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Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the outspoken cyclist your weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel, advocacy, the bike industry, and much, much more. You can subscribe to our weekly podcast at outspokencyclists.com or through your favorite podcasting app to listen anytime. Now here's your host, Diane Jenks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to the outspoken cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. I have a couple of quick notes before we get on with our guests today, I want to offer a huge congratulations to American Matteo Jorgensen from Team Visma Lisa Bike for winning Perry, Nice. This past Sunday. It was spectacular. The weather was really nasty, the racing was daring. And excited. I think it was a great win for both the team and Matteo. And for those in Northeast Ohio who know the Detroit Superior Bridge over the flats, the streetcar deck will be transformed into a bike PED path with a \$7,000,000 grant awarded. 2 Cuyahoga County by the US Department of Transportation this week. Infrastructure dollars at work. Congratulations, Cleveland. It's a great East West win. So today's episode features two very accomplished guests. First up is Mike Lyden, and where to begin? Let's see. Mike is an internationally recognized planner, writer, speaker and advocate for livable cities. But wait, there's more. In fact, so much more that I would direct you to his website. [St-plans.com](https://st-plans.com), where there is a great description of what he does and the accolades and projects he's been part of our new. Operated Mike will be with me in a moment. In the second-half of the show, Dr. Ralph Bueller will be back to speak with us about his part in a study about what happened with cycling during and after the pandemic. Some of the findings might surprise you. Some of them we already knew and some of them give us insight into what we might expect in the future. So Michael Lyden, he seems to have been born to the profession of urban planning with a love for towns and cities from his childhood, his work has been acclaimed far and wide. And he thinks about what we can do on both the micro and macro level, to realize better ways to make our cities livable and safe. Before we start, I want to make a correction to something I say early in our conversation. I mistakenly stated that the year the store I opened in downtown Cleveland was 1997. Nope, the year it was opened was actually 1989. Here's my conversation with Mike. Hi, Mike. Welcome to the outspoken cyclist. Thanks for joining me today. How are you?

Speaker 3

Good. Thanks for having me.

Speaker 2

Oh, it's my pleasure. You've done a whole lot of stuff. You've gotten a whole lot of awards. You are like the poster person for the kind of work I love to do, and I'm not sure where to start. So let's start at the beginning. Give us a little bit about your background and what you and what led you to doing what you're doing today, which is a lot.

Speaker 3

Ohh boy. Well, I grew up in rural Maine in a small town and was always obsessed with town and bigger towns and cities. And so anyways, I found my way into urban planning for a pretty young age. Since City was a big catalyst for me and did a lot of academic projects over the years. You. Grade School, High School, college, etcetera and then wind up realizing there was really, truly a profession built around making cities better and so wind up paying a degree in urban planning from University of Michigan and wound up in Miami for three years doing large scale design, urban planning projects for a firm called DPZ there. And then was excited about that work, but certainly frustrated by the pace of change. And also being an urban cyclist in Miami, understanding that my life was, you know, in danger every time you get the streets there. And I was cycling to and from the office about 8 miles each day one way. So it kind of came this part of my work, which was really advocacy and not so much consult. Work, but advocacy work there and help get some bike initiatives started largely out of self preservation and. You know, between that and. Being frustrated, but things weren't happening, not only in Miami, but you know, in just urban planning in general, got really excited about some initiatives. I got to be made aware of from open streets or cyclovias down in Bogota. To some other activist LED projects that were really popping up everywhere at that time. Kind of in reaction to the the Great Recession, and then all these online tools that people were developing and able to share ideas and pictures and got inspired and said, you know what, there's a common thread here, it's it's what we call tactical urbanism. And we should really sort of build a practice around marrying streets, St. design, transportation and the need to tend. To do that faster and to create an outlet for people who really care about these things to to push cities and push themselves to really deliver safer communities. So that's the short.

Speaker 2

So I have a question about urban planning. When you first started and urban planning now I've been clearly watching it for more closely the last four or five years than I did the previous eight. When I first started the podcast. But I've been in the bicycle business for 40 years and I've seen now what I felt. They have been really, really slow. Beginnings of trails and paths and connections and lack of. Connections does seem to be accelerating. The pace is accelerating, but I'm wondering about the thinking about urban planning, how you've seen it change from, you know, more roads, more parking lots to what we're seeing today.

Speaker 3

Yeah, that's a great question. I love that question. There's, you know, been thinking about that recently. Where things were when I was in grad school and starting my career as a young planner, certainly not where they are today at that. Point it was still. In many cities, most cities. It was. Hey, can we get people to live downtown or how do we get people to? Invest in our core. Today, it's. Oh my gosh. How do we hit the brakes on this? It's become so expensive we can't build enough housing. Everybody wants to live a walkable lifestyle, and it's very, very expensive to do. It wasn't. That way you know 20 years ago. I think a. Lot of cities are so desperate for people to live in the city somewhere or to live in the downtown area. And you know, we just spent many decades not building enough housing for people, and it's just become extremely expensive and and challenging. And it really impacts many, many, many different issues, not just housing but economic issues, transportation issues, Community relationship building issues. So I think that. To me, is like the biggest shift in change is that you have a much greater demand and a big lack of supply and it's really driving the conversation today in a way that it was not 20 years. To go as it relates to streets and public space and transportation, there's just been this huge awareness building campaign that feels like through 1000 different, you know. 100,000 different actors to get our political leaders to understand the value and and and how important it is for multiple reasons to invest in safe cycling and walking active travel. Public transportation, and we're certainly not at the scale we all want to be at, but there's certainly much more awareness and it's really the last couple of years you've seen this tipping points or be reached with getting rid of parking minimums and the whole parking reform movement is taken off the YIMBY movement in terms of housing and being great housing positive for communities and. And you know. That that's starting to have real impact on the political spectrum across the country and. That's really exciting to. Right.

Speaker 2

Well, anecdotally, and I can do it from my own perspective in 1997. We had the bright idea of opening a really high end, beautiful space, rehabbing a 1920 something space in downtown Cleveland in between what is Tower City and the lakefront in the what they called the Warehouse District, and exactly what you said was.

Speaker

Hmm.

Speaker 1

MHM.

