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## Narrative around Seoul's new bicycle paths plans - masterpiece of storytelling

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Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon cycles along Bogota's Ciclovía, Colombia, July 14 when Park announced his plan for Seoul's bike-only highways, or Cycle Rapid Transportation (CRT). / Courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government

By Nikola Medimorec

In July, Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon traveled through Latin America, to study their solutions to common issues and bring some of them back to Seoul. South America is the world's second-most urbanized continent, and offers a large number of solutions for urban mobility. During his stay in Bogota the mayor participated in a car-free event and then announced his plan for a new express cycling network.

The plan is called Cycle Rapid Transit (CRT), a network of bicycle highways through the city. A special feature of the bicycle infrastructure is most parts of the network will be elevated.

Good-quality, physically separated bicycle lanes that support bicycle commuting are highly needed in Seoul. The elements of the elevated bike infrastructure consist of tubes, canopies and lanes with vegetation. The mayor emphasizes the concept as a people-centered bicycle revolution.






Such a plan faces many difficulties in reality because elevated structures aren't cheap and ramps are needed to make this exclusive, elevated infrastructure accessible. The next steps are to develop a master plan in the coming months and conduct a feasibility study. Even though the announced plans are exciting, even more interesting is the narrative the mayor created around the announcement.

The new cycling infrastructure resembles very closely the bus rapid transit system (BRT), bearing a similar abbreviation, CRT. It also uses the same network as the BRT because the basic intention is to build it above the exclusive bus-only lanes of the BRT system. Seoul learned in the 2000s how to implement the BRT system from Bogota, which is besides Curitiba globally known as the best practice for BRT systems. So it isn't just a coincidence that Seoul's mayor choose Bogota as the city to "publish" the CRT plans. The major issue of the BRT is that after over 15 years Seoul's BRT network still isn't complete: Only around 60 percent of the planned BRT network is built and under operation. If it takes so long to build public transport infrastructure, how long will it take to build the cycling infrastructure

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Further, Seoul's mayor refers to the Ciclovía as an inspiration for the CRT. The ciclovía means cycle-way in Spanish, but in the context of Bogotá it refers to their open street event every Sunday morning. During the event, major streets are closed to cars and only people walking and cycling are allowed. Bogotá was successful in increasing the cycling share from 0.5 percent to 6 percent and plans to reach 10 percent by 2020. Colombia's capital clearly has lessons for Seoul.

But exploring Bogotá's streets with Google Street View, I couldn't identify any major elevated bicycle structures except some pedestrian bridges. Bogotá built the majority of its bike lanes on street level, put up physical barriers to protect cyclists from cars and introduced bicycle education at schools. By integrating cycling into their daily lives, the city increased people cycling.

Of course, the idea of the CRT wasn't suddenly born while riding through the Colombian streets. At the end of 2018, Seoul held an idea competition asking citizens to submit ideas about elevated cycling infrastructure. The idea competition was named Eco-Bike Line and the elevated lanes were described as Sky Bike-Ways. The winning concepts have been published but gained little attention. And even before that, in 2008, a concept of elevated express tube-cycleways was developed. But the concept never saw the light of the day except in a few controversial news articles referring to the high costs and a miniature model displayed in the lobby of the old Korea Transport Institute.

Most importantly, the mayor utilized a nice approach for the narrative: By announcing such a concept while in another city, it convinces more people to believe in its success. It works here, so let's implement it in Seoul! This strategy of referring to a famous, successful concept (in this case the Ciclovía) and then bringing it to Korea is a signature move of the mayor. Mayor Park announced the idea of transforming Seoul Station Overpass into a pedestrian bridge, now known as Seoulo 7017, during his visit to the High Line in New York City. Another example is the new Green Transport Promotion Zone which is under trial in Seoul's city center. Here Seoul learned from London's low-emission zone, which was recently upgraded to an ultra-low-emission zone; Mayor Park also made major announcements while together with London's mayor Sadiq Khan.

The mayor's narrative for the CRT was prepared thoroughly and had great impacts. The narrative helped to accelerate the waves that the announcement made through all news outlets in Korea. The new bicycle master plan follows the people-centered development of Seoul. It supports the long-term target to reduce traffic volume of private cars by 30 percent and increase the usage of walking, cycling and public transport by 30 percent by 2030. Now the blueprint has to be applied to Seoul's streets and the feasibility of the projects must be assessed.

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