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The Spoke n' Word: Popularizing Urban Cycling Through Communication

Fifty years ago, Copenhagen's streets looked nothing like they do today. Where separated cycle tracks now exist, wide vehicle lanes once dominated. The attention now given to cycling education and encouragement was not even an afterthought before. Copenhagen's streets were dominated by cars and the infrastructure required to move and store them. It was a typical "American" city with wide lanes and huge parking lots.

Today, Copenhagen is the ideal city for cycling advocates around the world. Almost half of Copenhagen's population bikes to work each day.¹ Copenhagen boasts nearly 400km of designated bicycle lanes.² Its ridership continues to ride throughout the winter, a practice unthinkable to many American cities. Sadly, Copenhagen's entire bicycle culture seems to be unthinkable for most Americans. Some think that our cities are too far gone. However, our streets are lost only when we stop believing they can improve.

¹ 45% of Copenhageners bike to work. See Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 152.

² "Bicycle Culture", Denmark.dk, accessed June 15, 2018, <http://denmark.dk/en/green-living/bicycle-culture>.

In fact, most American cities have a huge opportunity for change. Like 1960s Copenhagen, we have massive streets now dedicated to cars that with the right leadership can be reapportioned to all road users. This movement can happen in the United States, as New York City Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan proved by tripling the number of people on bikes each day in her city in ten years. Parodying a classic New York phrase, she notes that, “If you can remake it here, you can remake it anywhere.”³ Any city can be a cycling city with the right leadership.

That’s what this paper is dedicated to helping cycling advocates popularize urban cycling through communication. As advocates, our goal is to “reestablish the bicycle as a respected, accepted, and feasible transportation form.”⁴ **We can reestablish bicycle transportation through well-crafted, deliberate communication to the public and to government officials. This essay should serve as orientation to help advocates know how to best communicate with the public and government.** Though many of us are not urban planners by profession, democracy allows us to influence the way our cities are built. We have the power of influence. With our leadership, we can “return to a place where the bicycle is considered a powerful, useful tool that we can’t live without but that garners little attention.”⁵

³ Janette Sadik-Khan, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 360.

⁴ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

Be Approachable

Many advocates adore bikes and may even dedicate themselves to a specialized cycling discipline; however, we must be approachable to the common person. That means crafting our messages so they appeal to the non-cyclist. Urban designer Mikael Colville-Andersen often starts off his speeches telling the audience, “I am not a cyclist,”⁶ “I’m just a normal schmuck in normal clothes, not some Captain Spandex.”⁷ This is the attitude we advocates must adopt if we want to appeal to the masses. We can communicate this attitude in many ways; let’s start with image.

In order to appeal to the masses, we bicycle advocates must look the part. Does that mean dressing in the “full kit” of spandex with our \$5,000 racing bike? Absolutely not. It means riding a practical bike and dressing for the destination, not the journey. The more we dress like the people in the cars next to us, the more approachable we will be and the more likely they will consider riding alongside us the next day. Colville-Andersen states that “decades of a narrow projection of cycling’s image has caused the general population in many of these cities to regard cycling as a fringe activity, and they often associate riding a bicycle with ‘uniforms’ and clubs or tribes, as opposed to being something for everyone.”⁸ Let’s look the part.

⁶ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 2.

⁷ *Ibid*, 101.

⁸ *Ibid*, 133.

Once we pass the litmus test we look like “just a dude on a bike”⁹ and the public is willing to listen to us, we must keep our speech approachable. Cycling is filled with jargon “roadie”, “10-speed”, “29-er”, to name a few that can instantly put a barrier between us, the advocate, and the non-cycling public. Their ears will figuratively close and our message will no longer matter to those who aren’t already into cycling. That’s a terrible situation to have since we are trying to sell cycling to the masses. Instead, our language must be simple, using terms that the masses are familiar with. When we do have to use bike-specific language, let’s define the term and not assume that everyone knows what it means just because we do. Colville-Andersen puts this well when he says that we should, “be an avid cyclist if that’s your thing. Just don’t speak like one to the public at large.”¹⁰

