

Against the Abstract Space of Transport Planning: Automobility, Cycling, and Urban Mobility Justice

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Research problem

- Cycling remains marginal despite sustainability benefits.

- Dominant explanations focus on behaviour, technology, and infrastructure, excluding ideology etc.

Thus

I argue planning epistemologies reproduce this marginalisation.

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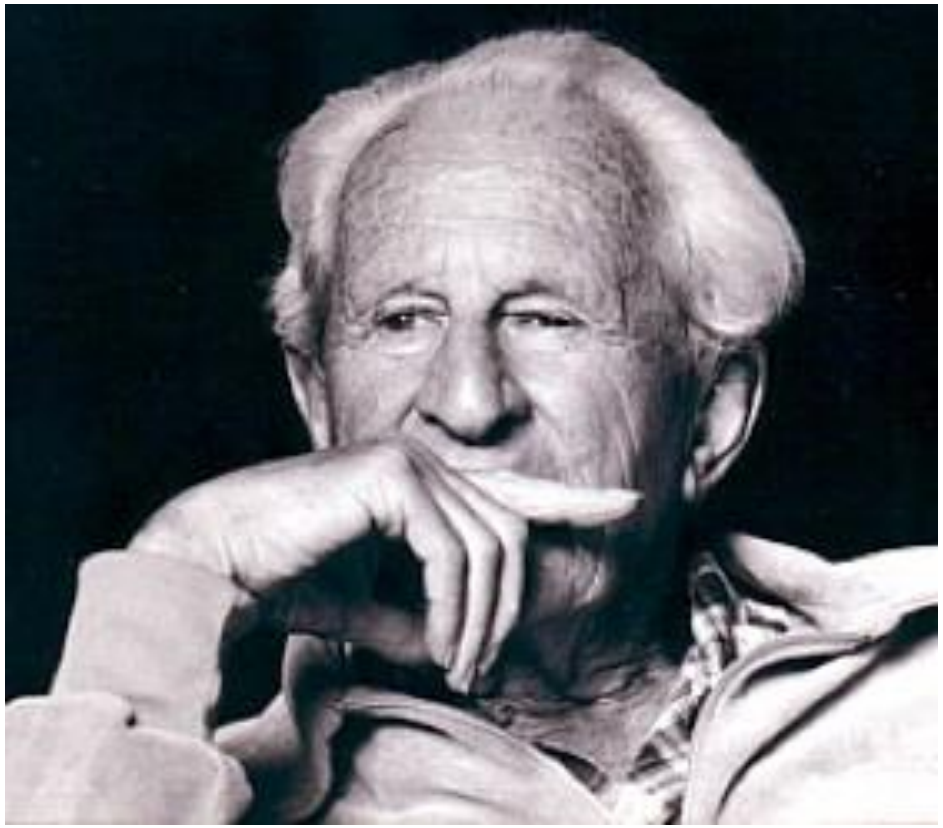
Herbert Marcuse and Critical Theory



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Critical theory

- Critically questioning the real world
- Allows the researcher to be suspicious of rationalities
- About revealing structures and power relations in societies
- Supports different methodological approaches for critical analysis

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Marcuse and the false needs

The intensity, the satisfaction and even the character of human needs, beyond the biological level, have always been preconditioned … We may distinguish both true and false needs … Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.

(Marcuse [1964] 2002, 6, 7)

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Marcuse and reason

Marcuse sees that after the German philosophers Hegel, Kant or Fichte:

The world was to be an order of reason.

(Marcuse, 1999 [1941]:4)

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Marcuse and methodologies

Made into a methodological principle, this suspiciousness has a twofold consequence:

(a) it strengthened the shift of the theoretical emphasis from the metaphysical "What is…?... to the functional "How…?, and (b) it establishes a practical (though by no means absolute) certainty which, in its operations with matter, is with good conscience free from commitment to any substance outside the operational context.

(Marcuse 2002 [1964]:155)

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The quantitative shift in planning

- Marcuse's shift in science also effected planning
- Instead of seeing space as relational, space is seen as abstract
- Meaning, what can be measured counts



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Zygmunt Bauman and urban space wars



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Baumans Space Wars I

- Social space comes from social relations, not from objective, measurable space
- By forcing space into measurable facts conflicts rise
- Those are space wars and are most visible in urban contexts
- Daily battles over urban space – clear connection to mobility

(Bauman 1998)

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Baumans Space Wars II

Not just the question of measuring the space 'objectively' presented a problem, however. Before it may come to measuring, one needs first to have a clear notion of what is there to be measured.

