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City roads: A “stage” for cycling drama or delight?

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Research on and provision for city cycling has been influenced by Safe System principles for over 20 years. In Australian and some other cities however, the safe system approach for cyclists has been compromised by the politics of maintaining or improving mobility for motor vehicles, resulting in an increase in trauma for cyclists. Many people in many cities remain too scared to ride for short trips and are denied the delight of self powered mobility. Their communities are also denied the liveability, economic and other benefits of city that is safe for cycling. This paper addresses the apparent gap in understanding the barriers and enablers to the transfer and adaption of measures to make city cycling safer. The method used is case studies of inner Melbourne, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, involving key informant interviews and drawing out differences in policies, regulations, plans, actions and crash outcomes. By considering how people, vehicles and infrastructure act through the sometimes different and yet in some ways similar: contexts, processes and content, I explore how cycling safety performance may be co-produced. A hybrid framework for policy analysis is developed around the core pillars of the safe system that draws on health and public policy models and the insights from Actor Network Theory. On each cities mobility “stage”, the road system, much is communicated between road users by: their vehicles and the relative capacity to injure or be injured, by the allocation of infrastructure space and time, and by behaviours including who are prioritised in regulations and enforcement. Contextual barriers and enablers, revealed through the case study comparisons, include factors like: cultural context, the diversity of human actors (gender, ethnicity, age and ability), the approach to policy formulation and integration, availability of data for ‘evidence based policy’, and the experience of decision makers and communities of different possibilities. Such factors will also be of importance to how new technologies are ‘constructed’ in individual cities to contribute to safer and more cycling.