Speaker 2

Going on, nobody came downtown. There wasn't enough housing. There were no groceries. There were no drug stores. There were no dry cleaners. So it really well, it

was a beautiful space. Once 5:00 rolled out. That was it. Everybody left downtown. So I totally get it. And I also see they're trying to take all of these buildings that used to be department stores.

Speaker 3

Right. Gone gone. Yeah.

Speaker 2

And whatever, and turn them into. How? Missing and you're right, it's it's expensive and it's not happening fast enough. It's just crazy. It's crazy. Let me reintroduce you, and then we're gonna talk a little bit about the actual work you're doing right now. We're speaking with Mike Lyden. He is an internationally recognized planner, writer, speaker and advocate for livable cities, which everybody knows I'm I'm way into that. His company is St. plans and I wanted to talk about tactical urbanism, define it for us.

Speaker 3

Oh yes, it's a wonky term for using short term projects to affect long term change and it's it's all about very intentionally doing so. So seeing a problem or a challenge in built environment and then knowing that a fix won't happen in a permanent way tomorrow. But there are things that we can do tomorrow that would. Inform and impact and build support for that long term investment so. You know, we we use that as a tool in our practice in a lot of different types of ways in a wide variety of projects. But it really is a way to have people participate in the creation of their city and then to use as a diagnostic tool and see is there political support for this. If so, what works about this, but doesn't, let's make sure we don't. You know, hardline infrastructure investments that are not going to work in the long term. So in some ways it's a very radical strategy and a lot of it's a very conservative strategy and that you're sort of hedging against big dumb money being spent on projects that shouldn't be spent that.

Speaker 2

So give us an example of a couple of projects that started out being sort of temporary and I think COVID Nove a lot of things to new sort of new thinking but and and that have then turned into permanent solutions.

Speaker 3

Sure. I mean, there's sort of a long history there, various projects that have gone through that trajectory and you know there are some that take three years to go through that cycle, not many but so. And there are some. That take 15 or 20 years to go through that cycle. It really just depends on the context and the. Projects and I'll. Talk about one that I was not involved with, but extremely inspired by, you know, 15 or 16 years ago, which is right here in, in Dumbo, Brooklyn, where we have our office now. You know, back in 2007, the city. In the relatively newly formed Business Improvement District, in this neighborhood, painted a green triangle in what was a sort of angled parking lot and

a big expanse of asphalt. They just painted green and threw out some planters and said look, now it's a Plaza. And that image is one that is still burned in my memory from, you know, just maybe joining Twitter in 2007 or 8 and thinking that is super cheap and that is super effective. And that project has gone through probably 3 different iterations since it was first installed in 2007. I mean. Different temporary iterations so. Green at first, then the mural got paint on top and then the new mural, and then a whole bunch of programming and configuration changes have happened with that space from holiday festivals to flea market to art events all happening in this little triangle and this sort of really kind of. Beautiful dynamic space. Really serving as a public space that the neighborhood always. Needed as they continue to grow and now that's 2024. About a year ago they started construction on not just making that little triangle. Well, permanent, but expanding it pretty dramatically by closing the adjacent St. to through traffic and then connecting it to an existing Plaza in the Archway underneath the Manhattan Bridge. So you're getting this very large new permanent beautiful, rebuilt public space that, you know never would have happened and never would have been as. Valuable to the community? Had it not been done. First with pain. So again, that's a long arc to go from 2007 to 2024 and it's still not quite done, but the value creation and the benefit for the community and the city in that interim period of you know, 15 years is is tremendous and I. Think that's the. That's the increment of opportunity that people always miss. Think like. Yeah, we're gonna invest in this long term, but don't forget to think with those short term investments that actually drive the value and bring the benefit and then you can learn from them for what you actually want building with permanent infrastructure. So it's a. Really, really cool story. And it kicked off. The Plaza program here in New York City, and now there's more than 75 different plazas like that in different phases of development. So the the projects and the methodologies don't just scale and iterate and become permanent over time, they can become programmatic. They can become a citywide sort of approach to change making. And that's what's happened here in New York. And I think it's really. Really cool.

Speaker 2

So I have a question about pushback when when things like that start, people are always skeptical or you're taking away my whatever the NIMBY thing not in my backyard. By doing it incrementally, do you think that you get more buy in that people become more in favor of it and begin to actually support it? And then you know, help it grow?

Speaker 3

It certainly helps. I mean, we're all about showing, not telling, right, people want, they don't want to be told, right. Anything really. But if you can get away with showing them even for a weekend or month, you know, it's it's that experience, that visual experience of like, oh, I actually still found a parking spot or, you know, I actually enjoyed seeing all that positive activity.

Speaker 2

True.

Speaker 3

In the neighborhood, you know it. Does really help to change hearts and minds? Of course not. Everybody obviously, but that experiential change means a lot. And what's so powerful about the the flexibility and the non permanence of the materials is that you can literally adjust and change things as you're seeing, like, OK, maybe you've gotten all the big hump of. Should it be here? But this isn't quite working the way that we intended or the way we wanted to, or we've got a complaint from this resident who says X about this project. And like OK. We can move this piece over there. We can figure this and then, you know, we'll not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Also keep the project, but we will be able to tweak it so that it responds to how it's used on the ground effectively. So it's it's really helpful to be able to do that with projects as you work out the kinks and you can't do that the same way with permanent hardscape infrastructure.

Speaker 2

Let's take a short break. When we come back, I want to talk about the infrastructure bill and how that's either loosened up or not. Monies for these kinds of projects and what projects you might have on the drawing board right now. We're speaking with Mike Lyden. He is the principal of St. plans. He is in New York City and I know you have offices elsewhere. Including Florida, which is one of those problematic states in my mind, for biking, and he's an internationally recognized planner, writer, speaker, and advocate for livable cities. We'll be right back. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist. We are back on the outspoken cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Sam, we're speaking with Mike Lyden from street plans. So how has infrastructure money helped? Some of the work you're doing right now? And is it helping?

Speaker 3

A lot of the work that. We do. I it's. Well, we back up. Money gets allocated at the federal level, money doesn't start flowing at the local level for. A long time so. So we we directly haven't seen any immediate benefit, but we have some projects that are coming up that are funded with infrastructure dollars that we hope will be very impactful. And one of those projects is in New Haven, CT where we'd actually help the city complete cycling and walking and transit.

