

Bogota's Urban Happiness Movement

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From living hell to living well: A radical campaign to return streets from cars to people in Colombia's largest city is now a model for the world

By CHARLES MONTGOMERY

On a clear, cloudless afternoon, Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogotá, leaves his office early in order to pick up his 10-year-old son from school. As usual, he wears his black leather shoes and pinstriped trousers. As usual, he is joined by his two pistol-packing bodyguards. And, as usual, he travels not in the armoured SUV typical of most public figures in Colombia, but on a knobby-tired mountain bike.

Mr. Peñalosa pedals through the streets of Santa Barbara in Bogota's well-to-do north side. He jumps curbs and potholes, riding one-handed, weaving across the pavement, barking into his cellphone with barely a thought for the city's notoriously aggressive drivers.

On most days, this would be a radical and perhaps suicidal act. But today is special.

Ever since citizens voted to make it an annual affair in 2000, private cars have been banned entirely from this city of nearly eight million every Feb. 1. On Dia Sin Carro, Car Free Day, the roar of traffic subsides and the toxic haze thins. Buses are jam-packed and taxis hard to come by, but hundreds of thousands of people have followed Mr. Peñalosa's example and hit the streets under their own steam.

Former Bogota mayor Enrique Penalosa tours his city by bicycle on the Car Free Day he instituted, campaigning for another term.

(Juan Velasco for The Globe and Mail)

"This is a learning experiment! We are realizing that we can live without cars!" Mr. Peñalosa bellows as he cruises across the southbound lanes of Avenida 19, pausing on the wide, park-like median. A flock of young women rolls up the median's bike path, shouting, "Mayor! Mayor!" though it has been six years since Mr. Peñalosa left office (consecutive terms are constitutionally banned in Bogota) and he has only just begun his campaign

to regain the mayor's seat.

Car Free Day is just one of the ways that Mr. Peñalosa helped to transform a city once infamous for narco-terrorism, pollution and chaos into a globally lauded model of livability and urban renewal. His ideas are being adopted in cities across the developing world. They are also being championed by planners and politicians in North America, where Mr. Peñalosa has reinvigorated the debate about public space once championed by Jane Jacobs.

His policies may resemble environmentalism, but they are no such thing. Rather, they were driven by his conversion to **hedonics, an economic philosophy whose proponents focus on fostering not economic growth but human happiness.**

Proponents of hedonics, or happiness economics, have been gaining influence. London School of Economics professor Richard Layard, who wrote the seminal *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, was an adviser to Tony Blair's first Labour government. Prof. Layard asserts that, contrary to the guiding principle of a century of economists, income is a poor measure of happiness. Economic growth in England and the U.S. in the past half-century hasn't measurably increased life satisfaction.

So what makes societies happy? The past decade has seen an explosion in research aiming to answer that question, and there's good news for people in places like Bogota: Feelings of well-being are determined as much by status and social connectedness as by income. Richer people are happier than poor people, but societies with wider income gaps are less happy on the whole. People who interact more with friends, family and neighbours are happier than those who don't.

And what makes people most unhappy? Not work, but commuting to work. These are the concepts that guided Mr. Peñalosa's car-bashing campaign.

"There are a few things we can agree on about happiness," he says. "You need to fulfill your potential as a human being. You need to walk. You need to be with other people. Most of all, you need to not feel inferior. When you talk about these things, designing a city can be a very powerful means to generate happiness."

In the mid-1990s, Bogota was, citizens recall, un *enfierno* - a living hell.

There were 3,363 murders in 1995 and nearly 1,400 traffic deaths. The city suffered from the cumulative effects of decades of civil war, but also from explosive population growth and a dearth of planning. Wealthy residents fenced off their local public parks. Drivers appropriated sidewalk space to park cars. The air rivalled Mexico City's for pollution. Workers from the squalid shanties on the city's south end spent as much as four hours every day commuting to and from Bogota's wealthy north.

In 1997, a study by the Japanese International Co-operation Agency prescribed a vast network of elevated freeways to ease Bogota's congestion. Like cities across the Third World, Bogota was looking to North American suburbs as a development model, even though only 20 per cent of people owned cars.

The tide changed with Mr. Peñalosa's election in 1998.

