

Ciclopaseo in Quito: people on movement

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Abstract

Ciclopaseo is a 30 km route opened on Sundays every two weeks only for cycling, walking or any other non-motorized transportation transport. This route crosses the main streets of Quito with an average of 40.000 participants each time. A group of young urban cyclists are the promoters of this project (*Biciacción* Foundation) supported by the Municipality. *Ciclopaseo* encourages the use of bikes as an alternative transportation, as well as the recovery of public spaces for people. After almost four years, *Ciclopaseo* constitutes a recreational, sport and mobilization option in the city. Quito has changed greatly since the beginning of the project because *Ciclopaseo* does not only promote an ecological consciousness, but also a sense of citizenship, identity and sustainable urban mobility. This little essay is based on a university project that pretends to investigate how *Ciclopaseo* could become a potential public space to develop a citizenship sense. The project is a part of a final essay to obtain a Masters Degree in Political Management in the National University of Córdoba, Argentina.

1 Some antecedents

The bicycle is a tool that allows the improvement of public spaces, which is very important to improve the citizen's quality of life.

The analyses of urban spaces have been the central point of many social researches because of their importance to the human condition, which consequently includes a political perspective. Beyond any other possible elements to approach urban spaces, such as the economic growth of the cities or the architectural aspects, this conceptual frame allows to looking at the cities in a broader way: cities incarnate the biggest stage of human representations. Therefore, their cultural sense and content have turned them into an ideal place for citizenship development.

Quito has a population of 2 million people with approximately 300.000 cars, circulating every day. According to CORPAIRE¹¹, Quito has the highest percentage of car growth in Ecuador: between 5 and 8% annually. In fact, Quito has become a city for automobiles, which has had a very negative effect in how urban spaces are planned and understood. The city seems to be a place where the most important actor is the machine, not the human being. Furthermore, the citizen rights have turned into a kind of car rights.

Although the automobile users are a minority¹², the city is dominated by the *car culture*. A kind of hierarchy system seems to have been installed in the streets and the everyday life. Cars became the symbol of modernity and are determining the design of urban spaces.

¹¹ CORPAIRE is a municipal institution that works in the improving of the air in Quito. For more information www.corpaire.org

¹² In Quito only 20% of people use automobiles, the rest 80% are pedestrians and public transport users.

As in other cities of Latin America, Quito has privileged highways, wide and long streets and small sidewalks. In consequence, the quality of urban spaces is very limited: there are spaces only for car traffic, but not to be visited, enjoyed, walked or imagined by their inhabitants.

Jordi Borja, the Catalan urbanist and researcher says the public space is a social performance place, where society can be visible. For that reason, a city that privileges public spaces before the private ones is a city that privileges a quality of life of its inhabitants (Borja, 2001: 391). The problem of our current urban places is that they are *no-places*, as Augé emphasized: places with no identity, no history and no interaction (Augé, 1992: 83). In these *strange places* are not possible to develop any sense of citizenship.

2 How *Ciclopaseo* is done in Quito

With the collaboration of the Transport Department of the Municipality and Transit Police, the streets are closed for six hours each Sunday every two weeks. Quito is a long city from north to south, but narrow from west to east. One of the achievements of *Ciclopaseo* is the integration between the north and the south of Quito, which covers almost the whole city¹³. Motorized transport can cross through the *Ciclopaseo* route from west to east or vice versa, but cannot enter the cyclist route. With the help of transit policemen, traffic lights, fences and cyclist monitors, the route is completely sheltered, which offers total security to the users.

Through the *Ciclopaseo* route there are 8 information points. People of *Biciacción* give some services (like information about the *Ciclopaseo*, cultural activities, the correct use of bikes, mechanical assistance and others). In addition, in each one of these points, people can find water supplies, which are sponsored by the Water Company of the Municipality. There are some points to rent bicycles too.

Public institutions of the Municipality are the main sponsors of this project. However, recently many companies, brands and private institutions have been interested in advertising their products during the activity, which is a very significant contribution in order to this project to continue. Also *Ciclopaseo* has created many alternative jobs such as route monitors, mechanics, tourist guides, aside from the people working in its organization and coordination. Around 50 people from *Biciacción* are hired each Sunday, and around 200 policemen cover the route.

In 2005 *Ciclopaseo* was the winner of the 2nd. Concourse “*Ciudades Activas, ciudades saludables*”¹⁴, organized by *Ciudad Humana* Foundation (Bogotá) and the Panamerican Health Organization in the Recreation and Sports category.

¹³ Historically, Quito has been divided in north and south, separated by the Old Colonial City that is most tourist area. The north being the privileged zone and the south has been forgotten by previous government administrations. Just recently the current government has begun to recover the enormous south of Quito. *Ciclopaseo* has allowed for first time the interaction between these two important urban areas. Many people from the north visit every two weeks the south of the city by cycling, and vice versa.

