

European Cities Do Away with Traffic Signs

By Matthias Schulz

Are streets without traffic signs conceivable? Seven cities and regions in Europe are giving it a try -- with good results.

"We reject every form of legislation," the Russian aristocrat and "father of anarchism" Mikhail Bakunin once thundered. The czar banished him to Siberia. But now it seems his ideas are being rediscovered.

European traffic planners are dreaming of streets free of rules and directives. They want drivers and pedestrians to interact in a free and humane way, as brethren -- by means of friendly gestures, nods of the head and eye contact, without the harassment of prohibitions, restrictions and warning signs.

A project implemented by the European Union is currently seeing seven cities and regions clear-cutting their forest of traffic signs. Ejby, in Denmark, is participating in the experiment, as are Ipswich in England and the Belgian town of Ostende.

The utopia has already become a reality in Makkinga, in the Dutch province of Western Frisia. A sign by the entrance to the small town (population 1,000) reads "*Verkeersbordvrij*" -- "free of traffic signs." Cars bumble unhurriedly over precision-trimmed granite cobblestones. Stop signs and direction signs are nowhere to be seen. There are neither parking meters nor stopping restrictions. There aren't even any lines painted on the streets.

"The many rules strip us of the most important thing: the ability to be considerate. We're losing our capacity for socially responsible behavior," says Dutch traffic guru Hans Monderman, one of the project's co-founders. "The greater the number of prescriptions, the more people's sense of personal responsibility dwindles."

Monderman could be on to something. Germany has 648 valid traffic symbols. The inner cities are crowded with a colorful thicket of metal signs. Don't park over here, watch out for passing deer over there, make sure you don't skid. The forest of signs is growing ever denser. Some 20 million traffic signs have already been set up all over the country.

Psychologists have long revealed the senselessness of such exaggerated regulation. About 70 percent of traffic signs are ignored by drivers. What's more, the glut of prohibitions is tantamount to treating the driver like a child and it also foments resentment. He may stop in front of the crosswalk, but that only makes him feel justified in preventing pedestrians from crossing the street on every other occasion. Every traffic light baits him with the promise of making it over the crossing while the light is still yellow.

"Unsafe is safe"

The result is that drivers find themselves enclosed by a corset of prescriptions, so that they develop a kind of tunnel vision: They're constantly in search of their own advantage, and their good manners go out the window.

The new traffic model's advocates believe the only way out of this vicious circle is to give drivers more liberty and encourage them to take responsibility for themselves. They demand streets like those during the Middle Ages, when horse-drawn chariots, handcarts and people scurried about in a completely unregulated fashion. The new model's proponents envision today's drivers and pedestrians blending into a colorful and peaceful traffic stream.

It may sound like chaos, but it's only the lesson drawn from one of the insights of traffic psychology: Drivers will force the accelerator down ruthlessly only in situations where everything has been fully regulated. Where the situation is unclear, they're forced to drive more carefully and cautiously.

Indeed, "Unsafe is safe" was the motto of a conference where proponents of the new roadside philosophy met in Frankfurt in mid-October.

True, many of them aren't convinced of the new approach. "German drivers are used to rules," says Michael Schreckenberg of Duisburg University. If clear directives are abandoned, domestic rush-hour traffic will turn into an Oriental-style bazaar, he warns. He believes the new vision of drivers and pedestrians interacting in a cozy, relaxed way will work, at best, only for small towns.

But one German borough is already daring to take the step into lawlessness. The town of Bohmte in Lower Saxony has 13,500 inhabitants. It's traversed by a country road and a main road. Cars approach speedily, delivery trucks stop to unload their cargo and pedestrians scurry by on elevated sidewalks.

The road will be re-furbished in early 2007, using EU funds. "The sidewalks are going to go, and the asphalt too. Everything will be covered in cobblestones," Klaus Goedejohann, the mayor, explains. "We're getting rid of the division between cars and pedestrians."

The plans derive inspiration and motivation from a large-scale experiment in the town of Drachten in the Netherlands, which has 45,000 inhabitants. There, cars have already been driving over red natural stone for years. Cyclists dutifully raise their arm when they want to make a turn, and drivers communicate by hand signs, nods and waving.

"More than half of our signs have already been scrapped," says traffic planner Koop Kerkstra. "Only two out of our original 18 traffic light crossings are left, and we've converted them to roundabouts." Now traffic is regulated by only two rules in Drachten: "Yield to the right" and "Get in someone's way and you'll be towed."

Strange as it may seem, the number of accidents has declined dramatically. Experts from Argentina and the United States have visited Drachten. Even London has expressed an interest in this new example of automobile anarchy. And the model is being tested in the British capital's Kensington neighborhood.

URL:

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,448747,00.html>

© SPIEGEL ONLINE 2007
All Rights Reserved

Reproduction only allowed with the permission of SPIEGELnet GmbH