

1. Projects



Theme 8: Urban rhythms and the mobility of pedestrians and cyclists

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A defining feature of modern lifestyles is being overloaded with activities while also being pressured to travel fast and far. As a result, a significant part of the population aspires to slow down their pace of life. In this section, we look at how walking and cycling can contribute to fulfilling this aspiration.

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Cycling and walking: literature review - Urban rhythms and the mobility of pedestrians and cyclists

In praise of slowness

Today, after more than a century of promoting the speed of travel, “an intellectual tradition has gradually given rise to a body of criticism against the myth of the ‘natural’ benefits of speed” (Desjardins, 2015). Indeed, over the past twenty years, there has been growing interest in issues relating to slow mobility. Copenhagen has pioneered this trend, but many European cities are also getting involved. They are beginning to redesign

spaces occupied by cars in favour of efficient public transport systems and so-called soft or active modes of transport. The aim is primarily to improve the quality of life, but also to reduce air pollution, traffic noise and stress for inhabitants of city centres (Gehl, 2011). This renewed interest in slowness is reflected in the growing number of pedestrian or shared areas around city centres, as well as through the creation of networks of cycleways and pedestrian paths.

To carefully analyse the relationships between slowness and the commons, we must also delve into the roots of the renewed interest in slowness in urban planning. Since the 2000s, a new urban utopia has emerged around the concept of the Slow City (Knox, 2005). Through the Cittaslow international network, 200 small cities (under 50,000 inhabitants) have committed to pursuing a strategy that promotes environmental quality, a strong urban fabric, local products and specificities, and the sense of community. Echoing the principles of “slow food” or even “slow science,” the idea of slowness refers not only to a difference in speed, but, more fundamentally, to alternative forms of production, social organization and relationships to others. When applied to the city, the fundamental idea is therefore this: we must slow down — our traffic, our flows, our production rates, etc. — to create the conditions for sustainable urban development.

While speed has traditionally been considered a symbol of productivity and technical progress, slowness now appears to be an “innovation” that can drive a new urban transition (Wiel, 1999). As such, compared to the motor city, the pedestrian city is presented as “the ultimate fast city” (Lévy, 2008, p. 58).

A principle that is hard to generalise

Nevertheless, the Slow City has also been criticised by some authors who claim that, as an urban model, it responds to specific localised interests and contexts that are hard to generalise. Recent studies on this topic suggest that when urban planners are inspired by the Slow City model, their proposed plans are narrowly and selectively focused on areas within cities (Knox, 2005). As a result, the Slow City model appears to be a “luxury” of privileged portions of the territory (the centre versus the periphery) (Reigner, 2013).

This raises the question of what slowing down means. The slowness of a given lifestyle certainly depends on the ergonomics of public spaces and transport systems, but it does not maintain mechanical relationships with them. In other words, it is not because a space is designed to promote slowness that it is used as such. Rather, research on the subject suggests that slowness can go hand in hand with an intensive use of digital communication systems (smartphones, tablets, laptops connected to the Internet), which is facilitated by the increasing availability of free Wi-Fi in public spaces (Christie 2018). Similarly, numerous studies show that people who travel shorter distances each day carry out activity programs that are more complex in terms of the number and diversity of activities than people who complete large daily mobility loops.

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Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

En savoir plus x

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