

EMBRACING TRAFFIC CHAOS, MAY 2010

I've been back in Toronto for a week now after a whirlwind 2-week trip to Belgium, Jordan and Syria. First to bicycle-friendly Gent, then Amman, a fast-growing city experiencing the negative effects of sprawl not unlike those found in the GTA, and two marvelous days wandering through the souks of Damascus, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

As a cycling advocate steeped in the particular problems and perspectives of my home city of Toronto, whenever I travel I find myself compulsively watching and documenting how transportation functions in other cities. This trip was no exception.

At first glance there is very little in common between the pedestrian-priority streets, tree-lined bicycle paths and multi-lane arterial roundabouts found in northern Europe and the frenetic jumble of pedestrians, cars and the occasional bicycle in Middle Eastern cities. But in both of these places I observed an admirable quality that I wanted to bottle and bring back home with me - the ability to *chill* amidst the mixing of traffic modes.

As pedestrians flattened against the ancient Roman walls in the old city of Damascus to let pass a honking, exhaust-spewing car careening around the narrow streets, I laughed to myself thinking about the outrage this behaviour would induce in Toronto.



Main street, Damascus
Photo credit: Hannah Evans

In Gent, it was only the North American tourists who clutched their hearts and jumped aside at the sound of a bicycle approaching them quickly from behind in a pedestrian-priority street where bicycles are permitted. The Belgian pedestrians didn't miss a step or pause their conversations as the cyclists weaved around and between them. And nobody scowled, swore or lost their tempers.

It all made me wonder. Are all of our Herculean attempts at imposing order making us cranky? Maybe we need to insert a bit more traffic chaos into our lives.

We do have our own Toronto example of this. Visit Kensington Market on any given day and you'll find cars, delivery trucks, pedestrians, and cyclists all negotiating the narrow streets and sidewalks in an amicable fashion.

I'm a bit of an old-timer cycling advocate. I've been at this since 1993. I'm in favour of just about any new bike lane or park trail being proposed to provide cyclists some badly needed protected space. But I'd also like to see a lot more of our streets function in the good-natured chaotic way of Baldwin or Augusta.

This is one of the reasons I'm a big proponent of a relatively new concept called Complete Streets. To date over 100 jurisdictions across the U.S. have adopted Complete Streets policies that ensure that transportation agencies routinely design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for *all* users, including cyclists. The beauty of these policies is that they aren't prescriptive. Each complete street is unique, depending upon the context. But what ties complete streets together is that they are all designed to balance safety and convenience for everyone using the road.

A complete streets policy is a simple, yet missing piece of the transportation puzzle here in Canada. Cyclists have a legitimate right to use every single street, including arterials, where especially downtown, they are local businesses best customers. The Clean Air Partnership has released two research studies demonstrating that on Bloor Street, one of Toronto's most important arterials, cyclists and pedestrians visit businesses more often and spend more money per month than drivers and public transit users. Yet despite these facts we are hearing from mayoral candidates that cyclists should not be accommodated on arterial roads. We are a young country so perhaps it's not surprising we are having debates here that would be unimaginable in older countries.

But we've got to find a way to get beyond the divisive debates we have here in Toronto about how to allocate road use in a way that's safe and fair for everyone. Adopting a Complete Streets policy could be a good place to start. In the meantime, let's find a way to let those unpredictable moments of traffic chaos slide on by with a smile.

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Pedestrians and cyclists on Damascus street
Photo credit: Hannah Evans