Speaker 2

OK.

Speaker 3

Plan called safe routes for all and then we're able to, once the safe streets and roads for all very actually coincidentally named in a very similar way program got released by

FHWA for 5 billion / 5 years. We were able to pivot that plan to make it eligible to apply for infrastructure dollar money, not planning money. Very good the plan, but infrastructure money and we wound up getting some success out of that. And so that's taken a while to go through the whole contracting agreement phase between the federal government and the city. We are taking some. Of the priority projects in the. Corridor out of the plan. That touches a couple of the city's equity priority neighborhoods and will be able to invest those dollars and changing the corridor. It's much safer for walking, cycling, transit use and, of course, driving, and it's rate where there's a high school, there's an early age, elementary school, there's, you know, a lot of dense housing around, and it's gonna be an opportunity on that quarter. And make make a difference and so that will start flowing. You know probably later this year that project will advance with those federal dollars. Overall, we're seeing that stuff start from year one, really start to now get into the planning and development phase. There's going to be many more years of that if the current administration I think stays in office for the next, you know, six years or five years or whatnot and that's that's exciting too because what it what the. Money is doing is basically convincing or bringing departments of transportation at a state level to the table and realizing that some of the things that are eligible to be funded with those infrastructures. Dollars are things are not very comfortable with or having been historically so it's it's opening up the eyes and I think the attention from a policy and a design perspective on what's possible in our streets, including doing tactical quick build projects of which this version of New Haven is what we will wind up doing. So we've worked on a lot of those kinds of. Projects with local municipalities. We've not had nearly the same amount of buy in from state dot and I think that's starting to. Change and that's all because of. The the the carrot and the stick, which is called, you know, billions of dollars.

Speaker 2

Right, exactly. Exactly. This didn't occur to me before, but I wanted to ask you about it because my guess is you've run up across. It and I don't know how it gets fixed. When the National federal Interstate system was built, a lot of communities were divided so that you had. Something on one side and something else on the other, and this highway going down the. Little resulting in some very inequitable situations. And when somebody says we're gonna get rid of that, what do you do? How do you get rid of that highway? And what do you put in its place and where do you send that traffic?

Speaker 3

You. You blow up the highway. That's what you do. With it you just demolish it.

Speaker 2

OK, I'm all for that.

Speaker

Bye bye. No, I mean.

Speaker 3

It's a very intensive process and projects going to think about how you. To physically remove something which you know it's obviously extremely destructive. It was built. But it's not like taking it down. It's like a cakewalk, either, and it takes a lot of time, right? But what it does lead is these huge gashes of land, these corridors, you know, 100 feet, sometimes much wider.

Speaker

Right.

Speaker 3

The loss of land that can be redeveloped and reimaged, and now they're in, you know, 2024, there's a handful of communities who have done this successfully over the last couple of, you know, decades. Rochester, NY, is one of the more recent ones where you can see in multiple phases they've been removing this inner ring highway, which really. Was. Pointless as a infrastructure that it got built, but it so created this noose around the around the downtown and so taking that out in pieces is allowed for an acreage St. which still moves plenty of cars, but they don't incorporate walking facilities and protected bike lanes and all that extra land to build new housing, right? To repair the city and bring people to live downtown. So I think the the trade-offs are immense when you think about the removal and then the downside of well, what happens to the traffic well it a. Lot of it evaporates. You know, there's the not a theory, but. There's been proven. That when you remove capacity you get less cars. You get less. Demand to use that infrastructure. So that's really hard for people to understand politically at a neighborhood level, conceptually, whatever. But when you see that infrastructure removed you. See traffic counts. Shrink, you see less crashes, you see cleaner air. You see land opened up for housing and commercial development to get better walking and biking facilities. So it's the the trade-offs and the the benefits are immense if you can. Off.

Speaker 2

Something you mentioned about taking these things out and having having these big swaths of land, how is climate change affecting the work you're doing?

Speaker 3

It's. It's pretty central. I mean, it's this massive global issue and challenge, right, but the only thing you can do is work at it, you know, block by block and at a local or municipal level. I mean, sure, some projects and efforts go well beyond that. But for the everyday planner or advocate, you know, you've got to be thinking about how you can position the work that you do. To contribute to reducing and you know mitigating the the damage that has been done and will continue. To be done by a. Going to change. So for us that's, you know, designing streets that are, you know, literally greener, not just green paint for cycling but actual have a lot more space for landscape to absorb water, to bring

shade which is so critical as actually having a conversation yesterday about the value of shade and obviously the the. Micro climate that you can have on a single block between and the area that's shaded in the area. That's not. So all of that has to be top of mind. We're thinking about not just permanent infrastructure investment and planning for that, but how do we do that in the short term in the temporary way as well. And you know one one example from our portfolio of projects is that we had worked in Norfolk, VA maybe seven years ago at this point and their city. That's really in trouble when it comes to rising sea level, right? But they also are getting increased rain events, so they're getting water coming up from below and through the sewer system. But they're also getting bigger rains from above. And that combination of that is is not good. So how do you take a tactical approach to something that's so systemic? Well, you got to chip away at it. And So what we wound up doing was having this workshop where at the time a group called 100 million cities. And a bunch of property owners and residents of a couple neighborhoods that were most impacted by this issue of stormwater and sea level. And we tested out rain barrels and we showed them what a rain garden looks like. We really like built these things and hooked them up to a roof and we actually had the fire department on the roof using the hose to blast water down, you know, on the roof. So we go into the drain and then you could see how the in real time. You can see the rain barrel, catch the water and delay it from going into the storm water system. And so it was like about education. And then we through that workshop and through that, you know, two day process came up with a series of recommendations on how. The city could. Use this small scale green and blue infrastructure to to mitigate stormwater challenges. Facing and they, you know, to their credit, put this program in place where they offer I think it's twice a year. They offer grants of \$2500 to property owners to hook up and build this type of infrastructure which is not very expensive. And they've done that now for I think it's been six years and so you add up all the grants and all the projects over six years you start to make a dent on this stuff right. You can't just silver bullet your. Way out of it. But if you can work with. Property owners, it's sort of like a network scale across the city you can. Start to make a difference at a. Cost.

