

THREE I'S: IMPEDIMENTS, INFRASTRUCTURE, IMAGINATION

The first Critical Mass ride took place sixteen years ago, right here in San Francisco, in 1992. Since that time, we've witnessed the spontaneous spread of Critical Mass to several hundred cities around the world. And perhaps not coincidentally, we've seen a revival of bicycling as an integral part of the urban experience in cities from San Francisco to New York to Paris to Budapest. There's no question that the bicycle is experiencing a resurgence on a global level.

Just in the last three years, New York City has begun implanting bike lanes on over 200 miles of borough streets, and even put in the first segregated side path along parts of 9th Avenue in Manhattan. The city of Paris, France has gone from almost zero bike space and infrastructure to one of the most heavily used and publicly celebrated systems in the world, the Velib, that provides thousands of bikes for short-term free use, and longer-term at modest rental rates, working much like a library system. And with them Paris has built an impressive network of bikeways throughout the city. Copenhagen has long had the world standard for bicycling, with sidepaths dedicated to bicycle transit on all major thoroughfares and most secondary ones too. Similarly, Amsterdam is a bicycling paradise, and increasingly Berlin is becoming one too.

These changes are far from what could or should have been implemented by now, but let's face it: All of these cities are *way ahead* of San Francisco. Our city lags far behind other North American cities like Portland, Vancouver, Chicago and Montreal — each of which enjoys vastly better bicycling infrastructure and rules than what we are subjected to in San Francisco... After *sixteen* years, the results are pretty unimpressive.

While the SF Bike Coalition has grown from a few dozen to nearly 10,000 members during this time, the physical landscape of the city has barely changed at all. Yes, we have some improvements, notably the bike lanes on mid-Market and Valencia Streets, and various other places around town that have also been striped. But compared to what *could* be and certainly compared to what *should* be, we have hardly made any progress at all.

So, as we pedal into the autumn of the 17th year of Critical Mass, witnessing the explosive growth of new cyclists overwhelming the sickly and hostile infrastructure of our urban environment, let's at least note the many obvious improvements that should be an urgent agenda for local politicians wanting to meet the needs of the population that is out front, changing our lives and the world with them...

In San Francisco we are beset with several overlapping problems, none of which can be solved easily in isolation. At the most basic level we have parking meters serving double purpose as ubiquitous bike locking stands. Now the city is starting to pull them out in favor of new electronic parking systems. This drastic shrinkage of bike parking can be easily addressed by preserving the poles of defunct meters, capping them with (hopefully artistic) structures so they can continue to function as cheap, effective and ubiquitous bike parking.

The city should also consider dedicating a parking space on each side of the street to 90-degree bike parking with permanent racks and a protective barrier from cars and motorcycles (a successful solution in Portland and in front of the San Francisco Library). This solution will benefit pedestrians and wheelchair users in heavily trafficked areas where bikes locked to meters create clutter.

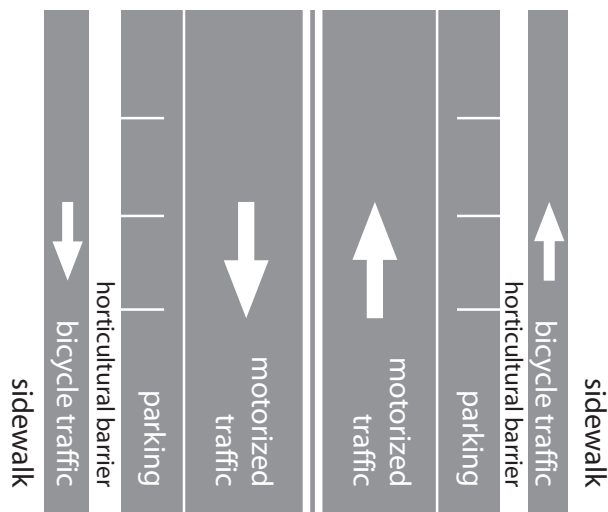


Bike parking in front of San Francisco Library: a model for the rest of the city

There is a big redesign of Valencia Street about to begin between 15th and 19th Streets. Regrettably the years of planning that have gone into this have ignored the opportunity to put in the civilized world's solution of separate bikeways* alongside the sidewalks (with separating curbs between sidewalks and the car-parking zone, car traffic pushed to the center of the street). This is a huge missed opportunity and if we can, we should insist that a sidepath system is implemented in this redesign to show how superior it is to the unsafe double-parking zone that is called a bike path on our current street configuration.