(Bauman 1998:28)

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Baumans Space Wars III

…most power is exercised by the unit closest to the source of other units' uncertainty. The manipulation of uncertainty is essential; it is the primary stake in the struggle for power and influence inside every structured totality – first and foremost in its radical form of modern bureaucratic organization.

(Bauman 1999:177)

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Baumans Space Wars IV

Urban territory becomes the battlefield of continuous space war, sometimes erupting into public spectacle of inner-city riots, ritual skirmishes with the police, the occasional forays of soccer crowds, but waged daily just beneath the surface of the public (publicized), official version of the routine urban order.

(Bauman 1998:22)

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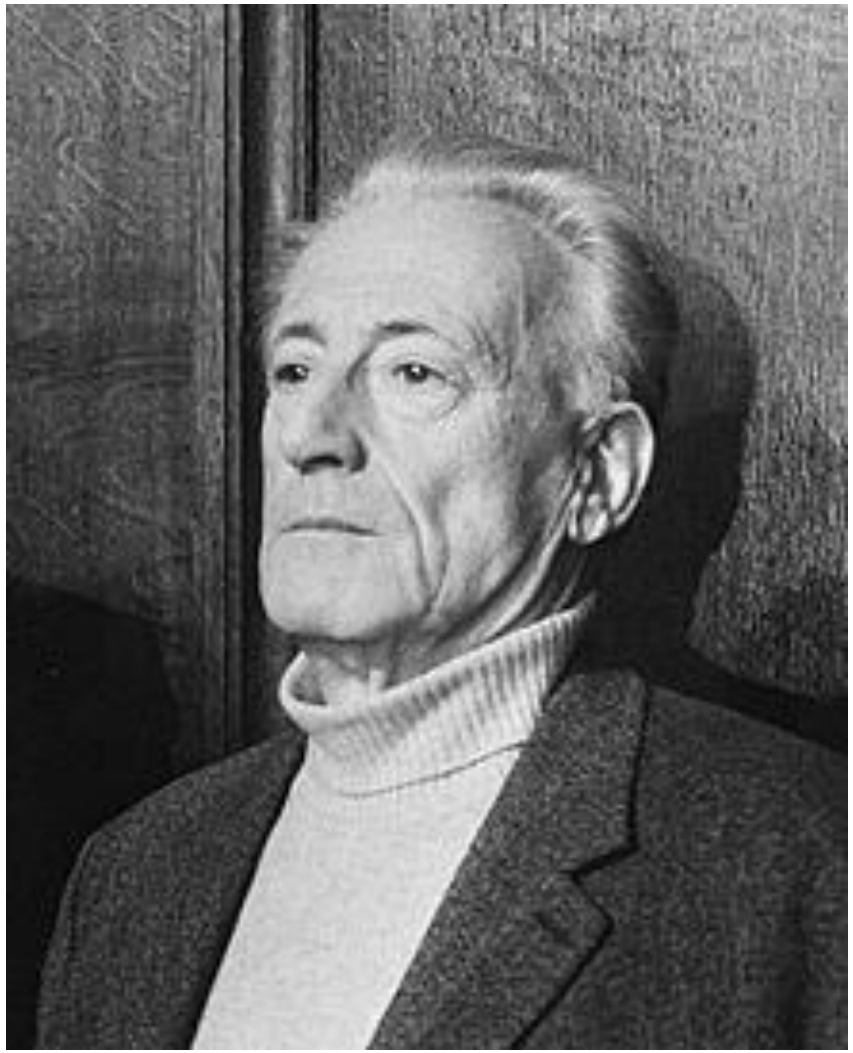
Henri Lefebvre and the production of space



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Lefebvre‘s production of space I

- Space is socially constructed
- Space is produced through relations
- Space influence social relations and vice versa
- Social relations and space changes over time and space
- Those spaces rule people’s life

