

OPINION

Cycling is a tool for physical distancing – and a way to put our fragmented cities back together

NICHOLAS SCOTT

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Nicholas Scott is an assistant professor of sociology at Simon Fraser University. He is the author of Assembling Moral Mobilities: Cycling, Cities, and the Common Good.

Vancouver's Stanley Park has never been quieter, its nature never so audible to so many people. Opened in 1888, a colonial construct written over the traditional territories of Coast Salish First Nations, including the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh, Stanley Park soon became interwoven with the car and its roads.

Then, on the morning of April 8, 2020, something extraordinary happened: the car park came undone. In order to reduce the number of people in the park and increase physical distancing, while giving slower, self-propelled locals precious access to the outdoors, the Vancouver Park Board closed Stanley Park to cars for the first time ever (excluding emergency services, public transit, city vehicles and the entire highway to the North Shore that slices Stanley Park in two).

Partially released from the jaws of motor vehicles, including the float planes roaring over its tree canopy and passenger jets thundering through the skies above, Stanley Park suddenly sounds (and smells) like the healthy,

unadulterated and fictitious wilderness many Vancouver residents and visitors imagine it to be.

Vancouver's experiment in prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists to help fight COVID-19 highlights dynamic possibilities for physical distancing in the city, but also for repairing humanity's relationship with the environment and our cities in a postpandemic world.

Walking and cycling provide tools for physical distancing and ecological repair. Some cyclists, of course, are insufferable distancing failures. In car-lite Stanley Park during its inaugural afternoon, I was biking by and saying hello to a small child riding with her mom, about two metres between us, when a Lycra-clad athlete whipped by my left with no such cushion, moistly brushing me with his slipstream (the flowing wake behind runners and cyclists).

While some cyclists flout the rules – as do some motorists, transit users and pedestrians – most don't. And like motorists, cyclists, owing to their velocity, are pretty good at keeping two metres apart from others while on the move. Compared with motorists, however, cyclists spread their essential tasks and travel across a smaller urban footprint.

Conversely, compared with pedestrians, cyclists inhabit a larger city. This middle ground is normally shared with transit, but ridership has cratered under the weight of distancing and home isolation, with cash-strapped authorities cutting services. Hovering between driving and walking, cycling carries rich potential to advance what scientists call "dynamic distancing."

Dynamic distancing is what epidemiologists at the University of Toronto and University of Guelph call fighting COVID-19 while strategically easing universal isolation and physical distancing (closely matching local easements, for example, to the number of nearby intensive care beds in use).

Over the next 18 months, as the country waits for a vaccine and surfs the waves of the novel coronavirus, urban residents who have hunkered down will gradually trickle and then stream out of the walkable enclaves around their homes and essential stores. While it will be tempting to hop back in the car, this runs the risk of people driving from all over to popular gathering places and undermining controlled easement.

Cycling affords a kind of Goldilocks check on our gradually expanding urban mobility. It sprinkles in more reachable districts on top of walking, without putting the whole city in play. Expending the same amount of energy as it takes to walk a few blocks, people can cycle between several neighbourhoods, layering in more stores, parks and other destinations. It has never been safer and more pleasurable to cycle in the city, and to breathe in street air, with so many cars and tailpipes parked at home.

Another advantage of slowly expanding city life through cycling relates to trust and civility. To a greater degree than motorists, cyclists are part of, and accountable to, their local communities. While cycling, people engage their surroundings with more of their senses at slower speeds. And they can stop more easily than motorists – which is why they do not injure others as often and, on average, spend more money at local businesses.

Performing dynamic distancing through cycling extends an invisible web of relationships that increase mobility but also urban resilience. It's a thin web. Keeping city parks open, and redirecting precious streets to pedestrians and cyclists, requires solidarity and trust – between diverse strangers, and between people and their governments.

Cycling doesn't just offer a dynamic tool for distancing people; it also provides a way of putting people, and their cities, back together again. Cycling has inequities and needs to be more inclusive, like other mobilities. Yet it offers extraordinary untapped powers to foster diverse, urban kinds of togetherness and help repair humanity's deteriorating relationship with nature.

After five years of ethnographic research on city cycling in Canada, I found that cycling can advance the common good and build strong cities in multiple ways, fostering ecologically good cities that reduce our dependence on motor vehicles. Cycling can help repair the world, not only by mitigating habitat degradation, mass extinction and climate change, but also by getting people outside and increasing their appreciation of nature and life itself.

As renowned Chinese-born artist and dissident Ai Weiwei recently wrote in *The Globe and Mail*, perhaps the most important thing COVID-19 can teach us is about “the true value of our fragile little bundle of life, and how it can live in

harmony with nature at large. ... To stand in awe of life itself is the best way to see the connections between an individual body and the rest of life.”

A true trickster, even as the coronavirus lays bare our social divisions and their connection to environmental ruin, Mr. Ai points to ways of reassembling our commonality and repairing the world, from a nightly banging of pots and pans for front-line workers to big blue skies filled with birdsong and clean air. As I bike the quiet city, I keep my distance. I can’t stop thinking about Mr. Ai’s *Forever Bicycles*, a site-specific installation of innumerable bikes, all interlocking, whose configurations change to support different environments. I imagine them all coming to life.

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher