work and live, and a growing fear of the car's carbon wheel print, these islands of civilization might rise, and the seas retreat. Even in Los Angeles!