UCL TRANSPORT INSTITUTE

Cycling and culture

Report of a symposium involving UCL researchers and others | 1 May 2014

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Introductions

Nicola Christie
Director of UCL Transport Institute

Nicola Christie set the symposium in context, talking about the set of research themes that have been chosen to guide the Transport Institute in its first phase *(see Figure 1)*. These include culture, under which heading the event was taking place.

Nicola then handed over to Iain Borden, the theme leader for culture, and the event's chair. Iain invited us to think about two things:

- Why culture? Alongside the many "hard and fast" aspects of transport which are very important, there will be cultures of risk, finance, passion, body, perceptions, aesthetics, speed, and of way things appear to people. These cultures contribute to what transport is.

- And how do we talk about aspects of cycling culture? Are they ineffable? "The feeling of the body as it spins its legs and cycles its bicycle and spins through the streets of London… it's actually not very easy to put that into words."

Iain then set the wheels of the symposium in motion by introducing the speakers.

Figure 1

Michael Hebbert
UCL Bartlett School of Planning

Canyon Culture

Michael described the street canyon as a coded cultural artefact, developed in the 19th Century to a high level of sophistication, culminating in the boulevards of fin-de-siècle Europe. After being out of fashion, the late 20th Century saw the beginning of its revival. The reinvention of the canyon-street is the "keystone of post-modern urbanism" and needs to involve all actors.

The bicycle is the perfect transport mode for the urban street canyon: "there is a lot to be said about the erotics of cycling down a street canyon, feeling the built environment form caressing you on either side of your face as you cycle," Michael told us. But conflict with pedestrians must be avoided. It requires subtle street design and a culture of everyday family bike use, not a "commuter peloton" on a Cycling Superhighway. In closing, Michael commended to us two sources of inspiration – www.streetfilms.org/ & www.streetsblog.org/.

Alan Latham
UCL Geography

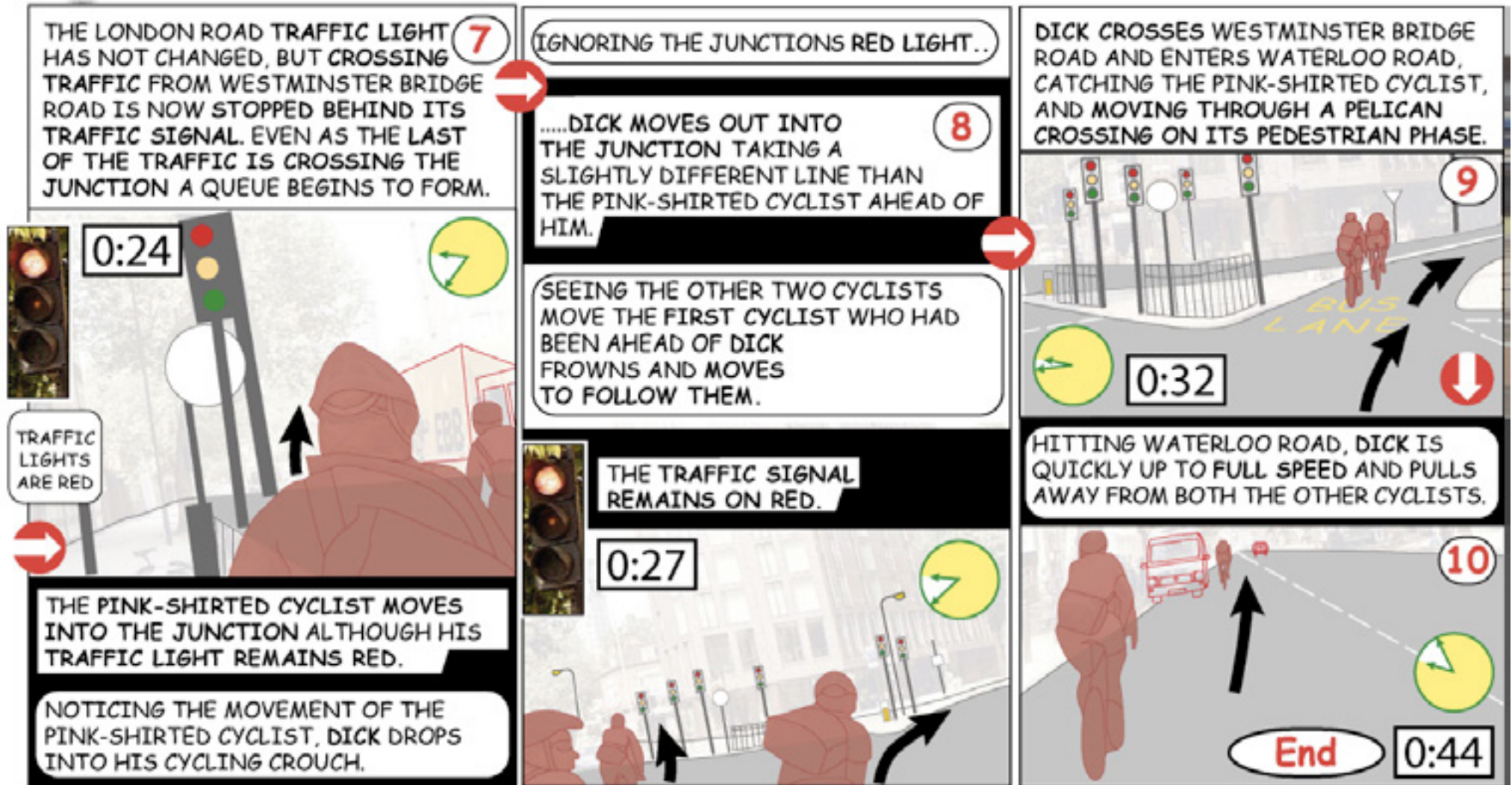#### Inhabiting infrastructure: exploring the interactional spaces of urban cycling

