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## FLYING BIKES

Imagine: 50KMH. 30 feet above the ground. On your bike.

By Carman Melville



Chris Hardwicke is a Toronto architect who has spent much of his life with an eye toward the future and a healthy respect for the past. Since his youth, he's been dreaming of ways to make life in cities more organic, healthy and vital. The Velo-City Project is his brainchild and it sounds really cool.

What is the Velo-City project?

Basically it's an idea for helping bikes commute through the city. Specifically what it is, is a whole bunch of tubes that are generally up in the air and you ride your bike through them and they're enclosed so you don't have to deal with the weather and also you don't have to deal with cars and stuff. They would be made mostly of glass and it would be like riding through an atrium. There would be 3 lanes of traffic just like on a highway, for slow, medium and fast travel. Each tube would have 2 directions of traffic and each direction would be separated and because of airflow it sets up an increased ability to ride faster.

What was your inspiration for this project?

I didn't want to wait for the question: "What would make the city better?" Toronto is one of the biggest biking cities in North America, but it's got a long way to go. You just have to go to Asia or Europe to see what real biking infrastructure is. Considering how many people are already biking here, without benefit – I mean our bike lanes are just paint. Biking was huge before cars came along.

And it was considered the "modern thing." Then all the companies that made bikes switched over to cars, so of course now it's not in their interest at all to help bikes out. Cars took over the world. Now bikes, which don't hurt the world at all just get a strip on paint on the side of the road! (Laughs). Paint! It's outrageous! So that was the idea: "What can I do for bikes to help them get around and faster?" I think they [bikes] could compete pretty closely with subways and highways, for commuting at any rate. And even roughly in speed.

Well subways don't get going much faster than 40 or 50 kilometers per hour in between most stops anyway....

Right. Plus there's the waiting and all kinds of other stuff. The other advantage I thought of for Velo-City is that you can put it just about anywhere because there is no noxious output. There's no exhaust, no fumes, no noise, so in reality you could run one right past this building that we're talking in, if you wanted. You could link the system into buildings. But then when I started drawing the map of it, it turns out that the project actually fits exceedingly well into the ravines and trails system and into the infrastructure system that's already there.

Like running parallel to, or over top of existing train lines for example.

Yeah, highway corridors, trains...and you, the rider would be protected from the pollution though, because you'd be riding inside an enclosed tube. And also it could act as a buffer or a



noise wall. Really the hardest part of it would be getting everyone up and down and creating intersections to make it useful. It would require ramps at a pretty low grade, somewhat less than cars because they would have to be ride-able and it has to be accessible for everyone, of all ages. But anyway, I found that getting it into the down down downtown is hard, just to “jam it in” there. But in reality you don’t really need it as much, because when you’re downtown, you’re downtown and you’re already basically where you want to be. And the downtown is all ready pretty rider-friendly. But in the suburbs...I mean, have you ever tried to ride your bike far in the suburbs?

Yeah. It’s kind of scary. Except for the paved bike paths by the river, it’s wide-open roadways and traffic is much faster. I felt safer riding downtown.

Yeah it can be crazy. Cars are used to seeing you downtown and it’s actually more dangerous in the “burbs,” so I think Velo-City is actually very useful out there.

What else would it have, ideally?

There could be a whole bunch of other things in the tubes too I was thinking, that could be added, like I thought that there could be a giant greenhouse as well. Or have solar power panels. You could even run fiber-optic cable for the Internet through it. Because the tubes are enclosed you could use them for other things. You could even have a “yellow-bike system” in it. Let’s say you take the GO Train to a certain point then you enter Velo-City where you could rent a “yellow-bike” that stays in the system. At intersections within the system, bike traffic could support shops and small businesses, just like in some subway stations. And biking would be particularly good for that kind of local market economy because you’re almost a pedestrian. You could just pull over, lock up your bike and shop, then throw what you buy into the basket or into your saddlebags and then ride on.

How many people could the Velo-City project transport each year?

Well look at this way, the city of Toronto wants to get 20 percent of the people on bikes by the year 2020. That’s 20 percent of the total trips in the city and right now they’re at about 8 percent. It’s a pretty ambitious goal for their bike plan which is really good in principle. But when it comes to the maps, it gets really difficult and really political because the car people get upset when you start taking their space away or “taking away part of the road.” With my system, I could help get them (Bike-planners) up to 30 or 40 percent. And the great thing about it is that it actually relieves all the other transit so there would be more road for people to drive and it makes more room on public transit for people.

How much would the Velo-City Project cost to build?

It would be comparable to building a highway. So it’s not cheap as a one-time cost. But at the same time, so much money would be saved compared to a highway because when it’s done it’s done and it just has to be cleaned. It could be heated by solar power and it’s only people on bicycles using it. And it doesn’t have to be built all in one shot. It could be done incrementally. Basically it’s the same as building any piece of infrastructure, like building a new streetcar or subway line. But this kind of thing saves so much money in other ways. Look at how much money is spent on hospitals and illness that’s related to pollution, we’re spending billions of dollars per year. So you’d see a decline in that spending and an increase in the health of people using it. The benefits are unbelievable.

You need a “numbers-wiz” on your side, man. You need to create a “United Front.”

For sure! I want to get a team of people involved. Sometimes people just have all these far out things they think would be totally cool ideas. Like they go even further with the idea and it makes me laugh. “Like, what if the bikes had sails on them? And then you could, like, sail-bike!” (Laughs). But this thing will totally work. It could be built all in one piece or be put together in stages and it doesn’t preclude any other form of transit. I mean people could roller blade in it too. There will be 3 lanes. I have a few project ideas like this, to open

people's eyes, to show people alternatives that would really work and make life better. And riding your bike in an elevated tube at 50 kilometers per hour would be really cool!

Yeah. That would be cool.

chris hardwicke



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