Speaker 2

How are you incorporating charging stations for things? Not just cars, but also E bike scooters. Some of the ride share stuff.

Speaker 3

We're not. We don't really get into the charging infrastructure game for vehicles, although I think there's a.

Speaker 2

OK.

Speaker 3

Fight that needs to be had over that.

Speaker 2

Hmm.

Speaker 3

You know, we've locked in on street parking, which also creates demand for driving when it's so convenient. And it's free. We've locked, we've locked that in for many generations now. And to just assume that we should keep using the curb.

Speaker 2

Right.

Speaker 3

Always that way, by putting curbside charging stations in is maybe problematic. You know, we just saw a proposal or an article today actually here in New York City. That the city is investing a huge amount of money and rolling out from a pilot into a much bigger scale installation. Of all these chargers at the curb, but what? That does it locks in that use.

Speaker 2

Right and the space.

Speaker 3

And. And the space and today we. Need to fill your car with gas? You go to a centralized place, you go to a gas station that's concentrates the source of power delivery. You know, spreading that out to every neighborhood will mean that you aren't adding all the other things that you do, like greenery. It makes bike lanes challenging now because now you got cars that have to access the curb. So there's a lot of questions that need to be answered. About how we. Do this I and I should step back. I believe in electrification. I think that's going to be an important piece of this. But how we do the electrification? And where really matters and you know all this is happening here in New York. Well, we have a whole large like hundreds of thousands of delivery cyclists here who all went on E bikes who don't have easy access to public charging and. What that means? Is they're doing it in basements, they're doing it illegally. Oftentimes the batteries are not certified, so not safe. And there's been, you know, I can. Tell you how many fires have broken out this last couple of years based on the on the charging battery, so it's it's very pernicious and like we're just not like left hands not talking to. The right on. These issues yet in the least, these public charging stations need to accommodate not just for cars, but for micro mobility. Well.

Speaker 2

Yeah, that seems to me like somebody with an engineering mind should come up with a vehicle that is self charging. That that wouldn't need these stations every five seconds, you know.

Speaker 3

Well, there. Right, right. And you know the technology will improve and the batteries will last longer over time, but we're not there yet at all and you know, think about the 1940s or 50s and all the cities we're introducing on street parking and metering and or not and what that did in New York, you couldn't park on the street before.

Speaker 2

Yeah, it will.

Speaker 3

1950 so. It's this moment. Right now we're sort of. Are we gonna do this again? And then we're locking it in? And how are we doing it? This is a really big. Big move from a policy perspective and I don't think it's all been thought out enough, not only in New York, but I think definitely nationally it's not been well thought out.

Speaker 2

So before I ask you a couple of personal questions, I want to know if you have a big picture vision, if you could, you know, the in the perfect world, what a city might look like and act like in the future.

Speaker 3

Hmm.

Speaker

Or.

Speaker 3

Well, I think a city should be for everybody who wants to live there, to be able to live there. And at the moment that is not, that's not the case. The cities are our best engines of economic opportunity and they're really probably the best tool to fight climate change from an emissions perspective, right? If you truly live. A lifestyle where you don't have to drive for anything or drive very little. The value of that you know, sharing party walls and buildings is incredibly energy efficient. Being able to walk to the corner to get all your groceries and your daily needs is incredibly efficient and it's a huge tool to fight against climate change. So my my dream vision is that we have a lot more. Cities we have bigger cities and we have better ways to connect all of our cities and that people can live there, want to live there and find opportunity and that's. That's a city. We don't have right now in the United States, in my opinion.

Speaker 2

Are there cities around the world that are worth emulating that aren't places like Amsterdam where it's small and it's flat and it's, you know, you know, can you, I mean you mentioned Bogota and I spoke with I can't remember his name. Go ahead.

Speaker 3

I think cities. I mean, cities around the world are doing certain things really well, so you can't learn from just one city. You need to think about, you know, all the interesting things that cities have done over generations, honestly and and learn from them and see what can be adapted. And, you know, as is political, will to do so in your own city. So I wouldn't point to one city and say, hey, it's perfect. You know, Paris is doing amazing things. With the streets. You know, I wouldn't say they've done a lot with you. Know housing, say housing, is still very, very. There Tokyo, on the other hand, has done amazing things with housing and building and making it affordable, but they really don't have much bike infrastructure or, you know, they got these big nasty streets too. So they haven't solved that problem. So, you know, no city has it all worked out, that's for sure. It's all about learning from the good things that. People been able to pull off, in my opinion.

Speaker 2

Well, and then you also have in the United States cities that are so disparate in size and in in geography and and you know, like we have the great lake here and. And you have the Hudson River, and there's just so many variables. I understand that. So what do you do when you're not working, which it seems like you're probably working 28 hours a day?

Speaker 3

And it worked. Probably too much. Well, I've. Got 2 little boys, so I'll you know along my wife we love to go out into the city and just visit different places, go different parks, we ride bikes everywhere, you know. Got a an electric cargo bike with the kids sit on the back and they're age 3:00 and 6:00 so they're. Still. Relatively easy to. Cycle around whether not too big and heavy yet. So we do. A lot of that I'm also a runner, so love to run around New York and or whatever city I'm visiting. The first thing I like to do is get off the plane and go, go run. Oftentimes, you know, in a park or along the waterway, whatever is a. A good way. To kind of see neighborhoods and see the city. So that's a big passion of mine. I do a lot of that. Yeah, another that I do a lot of. Thinking and reading about urban.

Speaker 2

Planning. I'll bet you do. Well, it's been a pleasure to speak with you. How can my listeners find out more about you and the work and St. plans and tactical urbanism?

Speaker 3

Yeah, you know, St. plans.com. Check out our our website.

Speaker 4

You can go.

Speaker 3

To tacticalurbanismguide.com, check out some of the resources we have there. I should also say we're working on a new book, so we released a book in 20. 15 about tactical. Organism and we have a a new book coming out. Probably this time next year with Island Press that we're currently writing, so that's going to be a, you know, a big download of all the things we've learned over a decade of practicing tactical urbanism at St. plans and with many, many collaborators and partners. And you can find me on all the social medias, you know, Twitter and. Instagram and all that.