¹⁴ Active cities, healthy cities.



2.1 *Ciclopaseo*: a many ways street

Two Sundays a month, *Ciclopaseo* is the possibility to reduce the space of cars and give it back to people on bikes, pedestrians and any other non-motorized transport means. Gradually, the objective of this activity is to transform *Ciclopaseo* into a place of meeting and interaction. The Municipality has supported this project from the beginning, although it is an initiative of several civil and social groups such as *Biciacción* Foundation, a non-profit organization created in 2002 to promote bicycles as an alternative transport means in the city, and in order to start thinking about the importance of urban spaces.

As Borja says, people practice citizenship in public spaces, this means, in the streets and among people, being oneself and getting together with others, accompanied by others, and sometimes confronting them (Borja, 2003: 352). In fact, when someone visits Quito on a *Ciclopaseo* day, it is possible to appreciate a different city in which people can interact with their environment and lose the feeling of fear to others. *Ciclopaseo* allows observing the mixture and the diversity that the city represents: kids, young and old people, adults, men, women, the cheapest and the most expensive bicycles, north and south population, low, middle and high social classes...

Diversity is highly important in the new meanings of citizenship that *Ciclopaseo* can generate, which includes the rights that protect and integrate the whole society with equality. We think *Ciclopaseo* is not only a cyclist route. There are many ways to see it and understand it. *Ciclopaseo* is a many ways street. It is a pragmatic action to reduce pollution and to understand that not only a car gives people mobility. It is also a sport and recreational activity for diverse population. It is also a way to promote the bicycles as a mean of urban transport. But in addition, *Ciclopaseo* is a way of getting to know what we cannot see due to our daily rush: a city that needs the participation of civil society to reconstruct the citizenship sense.



2.2 *Biciacción* Foundation: cycling citizenship in the city

The members and collaborators of *Biciacción* Foundation are principally urban cyclists interested in obtaining respect for other means of transport in the city. Some of them come from an important environmental Ecuadorian organization named *Acción Ecológica*. Some of members are professional people or students that work in different areas.

Besides *Ciclopaseo*, *Biciacción* carries out other projects to promote the use of bikes: “*Ciclopaseos Patrimoniales*” is a tourist bicycle project to show the colonial town to the *Ciclopaseo* users, as well as the cultural heritage of the city and some traditional and popular paths. Each *Ciclopaseo* Sunday, some eco-tourism students develop this activity, which is completely free¹⁵.

“*Ecopaseos*”, is another project which promotes ecological and rural tourism on bicycle every month, by visiting high biodiversity reserves and natural parks, historical and folkloric sites in Ecuador.

The most recent project, launched in February 2006, is “*Viernes de Pedales*, the Urban Bicycle ride of Quito”. This activity is a critical mass¹⁶ that aims to show the urgency to solve the pollution, noise and traffic problems caused by the excessive use of cars in Quito. The last Friday of every month, many bicycle riders take over the streets and demand respect from the car drivers, as well as the acknowledgement of their right to circulate in the city.

Finally, *Biciacción* has a publication edited by all its members. This publication is part of the communication strategy of the foundation to promote not only its activities, but also to generate public opinion about urban spaces topics. This magazine is distributed every month with one of the most

¹⁵ This project is completely supported by the special funds of the Municipality for conservation of the Colonial City (FONSAL).

¹⁶ Critical Mass is a monthly bicycle ride to celebrate cycling and to assert cyclists' right to the road. The idea started in San Francisco in September 1992 and quickly spread to cities all over the world. For many people Critical Mass is not just about bikes, it is not an organization; it's an unorganized coincidence. It's a kind of movement of bicycles in the streets. For more information: <http://critical-mass.info/>

important national newspapers, *El Comercio*, and is handed out in the *Ciclopaseo* route. Besides, all these themes appear in the *Biciacción* web site, too¹⁷.

3 Conclusions

Although *Ciclopaseo* is mainly a recreation activity and a way to promote bicycle use, it also has become a very effective way to think about public spaces in the city. Actually, urban spaces are places where people rarely stay; big areas through where we run and don't really walk. In this context, *Ciclopaseo* is an opportunity to think on the city we have versus the city we want.

By cycling or walking, the *Ciclopaseo* route permits a different use of the city for the human being. People can approach to the urban spaces with a sense of affection for the place where one lives. In addition, *Ciclopaseo* is a human space because of its diverse, public and political condition. The plurality in our cities is necessary to decentralize the use of streets and roads, which is currently given to cars and velocity. In advance, we also think *Ciclopaseo* is an important platform to deliberate about citizen's rights and responsibilities, through a very simple activity such as cycling the town.

Literature review

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¹⁷ www.biciaccion.org