Alan spoke about research done with Pete Wood of the OU, centred on "the corporeal engagements and skills involved in navigating London's streets on a bicycle". What are the situated interactions of cyclists with other road users and transport infrastructure and how do these relate to the business of travelling?

To do this, they accompanied their research participants on one of their normal cycling journeys. This ride-along was recorded by a single camera on the researcher's helmet. It was followed by an interview with the participants based on the material from the ride-along. They then converted the footage into maps and associated cartoon strips *(see Figure 2 overleaf)* which help to show how different individuals negotiate the streets (especially intersections) and why they do it that way. This pilot research demonstrates the range of compliance with the Highway Code, including occasions when riders find it best to get off and walk, and offers insights into rule-breaking (or "rule-making") and the justifications provided for it – very often the individual's concern for her/his own safety.

Figure 2

Helena Titheridge
UCL Civil, Environmental and Geomatic Engineering

The use and future of e-bikes in Xi'an, China

Helena reported on the sharp growth in production and ownership of e-bikes in China and the associated controversy concerning their safety and environmental impacts. Because e-bikes range from push-bikes with batteries to electric scooters *(see Figure 3)*, there is debate concerning whether they should be seen as motorised vehicles. Where they are allowed on the highway, do they fit better with pedestrians or motorised traffic?

Though ostensibly "green", in China e-bikes run on electricity which is probably generated using brown coal, and their batteries can cause highly-poisonous leaks if damaged. In addition, it is common for vendors to instruct purchasers in the removal of speed restriction devices. In the context of

a proliferation of e-bikes, certain cities have responded to these concerns by imposing bans or restrictions.

Helena described work done in Xi'an with Runing Ye. This central Chinese city has a population of 8.5 million and 650,000 e-bike registrations. There is an extensive network of cycle lanes (on which e-bikes are allowed) but motorcycle use is restricted.

A survey was undertaken on commuting and well-being: this indicated that the respective shares of bicycle and e-bike in the journey to work were 4.2 and 5.4 per cent but that travel satisfaction was not significantly higher for bicycle. Associated attitudinal questions indicate that those commuting by e-bike aspire to car ownership more than their cycling counterparts. This suggests that the e-bike is, in Xi'an at least, less a member of the push-bike family than a stepping stone to the car.