Speaker 2

Yeah, Island Press is really a good publishing house for the kind of work you do and a lot of the bicycling stuff. I I really appreciate the work they do. Well, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for speaking with me. We've been speaking with. Mike Lyden. He is with street plans. And it's St. plans.com. I hope you have a great spring. Enjoy the weather when it gets there and I hope we get to talk again.

Speaker 3

Thanks, Anne. Appreciate it.

Speaker 2

My thanks to Mike Lyden for joining me on the show today. You can find out more about his work at st-plans.com, including some of the really cool projects the organization has worked on. Follow Mike on social media at Mike Lyden. Let's take a break and when we return, we'll speak with Professor Ralph Bueller about his findings from his study cycling through the COVID-19 pandemic. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist.

Speaker

Weekend.

Speaker 2

We are back on the outspoken cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jang. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we behave in so many ways. We found ourselves learning a new way of moving about, and whether it was going to and coming from work, shopping for groceries or just getting outside for pleasure. The impact of the worldwide need to alter the way we travel is a topic of great interest to my guest. Doctor Ralph bueller. Ralph joins me to discuss his findings, which were published recently in an article titled COVID-19 impacts on Cycling. Hi, Ralph. Welcome back to the outspoken cyclist. Good to talk with you. How are you?

Speaker 4

I'm very well. Thank you for.

Speaker 2

Having me ohh, it's my pleasure. We all got through COVID. It seems pretty well. And what we're going to talk about today. Has to do with COVID and some of the research you've been doing. It's been a while since we spoke, and you mentioned in a study and transport reviews titled. Quote COVID-19 and cycling a review of the literature on changes in cycling levels and government policies from 2019 to 2022. Explain how and why this study was done.

Speaker 4

So first I apologize for the long title, but these academic titles are always a hand. So as we. All experienced, I think COVID was a a big shock to our to our lives and to our behavior and and part of that was also related to to bicycling. People stopped going to work, they worked from home. More people wanted to get outside for recreation and just getting outside of the house. So there were big changes in how people get around. And we were interested in a what happened during COVID to bicycling and and B how are these trends sort of panning out over the years? So what happened in 2021 and 2022 compared to to 2020? And we wanted to see what we know in the in the literature out there.

Speaker 2

And you did learn a lot as somebody who's been in the bike business, the experiences we had were. Things like product shortages and everybody digging bikes out of basements and garages and just getting on a bike to get outside number one and to figure out what the social distancing was. And if somebody sneezed, how far behind them you should be, right? I mean, it was some really weird and and kind of silly stuff in some ways. But it was very serious in other ways so. What was the literature saying? As you began to look at it.

Speaker 4

So there's a lot of variability in in, in over time. There's a lot of variability by geography. This means by country, by city, but also by parts of the city. For example, we saw big declines in cycling in business districts or close to universities, because suddenly the bike commuters who went to these business districts to work and the students who went to these universities. They didn't bike there anymore, so cycling. Declined a lot and if there was a bike counter along a route to one of these, we saw declines in. But at the same time, we saw big increases in cycling in other places, often on recreational shared use trails or in neighborhoods or in other locations. The same was true also by time of day. We saw declines in bicycling in the morning because precisely people were not going to work anymore. They were not commuting. But we saw big increases in cycling

on the weekends. And in the afternoons, because that's what people, when people are out now riding, riding their bikes. So the the research shows a lot of variability overall, though we saw increases. In bicycling, so bicycling came out stronger of the pandemic than it went in.

Speaker 2

Do we know who was cycling mainly? I mean, we think about cycling when I think about cycling. My clientele has always been skewed male and skewed somewhere in the middle age, say 39 to 55. Did that change during during the pandemic?

Speaker 4

It changed a little bit, but again there's lots of variability. Several studies show that those who. Increase their cycling or picked up cycling were also mainly men, middle-aged and younger, but some studies show that in particular along streets that were closed for cars or new. Pop-up bike lanes. They were put in. They find that more women were riding there and that older. Individuals we're riding, we're riding there. The same is, I think, true for for younger kids. And I will tell a a private anecdote here that's not in in the research, but during the the lockdowns, I I was riding with. Had two kids who were five and seven at the time we were riding 3 abreast along the streets because nobody was out. No cars were out and they loved it. Now if I tell them, let's go for a bike ride. They will tell me they're all the. Cars and it's dangerous so. We had people who were more risk averse if they know it, like the little kids. If they don't know it, like the little kids, or if they know it like all like. Belts that rode more, more bikes. But again, there's variability in the in the places and the type of facility where people are riding.

Speaker 2

Let me reintroduce you, and then we're gonna talk a little more about some of the things that have happened as we've moved out of COVID and into what's happening today. We're speaking with Dr. Ralph Bueller. He's a professor of urban affairs and. Planning in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech Research Center in Arlington and your area of research has an international comparative perspective. So did you study this COVID phenomenon of more cycling for a while, and then maybe it's tapered off? Outside of the US.

Speaker 4

Yes. So we studied it in the US, in Canada, in European countries, and we also reviewed studies from. Australia, some from Asia and some even from from from Africa on on that and in in general we find these similar trends that during the pandemic that means after the lockdowns because during lockdowns, often people didn't ride their bikes because in some countries you were not allowed to leave your house. So if you left your house, you have a sheet of paper saying, oh, I go there and. Yet to have a reason to go somewhere, but once these lockdowns were lifted, we generally saw increases in bicycling. All over, if it's. If it's Australia, if it's Canada, if it's the US, if it's the

European countries, we will study from Vietnam, where we saw that many cycling and parks in in, in, in that study. But we saw general increases right during the, the the pandemic. And then there's big variability in what cities did. In terms of accommodating this cycling, some cities did very little. There was just less car traffic because people stayed at home and some people rode their bikes because there were fewer cars out there and other cities really took the COVID pandemic as a. As an opportunity almost to expand the bikeway networks, cities they come to mind their Paris, France, for example, or Brussels, Belgium, they they have plans for expanding the bikeway networks and then the pandemic hit. And they said wait a minute. We have all these plans, we know the routes. Why don't we do very cheap pop up bike lanes along those routes? And they really expanded their bikeway network and they saw. The the strongest increases in cycling and also the most sustained increases because they need many of these pop-up bike lanes. Permanent sort of growing their bike way that were considerably and those were the cities that sort of kept the cycling at the at the higher level than cities that didn't do anything or that pulled back their pop-up bike lanes.

