

Bicycle Safety: City of Montreal Pedaling Backwards

(After having coasted for 25 years)

In the industrial countries around the world, the car's prestige and its status as a symbol of freedom is becoming badly tarnished by the evident damage it is causing to the environment, as billions of them crawl along on congested highways. Bureaucrats drive cars, and for them, cyclists are more of a nuisance (like flies). Inside their one-ton armor cocoon, they are never exposed to any danger or risk from a menacing cyclist. This leads to the fact that bureaucrats push rules and regulations that they use for cars upon the cycling public, unaware of the consequences this has for cyclists. Cyclists are exposed to high volume of motorized traffic moving at relatively high speeds, to irresponsible people who open car doors without looking and also to fixed objects, such as metal posts installed on the side of bicycle paths (for the safety of cyclists?) used to separate cyclists/cars.

In the modern North American society, cars have priority over the roads and sidewalks are reserved for pedestrians. Cyclists on the other hand are left with nothing, except sharing the roads with cars and are exposed to all types of danger, including road rage. Car drivers have never formally been educated on how to deal with cyclists on the roadway. An unsafe and hazardous situation always presents itself when a cyclist is proceeding straight past a row of parked cars and a car door suddenly opens in front of him unexpectedly. In general it's the cyclist who ends up in the hospital, usually with very serious injuries. To avoid this type of danger/accident, all we have to do is educate the car drivers to always open the car door with their right hand only. This forces them to look behind and makes it impossible for the car door to suddenly swing open in front of a cyclist. Has any car driver ever received a ticket for endangering a cyclist's life with a car door?

Legislation to make the wearing of helmets compulsory may distract attention from the primary source of the cyclist's problem: sharing the road with cars. We must understand that wearing a helmet does not prevent accidents. It is simply a passive safety system, since we benefit from wearing a helmet only if we are involved in an accident. The government's program to make the public wear helmets makes the government officials look good, but ultimately it's the cyclists who have to pay for the helmets and deal with the risks they are exposed to. More financial resources should be directed towards the prevention of accidents by designing better bicycle paths which safely separate cars from bicycles. This would make the cyclists feel safer and increase their number, consequently reducing car congestion downtown, which would again be beneficial to the environment and improve the health and well-being of everybody. **Logically, we should make it mandatory for the city to construct more (and safer) bicycle paths. This never took place: Between the years 1994 and 2001, the city of Montreal spent only \$24,000 dollars on bicycle infrastructures.**

Today, Montreal has no bicycle network. What they call a network is comprised of many segments and after twenty-five years of promises the most important downtown section is still missing this summer. Shortly after the excavation for the Maisonneuve bike path took place, a 1000 ton support beam was discovered to be cracked, which caused major disruption in downtown transportation for a weekend. This is like having the champagne bottle not break on the bow during the christening of a new ship, a bad omen, except the costs incurred for the repairs of the crack exceed the entire costs of building the Maisonneuve bicycle path.

After having ridden half a million kilometres downtown, I presented the city a petition of 5000 signatures in November 2005, demanding the city address the problem of a lack of bicycle infrastructure downtown. In my opinion, the city of Montreal is building a badly designed bike path downtown to convince the public that they care about the bicycle environment, and they are dragging their heels by opening it in the fall. Why wasn't it opened in the summer? The city of Montreal transportation experts do not happen to ride bicycles, nor do they understand the needs and problems of cyclists. This becomes very apparent when you look at the cycling map that was

presented at the press conference in May 2007, when the city announced the planned opening of the downtown bike path. They were not able to print a simple cycling map without many errors. Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine Tunnel, for example, is indicated as a bicycle path and so is the Olympic basin. They somehow became part of the claimed 200 km network.

Since today no one represents cyclists in Montreal, the city took it upon themselves to carry out this function. Because of that, a more unsafe situation has occurred where "the blind are leading the blind". The old bike path design errors are being reproduced again at a cost of 3.5 million dollars downtown.

Because the Maisonneuve bike path is a two-way bike path on a one-way street, one lane will be going the wrong way, against the car traffic. The whole path is on the wrong side: on the south side (left) where most cars are turning towards the autoroute (means at most intersections cars will be turning left, crossing the cycle path), and it is too narrow. To sum it up, it is an exact copy of the infamous dangerous "Rachel bike path design" from the 1980s, except there will be more cars, cyclists and pedestrians in the mix. One week after the Rachel bike path was inaugurated, a cyclist died using it. How long will it take for the same thing to happen on the downtown bike path?

