



Changwon: The Bicycle isn't About "Saving the Planet"

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This Saturday in Changwon, Bernhard Ensink, Secretary General of the European Cyclists' Federation claimed that the attitude of young German adults is changing, that they are less inclined to feel the need or even 'want' for a personal automobile, and more inclined to want the latest iPhone. According to Ensink, a staggering 80% of young Germans believe that people don't need a private car anymore. His words have striking relevance, not just in Germany or the EU, but throughout industrialized nations around the globe.



Bernhard Ensink speaks in Changwon, South Korea
(photo | sociocity)

It was a finding echoed most often during the EcoMobility World Congress, there a very real change in mindset happening, and a distinct movement away from the car in most developed nations.

Whether it's gasoline, electric, hybrid, ethanol, nitrogen, or CNG, cars as a form of transportation have already hit or will soon hit peak usage in most developed nations, and the numbers are slowly shifting towards human power and public transit. Although the "eco-conscious" wave might have helped us get here, in the end it's not only about saving the planet, not about less CO2 emissions, not about global warming; it's about a better quality of life for every human being, and the cities and transportation methods necessary to achieve that quality of life.

When examining multiple quality of life issues, transportation comes up in relation to nearly every single one of them and can have a very negative or very positive effect. EcoMobility enforced that notion, and it's apparent that many of the world's transportation leaders have found their field to be most relevant to daily life improvements. And as Eric Burton notes, compared with other large-scale changes, transportation is not so difficult a change to make... out of all

the technological improvements which touch our day to day life, transportation is the easiest to impact.

Freedom, What is it Good For?

Early on in the conference, Ensink took us back to 1919, where the average 'safe walking distance' for a person was around six miles. That is to say, mom would generally tell her sons: Going fishing boys? Just make sure you don't walk too far that you can't make it back before dinner time.



Safe Walking Distance (illustration | society)

By 1950, the distance viewed as safe for walking had been reduced down to 1 mile, mom would now say: boys, I don't want you crossing the main road to hang out with those filthy Lehman kids, and be sure to make it back in time for dinner.

Today's average, safe walking distance? It's around 300 yards, or to the end of the block.

Mom is now saying: if I can't see you kids from the window, you've gone too far, and come in for dinner when I blow the dinner whistle.

Kids want to come, explore, learn, and parents want them to be safe doing it, the same limitations apply to elders who can no longer drive, who stand at the doorstep of their home, looking out at a system which fails to help them meet simple needs such as walking to the store on their own.

Gil Penalosa, Director of 8-80 Cities makes the point in the very name of his organization, asking us to think of an 8 year old, and think of an 80 year old, both of whom are very close to you, then ask if you would let them walk across an intersection to the store alone. If your answer is yes, you live in a walkable city. If the answer is no, you must ask, why not, and what improvements should be made so that your neighborhood is more safe, and more walkable?

In essence, everyone deserves to be able to answer yes to Gil's question. How free do we really feel if we can't safely walk further than the end of our street?

From Vehicle Traffic to Crime

It's interesting that many people's minds will jump to crime as the culprit, as the cause of this shortened ring of safety. But you can't blame the smoke for pollution, and while crime may be a factor, it is not the root cause of our inability to walk through a neighborhood.

The root cause is 100% in the design flaws of the modern city, or more specifically, cities designed for the car. Humans, bikes, and rail be damned, they are all afterthoughts in most city design.

Our cities are currently geared towards one thing: a 1.5 Ton metal box hurtling down a street at 45mph, carrying a single person 1/20th its weight. The problem with this design? **We are not a**

society of cars, we are a society of *people* who unfortunately have chosen to embrace the automobile as our main method of transportation.



Nubija Bike System Tour, Changwon, South Korea (photo: Suhee Kang | sociocity)

The needs of the person and the needs of the car are not synonymous, and by design, the city must return to servicing the needs of the person first.

To anyone looking in from outside our society, our reliance on the automobile would seem completely ridiculous, but we have grown up with the fact that it is 'normal' and thus it has become an acceptable part of life for us. However, many of us are now challenging this thought, and asking ourselves "would I rather drive a metal box that weighs 20-times my weight and be confined to that box for 99% of my travel, or would I rather reject the car and move about freely through walking, bicycling, and public transit for 99% of my travel?"

We're beginning to 'get it' finally, and as most acts of cultural re-programming go, it starts with our youth. Attitudes are changing, and the sticking point is now largely in infrastructure.

But this new infrastructure won't build itself, and it won't appear for the good of the citizens alone, it must be demanded by those who want a better quality of life.

Today, the question isn't *if*, but *when* today's school children, university students, housewives, and commuters will stand up and force our cities and our transportation industry to change for the better.

URL: <http://www.sociocity.com/rethink/changwon-the-iphone-the-car-and-true-freedom>