Speaker 2

So this is sort of outside of the the study that you did, but I want wonder if you've noticed. Some of these places that have either allowed their infrastructure to become more permanent, you know, having people, maybe narrowing streets, calming traffic, putting more bike lanes in has the infrastructure bill made any difference, do you think out of this? I don't know if it came out of COVID or not. It almost feels like it should have.

Speaker 4

I mean, in in the US, the availability of funds or the flexibility of funds on the on the local level is very important. So local governments can decide what to do with the federal funds they get. So historically, U.S. Federal transport funding came with strings attached. So you got the money and you could only use it for roadways. So you could only use it for transit. And that has gotten. More flexible overtime. And then with the the infrastructure build has also been more money and the communities who wanted to use it that way they could, they could, they could do that. But I think with the the quick reaction with these pop-up bike lanes to COVID it was. More about the. The local government sort of having the idea to use this moment and and local local agency and to do to do something, but often they put up these little cones and it. Was very sort. Of make makeshift to do it and then later when the funds came in or they had the funds, they could make them. Permanent and and the political will by the way.

Speaker 2

Well, yeah, political will. There's always that. So I wondered about some of the phenomenon that I heard and it's anecdotal. It is not necessarily you know fact, but maybe you know it's some of the the changes that have occurred for drivers making cycling even during the pandemic. Somewhat more dangerous that they're going faster,

there are fewer cars on the road that they're angry. I don't know if you if any of that came into the study that you were doing.

Speaker 4

It didn't come into the study, but it's a very troubling trend, which, by the way, is a, is a US trend.

Speaker 2

Of course.

Speaker 4

Yeah, yes, of course not. Of course, because. Of the the. The logical arguments that you made, well, the driver has less congestion, drivers are faster and that's why crashes are more impactful the same. Happened in in Europe, for example, there were fewer cars out there that people could travel, but we didn't see the increase in in cyclist fatalities and pedestrian fatalities, by the way, as we saw it in the US, it's a very troubling. And in the US and that trend for pedestrians at least has been ongoing for 10 years, even before before COVID. So we have a a really bad Traffic Safety problem here in, in the US and and it's mainly pedestrians but also cyclists that get killed at a higher rate and by by drivers, we still have to fully figure out. Why that is we had a spike during the pandemic, likely related to some of the factors you mentioned. We also have larger vehicles with higher hoods that are more likely to kill you when they hit you. It's a bigger mass that's more likely to hit you when you to kill you when you when you get hit, and we may have more speeding. So there are many, many other factors that. That that play a role, but I wouldn't pin it solely on the pandemic. It may have amplified an ongoing trend, but we have this trend in the US. I would say since 2012 at least for pedestrians to some extent for cyclists.

Speaker 2

So this is the third episode of my show in a row that we've brought this up. This trend of more pedestrians and cyclists being killed on the road and every time it's come up the topic of E bikes gets injected somehow. I don't know if you're doing any study. Looking at E bikes or not as. But when I talk to the NTSB they are not getting data that gives us an opportunity to. Sort of analyzed whether E bikes are the problem or are a problem.

Speaker 4

I would say E bikes. There may be an issue with E bikes, but E bikes can't be the problem that pedestrians get killed. So if the trend for pedestrians and cyclists, then I would first go and blame the drivers because they are killing both E bikes is another issue. Bikes are of course faster allow people to go faster than. Than with other bikes and the fall at a higher speed is more dangerous than a fall at A at a lower speed. I think that's that that that's pretty clear, but I wouldn't. I haven't seen any good data that that sort of says that E bikes are at the root of this of this issue. And if it were just E bikes

then we wouldn't see the trend for pedestrians at all because they are not, they're not motorized. With a with a with an electric motor and then the other thing with E bikes is of course the way. They are ridden. And just because you have an E bike does not mean that you have to go fast. You can go fast, but people who ride bikes may just people who would not ride otherwise, or they ride an E bike for a longer, a longer distance than they would ride otherwise. So not even. The ebike user is a reckless, A reckless person who is just racing to to fall down, so I would be a little bit careful with the E bike so don't rule it out if there's an issue given the higher the higher speed but the the overall national trend, I think we see is is related to to driving in particular because we see it for pedestrians. As well.

Speaker 2

Yeah, I think that's a really good observation, one that nobody else has actually couched it that way. And I appreciate that. I can see that that is probably so. So let's Fast forward to now. Because we're going to give people a a link to the your study and to the IT, it's part of a much larger study. Your portion of it, but. What do you think is going to happen going forward in terms of? There seems to be a decline right now in cycling. There's a decline in bike sales, shops are reporting suddenly, a glut of inventory when they had nothing during the pandemic. Do you see this balancing out at some point?

Speaker 4

Yeah, it's, it's it's difficult where we where we are at the moment. So we have these places that I talked about before like like Paris, France or Brussels that are really on the up and up in, in New York. I think in the US, I think New York City looks looks very strong in, in, in their bicycling trend. But many other cities like Portland OR or Minneapolis that used to sort of be the big, big cycling cities. At least the bike commute hasn't hasn't come back, and I think that's one of the the key issues here. Is what's gonna happen to our commuting behavior, and especially for cities inside where we're cycling? Commuting was a big thing, like Portland or or or Minneapolis and. A big share. Of of the population is still working from home, if not permanently, then maybe two days a week. So people go to the office on on Tuesday. Wednesday and Thursday, but they're not going to the office Monday and Friday. And so these are bike trips. That are missing. We don't see them in the commute data. We don't see them at our at our counters. At the same time, we still see higher cycling levels of increases along certain recreational trails and recreational activities. So it's still I think it's still. Up in the. Air how it will, how it will pan out and then of course the cities who who didn't make the bike infrastructure. Permanent or didn't do anything for cycling. They lost all the people again who who rode bikes before, because now they are having a bad a bad experience. They only need. One close pass by a car or one one close close encounter and you say hey, I'm. Not I'm not. I'm not doing this. I'm not doing well. This is. This is too dangerous. I feel it's too dangerous for me. So we still have to see how it how it goes. But I think we have to have this big spike during COVID and went down from that. But overall, I think

