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Book review

Velotopia: The Production of Cyclespace in Our Minds and Our Cities, S. Fleming. nai010 Publishers, Rotterdam (2017). (£23.00 (paperback) ISBN: 978-94-6208-352-3)

The premise of *Velotopia* is simple: what would an ideal city built around cycling look like? For good or for bad, Fleming does not sell himself short. His proposal is a bold one and consists of envisioning a new form of "bicycle urbanism" which follows Corbusierian principles, but also claims to build on Jane Jacobs' human-centred sensibility.

In practice, such a marriage proves impossible: the spirit of the book falls squarely with the former of these two authors. Fleming's Velotopia – a circular city of 15 km in diameter and 6 million people – is defined almost entirely in mechanistic terms. Velotopia can be summarised as resembling a giant skating rink for cycling, with evenly spread ground floor commercial premises acting as pillars for apartment and office blocks, allowing people to cycle underneath buildings. To a large extent, we can think of it as an attempt to apply Marie Kondo's principles of wardrobe organisation to the ordering of movement in a city. Traffic lights – and conventional streets for that matter – are absent, while a small number of electric vehicles operate in a similar manner to autonomous carts in airports. Pedestrians are largely separated from cyclists through elevated walkways between buildings, and residential buildings have built-in ramps which allow people to cycle right into their own home.

According to Fleming, this is the only way in which cycling can compete with the door-to-door convenience of the private automobile: if a cycling city is to be better than a car city, it needs to be so on utilitarian terms. In his own words, Velotopia can be the "fastest" and "most connected city the world has ever seen". If we accept the book's calculations, average cycling trips in Velotopia would be 30 min and 7 km long in a city of 6 million people, outperforming travel times in any existing city this size.[1] In many ways, Velotopia embodies the ultimate individualist utopia, offering unlimited freedom, speed and flexibility, but also placing the responsibility for mobility entirely on the shoulders of the individual. However, we occasionally get a glimpse that what Fleming ultimately cares about is not optimising time and speed, but rather the enjoyment of cycling itself: "moving in this city is fun"(p.132).

The book's unapologetically visionary tone is refreshing, and Fleming has given some thought to pre-empting obvious criticisms to his proposal. As is often the case with utopian ideas, it is often unclear how seriously Fleming wants to be taken – his hyperbolic and tongue-in-cheek tone occasionally feels counterproductive (what are we to think of his proposal to speed up cyclists by providing tail winds through wind turbines, for example?).

The main justification put forward for velotopian thinking is the need to offer developing countries an attractive alternative to car-based development. By starting a series of small-scale velotopian "heteropias" in the developed world, the idea is that we can inspire and encourage developing countries to pursue a better model of urban growth. The trouble is that while Fleming's vision might resonate with design-savvy urbanites in Nordic countries, it makes no effort to engage with the economic and sociocultural aspirations of developing countries. If it were truly serious in its aim to inspire alternative mobility visions in developing countries, one would expect some mention of how velotopian principles might be applied in developing cities.

More problematic for the book's argument, however, is the fact that the bicycle is assumed to be the solution to future urbanisation from the start. In this respect, Fleming's single-mindedness is likely to alienate those who are not already self-professed cycling believers. The ambiguity as to whether cycling is a means or an ends in itself is never completely resolved: while cycling is generally framed as a means to other ends, the introduction clearly states that cycling "can also be an end in itself" (p.13). In particular, Fleming is almost vindictively dismissive about the possibility that pedestrian cities might offer an alternative model of sustainable urbanisation. Apart from somehow considering that pedestrian cities are a "dusted-off relic", his main criticism of pedestrian urbanism seems to be our failure to build good pedestrian cities over the past few decades. I find myself agreeing with him on this point (at least in most countries), but this does not mean that a bike-centric city is fundamentally better than a pedestrian city, or that it might be any easier to build.

Even if we accept that bicycle urbanism is the way forward, I find myself unable to embrace Fleming's vision on one fundamental account: its failure to acknowledge the street as the central building block of the city. As presented, Velotopia is a city without streets, consisting of almost all movement and no place functions. Although cars are the purported enemy, what Velotopia achieves is to translate the car-based drive-through mentality to cycling. If we have learnt anything from Jane Jacobs, it is precisely that cities are defined by their streets. Given Velotopia's diffused patterns of activity, its lack of people strolling around (everyone is too busy cycling) and its unclear divisions between open and enclosed spaces, I find it hard to see how it could avoid coming across as both lonely and claustrophobic.

[1] Considering a 7 km cycling distance acceptable for most people seems overoptimistic, at least in real-world cities: even in the Netherlands, three quarters of all cycling journeys are below 5 km.
Source: < https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2008/38/commuter-cyclists-prefer-short-distances >

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Where Fleming is fundamentally right is in affirming that true bicycle urbanism does not yet exist: even in the Netherlands, cycling infrastructure is planned as a superficial addition to cities. Perhaps the beauty of the bicycle is that it does not need its own space – like a chameleon, it can choose to be either a pedestrian or a motor vehicle – but the search for a bicycle urbanism is clearly a worthwhile goal. While Velotopia might be pointing in the wrong direction, the vision it offers is a memorable one, and promises to give us plenty to talk about for a good while.

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