Figure 3: **The E-bicycle continuum**

Bicycle style e-bike (BSEB)   Scooter style e-bike (SSEB)

There is a backlash against China's 120million electric bicycles
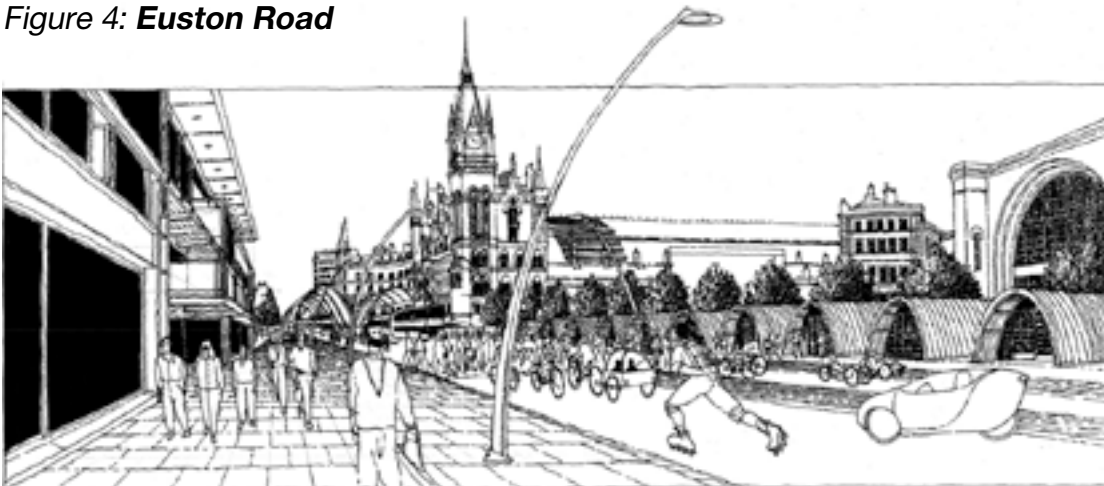
Steve Johnson
The Architecture Ensemble

Car-free London competition 1998

Steve took us back in time by describing his collaboration with Arup on an entry to the competition to envision a car-free London, run in 1998 by the Architecture Foundation. Amongst the inspirations behind their entry was the thought that "streets are the stage for city life and people are the actors" and the objectives included "offering buildings a better setting: giving people time and space to appreciate the streetscape". Amongst the measures proposed were:
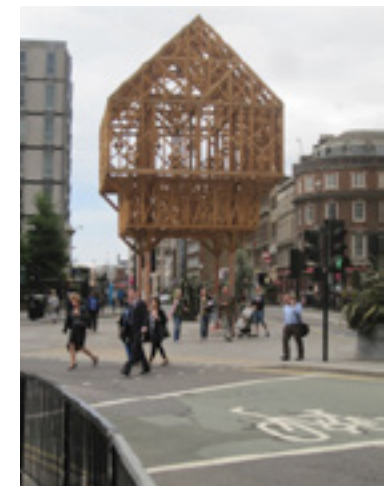
- The law of the sea - the more vulnerable users to have higher priority on the streets with vehicles giving way to pedestrians.

- The **SMILE** Card: **S**mart **M**oving **i**n **L**ondon for residents and guests for all public transport modes. Not available to car owners.

Steve presented drawings that had been part of the submission *(Figure 4)*, then showed how other cities (Istanbul, Split, Zagreb) have already adopted some of these principles. Moreover, London (prompted in part by New York and Chicago) is beginning to do the same "albeit very cautiously", in locations such as Regents Place, Kings Cross and Shoreditch, with audacious plans for Clerkenwell Boulevard. So the proposals from the competition entry have become reality to some extent. And this reflects fashion ("Brompton redesigned the bowler hat in the form of a bicycle") as well as a desire to be free from crowding and congestion. But, Steve argues, the Jeremy Clarksons are impeding progress, as are the taxi lobby and the bus companies. Who will win? Either way, there are significant benefits from the transition *(see Figure 5)*.

Figure 4: **Euston Road**

Figure 5
Paleys upon Pilers, Aldgate

Aiden Sidebottom
UCL Security and Crime Science

Designing out bicycle theft

Aiden started by describing the positive correlation between losing a bicycle and stopping cycling, pointing out too that there are very few recoveries of stolen bicycles or prosecutions of bicycle thieves. So there are good reasons for trying to stop bicycles being stolen in the first place, particularly given that cycle theft in London has been increasing roughly in line with the volume of cycling (whilst other crime has steadily fallen).