we're not down below where we started in 2019. We're still above that. We are below the big peak we had maybe in 20/20/21. I think we come out. Ahead of 2019, but in a different way, we won't see the commute numbers returned because people will. Some of the work from home will stick, at least for for parts of the for parts of the week, and then for us as researchers. The challenge, then is how to. How to find the cyclists and how to count them? We we used to rely a lot on the US Census or American Community Survey that counts workers that commute to work, and that indicator is is going to be a bad indicator going forward because it's it's so far below. So for most modes than what it was before before the pandemic, so we have to find new ways of of counting cyclists and finding cyclists, and figuring out what they what they do. But overall I'm I'm optimistic most optimistic for the cities that really pushed, pushed bicycling and and took COVID as an opportunity to expand bikeways less optimistic for places that didn't do much or that rely heavily on on bike. Computers.

Speaker

So.

Speaker 2

As paths and trails begin to be completed, so there are lots of sort of sections of trails that never went anywhere. You know it went from one block to another or one mile or whatever, but I'm seeing some things starting to connect. For example, in our area, Northeast Ohio. I'm wondering if you think that would be a place that you would start counting as opposed to city streets. At for commuters?

Speaker 4

Yeah, I mean, these are these are places where you have to start start. You have to start counting at these connected networks or at intersections with with, with major trunks or routes of the network intersect. There's also a whole new push towards. Passively generated data, so it's your your your cell phone that whenever you get an app that seems free, you agree to all sorts of things that you don't know about. But it means that so there are people who who take your, who take your data and they also use it for transport planning. So your your bike. Will show up there, of course other bike apps were more regular cyclists who want to track their rides, where they report their data, and we can we can follow.

Speaker 2

Yeah, like Strava.

Speaker 4

Like Strava? Yeah. So we have to to sort of rely on different different data sources or or maybe you do that as well like I get from my phone once a month I get a a report by from Google where I went everywhere and they show me a map and they show me different places. I don't know if I ever agreed to it. But they it's just.

Speaker 2

But there it is.

Speaker 4

Started, it started popping up at the pundits that people who are having having data are collecting that data and. You're you're exactly. We have to count where networks come together or where important routes of networks, networks connect and put the put counters up at those at those locations.

Speaker 2

So what is the next thing you're working on now that this project is sort of where it is it's been published?

Speaker 4

Yeah. So we have been working more more recently on on something that was not related directly to cycling. We were working on travel behavior of older adults like to how do older adults change their travel behavior overtime. It's very interesting. Group because it's a growing group, so we're going to have more and more older adults in, in the population as a share of the population and older adults are also changing in the sense that they're more active than previous generations of of older adults. And so the question is, how do they get around? Do they drive more or do they ride transit to do the right bicycles do, do they walk more? And what are the? Projections into the into the future, but it's more related to all modes of transport and not specifically to. To bicycling, we have a comparison in there as well, where we look at the. US and that and that. Many, not surprisingly, German older adults ride bikes more, walk more, but maybe shockingly, the growth rates, because they started at a lower level, the growth rates in car use are much higher in Germany. So that's one generation ago drove a lot less than now in the US, although dogs drove. At higher rates already and. They're sort of flatlining or growing minimally, where there's huge growth in Germany, for example, and that's bad news for their sustainability goals because older adults are accounting for a larger share of the population. They drive a lot more. There will be more CO2 emissions and all sorts of other things that didn't exist didn't exist before. But it takes us. A little bit away from the. From the bicycling the bicycling research more into looking at at elder adults and and their their travel behavior. I also wanted to make one one other point and I'm not sure how it is related. But you mentioned that there may be a. Sort of a decline in cycling or less interest in cycling, and I'm wondering and I haven't seen any good research on that, but how E scooters and and these other new micro mobility modes, how they relate to cycling, because we had in the early. 2000 tens or so, bicycling was the cool thing to do. Like if you went to cities and new, new, young urbanites who move that they picked up bicycles because it was sort of the the the cool thing. But now we also have more of these E scooters and and other modes that are sort of the the cool thing or the cool, the coolness factor. And I haven't seen any good studies, so if you.

Evaluating that, are there are the E scooters. Compliments to bicycling. You may ride a bike for some trips. You may ride scooters for others boys, there are some competition between them. Still, you may you wanna be seen more likely on an E scooter these days because that's the that's the better mode to be on than than the bike. And I don't know, I haven't seen, haven't seen. Save that.

Speaker 2

That's an interesting question. E scooters have come up a couple of times in the conversations I've had, and I know we have different, you know, like the like, the bike share scooter share. You know that you can use your phone and get a scooter and take it somewhere. I don't know. They scare me just to look at them. I I fell off a skateboard. Once that's enough for. Me. So you know I'm. I'm not looking and going on a scooter anytime soon, but I I just. I just think that. Cycling has somehow taken a hit and part of it also, and I don't know if you've studied this at all. Part of it has to do with the cost of entry. Bicycles are very expensive right now in my opinion. I mean, I've been in this business 40 plus years, so I've seen the changes and yes, of course there's inflation and there's all of those things. But I think the manufacturers have a lot to do with it. So I'm not. I'm wondering how bicycling is faring in terms of people being. Able to get into it. It's not an inexpensive purchase.

Speaker 4

But I think bike stores have had bikes at at higher price points. Like. I remember when I came to you as the first bike. I bought as a student was a. Was it 50 or \$80.00 at at Walmart it was very cheap, very cheap bike it, but it did. It did the trick to get me around campus and get me through the to the grocery store. And I I haven't looked in a while where the where that price point is for the really low quality bike. That's sort of the the entry bike and I don't know how that has that has moved, but it was not a good in fact the pedals.

Speaker

Right.

Speaker 4

Fell off when I when I wrote it because they hadn't. They hadn't attached them properly. They didn't know how to attach them properly, but that's a that's a different, a different story.

