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Survival of the Fittest

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Saturday, 11th September will see a new cycling route open along Bournemouth's sea front. Good news for cyclists keen to enjoy the sea air, and great news for Sustrans, the environmental charity responsible for promoting the 8,000 miles of cycle paths already in use throughout the UK.

But, while pedalling up and down the prom may fill many with delight, the whole idea of mixing pedestrians, cyclists, roller bladders and the like remains a singularly "un-British" phenomenon. As a result, plans to introduce "shared surfaces" remain some of the most hotly contested planning and design issues. Moreover, public opposition to existing schemes has resulted in some Councils introducing cycling speed limits, and in at least one location, officers have even been stationed with speed cameras to deter any aspiring 'Lance Armstrong' from his/her dash for the yellow jersey.

Contrast our desire to segregate and police, with the French, Dutch or German approach to street usage. Major cities including Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Hamburg have all managed to facilitate shared street surfaces without much of a public out cry, In fact, a Sunday stroll along the Seine would not be quite the same without admiring the dexterity with which children, adults, dogs, bikes, and roller skates intermingle. So why do we find this so difficult?

As an Australian visitor remarked to me recently – "You Brits certainly love telling each other what to do," and maybe therein lies the problem. Too much law and too little logic. Or, to put it another way a fundamental lack of faith in individual and collective competence. While most of us recognize the importance of parameter setting in the way in which we design, build and manage our environment, worship at the altar of risk assessment has a horrible habit of removing any real ability to take responsibility for the way in which we inhabit places and spaces.

As a result we are creating sterile towns and cities of Truman-esque dimensions in which water features are drained, trees are felled and historic structures remain cordoned off. Making streets "safe" is as much about developing our own abilities to



negotiate modern life as it is about introducing speed restrictions, lighting and all the other paraphernalia of so called urban design. In fact, having witnessed Leicester Square on a particularly busy summer night one might go as far as to suggest that resources might be better spent on “calming” the user as opposed to the “traffic”.

So, good luck to all those hardy professionals and intrepid amateurs who take to their bikes this weekend. I, for one, would be happy to take my chances in their midst. After all, evolution relies on promoting - as opposed to stifling – the survival instinct.