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## Around town: coping with growth and other challenges

**Professor Danny Dorling does not claim to be an expert on traffic or cycling so how did he come to be talking about both subjects in a city he hasn't lived in for 20 years? The Leisure Review reports on a vision of how our cities might cope with economic growth and other environmental challenges into the next century.**

After a couple of decades away, Danny Dorling has returned to his home town. He brings with him a lengthy curriculum vitae that features early roles in play work and pre-school education followed by numerous academic posts, including ten years as professor of geography at Sheffield University and the post that brought him back to Oxford, the Halford Mackinder chair of geography of the University of Oxford's school of geography and the environment. None of this, he confesses, really qualifies him to address the annual general meeting of Cyclox, the Oxford cycling campaign group, on what cycling in the city might look like going into the next century. However, this is exactly what he has been invited to do.

"I am not an expert on transport or cycling," Dorling explains. "My only qualification for being here is that I have only travelled in Oxford on a bike. First between the ages of 6 and 18, and then back again this year. I may well upset a few people by saying how nice it was to see that although not much had changed – very little in some parts of the city – and while some things have got worse – the traffic on the ring road is appalling – some things have got better. If you go away for 25 years you discover that provision for cycling is better. It's far from perfect but it has changed."

The things he had noticed were not revolutionary or even innovative – cycle lanes painted on pavements, some road junctions altered – but provision for cycling has been extended. However slow the progress might have been, there has been progress.

"It is very slow but it has actually happened," he said. "If you go forward to 2100 you can be optimistic about what is likely to happen. It will be slower if people don't help it to happen but I think it's inevitable. I can see no other way of this city coping without it becoming more cycle-friendly in the future. I'd like to show you why that is."

His starting point is Sheffield, Dorling's home for ten years and a city in which he finally gave up owning a car. This decision came about not through any great moral imperative or enthusiasm for physical exertion on his part but simply because it no longer made sense to drive.

"It became easier to get round even a hilly city by bike, even for someone quite unfit like me," he explained. "I also got to know the cycle activists who do incredible work getting things altered to make things easier for bikes. It may be that it is a bit easier to do this in Sheffield, possibly because people can bike out of Sheffield into the wonderful countryside and there are numerous traffic-free cycle routes in the Peak District but also because people tend to hang around Sheffield for a long time. This means activist groups get more traction. In contrast, Oxford is a migrant city. People come here for three years or ten years to study or work at the universities and I suspect that makes it harder to

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get the same kind of traction.”

Not that Oxford or other cities are short of ideas. People have been arguing about how best to improve cycling and traffic management since the 1950s. Recently the broadcaster Jon Snow who used his ‘King for a Day’ column in the Guardian to dream of a ban on private cars and lorries, motorcycles and minicabs from the centre of London and city centres across the country. Such a vision may be fantasy but there are opportunities. Cities such as Oxford, Cambridge and Hull, the three cities that have the highest rates of cycling in the UK, all have flat, constrained city centres that lend themselves to cycle use and all could serve as pioneering exemplars.

“Hull is a bit like Oxford was during my childhood,” Dorling says. “Oxford was dominated by bikes. As a child I would often have to wait while men cycling three abreast on the ring road cycle path went past before I could get to school. They were cycling from Barton to the car works. This was the 1980s and this city was dominated by bikes until the 1980s and 90s.

“I was reminded of this a couple of years ago in Westminster. Trying to cross Whitehall to get to the Cabinet Office, I was delayed by civil servants riding bikes three or four abreast. To me it was just like those car workers but these were middle-class men going a bit too fast. Car workers were much more sensible, of course. They were not trying to get to the car factory too fast; it’s not that fun a job.”

While he may not be an expert on transport, Dorling does concede some knowledge of housing. His latest book, titled *All That is Solid*, explores how and why housing became the defining issue for British society. Like numerous other towns and cities in the UK, Oxford has a housing crisis exacerbated by its popularity and its geography. More housing is needed but with housing comes traffic.

“I suspect we are finally going to get more housing,” he says. “All the political parties have promised more housing. At the moment we build in Oxfordshire, putting houses around dozens of small villages in an effort to irritate people who live there but when you do build houses, the roads fill up. The obvious place for housing here is a little bit in the city and a little bit on the edge of the city, and the reason is obvious: you can cycle from those homes to where you want to get to.”

Commuting is a gruelling process. There are now an estimated 40,000 people trying to drive into Oxford or access the park and ride system every day. Another 5,000 people travel the other way, commuting into London. With the cheapest part of London now requiring £250,000 to buy a property and with Oxford expected to continue its growth, there is little sign of the situation improving in the near future.

“So what do you do about it?” Dorling says. “This is about very long-term thinking. It’s about working with the current planning systems and lobbying to make better decisions but also about having an eye on what might happen in 30 or 60 years’ time. This is probably going to be a successful world city. It is going to get a bit bigger so need to think about how you cope with more people.

“The 1927 plan for Oxford was based on the idea of having a circular city. And why circular? Because most people cycled so distance really mattered. People will do one-, two- or three-mile trips quite happily by bike but when it gets to four miles it’s a bit more of a drag. So if you think about cycling, or if not cycling then public transport, you have to think about the sites for housing. If Oxford has greater population it is also going to have to worry about the streets and how people move about. You can see this in London now. At rush hour outside London’s mainline stations you can see that pavements are no longer adequate.”

So much for the problems: what of the solutions? Dorling has a few ideas.

“My fantasy plan involves thinking about one-way traffic on the arterial routes,” he says. “With one lane for buses and one lane of cars, this would leave room for a lane for bicycles. Another idea, which wasn’t mine, is speed. The city has already gone to 20mph speed limits. Why don’t the arterial routes go down to 20, or even eventually down to 10mph. You could go both ways at 10 but very slowly and this reduces the amount of inefficient traffic. You still need people and commercial traffic to get in but you really want to deter people who are on the edge of a bike/bus/car decision to err towards using a more sociable means of getting into the city. In Europe they engineer the system so that using a bike is by far the fastest way and then people switch.”

Dorling concedes that these are very sensitive issues but argues that despite the inevitable controversy it is worth applying a little idealism. For all the convenience they offer for some, cars are bad news. They are responsible for huge numbers of deaths, particularly for younger people. They make our towns and cities dangerous and intimidating for young and old alike. They foster and promote inequality in society.

“Some people will need to use cars but you will have to reduce the number of cars in the city if you are going to comfortably increase the number of people cycling and walking,” he says. “That needs to be stated so that you get to a point when it’s so boring and obvious that nobody is shocked by it. And if we don’t say it, it will take a bit longer to get there.

“Oxford already has a school with the highest proportion of children cycling to school in the UK. We need that to be possible for most of the schools around the city. It improves quality of life immensely, especially for parents who then do not need to be taxi service. Oxford is well geared up for cycling and there is no other way to cope with increased pressure of people but provision for cycling has to be so much better.

“Ultimately there has to be fewer cars because they take up road space and it’s far too precious for that.”

**You can find out more about Danny Dorling’s work, including his 88-page CV, via [www.dannydorling.org](http://www.dannydorling.org). His latest book, *All That is Solid*, was published in paperback in February by Penguin. His exploration of the impact of wealth on society, *Inequality and the 1%*, was published in September 2014 by Verso Books.**

**The Centre for Cities can be found online at [www.centreforcities.org](http://www.centreforcities.org)**

**Cyclox, Oxford’s campaign for cycling, can be found at [www.cyclox.org/](http://www.cyclox.org/)**

**Jon Snow’s King for a Day column for the Guardian can be found via [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree)**

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