"A city can be friendly to people or it can be friendly to cars, but it can't be both," the new mayor announced. He shelved the highway plans and poured the billions saved into parks, schools, libraries, bike routes and the world's longest "pedestrian freeway."

He increased gas taxes and prohibited car owners from driving during rush hour more than three times per week. He also handed over prime space on the city's main arteries to the **Transmilenio, a bus rapid-transit system based on that of Curitiba, Brazil.**

Bogotans almost impeached their new mayor. Business owners were outraged. Yet by the end of his three-year term, Mr. Peñalosa was immensely popular and his reforms were being lauded for making Bogota remarkably fairer, more tolerable and more efficient.

Moreover, by shifting the budget away from private cars, Mr. Peñalosa was able to boost school enrolment by 30 per cent, build 1,200 parks, revitalize the core of the city and provide running water to hundreds of thousands of poor.

The shift was all the more radical in that it was not motivated by the populist socialism that has swept much of Latin America. Mr. Peñalosa, the son of a Colombian politician and businessman, studied economics at North Carolina's Duke University. His first book shouted **Capitalism: The Best Option.** Yet even as he worked as a business management consultant, and

later an economic adviser to the Colombian government, he began having doubts.

"I realized that we in the Third World are not going to catch up to the developed countries for two or three hundred years," he recalls. "If we defined our success just in terms of income per capita, we would have to accept ourselves as second- or third-rate societies - as a bunch of losers - which is not exactly enticing for our young people. So we are forced to find another measure of success. I think the only real obvious measure of success is happiness."

HAPPIER TOGETHER

Mr. Peñalosa offers an eager " *Como le va?*" - how's it going - to a pair of dust-caked labourers cruising past on the bike path. He is clearly campaigning: Every commute is a chance to remind Bogotans that their bike routes were his idea, and their parks his doing. But he is also a preacher spreading the word.

"See those guys? Before, cyclists were seen as just a nuisance. They were the poorest of the poor," he says. "Now, they have respect. So bikeways are important [because] they show that a citizen on a \$30 bike is equally important to someone driving in a \$30,000 car."

This principle of equity led him to hand road space over to public transit and pedestrian areas - a way of making private space public again.

University of British Columbia professor emeritus John Helliwell, who studies economics and human well-being, sees added value in such measures. "When you get data on people's life satisfaction, and you try and explain the differences, the variables that jump right out at you relate to the trustworthiness of the environment that people are living in. How much can they trust strangers? How well can they trust people in the neighbourhood? How trustworthy are the police? The more positive answers people give on these questions, the happier they are," Prof. Helliwell says.

"So what do you need to do to establish these higher levels of trust? It turns out that frequency of positive interaction is the key."

Public spaces that bring people together in congenial activity produce happier citizens than those - like traffic jams - that spur animosity and

aggression, Prof. Helliwell says.

By linking the economics of happiness to urban design, Mr. Peñalosa really does seem to have made Bogotans happier. The murder rate fell by an astounding 40 per cent during his term and has continued to fall ever since. So have the number of traffic deaths. Traffic moves three times faster now during rush hour. And the changes seem to have transformed how people feel.

"The perception of the city has changed," says Ricardo Montezuma, an urbanist at the National University of Colombia. "Twelve years ago, 80 per cent of us were completely pessimistic about our future. Now, it's the opposite. Most of us are optimistic," he says, referring to Gallup polls.

"Why is this important? Because in a big way a city is really just the sum of what people think about it. The city is a subjective thing."

Bogotans don't give Mr. Peñalosa all the credit. Every Sunday since the 1970s, Bogota has blocked off its major roads so that citizens can jog, walk or bike in safety. These *ciclovía* days transform the *avenidas* into vast, linear parks, where more than two million Bogotans come to play, picnic, do aerobics and eat sweet *arepa* bread from mobile vendors. A generation has grown up knowing streets can change.

But people have changed too. Mr. Peñalosa's unorthodox predecessor, Antanas Mockus, is credited with building a new culture of citizenship. The former philosophy professor hired mimes to make fun of bad drivers. He sent actors dressed as monks into the streets to encourage people to think about noise pollution. He gave out thousands of coloured cards - the kind referees use in soccer games - so people could express their disapproval of others' driving.