One approach to reducing cycle theft is through situational crime prevention: increasing the security of bicycles through a) where and b) how they are locked. There is plenty of room for improvement, given that an extensive survey found only 12 per cent of bikes had been locked in a way that the research team deemed "secure".

One response was a sticker encouraging the owner to lock both wheels and the frames to the stand. These stickers led to an improvement in locking practice compared with control sites. But this is a discretionary intervention, in that it relies upon the owner seeing and acting on the advice. A more

sophisticated response was the M-shaped stand *(see Figure 6)*, designed to encourage users to apply the lock at a height that would increase the probability of securing at least one wheel as well as the frame. This too seemed to lead to an improvement in the security of locking practices.

But there is still much we do not know. For example, does better locking practice lead to reduced theft? Do "fly-parked" bicycles (those attached to street furniture not designed for locking bikes) stand a higher chance of being stolen? And how might we disrupt the stolen bike market as a way of discouraging bike theft?
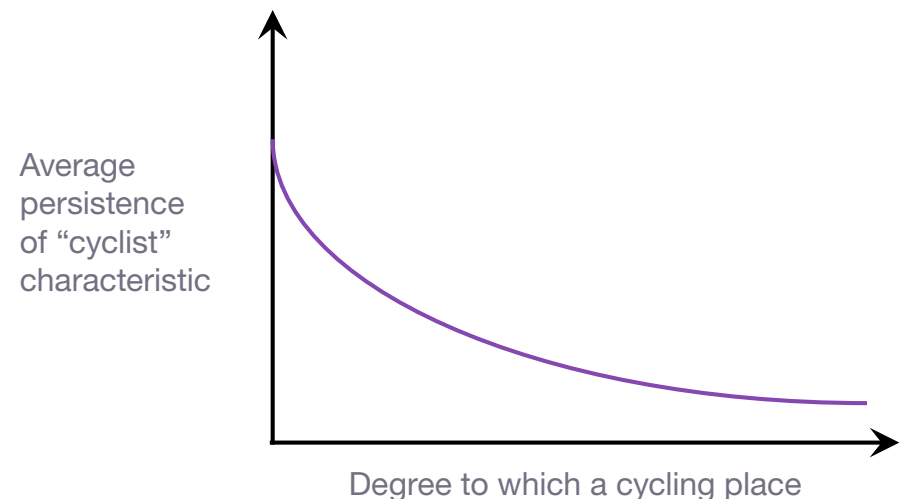

Figure 6

Tom Cohen
UCL Transport Institute

Cycling and identity

Tom reported on a small number of interviews conducted with people he had button-holed at Spin London, an event that describes itself as "The Urban Cycle Show". He had set out to explore what it means to be a "cyclist" and how this relates to other aspects of people's identities. He also wanted to learn about the relationship between the status of "cyclist" and the cycling environment.

The interviewees provided a diversity of responses concerning what a "cyclist" is, ranging from the very inclusive ("anyone who cycles") to the more exclusive (someone for whom cycling is the default mode) but their subsequent descriptions of themselves gave the clear impression that the "cyclist" is (at least for now) a minority, is "other". Analysis of how cycling fitted in with the other elements of people's lives suggested it was a less persistent attribute of identity than, for example, character traits or the fact of being a parent, but possibly more persistent than current job or home location. And Tom's discussion with interviewees of whether they lived in "a cycling place" led him to hypothesise a relationship between the prevalence of the "cyclist" and ease of cycling: "cyclists" will be a larger part of the bike-riding population in places where cycling is possible but not necessarily pleasant and, hence, not normalised. He also postulated that the average persistence of "cyclist" as a component of identity would also vary with cycling environment *(see Figure 7)*.

Figure 7:
Persistence of cycling identity vs environment

Average persistence of "cyclist" characteristic

Degree to which a cycling place

John Adams
UCL Geography

How societal attitudes to risk shape a cycling culture

John started by contrasting the ratio of fatalities in road traffic accidents to vehicle numbers in the UK (which has one of the lowest values) with Nigeria (200 times higher) and Bangladesh (1,200 times higher). What explains these differences – engineers? Legislators? He argued that, because these states appear to have very similar safety regimes, it must be down to behaviour. Does this also explain the steady drop over time in the total number of road deaths in the UK?

