

# Cycling Smart In Copenhagen: ‘Smart Cities’ Call For Smart Solutions

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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*“Every increase in motorized speed creates new demands on space and time. The use of the bicycle is self-limiting. It allows people to create a new relationship between their life-space and their life-time, between their territory and the pulse of their being, without destroying their inherited balance. The advantages of modern self-powered traffic are obvious, and ignored.” - [Ivan Illich](#)*

India’s cities are in crisis. They are clogged with traffic, choked with pollution, blighted by concrete flyovers, overcrowded, suffer from power and water shortages, are prone to flooding and can at times be almost unbearable to live in. The plan to introduce ‘smart cities’ to India is intended to remedy many of these problems. These smart cities will function effectively, however, only if many of the underlying issues are addressed.

From the crisis in farming and associated rural migration to energy concerns and an expanding population, the problems are immense and varied. But let us focus on just one issue here – transport.

Delhi recently introduced ‘odd-even’ licence plate traffic days (vehicles with certain registration number endings allowed to be on the road on alternate days) to try to cut down on traffic congestion and pollution. Although this policy may bring some temporary relief, it will fail to solve the underlying problem because the model of social and economic ‘development’ being promoted is one that associates car ownership with progress and prosperity.

The greater the urban sprawl, the greater the benefits for the car industry and the real estate sector. As long as urban planning centres around motorised vehicles and warped notions of ‘development’ governed by powerful private-sector players, India’s cities will continue to sprawl ever outwards and be defined by traffic congestion and air and noise pollution. (And, as long as there is a headlong rush towards urbanisation, again, fuelled by corporate interests [not least global agribusiness], hundreds of millions will head for the cities and urban problems will mount).

India could do worse than look to somewhere like Denmark, which is a world leader in ‘green’ policies. For instance, over 20 per cent of the nation’s energy already comes from renewable energy, and the aim is to reach 100 per cent by 2050. But you don’t have to read up on statistics to appreciate Denmark’s record in this area. Go to Copenhagen and you will see ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ all around, not least in the city’s approach to urban transport. Copenhagen alone has around 400 km of cycle paths and about 40 per cent of the capital’s population commute to work by bicycle.

Copenhagen is world famous for its cycling and has in recent years been voted the 'best city for cyclists' and the 'world's most liveable city'. The 'liveability' factor is due to many reasons, one of which stems from the emphasis placed on cycle transport. But, until the 1960s, Copenhagen's history mirrored developments in many other Western cities - developments that are currently compounded many times over in Indian cities. It became increasingly difficult to ignore the traffic congestion and accidents and the growing traffic-pollution and noise problems. As in today's Bengaluru where older residents wonder what happened to their 'garden city', Copenhagen was no longer the city that most Danes knew and loved.

The growing environmental movement at the time and the rising cost of oil helped the cause of the bicycle. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed conflicts between bicycle and car interests in Danish cities, not least because the authorities sought to establish road networks that cut across the beautiful lakes which separated the older part of the city from the more recent suburbs. This resulted in an urban transport solution that gave space to cars but perhaps more importantly to bicycles, pedestrians and public transport. Visit Copenhagen today and what is striking is the large amount of cyclists as well as the thoughtful planning that has facilitated an integrated system of bicycle lanes.

Throughout the world, there is now a desire to improve public health and combat climate change. As a result, Copenhagen's renowned cycle-friendly policies are now serving as a template for some of the world's most congested cities. In Mexico City, for example, the authorities are devising a bicycle strategy and recognise that, unlike cars, even the poorest segment of the population can access a bicycle. In this respect alone, the bicycle is a democratic means of mobility.

However, this type of transport is only truly democratic if spatial segregation is limited. Mexico City's bicycle strategy attempts to address this issue through a comprehensive cycle path network, which aims to create mobility through areas that have been closed off due to previous planning strategies.

Cities designed for cars are also characterised by large distances and many obstacles which hamper movement both on foot and by bicycle. In some of the world's metropolises, distances are so large that a well-developed cycle path network is insufficient to ensure mobility for all. In such cases this network has to be integrated with eco-friendly, bicycle friendly public transport.

To make cycling attractive, it is not enough just to create cycle lanes and make bicycles available to all (Copenhagen made 1,300 free bicycles available for cycling around the city centre; it now favours a 'bike share' programme). Interesting urban environments must be created. Long, monotonous stretches have to be broken down into smaller sections and offer appealing features at ground level. In other words, city planners have to stop thinking like motorists and plan for the needs of cyclists and pedestrians, in terms of, for instance, better and more greenery and intersections that allow for the free flow of cyclists.

In Denmark, the newly opened Copenhagen-Albertslund route is the first of a planned network that will comprise 26 Cycle Super Highways, covering a total of 300 km. The network will increase the number of cycle lanes in Greater Copenhagen by 15 percent and is predicted to reduce public expenditure by 40.3 million euros annually thanks to improved health. A total of 22 municipalities in the Greater Copenhagen area have all collaborated to build the new network of cycle routes. The project intends to expand, improve and link

existing cycle lanes in Greater Copenhagen, as well as improving signage, so commuters can quickly identify the easiest route available.

Smart cities call for smart solutions in an age when carbon emissions and respect for the environment have come to the fore. And very often it is the low-energy, simpler forms of technology that can provide the answers. Writing in 1973, the philosopher and social commentator Ivan Illich stated the following:

“Man on a bicycle can go three or four times faster than the pedestrian, but uses five times less energy in the process. He carries one gram of his weight over a kilometer of flat road at an expense of only 0.15 calories... Equipped with this tool, man outstrips the efficiency of not only all machines but all other animals as well... In contrast, the accelerating individual capsule [the car] enabled societies to engage in a ritual of progressively paralyzing speed.”

According to Illich, bicycles offer a cheap, sustainable and affordable means of transport for the poor:

“With his much lower salary, the Chinese acquires his durable bicycle in a fraction of the working hours an American devotes to the purchase of his obsolescent car. The cost of public utilities needed to facilitate bicycle traffic versus the price of an infrastructure tailored to high speeds is proportionately even less than the price differential of the vehicles used in the two systems.”

Much modern urban planning is car-centric. But where is the need for the car if work, school or healthcare facilities are close by? Less need for ugly flyovers or six lane highways that rip up communities in their path. Getting from A to B would not require a race against the clock on the highway that cuts through a series of localities that are never to be visited, never to be regarded as anything but an inconvenience to be passed through en route to big-mac nirvana, multiplex overload or shopping-mall hedonism.

Instead, how about an enjoyable walk or cycle ride through an urban environment defined by ‘community’ rather than by the car and which is free from traffic pollution or noise, where the pedestrian is not regarded as an obstacle to be honked at with horn, where the cyclist is not a damned inconvenience to be driven off the road or where ‘neighbourhood’ has been stripped of its intimacy?

India is not Denmark, of course. Denmark is a small country with a low population. But, as in Mexico City, with its huge population and urban problems, India could learn much from Denmark’s attitude towards the bicycle. After all, smart cities call for smart thinking.

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## About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is [www.colintodhunter.com](http://www.colintodhunter.com)  
[https://twitter.com/colin\\_todhunter](https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter)

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