Mr. Mockus convinced Bogotans it was their duty to take care of each other. Inspired by his anti-corruption campaign and message of citizenship, 63,000 families volunteered to pay 10 per cent more than their assessed property tax. By the end of his term, tax revenues had tripled.

He had prepared Bogotans for Mr. Peñalosa's infrastructure changes, which required people to make sacrifices for the general good. The best place to see these ideas translated into urban design is Bogota's *hardscrabble* south side, where about 80,000 migrants - mostly refugees from

Colombia's civil war - arrive seeking shelter every year. Few of the streets are paved here, but a pedestrian-only avenue intersects the red brick slums of Ciudad de Cali.

This is where 19-year-old Fabien Gonzales joins the commuting throng just after sunrise en route to his job as a cashier at the Home Center on Bogota's north end. Mr. Gonzales takes home about \$238 a month and, like most of his neighbours, uses feet, bike and bus to get to work.

He cruises down one of Mr. Peñalosa's ciclorutas on a silver mountain bike, to the Portal de las Americas, a transportation hub linking bike paths and pedestrian roads with the Transmilenio rapid-bus network. The station is surrounded by broad plazas and lawns, where people linger over hot chocolate as the sun creeps up over the Andes.

He locks his bike and pushes onto a northbound express. "Before the Transmilenio," he says, "I had to leave home two hours before starting work. Now, it takes me 45 minutes."

The Transmilenio is a distillation of Mr. Peñalosa's philosophy on well-being. It also happens to turn everything most North Americans think about transit on its head. It functions much like an urban metro, combining stylish stations, fast boarding and express routes. It moves more people than many urban rail-transit systems for a small fraction of the construction cost.

"Many cities talk about building transit. We didn't want a transit project, but a mobility project. We wanted to move people," says Angelica Castro Rodriguez, general manager of the public-private alliance that runs the service. The Transmilenio also reduces Bogota's carbon dioxide emissions by nearly 250,000 tons a year. It's the first transport system to be accredited under Kyoto's Clean Development Plan.

But for Mr. Peñalosa, the key is that it seizes road space from other vehicles. "We are constructing democracy with our bus system. Remember, 80 per cent of Bogotans don't own cars. For them, every day is car-free day. This busway, unlike a subway, shows that public transport has priority over private interests."

Every week, Bogota hosts delegations from cities around the world looking for solutions to their growing pains.

"Before Peñalosa, mayors were terrified to take on the issue of auto-dominated public space, for fear that motorists would rebel politically," says Walter Hook of New York's Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP).

"But he not only challenged auto dependency, he succeeded politically. He's given other politicians the courage to follow. And other mayors have realized that they can't build their way out of congestion."

The ITDP now funds Mr. Peñalosa's efforts to bring his post-car message around the world. Jakarta, Beijing and Mexico City have handed over road space to bus rapid-transit systems and more are being built in Delhi, Seoul and Johannesburg.

PEDESTRIAN BROADWAY?

Mr. Peñalosa's solutions may work in the developing world, but is North America ready for his happy revolution?

Consider the advice he gave to planners in Los Angeles last year: Let traffic and congestion become so unbearable that drivers voluntarily abandon their car habits. And when Manhattan held a conference in October asking for a prescription for the gridlocked streets of New York, Mr. Peñalosa cheerily suggested banning cars entirely from Broadway.

"He got a standing ovation," observed an astounded Deputy Borough President Rose Pierre-Louis. **New York is now considering charging drivers to enter Manhattan.**

Mr. Peñalosa was also given a hero's welcome by hundreds of cheering urbanists, planners and politicians at last summer's World Urban Forum in Vancouver. Stuart Ramsey, a B.C. transportation engineer, suggested it was because the Colombian had gone ahead and done what they had all been talking about for years.

"Bogota has demonstrated that it is possible to make dramatic change to how we move around in our cities in a very short time frame," Mr. Ramsey said afterward. "It's simply a matter of choosing to do so."

"We could improve our air quality and dramatically reduce our emissions any

time we want. It's easy to do. All it would take is a can of paint and you'd have dedicated bus lanes. It doesn't require huge amounts of money. It simply requires a choice."