Sell It With Keywords

Ironically, bicycle advocates have much to learn from the car industry. Through a few keywords, marketing departments of car manufacturers changed the public perception of motor vehicles from loud, dirty, and dangerous machines to sleek, elegant, and even sexy status symbols. Look at any car advertisement and you’ll see a few things featured over and over: speed, efficiency, style, convenience, and comfort. How can anybody *not* want those things? It’s safe to say at least one of these keywords

⁹ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 245.

appeal to everybody. On the other hand, a bicycle ad – if you ever even see one – shares a few of those points: speed, efficiency, and style; but it rarely emphasizes convenience and comfort. In fact, bicycle advertisements – featuring cyclists in flashy lycra kits on pizza-cutter-wheeled road bikes riding at speed far away from civilization – seem to emphasize quite the opposite: that you will have to take a significant amount of time away from your work and family obligations to ride far away from home, and physically suffer while doing so. That is not convenient nor comfortable and it appeals only to a select few; perhaps only those who are already into cycling. Surely this messaging does not change the public perception of cycling nor get more people on bikes. Colville-Andersen agrees that we are marketing bikes the wrong way:

“We have, in our possession, one of the greatest products in history. An innovative, game-changing, life-saving, illness-preventing, city-improving product...With such an amazing product you would think it would be a piece of cake to get people on board, but there are still flaws in the techniques that are being employed.”¹¹

We need new keywords. Colville-Andersen recommends that we use these keywords: “liberating, modern, elegant, effortless, social, and convenient.”¹² Just as the car industry transformed the public perception of motor vehicles, we too can turn cycling’s image from an elite sport into an everyday transportation mode in the minds of the public just by how we market it. Let’s stay focused on our target group – “the

¹¹ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 246.

¹² *Ibid*, 250.

regular citizens of our cities who won't respond to sport-cycling messaging"¹³—and emphasize the keywords they will respond to. Let's create ads that show how fun and easy it can be to get around by bike. Let's show a mom with kids in a cargo bike, all smiling as they go to the park. Let's feature an elderly person on an e-bike riding home from the grocery store with a basket full of groceries. This is the type of marketing that will sell cycling to those who aren't currently riding.

Show, Don't Just Tell

Showing can be a more persuasive form of communication than telling, yet we do it too little. In advocacy, we often spend the bulk of our time writing messages, speaking to stakeholders, or trying to persuade key decision makers with our words when we could be *showing* people our desired outcome. Perhaps it's because it is easier that way; talk is cheap, and it takes far less effort to write a press release than it does to make a video, rendering, or take stakeholders on a real-life tour. However, showing is far more effective. As Colville-Andersen puts it, "We have to see in order to understand."¹⁴

There is no more effective way to introduce people to urban cycling than to actually get people on bikes. Nobody knows what it is like on a bicycle unless they ride a mile in our lane. If you want to persuade somebody to commute by bicycle, go for a

¹³ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 261.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 147.

ride with them. Their fears will slowly melt away as they once again experience the joy and freedom of riding a bike with an experienced person they can trust beside them. Many people just need that social reassurance that comes from riding with someone who does it safely every day. Social rides are similarly effective in convincing government officials to invest more in safe streets. As they experience firsthand the areas of their city that need improvement, they will realize how important investment in bicycle infrastructure is. You may even convince them to start riding to work; a practice that will surely influence their thinking and policy decisions for years down the road. Colville-Andersen wishes that “anyone working on bicycle infrastructure or planning [would be] handed a bicycle and told to ride it in their city for a month.”¹⁵ That would dramatically shape the design of a city’s streets.

There are also times when we advocates must physically reshape our city’s streets ourselves to get our point across. Tactical urbanism – temporary changes to urban environments – is also an effective way of showing the public what we want. Tactical urbanism produces life-sized models of an ideal that people can more easily relate to than just a rendering or printed image. In her book, *Street Fight*, Janette Sadik-Khan tells the story of a group of “urban guerillas” in Seattle who installed temporary protected bike lanes, complete with plastic posts glued to the street. They wanted to show how the street could be transformed to be safer for people on bikes

¹⁵ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 197.