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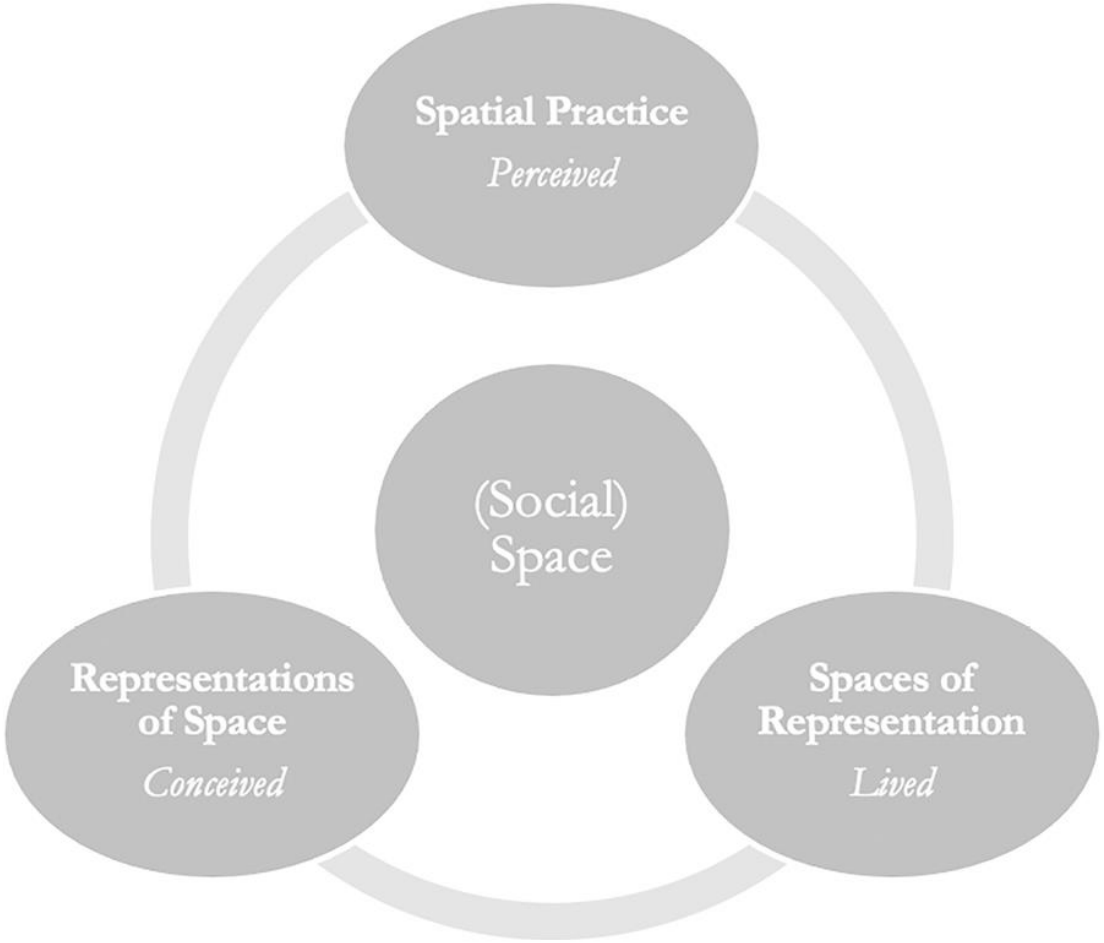
Lefebvre‘s production of space I



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Thus, transport planning often treats space as an abstract, neutral container and prioritises efficiency, flow, and optimisation. This grants epistemic authority to automobility while marginalising embodied and context-dependent cycling practices.

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What is Automobility?

- **Automobility is a socio-technical system rather than merely the private car.**
- Automobility is a **self-expanding and self-reinforcing system**.
- The car is both a material object and a powerful cultural symbol associated with **freedom, flexibility, status, individual autonomy, and modern citizenship**.
- **Automobility restructures social life** by separating home, work, leisure and retail activities across larger geographical areas, thereby making car travel increasingly necessary.
- **The system privileges private motorised travel** and tends to subordinate alternative modes such as walking, cycling and public transport.
- **Automobility has become a defining feature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century modernity**, shaping urban form, everyday practices, and patterns of mobility worldwide.