To design a safe bicycle path downtown, all you have to do is eliminate the parked cars on the right-hand side on Maisonneuve and St. Catherine and replace the parking spaces on both streets with a bicycle path that is unidirectional, which means that all bikes travel in the same direction as the cars, and wide enough to support cycling traffic. This design was presented to the city of Montreal in January 2002, incorporating special barriers that were manufactured from recycled rubber car tires for cyclists' safety.

The other major problem here in Montreal is **bicycle theft**. The best solution at the moment for people who own an expensive bicycle is to have two bicycles: a cheap one they can lock outside so they do not have to worry about theft, and another good one for riding that cannot be used for commuting. Not even this system prevents bikes from being stolen, and it is the cyclist who has to pay whenever a theft occurs – who has to buy a new bike. The city of Montreal bicycle division (?) is not interested in a better and more functional bike rack designed to prevent bicycle theft, one that securely locks the front wheel, back wheel, frame and seat with only one U-lock (which is possible; the city has seen the concept). The new designs they are testing at the Mont-Royal metro station at the moment are all of the same design: a metal tube attached to the ground, different shapes, cheap, and useless because none of them is designed to prevent theft (i.e. no progress.)

Instead the city will install a thousand metal rings on the new electronic parking meters posts with numbers, because the design of the new models, which replaced the old secure mechanical ones, allows the thieves to slip the U-lock over the top of the post.

What is happening today in Montreal? Nothing, except more cyclists on the roadways are avoiding more potholes, car drivers and crumbling infrastructures, while breathing more smog and having to listen to the city boast about winning the 1999 award for the best bicycling city in North America and how green it is.

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Two wheels and a cause

One man's crusade to shape up the city's cycling infrastructure

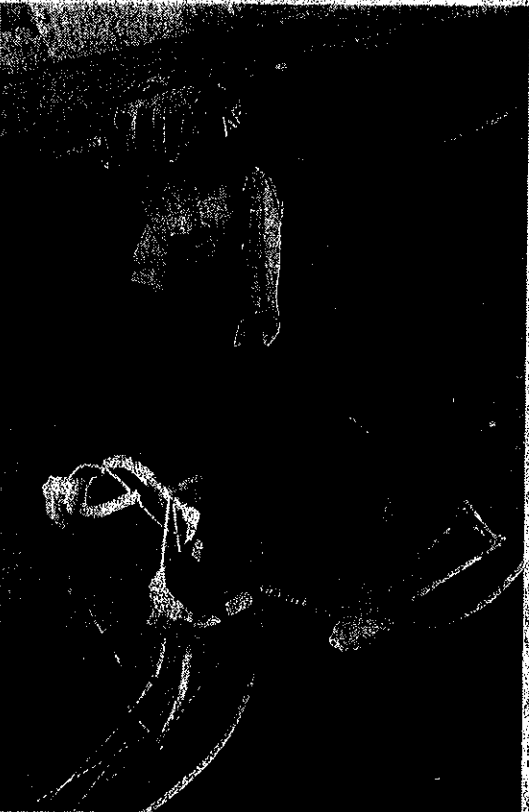
by PATRICK LEITENYI

Montreal's great for biking, right? Lots of bike paths, the lovely Lachine Canal to ride along, easy shortcuts for the street-savvy, and, because it's less of a car-oriented city than others, traffic can be manageable. Sounds great.

Peter Krantz, however, would like you—and the city and the province—to think again. The 40-year-old ex-courier, inventor and cyclist activist can easily point out any number of failings our biking infrastructure suffers from: poorly laid-out paths, dangerous metal barriers to keep cars and cyclists from colliding, and of course our famously reckless drivers.

"Look at this here," Krantz says over one of the dozens of photos he took of bike path hazards. This one in particular is of the bike path near the St. Patrick bridge over the Lachine Canal in St-Henri, where the path swerves sharply before merging with the bridge. "These metal poles. They're supposed to protect bikers from cars, right? What happens if a biker hits them? He'll be going to the hospital, won't he?"

Pointing to a photo of the Rachel path where Clark intersects it, he says, "This is insane. How many problems can you see in this picture? I see at least 12. These include potholes, the two-way direction, the parked cars and street signs lurching over the path at head level. Krantz's opinion on the state of



Jason Felker

This man hates our bike paths: Krantz both on foot and behind wheels. But he has a place reserved in his private hall for bureaucrats