with very minimal investment from the city. She notes that, “city managers reacted as you might expect – they yanked out the posts. But they later installed new posts officially.”¹⁶ Temporary installations were also a part of Sadik-Khan’s personal strategy. Her transportation division in New York City often temporarily closed streets – marked only with paint or traffic cones – and set up tables and chairs for people to gather. As people gathered in these spaces, her mayor, who had the ultimate power to change to the street, was convinced that it was a good idea and accepted the proposed change. Eventually, her plan transformed iconic sites like Times Square into pedestrian-friendly plazas that hundreds of thousands of people now feel comfortable being in each day.¹⁷

When neither time nor manpower permit tactical urbanism, we can still show the public how a cycling city looks by using examples of other cities. Colville-Andersen has basically created his business, Copenhagenize, by doing this. He started by simply taking photos of Copenhageners on bikes and sharing them online. Once he garnered interest from around the globe, he started his design firm, “Copenhagenize”, to export Copenhagen’s design and communications successes to any interested city around the globe. Sadik-Khan also used examples heavily when planning her projects. She often used successful examples from London, Singapore¹⁸, and others to calm the

¹⁶ Janette Sadik-Khan, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 135.

¹⁷ See color photos with captions “The Crossroads of the World...”, “In Times Square...”, “The Green Light...”, and “To give people space” for examples of Sadik-Khan’s temporary installations in *Streetfight*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 42

concerns of her colleagues. Eventually, her city became the example for many others. Nowadays, Los Angeles—a city built for cars—is adopting her trademark use of paint, tables, and chairs to create public spaces.¹⁹

Lastly, we must show with data. Sadik-Khan admitted that she worked for a data-driven mayor.²⁰ In her book, she emphasized the importance of data by saying, “In God we trust. Everyone else, bring data.”²¹ Data can be the convincing evidence that will persuade governments to invest in bike lanes and persuade citizens to adopt bike commuting. Let’s talk about how many people already are riding, how many people would ride with bike lanes, the financial²² and health benefits²³ of bike commuting, and so on. I won’t arm you with those stats here because the internet is full of them already and Google is open all-hours for your searching pleasure.

Attack as Needed

There are times when a soft approach will not work; it is then that advocates must attack. When we have already tried to communicate our message politely, but our audience will not listen, fair-weather advocates may give up, but we must turn up

¹⁹ Janette Sadik-Khan, “New York’s Streets? Not So Mean Anymore”, (presentation, Ted City, New York, New York, September 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LujWrkYsl64&t=607s>.

²⁰ Idid.

²¹ Janette Sadik-Khan, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 251.

²² AAA notes that the average motor vehicle owner in American spends \$9,000 per year to drive. See Erin Stepp, “AAA Reveals True Cost of Vehicle Ownership”, Auto Association of America, published August 23, 2017, accessed June 15, 2018, <https://newsroom.aaa.com/tag/driving-cost-per-mile/>.

²³ The health benefits of riding a bike are 20 times greater than any risk. See Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 167.

the volume. Jane Jacobs, fed up with battling against an unwilling government, wrote her paradigm-shifting book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* as a form of protest. Her very first line in the book states that, “This book is an attack.”²⁴ Her deliberate attack ultimately saved a neighborhood that would have been torn down to build one of Robert Moses’ massive highways. Protest was also successful in reshaping Copenhagen. Colville-Andersen notes that it was the citizens’ public protests that convinced Copenhagen start building safe roads for people on bikes. Tens of thousands of people showed up at city hall to protest unsafe streets and ask for better treatment.²⁵ It was then that Copenhagen finally invested in proper bicycle infrastructure that ultimately convinced hundreds of thousands of Copenhageners to ride.

What should we protest against? The literature seems to agree that bicycle advocates should protest against unsafe streets. Sadik-Khan, an expert in convincing governments to build bike lanes, notes that safety is the most powerful argument for bike lanes.²⁶ She then gives a powerful argument against status-quo American streets:

“Numerically, this death toll [of people dying in motor vehicle crashes] is the equivalent of a jetliner packed with 300 passengers falling out of the sky every three days for an entire year. It’s more than three times as many people killed in one year as died on 9/11, plus the American service people killed in combat in Iraq

²⁴ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities: 50th Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 5.

²⁵ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 68.