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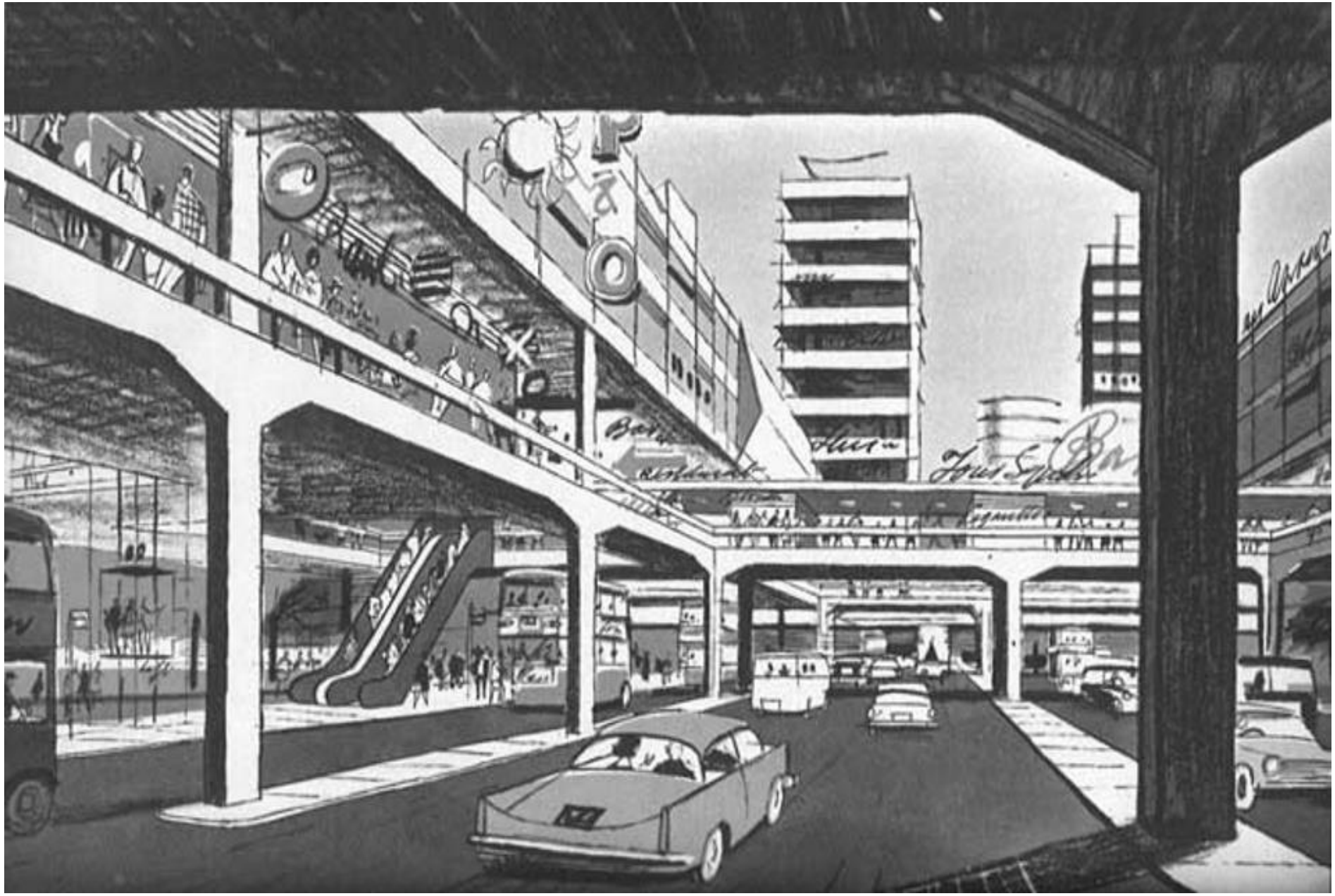

