

Taking Bike Lessons from Mia Birk

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There has been a lot of hype circulating around Indianapolis' growing bike culture, and for good reason. The city's new Indy Bikeways plan issued last November has the circle city on its way to a bicycle revolution, with a goal of creating more than 200 miles of bike lanes in the next 15 years.

With bike lanes and off-street paths like the cultural trail becoming integrated into our everyday transportation system, Indianapolis is heading in the right direction to becoming a healthier, more sustainable city.

There are several organizations around Indianapolis forwarding this movement by hosting races, car-free days, or events like the Mayor's Bike Ride for Kids.

One key player in Indianapolis' push for bicycle and pedestrian transportation is Health By Design, an initiative of American Planning Association Indiana. Health By Design is raising awareness about bicycling with their Urban Scholar Planning Series, a series of educational events designed to inform professionals, policy-makers and community members about public health, environment and quality of life in an urban area.

The next addition to the quarterly Urban Planning Scholar Series features Mia Birk, former Bicycle Coordinator of Portland, Ore., one of the country's most bike-friendly cities.

Kim Irwin, Executive Director of Health by Design, explained that Health By Design chose to bring in Birk for their series because of her accomplishments in Portland. "A bicycle-friendly community doesn't happen by accident," Irwin said. "You have to be very intentional about setting goals and directing policies and getting funding to create that community, and that's something Mia can really speak to."

Birk's journey in Portland began in 1993 when she started working as the city's Bicycle Coordinator. She was intrigued by the opportunity of experimenting with bicycle-friendly transportation in America.

Birk had studied cities around the world that had shifted their transportation model, and was curious to see how it would fare in America. The result: Portland became one of the best bicycling and walking cities in the country. NUVO spoke with Mia Birk about Portland's transportation transformation.

NUVO: When first assessing Portland's bicycle infrastructure, what was the most obvious problem you encountered?

MIA: The most obvious problem was the lack of bikeways and bicycle infrastructure. The first bike ride I went on in Portland was terrifying—it was a nightmare. There were a couple nice bike paths, but they weren't integrated in the transportation system. My job was to fix all that.

N: What was the least obvious problem you encountered?

M: The behind-the-scenes retraining of the bureaucracy. My assumption was that my job was convincing people to get out and ride. Which, to me, just seems like a good idea. But to others, it was not such a great idea. They felt like since no one was

biking now, why should they put in bike lanes. The majority of the transportation system was against integrating bikeways because it meant reforming the whole transportation infrastructure, and a radical change like that is always difficult. We needed to retrain everyone in urban function and gain a tremendous amount of support and get them on board with this mission.

N: What sort of techniques or tactics did you use when retraining the bureaucracy?

M: First, you have to respect other people's jobs and their training. I needed to learn what these people do for our transportation system. Then you have to add all these steps to help urban function comply with the new rules—like bike rack locations and leaving space for bike lanes or having curb ramps. I found that the best way to do this is to show the bureaucrats what it's like to be in a bike-friendly city—actually take them to a place where bicycles are part of life. Once they see how easy and convenient and even fun it can be, their objections are gone.

N: How did you engage the community in the development of bikeways?

M: We set up a program that allowed people to complain about problems they saw with the bikeways. We had a web form, a phone hotline and cards all over the city for people to fill out. We learned where the problems were and came up with ways to fix them.

N: What were some of the most successful ideas implemented in Portland?

M: The off-street trails in downtown Portland are a huge success, as well as bicycle boulevards in residential neighborhoods. Bridge transportation has also been a high point—in the past 20 years, human transportation on bridges has increased 20 percent, but none of that has impacted traffic congestion meaning that that 20 percent was alternative transportation like bicycling, walking or transit. Events promoting bicycling were also very successful, and still are. They help people see that bicycling is normal and part of everyday life.

N: Which ideas didn't see that same success?

M: Bike lanes in outlying parts of town were not as successful because the less-confident riders saw them as scary or unsafe. For these areas, off-street trails or bicycle boulevards away from the main streets would work better. Bike lanes work really well in certain parts of town, but not others—they aren't always the solution. Instead, they're like part of a tool kit used to fine-tune and apply proper transportation to the right environment.

N: How does negative media affect bicycle transportation development?

M: The media side of it always was and continues to be a challenge. The media cycles in and out of stoking the controversy, but it's not necessarily bad to have a story that's inflammatory or negative. It gets people talking and puts the issue in the public consciousness. It opens up a dialogue about bicycling. If you're not getting any attention in the media at all, you're probably not doing enough.

N: How has this bicycle revolution impacted the city of Portland?

M: There's an economic boom on the business side of things. A whole culture is blossoming around bicycles, including shops, manufacturers, distributors, lawyers, consulting firms, advocates and educators. Along with creating jobs, this industry helps Portland's tourism, with the healthy lifestyle being a selling point. There are so many events like car-free events, festivals and races that promote excitement about bicycling. There's a big impact in schools, too. Some schools have nearly 40 percent of students bicycling or walking to school.

N: What are some suggestions you have for Indianapolis' bicycle revolution?

M: Get a really good bike plan that is big and visionary. Use that blueprint to engage the community. Second, send a team of people to bike-friendly cities to get a feel of how bicycle transportation can impact a city and also debunk some of the myths about the problems with bicycling. Third, have a game-changer, like the cultural trail, or something that will make people excited about bicycling. Car-free events or other things of that nature are also great because they show people how fun bicycling can be. If it's seen as a drag, it won't work.

N: What are some words of caution?

M: Expect negative pushback. After 20 years of working on bicycle infrastructure, Portland is still receiving negative feedback and people tend to get nervous when they hear bad things about bikeways. Don't back down because you're headed in the right direction. Second, really invest in changing your transportation system. If you want to do it right, commit to the plan and institutionalize bicycling within the entire city's government. Third, be patient. Changes won't happen overnight—a real cultural change takes about a generation, but Indianapolis is headed in the right direction.

See Mia Birk speak Feb. 28, 2011, at Indiana Government Center South, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. For more information about the event, visit www.healthbydesignonline.org. For more information about Mia, visit www.miabirk.com. Mia will also have copies of her book about her work in Portland, *JoyRide*, available at the lecture.



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