San Francisco could go a lot further than this in many ways. Implementing side paths throughout the city should be a solution for feeder routes into bike boulevards that are streets set aside as priority bike routes.

Cars can be discouraged from any but local access by putting in bollards and hedges at key intersections that allow cyclists to pass through, but force cars to turn to a side street. This is all familiar in other cities, even across the Bay in Berkeley.



A separate bikeway plan

While we're designing a comprehensive, safe, accessible system of dedicated bikeways, we might as well start the inevitable depaving of the city. Let's daylight Mission Creek from 18th and South Van Ness all the way to the channel at 7th and King, building a linear park along it. Similarly, let's shrink Cesar Chavez Street to 2/3 its size and daylight Precita Creek all the way to Islais Creek near 3rd Street. There are other creek possibilities in other parts of the city too.

The MUNI should immediately open itself to allowing bikes on board the light rail cars that pass under the central hills of the city. Bike racks on buses have been a good addition, but the light rail longer distance service needs to accommodate bicyclists too. A new fight is brewing on the peninsula CALTRAIN system, where cyclists have managed to achieve a good commute service and now it's being cut back and threatened by myopic planners. And BART, though it has made some progress over the years, is still institutionally hostile to bicycling even though as a trunk commuter train system it should be the most aggressively friendly service in the Bay Area to cycling, its natural complement. An easy step: *Stop prohibiting cyclists from using escalators!* In cities around the world cyclists routinely use escalators, perfectly safely by squeezing their brakes for the duration of the ascent or descent, but due to BART's long-term antipathy to cycling, they still occasionally enforce this arbitrary and self-defeating rule. Meanwhile, BART is being overwhelmed by a big increase in passengers,

and a big increase in cyclists too. Add a bike car to every train! Take the lead from Caltrain and put bike racks with bungee cords in half a car at the back of each train and watch the explosion in bike commuting! And run the system *at least* until 2 a.m., so we can finally dispense with the absurdity of the BART pumpkins who are always rushing to catch the last train long before they're ready to go home.

Recently a proposal to allow Stop-Roll (a system used by Montana) to supercede the irrational imposition of car rules on bicyclists came and went without much fanfare and ultimately without being implemented anywhere. Along with bike boulevards and side paths, cities need to recognize that cyclists have a right to conserve their momentum, meaning if they come to a stop sign and the intersection is clear it's OK to roll through. If they come to a red light and the intersection is clear, it's OK to proceed so as to enjoy the safety of a relatively empty street on the other side of the intersection, and where motorists will see the cyclists ahead of them better if they're already in the road.

All of these ideas are in the realm of common sense and painfully obvious to most cyclists. The fact that much of this agenda is greeted with puzzlement, antipathy, or outright hostility by sitting politicians and transit planners underscores the gap between the population which is already moving on into the new world, and the bureaucrats who keep insisting that the rear-view mirror is the only place to see the future.

We ride for its own pleasure, to see our friends, to speak directly with one another, and to reinhabit the city with a new conviviality and *joie de vivre*. After sixteen years, it's high time that the political establishment and the planning bureaucracies turn their attention to the numerous achievable improvements that, taken together, will rapidly accelerate our regional compliance with the shift to urgently needed sustainable solutions.

— COMMITTEE FOR FULL ENJOYMENT, AUGUST 2008

* To be honest, this sidepath would set in motion a sequence of new problems, at least one major one that we can anticipate. In a society bent on criminalizing poverty, poor people are left to push shopping carts around scavenging for recyclables. If there were clear paths without cars or pedestrians, we can reasonably assume that the shopping cart drivers would soon make them their preferred thoroughfares too, pitting the destitute against the more affluent cyclists for the space. More criminal penalties against the already criminalized is no solution. Housing and meaningful, artisanal work probably is! So as cyclists interested in systemic urban redesign, we must not neglect the interlocking relationships in which we are always embedded. We need a comprehensive program of decommodified quality housing and publicly supported work for people who need it. This might dovetail nicely with redesigned streets, as we'll need hundreds of bike mechanics, landscape gardeners, urban foragers, muralists and sculptors to beautify and maintain this new streetscape and the transport that it accommodates.