

Car-Free Streets, a Colombian Export, Inspire Debate



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In Bogotá, Colombia, 70 miles of road are turned over to bicyclists and pedestrians once a week. New York will try it in August.

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When the crowds stream down Park Avenue and bicyclists have taken over Lafayette Street, the question may strike even the most ardent ambler: Whose idea was this, anyway?

Summer Streets — New York City's recreational experiment that will convert 6.9 miles of Manhattan into a car-free park during parts of three Saturdays in August — originated in the Andes. It was born 32 years ago in Bogotá, [Colombia](#), as the Ciclovía, or bicycle pathway, now a 70-mile route through the heart of the city that each Sunday attracts more than one million people on two wheels and two legs.

Bogotá's model has inspired several cities to follow suit. From El Paso to Ottawa, exhaust pipes are becoming a target of disapproval, at least in some areas. Cars have

been barred from Guadajalajaran thoroughfares and alongside improvised Parisian beaches to make room for the helmeted hordes.

Gil Peñalosa, a pioneer of the car-free effort, flies from city to city planting the seeds of the Ciclovía, a program that he resuscitated a decade ago as Bogotá's head of recreation.

When Mr. Peñalosa, 51, came into office in 1995, the Ciclovía, then eight miles long, was in decline and seemed to be on the verge of shutting down. Today, the weekly ride is nearly nine times longer and can draw up to 1.8 million participants on sunny days, Mr. Peñalosa said.

"It's almost a magical thing that takes place when people go to the forbidden," Mr. Peñalosa said in a telephone interview last week from Portland, Ore., where he addressed a conference on alternatives to car travel. "All of a sudden, the roads are filled with people and you have it to yourself."

He spoke of the Ciclovía with a passion that lent itself to exclamation points: "There are no losers!" "It's fantastic for business!" "It is the best thing Colombia has ever done!"

But the Ciclovía and similar experiments have critics. Business owners frequently complain that closing the streets reduces the flow of customers and hurts sales, and drivers gripe about inconvenience that results from sealing off major traffic arteries.

In New York City, where street fairs and parades already cause headaches for drivers this time of year, some worry that the new program, which will be in effect from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Aug. 9, 16, and 23, will make congestion intolerable.

Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the 11,000-member New York Taxi Workers Alliance, called the program "ridiculous" and said it will make it difficult for cabdrivers to break even.

August is the slowest month for drivers, Ms. Desai said, with the number of fares about 10 percent lower than normal. In addition, drivers are already expecting lackluster demand during August's annual parades in celebration of India and Pakistan.

"I think the administration should remember that Manhattan isn't just a playground," Ms. Desai said. "It's a place of work for thousands of people."

New York City has gained a reputation as a metropolis unfriendly to cyclists, but the city has laid out plans to improve safety over the next few years for the estimated 112,000 daily bike riders.

Barbara Ross came to the city 15 years ago and was too scared to brave streets lined with parked cars, where opening doors can bring a bike ride to a sudden and painful halt. Ms. Ross, 45, is now a regular cyclist and a spokeswoman for the environmental group Time's Up.

She said Summer Streets was a step toward making cycling the preferred means of travel for many New Yorkers. She also said that she hoped the effort would be popular and persuade the city to offer more lanes for bicyclists.

"It's O.K. to start slow, but the city is going to need to take more chances," Ms. Ross said. "The more bikers you have out there, the safer it is going to be."

But some people think bicycles themselves can be a hazard. Bette Dewing, who lives on the Upper East Side and is a longtime advocate for pedestrians, said she was concerned about the safety of residents, particularly the elderly and disabled, while hundreds of bicycles whizzed down the streets.

"They have certain lanes that they're supposed to stay in but they don't. It's just a free-for-all," Ms. Dewing added.

Increasingly, events like the Ciclovía are not just about bikes. In Bogotá, dancers, aerobic exercisers and skaters are common along a route that Mr. Peñalosa calls a "paved beach." People sunbathe, practice yoga along the streets, or sip mandarin juice in the shade.

It is the spontaneity of interaction that results from bringing together a wide variety of people that fuels Mr. Peñalosa's zeal.

"When people come together — young and old, and rich and poor, and male and female, and fat and skinny, and tall and short — everybody!" he shouted. "Then it becomes such a fantastic togetherness, and the complaints go away."

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