*Figure 8: **No children***

John then compared three countries with very "good" road safety records: the UK, Sweden and the Netherland. Sweden has Vision Zero, where the system is designed to reduce crashes; the Dutch have opted for shared space, letting chaos reign. People's minds collectively form a society's risk culture, said John and, for its part, the UK has adopted societal risk aversion. He provided numerous persuasive examples, the most telling of which was a playground from which the swings are removed at the end of the day *(see Figure 8)*. This was "risk management by the supervisor for the supervisor".

But the UK's approach to risk, superficially so successful, is not necessarily doing us much good in terms of cycling. A comparison of the UK with a selection of other countries confirms the low mode share for cycling but also a high fatality rate (per distance cycled) – significantly greater than those of France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. This despite our comparatively high helmet-wearing rate. Is this a case of our risk-obsessed culture being counterproductive?

Peter Murray
New London Architecture Centre

The drivers of change

Peter described his P2P trip which he and other British riders undertook in 2013, travelling from Portland, Oregon to Portland Place, London. Why look at America? Peter answered that Freiburg and other celebrated cycling places had been "studied to death"; they tend also to be small compared with London. The US may be where the concept of automobile-based place was born but it is also where the fight against it is strongest (eg the work of Jane Jacobs et al). The group travelled through a wide variety of places – both blue-collar and white-collar cities – and encountered a huge variety in cycling policy and infrastructure.

Amongst the many good examples they encountered, they found bike boulevards *(see Figure 9)* and buffer zones, created to ensure those on bikes are given enough room, one of several forms of road-space reallocation (a practice the Americans have given the charming title "road dieting").

New York City was a highlight, where the group met Janette Sadik Khan, the city's champion of cycling. Here, improved provision for cycling (eg a continuous cycle path around Manhattan) has occurred in conjunction with a more general reallocation of space from traffic to place-making. The underlying philosophy is that every user's needs should be catered for and the standard implementation approach is to introduce

measures temporarily at first then making them permanent if successful. The group also saw the economically beneficial effects of good provision – in Minneapolis, for instance, a new radial cycle route has spurred the development of housing along it.

And they saw considerably more than infrastructure, with Peter referring to the 3 Feet Please initiative, designed to persuade drivers to comply with the law in giving cyclists sufficient clearance as they passed. Reed Point, Montana was, however, not perhaps the most uplifting location visited: here, a truck driver accused them of being commies, and invited them to, shall we say, "go elsewhere".