²⁶ Janette Sadik-Khan, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 252

and Afghanistan combined in the decade and a half since, and nearly three times the number of Americans killed annually in homicides by guns.”²⁷

The Economic Points

Apart from safety, bicycle advocates would do well to talk about the economic benefits of cycling. Sadik-Khan notes that this is the second-most convincing point for public acceptance of urban cycling. There are numerous sources for data that are more specific to your own region, but I hope to list a few points from the literature that will get your mind thinking.

First, let’s talk money; specifically, the cost of bike infrastructure. It seems that cost is always the stated reason why governments fail to invest. However, what governments often fail to realize is that it is, “cheap—absurdly cheap—compared to the billions of dollars American cities have spent annually building new streetcar and light rail lines and rehabilitating or replacing aging roads and bridges.”²⁸ In fact, as Sadik-Khan showed in New York City, sometimes it only takes paint! Plus they are much easier to maintain since bikes are 16,000 times less destructive to asphalt than cars.²⁹ And in the long run, bike lanes pay for themselves over and over. It’s no secret that biking is better for business:

²⁷ Janette Sadik-Khan, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 208.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 167.

“Have you ever seen a car stop into a café for a sandwich, or window shop at the boutiques? Me neither. Cars don’t shop. People do...better streets mean better business. Changes that make it easier to take transit, walk, or bike also make for more interesting and walkable streets, which are much better for businesses’ bottom line.”³⁰

Our Power

As bicycle advocates, our influence is limited but valuable. It’s limited because most of us do not have the power to choose whether or not a bike lane will be placed on a certain street. We are not professional planners. This is worrying since Colville-Andersen claims that “infrastructure is the only way to grow cycling levels in a city.”³¹ When a bike lane is not installed, we are distraught. It can be frustrating; even debilitating, making us want to quit. However, our communication is more valuable than we may think. We do our part pushing upward from the bottom, continually reminding key decision makers that we exist and that our lives – and the livelihood of our cities – are valuable. Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a legendary urbanist advocate in New York City wasn’t a professional planner nor a key decision maker. She was just an activist who fought for the best for her city. Yet she saved important neighborhoods from destruction and inspired activists all around the world to fight for safe and vibrant cities. Like Jacobs, we can dramatically shape the way our cities look and feel. As we deploy powerful, deliberate

³⁰ Janette Sadik-Khan, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 253.

³¹ Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), 131.

communication, we can popularize cycling as a valid form of transportation. Our influence has the power to shift government priorities to funding bike lanes and convince our neighbors to leave their car at home and get on a bike instead. This method has been proven in “bike meccas” like Copenhagen and New York. If activists can remake it there, we can remake it anywhere.

Annotated Bibliography

Sadik-Khan, Janette. *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*. New York: Viking Press, 2016. (368 pages)

Streetfight is an account of what Janette Sadik-Khan fought for and learned during her time as transportation commissioner of New York City. Her book includes stories of her projects and information designed to help others carry out similar work in their own cities. A work that can awaken a sleeping city.

As the subtitle suggests, Sadik-Khan is an urbanist; she loves density and energy. She loves to see people walking, biking, and riding transit. She loves seeing people hang out in public spaces. My favorite part of the book is in the very middle: the color photos. They are before and after shots of the areas she did her projects in. The casual reader can learn much from just looking at these photos.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities: 50th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Modern Library, 2011. (640 pages)

Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is a classic, yet it still applies today. Written in the 1960s, this work is a deep dive into nearly every aspect of urban life: housing, transportation, economics, crime, and so much more. Jacobs' main thrust to her work is that dense, mixed-use development is ideal for city life. She

argues that the closer we live to public services, work, and commerce, the better off we will be. That way, we can more easily walk or bike to get around, grow relationships within our own community, and grow our local economy.

Colville-Andersen, Mikael. *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018. (296 pages)

Colville-Andersen's *Copenhagenize* truly is *the* definitive guide to urban cycling. If you aren't already sold on the benefits of bicycle commuting for you and your community, this is the book to read. It's clear, direct, humorous, and very thorough. What separates this book from the rest is its focus on cycling. Rather than exploring many aspects of urban life, this dives deep into cycling. This book is an ideal read for anybody who plans to advocate for cycling, work on public messaging, or city design.

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