

Hot wheels, high up



BIKE LANES | It's called velo-city, an ambitious network of elevated bikeways that, says architect Chris Hardwicke, isn't as futuristic as it seems, writes Jennifer Wells.

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[JENNIFER WELLS](#)

Good morning, Toronto. It's sunny and minus 40 with the wind chill. Traffic is frozen on the Gardiner. There's a pile-up on the DVP. Streetcars on King West and Queen East are at a standstill.

Cyclists, however, are once again enjoying a smooth, unobstructed journey into the downtown core. Riders report that visibility is clear, with speeds approaching 50 kilometres an hour in the right-hand lane. For all you high-powered money managers who like to look sharp in the a.m., the shower stall at the Yonge on/off ramp has reopened. And, yes, the city has once again stocked up on that French lavender soap that has been such a hit on Bay Street.

What? You don't believe it?

All right, so the part about the French soap is a bit of over-reach.

But ask local architect Chris Hardwicke about the future of cycling in Toronto, and he will draw you a vision of elevated bike tunnels that could remake the very culture of the city.

He calls it Velo-city or, more properly, velo-city, and it's catching international notice, from Hardwicke's appearance on National Public Radio in the U.S. earlier this year, to numerous international publications, to his scheduled presentation at the Good Life For All exhibition in New York City this September.

The vision: a network of elevated bikeways, tube-like and roofed in glass, providing protection from the elements. Hardwicke has mapped the velo-city network, tucking the bikeways along existing public highway, power and railway corridors, creating not a dense inner-city network, but rather one that connects distant parts of the metropolis. Cyclists will access the bikeways, which will run about five metres above ground level, through ramps tucked under the tubes. The planned grade of the ramps will be gentle enough to accommodate wheelchair usage.

According to Hardwicke's calculations, reduction in air resistance will increase cycling efficiency by about 90 per cent, allowing for speeds, or velocity, of up to 50 km/h. Advantages: no noise pollution, no air pollution. Plus, cycling is good for you, and in this conception bike riders are protected from their car-driving brethren. The scheme sounds futuristic, yet it is not entirely new. Joseph Adler, an irrepressibly charming engineer, was possessed of a similar vision a quarter century ago: elevated bikeways built not alongside highways, but above roadways crisscrossing Toronto's inner city. On top of the bikeways Adler conceptualized bike stations with restroom and restaurant facilities. The plan calls for interconnecting escalators to assist riders heading up into the bikeways, and ramps for the trip down to street level.

'Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race'
H.G. Wells, author and avid cyclist

By training Adler is a hydrotechnical engineer, but cycling is his passion. Just inside the door of his high-rise apartment sits his 25-year-old blue Peugeot, which he rides regularly. Behind the doorway sits his downhill skis. He is 75. In his position as president of Bicycle Expressway Systems, a one-man hobbyist operation, he is currently pitching his bicycle expressway to Dubai, figuring that any desert country with the moxie to build an indoor ski hill just might have the imagination to get behind his project.

Not that there hasn't been interest. Included in Adler's archive are supporting letters from Maurice Strong, William F. Buckley Jr. and endless Canadian politicians and

bureaucrats. In 1982, Buckley wrote an op-ed piece for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* championing the bike expressway. "Adler's idea is adaptable to any city," wrote Buckley. "But concretely, he has engineered ... a bicycle grid that would permit anyone living in metropolitan Toronto (they call it "metro" nowadays) to travel by bicycle from virtually any point in the city."

As it happens, nothing concrete has developed. "The visionaries don't have any money," sighs Adler. "And those with money don't have the vision."

That disconnect has much to do with the perceptions around cycling. Is cycling an add-on method of transportation or an essential service that demands and deserves substantial capital investment? Adler's projected cost: \$1 billion.

Chris Hardwicke is 38. He had never heard of Joseph Adler or his bicycle expressway until earlier this year, when Adler called him up. The two have not yet met. They share a sense of despair over the lack of serious funding for cycling. "All the other infrastructures are supported in grandiose ways," says Hardwicke.

Hardwicke's velo-city has not been conceived as an anti-car project, but rather as a system that elevates bike riding to equal status alongside private transit (the car) and public transit (GO, TTC). "The people seem to like to cycle," says Hardwicke of Torontonians. "But they don't have any support ... It's about time we built something that's sustainable."

Points to consider: a bicycle takes one-seventh the road space of a car. Ergo, Hardwicke's bikeways, conceived at an equivalent width, will have seven times the capacity of the adjacent roadways. Velo-city will relieve traffic congestion and the demand for parking spaces. The greater vision extends to this: creating a vibrant cycling city that will feed a proliferation of thriving businesses, cultural activities, restaurants and cafés. Bike riders, surveys have shown, are excellent shoppers.

In the draft for his Good Life presentation, Hardwicke has written this: "Over time, velo-city will create a cycling culture for Toronto: kiss 'n' rides, shower facilities, velodromes, bike parks, health clubs, cycle-path stalls, repair shops, bike couriers, bike picnics, car-free housing, inter-modal stations and cycling fashions. Above all, it would encourage active, healthier lifestyles and consequently better lives for all Torontonians."

Sound fanciful? In an interview Hardwicke says he senses immense energy in the city right now. "There's a huge desire for change," he says. In his work, Hardwicke has cited a quotation from H. G. Wells. "Every time I see an adult on a bicycle," wrote Wells, "I no longer despair for the future of the human race." The author was an avid cyclist.

Here's another Wells quote that seems to suit the circumstance: "What really matters is what you do with what you have."