Figure 9

Rachel Aldred
University of Westminster

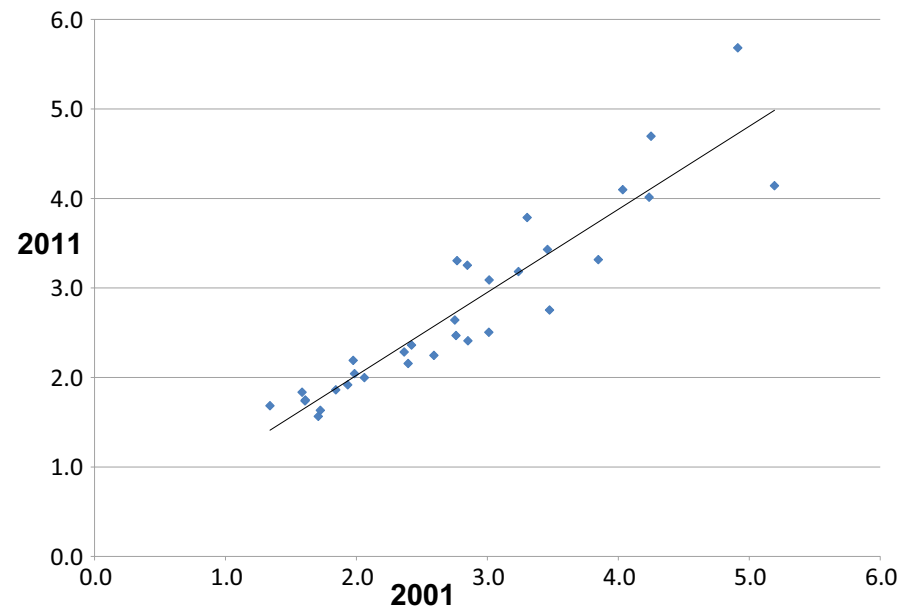### Cultures of cycling

Rachel spoke about her work on the Cycling Cultures project, in which four British locations with comparatively high levels of cycling – Bristol, Cambridge, Hackney and Hull – were compared in detail. They found some striking contrasts: in Hull, for example, a city of historically high levels of cycling, the mode is not aspirational; working class people cycle out of necessity and most people desire to drive. (Hull was the one location in which cycling had not increased between 2001 and 2011.) Hull contrasts with Cambridge, though both were seen as having established cycling cultures: Hull interviewees did not see the city as a "cycling place" but Cambridge, where cycling is the default mode for many, definitely is. The other two locations were chosen because the growth in cycling has been fairly recent. In Hackney, for example, cycling was seen as a middle-class, somewhat alternative, or trendy activity.

Rachel concluded with some broader observations: "cycling is seen as a good thing but cyclists as a problem out-group". In particular, cyclists wear protective clothing in response to a feeling of being under attack but are then criticised for being so attired; equally, they are criticised as incompetent road users if they do not wear high-visibility garments. There are other barriers to progress, including a stubborn imbalance in the London commuting gender ratio *(see Figure 10)* despite massive recent growth in total volume. A further obstacle is the naturalisation of existing

inequalities, with assumptions that old people or disabled people "can't cycle" constraining take-up. Rachel ended on an up-beat, noting that cars became aspirational in the 1950s in part because they offered a private space. As we increasingly spend our days physically isolated from others, the bicycle perhaps can provide the contact with the world that we are once more beginning to crave.

Figure 10:
**Limits of emerging cycling cultures:
Gender Commuting gender ratio, 32 London Boroughs, 2001 & 2011 (Census data)**

Notes from discussion

It was no surprise that the various presentations prompted an animated debate.

First, we were asked to remember the **great variety of cyclists** (and to remind policy makers of this too) – there is consequently no single "right" policy for cycling.

We then turned to the **interaction of cyclists and walkers in the public realm**. In the context of Transport for London's Moving and Place grid, intelligent design could and should be taking place, to accommodate all users in what is often a highly competitive environment. We were encouraged to redesign the street canyon virtually using Streetmix and to support the idea of a regular London "Close Down" along the same lines as Open House: this time, the streets would be closed to motorised traffic in order to let people admire London's buildings from the outside.

Cycling culture, meanwhile, sits within a wider set of relevant **cultures**. We were reminded that town halls have been opposed to cycling since the 1950s and that cycling had not had its fair share of the improvements to influential highway design guidance such as the DMRB. Meanwhile, car culture continues to exert a huge influence, with the UK's rich and powerful being conveyed in black limousines and citizens generally asserting the right both to park outside their homes and to drive wherever they wish. The London Cycling Campaign responds to these tendencies by choosing the locations of traffic jams to

serve coffee and croissants to cyclists, so as to show those sitting in cars what they could be enjoying. Much could be done, meanwhile, to tackle the dominance of the car by introducing tighter controls on the promotion of car ownership and driving.

We also discussed the **public policy context**. The much-lauded Danes were argued to have made progress in part because they sorted out the administration of their roads. In its own way, P2P had promoted policy change by prompting the establishment of the Construction Industry Cycling Commission. Legal aspects were discussed too: was the relatively good treatment of cyclists in the USA, for example, attributable to motorists' fear of litigation in the event of a collision? We wondered how to overcome the obstacles to progress. One practical suggestion was to present retailers with the consistently strong evidence that they would benefit from traffic being slowed. Another was to re-educate the current heads of transport in UK local authorities. Or wait for them to retire.

Once we had put the world to rights, the real debate started over a drink.

References

Unicyclists – a photoblog documenting cycling cultures at UCL. http://unicyclists.uclu.org/

Image credits

All images provided by the speakers

About UCL Transport Institute

UCL Transport Institute has been established to foster cross-disciplinary research on transport across UCL and to increase the impact of UCL's transport research through active engagement with policy makers, business-leaders and other stakeholders.