The fact that the people who plan and build the world's urban areas should applaud an attack on private cars suggests that cities may be on the verge of a massive change. Yet Mr. Peñalosa points out that North American cities may face a much bigger challenge than poor cities like Bogota. For one thing we have already spent billions wrapping ourselves in freeways.

"Transportation is a problem that gets worse the richer societies become," he says. "The 20th century was a disaster for cities. And the most dynamic economies produced the worst cities of all. I'm talking about the U.S. of course - Atlanta, Phoenix, Miami, cities totally dominated by private cars."

In Canada, commuters are discovering that the highways that brought us suburbia are no longer getting us to work so quickly. From 1992 to 2005, the average commute time in Canadian cities rose to 63 minutes from 54.

This is bad news for happiness. Recent studies on life satisfaction show that commuting makes people more unhappy than anything else in life. (It is, apparently, the opposite of sex.) Commuting also happens to rob us of time for family and friends.

In a 2004 study of German commuters, **psychologists found that the longer people spent getting to work, the lower their general life satisfaction tended to be.** The malaise brought on by commuting was not being balanced by work satisfaction or higher income.

If commuting makes us so unhappy, why do North Americans keep buying houses in distant suburbs? Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert suggests that it is **because humans are just not very good at predicting what will make us happy.**

"When we make predictions about happiness, we typically fail to consider adaptation - the process by which the brain gets used to things," explains Prof. Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. "It is much easier to adapt to things that stay constant than to things that change.

"So we adapt quickly to the joy of a larger house in the suburbs because the house is exactly the same size every time we come in the front door.

But we find it difficult to adapt to commuting by car because every day is a slightly new form of misery, with different people honking at us, different intersections jammed with accidents, different problems with weather, and so on."

So the misery of the long commute will almost always trump the happiness of that spacious den, Prof. Gilbert says.

The only major Canadian city where commute times didn't shoot up in the past decade was freeway-free Vancouver, where the city stopped adding road capacity in 1997 and has been aggressively "traffic-calming" ever since.

Thanks to the city's decision to develop dense new neighbourhoods near the downtown core, almost two-thirds of journeys made around downtown are done on foot, by bike or on transit. Aside from cutting carbon emissions, this kind of commuting also boosts feelings of connectedness and public trust, according to UBC's Prof. Helliwell.

In terms of happiness, then, Canada's big-city mayors are on track when they press the federal government for a national transit strategy. But Bogota suggests the secret may lie not in the megaprojects favoured by ribbon-cutting politicians, but in cheaper options that move more people.

The Toronto Transit Commission wasn't crazy about Prime Minister Stephen Harper's announcement of an 8.7-kilometre extension of the Spadina subway line, for example, because the same \$2-billion could have bought 47 km of light-rail line instead.

Still, Bogotans are not necessarily better than Canadians at predicting what will make them happy. **In 1996, when traffic congestion was considered the city's biggest problem, they voted against auto restrictions. It took courage - and, some say, arrogance - for Mr. Peñalosa to ignore the polls.**

By 2001, the measures and the mayor were wildly popular. Citizens voted to ban cars entirely during rush hour by 2015. And if, as polls suggest, they re-elect Mr. Peñalosa this October, the war on cars will escalate.

"We're lucky in the developing world," Mr. Peñalosa says as we roll up to his son's school. "We haven't had the money to build all those freeways. We are growing quickly, but we still have a chance to build our cities

properly, to avoid the mistakes made in North America."

Children pour out of the school's iron gates, Mr. Peñalosa's own son, Martin, among them. The boy carries a helmet and wheels a miniature version of his father's bike. The two wobble their way along Avenida 19's cicloruta, veering into the grass on either side of the path.

The median feels like a park, filled with children, suited businessmen, fast-food cashiers, the wealthy and the poor, strolling or rolling home together. On the whole, they do seem quite happy.

The scene reflects the city, a place that is more than the sum of its concrete, more than a set of efficiencies to maximize and so much more than a machine for creating wealth. It is, Mr. Peñalosa says, a means to a way of life.

END

Charles Montgomery is the author of the Charles Taylor Award-winning book: *The Last Heathen*.