Speaker 2

You also have parents who are. For fearful of letting their children ride by themselves, I mean.

Speaker 4

That's that's a. Whole other story. And we did, we did a study a while ago on just general trends in travel behavior in of active travel in the US over time. So we look at 2001 and 2017, that's what two national household travel surveys occurred. And what we had found there was that was very shocking and it fits your point is we had found increases in cycling between 2001 and 2017 among adults, especially around around 20 to 40 year olds. But huge drops in bicycling for those younger than 16. And and huge like 50%. Gigantic drops and the same also was true for for walking and then at. The time we looked a little bit at. We tried started investigating what's happening with children. Why are they not riding? And one is the point. You made that adults may not feel comfortable letting them ride. But we also came across, at least anecdotally, is that many kids don't learn how to ride a bike anymore. So we we ran into many people said it's not a rite of passage anymore. You don't necessarily know how to ride a bike. Because your parents never, never put you on a bike or they don't think it's it's necessary to do that. We got that a little bit confirmed through a. At least again, it's anecdotal, but the school program where in the school they are teaching cycling. And it's between, it's in 3rd grade I think and what the program ran into and I don't don't name any any cities. Or places. But if you're any. But what they ran into was. That they wanted to teach. As Traffic Safety rules in in 3rd grade and what they found out is that many of the kids couldn't ride a bike, So what they had to do is they had to bring in these a little bit larger Strider bikes to sort of. Get them to learn how to balance and then later add add the pedals on. But they had gone in in order to teach safety rules, but that was not what was needed. What was needed for many of the kids was to actually teach them how to write, how to ride a bicycle. So that was quite shocking at the time. When I when I learned. About that. And of course we have. The other thing that children may travel less overall, so they meet their friends online, they they they connect on a video game and then they they still they still together, but they're both at home or they are at home. At at at their screen, so they're traveling less. And then of course, with the increasing sprawl, that may just be easier for the parents or for everyone to connect the kids on an app rather than having them go to places or get get to places. But that's that's actually for the future. That's a very bad sign, because if somebody doesn't learn to ride a bike, a bike never feels comfortable riding a bike. It's not a matter of reminding them. Of what it was like to ride a bike as a kid, it's something completely new to get them out and I I get that to some extent, not not as extreme as I just said I every summer I take about 20 students to to Europe for a study abroad and one and one bike friendly city in fiber. I put those who volunteer and typically all do. On bikes to ride to ride bicycles. But many are not comfortable riding a bike because they haven't ridden for so long. And typically what we have to do is we have to put the seat of the bike low enough that they can always reach the ground with both feet flat, which makes it much harder for for riding because it it's not, it's not easy riding, but again it.

Speaker 2

Right.

Speaker 4

It also speaks to this, this idea that children. Do not necessarily write a lot, or do not write at all these days, and that's that's something that's that's concerning.

Speaker 2

It is very concerning to me, you know, that's like not teaching your child to swim. I I mean, I I kind of equate the two that they both are necessary I exercises or things that you need to learn and well that's another whole topic. And and fortunately I don't have little children, so I'm past that. But it is scary that parents are not teaching their children to ride a bike. I mean, I remember getting my first bike. I think I was 6 and was told don't go out of the driveway immediately. Went out of the driveway and fell down. And my father said, see told you, skin your knees, but. I learned to ride a bike. You know, and so today to think that kids are not riding bikes is very disturbing. It's very, very disturbing to me.

Speaker 4

It is and it's a big part of independence, like being able to get places.

Speaker

Right.

Speaker 4

Under your own. Power and you decide where you want to go. It's I think it's. Besides that, that's learning. The act of bicycling it's it's it's part of freedom and part of self determination for the for the kids. So it's. Really a bad? A bad trend, but we saw that very strongly in that 2001, 2017 national Household Travel Survey data for children.

Speaker 2

Sounds to me like a really good campaign that the bike industry could get behind is teaching. There is is getting to parents to teach their kids how to ride a bike. It seems to me that would be a really good way to get a new generation of children on bicycles. That would be awesome.

Speaker 4

Yeah, all all convincing. More schools to actually do bike bike riding training like physical education.

Speaker 2

That too, yeah. Well, well, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today. We've been speaking with Professor Ralph Bueller. He is at the Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs. You have a website of your own. Would you tell my listeners how to follow you and know about some of the work you're.

Speaker 4

Yeah, so my my website is Ralph BURALPHB u.wordpress.com. It's just Google, my name Ralph Bueller, Virginia Tech, and then my professional website at Virginia Tech in my own website will pop up. You can also find me on LinkedIn if you just Google. Ralph Bueller, and I'm also on. Still on Twitter, I'm not sure for. How much longer?

Speaker 2

Me too. I'm not sure why.

Speaker 4

I I really loved. I really. Loved Twitter in the in the past, but it has really taken a nosedive, at least in terms of activity on my account.

Speaker 2

I agree. Well, thank you again for talking with me. It's always a pleasure and I really enjoy learning what you're doing because it really kind of dovetails with all the other work that I'm doing. So have a great spring and summer. I hope you get to do a lot of writing this year and we'll talk again.

Speaker 4

Yeah. Thank you for.

Speaker 3

I mean.

Speaker 2

My thanks to Doctor Bueller for joining me today. I've put a link to his study on our website, outspokencyclist.com. Or you can find it online at the Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs under Dr. Ralph Bueller's Bio. There are quite a few other articles you can click on and read also. It is concerning that young people aren't learning to ride a bike. I didn't expect that when we first started talking. I hope you're teaching your children and grandchildren how to ride a bike. My guest on the next show will be Adam Rogers. Adam is a senior tech correspondent at Business Insider and he covers science, technology and our weird future. He reports on how technology changes the way we live. Our topic is about bike lanes, but we also discussed some of his other interest, including booze. Yep, booze. He's a fascinating guy and the conversation is really interesting. I hope you'll TuneIn. Please remember each show is accompanied by show notes, links and photos on our website. Outspokencyclist.com. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and subscribe to the podcast at your favorite app. Thanks for taking time to listen. Please stay safe and stay well and remember there is always time for a ride. Bye bye.

Speaker 1

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