

How to build a better city: It's child's play

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Christopher Hume, urban affairs columnist

Picasso said it took him a lifetime to learn to draw like a child. What would it take to make planners learn to plan like a child?

"A Call to Action," released recently by the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI), argues that to design a city that works for the young is to design a city that works for everyone.

This may not be an original idea – it goes back most recently to Enrique Peñalosa, the celebrated former mayor of Bogotá – but it is a beautiful one, powerful and radical, even revolutionary. You don't have to delve too deeply to realize that it would sweep away more than half a century of planning orthodoxy.

Do what's right for kids, and the rest will take care of itself.

That may be a simplification, but were the principles of kid-friendly urban planning to be implemented, it would mean dense, multi-use communities connected by extensive public transit. It would also mean cities where pedestrians and cyclists enjoyed equal access to the streets as well as the public revenues that pay for them.

As the authors of the report make clear, for kids, getting where they want or need to be is half the battle.

"All across South-Central Ontario, kids have become very dependent on their parents to get them around," argues Richard Gilbert, consultant and co-author of "A Call to Action." "When we started the study in 2002/2003, most municipalities didn't even require developers to build sidewalks. Since we have a lowest common denominator development industry, it doesn't do more than is required."

As Gilbert points out, that's largely why the number of car trips taken by 11- to 15-year-olds has increased 90 per cent in the past two decades. Most of the increase has happened in the suburbs, where, as the joke goes, you have to burn a litre of gas to buy a litre of milk.

"If you were to take a 13-year-old's point-of-view," Gilbert continues, "the suburbs would not have been built at all. Thirteen to 14 is the worst time to be a kid in the suburbs; it's a question of constantly resented dependence. On the other hand, a 13-year-old in the city is a pretty independent person with access to almost everything the city has to offer."

From a kids' perspective, the ideal city is one where destinations – school, park, home, stores, etc. – are close together and connected by cheap, efficient and safe transit. It also has wide sidewalks and bike lanes. Speed limits would also be lower than we're used to; cars are, after all, a leading cause of death and injury for children.

"A kid-friendly city would be a very livable city," says report co-author Catherine O'Brien, "whether you're talking about speed limits, scale or distances. When the appropriate infrastructure is there, the fear is diminished. There are more eyes on the street; people feel safer."

According to O'Brien, a recent survey determined that fully 75 per cent of kids would prefer to walk or bike to school. But distances between neighbourhoods and neighbourhood schools have never been greater. Some suburban communities have responded by building schools on main roads where parents can drop kids off and pick them up without blocking narrow residential streets.

This, of course, only makes sense if cities are being designed for cars. At the heart of "A Call to Action" is the assertion that cities must be human-centred.

"Distance is the greatest determinant for whether kids walk or cycle to school," O'Brien explains. "The limit for walking is about 1.6 kilometres, five to seven kilometres for cyclists."

Then there are simple things such as providing secure parking for bikes at schools. Some principals do what they can; others, unhelpfully, have banned bikes from school property.

It doesn't help, either, that nervous parents are reluctant to give their offspring the freedom that earlier generations of kids took for granted. And although statistics tell us crime is down in almost every category, fear is up.

"Toronto is getting safer," says the OPPI's Loretta Ryan, "but where do people get their perception of the city? From Citytv and CFTO."

As Gilbert observes, "Every year an average of five children are abducted in Canada by people other than family members. But thousands are injured or killed in car accidents."

The report also calls for formal mechanisms to give youth direct input into the political process. One good example is that of Breton, Alta., which has two youth members on town council who can speak at meetings but not vote.

For Ryan, a mother of two young children, the kid-friendly city is also one that encourages fitness. It does this by providing the infrastructure that allows physical activity to be incorporated into daily life.

According to Ryan, for the first time in history, children entering school today are not expected to live as long as their parents. Cut off from the world outside the mall, and raised on a 21st-century diet of junk food and moving images, kids suffer from unprecedented obesity and diseases traditionally associated with people old enough to be their parents.

And as O'Brien points out, "Kids who are ferried around by car see the world through a windshield. It's another version of screen time."

Still, the goals of the report are modest; it offers a list of guidelines such as:

"Identify where children and youth want to go or need to go ... and provide ways of getting there by foot."

"Do what is possible to reduce amounts of motorized road traffic..."

"...Provide separate bicycle paths or trails or, if not possible, install bicycle lanes..."

"Separate sidewalks used by children and youth from heavily travelled roads."

All simple suggestions, though easier said than done. The remaking of the city must start somewhere, however, and kids can lead the way. For planners, the hard part won't be learning how to work, but remembering how to play.

From the sage of Bogotá: walking as a key to happiness

Urban heroes don't come much more heroic than Enrique Peñalosa. As mayor of Bogotá from 1998 to 2001, he famously took back the city from the rich, car-owning minority and returned it to the urban masses that relied on public transit, bicycles and their own two legs to get around. During his term, Peñalosa built 1,200 parks, 300 kilometres of bike paths, 50 new schools and a network of libraries.

More important, he changed the culture of Bogotá into one that put people ahead of cars – no mean feat. One of his first acts as mayor was to enforce the ban against sidewalk parking. Car owners shouted and screamed and tried to have him impeached, but because what they were doing was illegal in the first place, their complaints went nowhere.

"We had to build a city not for businesses or automobiles," Peñalosa says, "but for children and thus for people. If only children had as much public space as cars, most cities in the world would become marvellous."

Today, Peñalosa travels the globe as an urban consultant. The rest of the planet has yet to catch up with his obvious if world-changing approach.

"God made us walking animals – pedestrians," he says. "As a fish needs to swim, a bird to fly, a deer to run, we need to walk, not in order to survive, but to be happy."

-Christopher Hume