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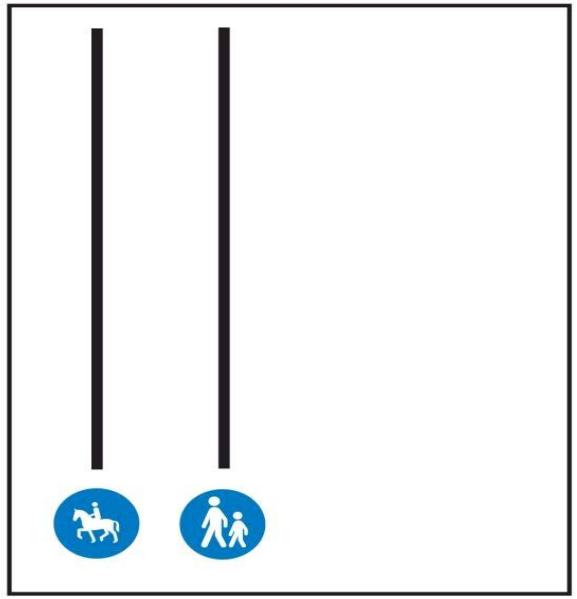
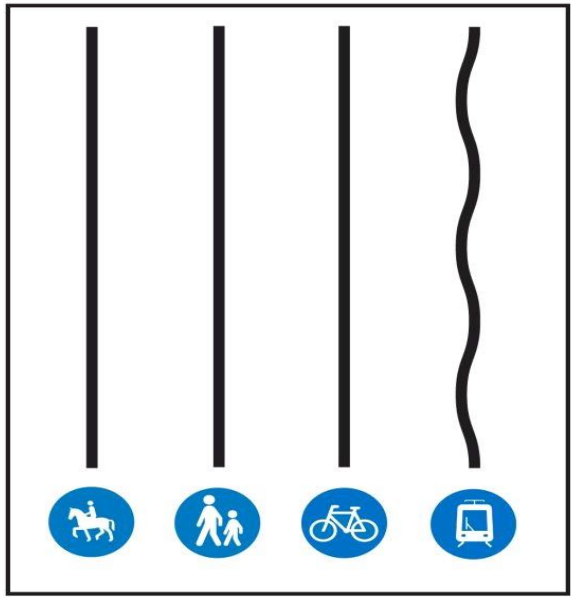
A Short History of Traffic Engineering



1800



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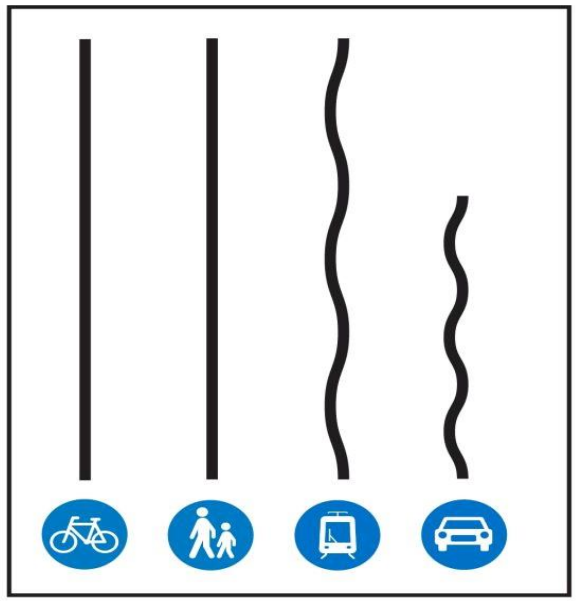

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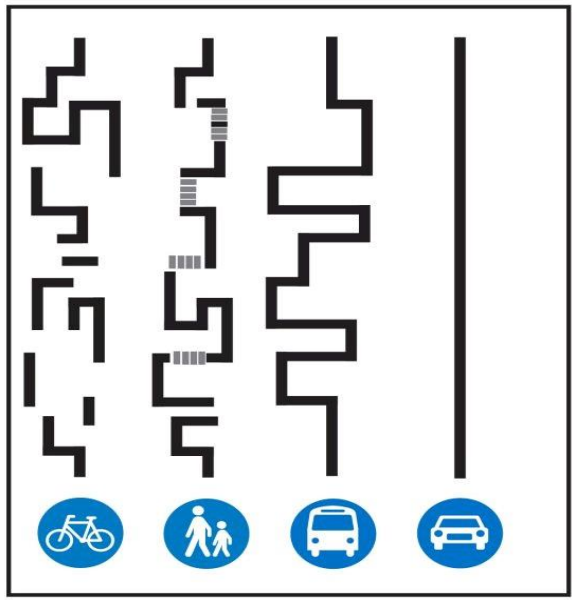

1950 - present

COPEN
HAGEN

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Cars need space I

Cars



Bus



Cyclists



Smart mobilitet
DIN TRANSPORT. DINE VALG.

Trafik- og Byggestyrelsen
Danish Transport and Construction Agency

AARHUS KOMMUNE

Cars need space II

Regular Cars



Electric Cars



Autonomous Cars



What about mobility justice?

I call for a spatial politics of mobility justice that:

- Challenges dominant planning epistemologies
- Repositions vélomobility as foundational
- Supports democratic and socially just urban futures
- Advances genuine sustainability transitions

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Cycling is not merely a transport mode. It represents an alternative spatial logic that challenges the dominance of automobility and opens pathways toward more equitable urban futures.

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