

going pedestrian

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A tale of two cities



Pedestrians have priority in San Nicolás. --

By Thomas Manning
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"Walkers are the practitioners of a city, for a city is made to be walked. A city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and walking is the act of speaking that language" according to San Francisco writer Rebecca Solnit.

Solnit's observation is particularly apt in many parts of Buenos Aires which are replete with wide footpaths, parks and plazas but this wealth of pedestrian riches has not always been so readily at the disposal of city dwellers and visitors.

In the heart of Buenos Aires, San Nicholas to use its official name, Solnit's repository of possibilities was hidden in a welter of narrow streets where traffic jams, noise, pollution and accidents predominated until Mauricio Macri took the reins at City Hall in 2007 and hired urban planners Héctor Lostri and Fernando Alvarez de Celis who are devotees of Danish 'liveable cities' guru, Jan Gehl.

Gehl says urban planners and architects must give pedestrians priority by strengthening the social function and size of public spaces which encourages the development of lively, safe, sustainable and healthy cities and in turn helps generate vibrant, open and democratic societies.

The pedestrianisation of San Nicholas began with three flagship projects designated, not surprisingly, 'Prioridad Peatón' (Priority to Pedestrians), in Reconquista, Suipacha and Carabelas Streets.

In Prioridad Peatón streets parking is prohibited, vehicular traffic severely limited to residents' cars, small delivery trucks and taxis all of which are restricted to 10 kph which is the pace of human walking, trees are planted and the street surface raised to a single level to allow for easy walking and the development of new economic activities such as bars, al fresco cafes and restaurants.

According to "To put pedestrians first in the heart of Buenos Aires", Lostris & de Celis' analysis of the outcomes of the first three Prioridad Peatón projects, land values for shops and apartments in the pedestrianised streets surged 22% and 12.3% respectively, vehicle emissions diminished 97% and noise by 50% and in particular and very dear to this writer's heart, the noise of car horns diminished by 100%.

This writer can bear personal witness that the prioritisation of pedestrians in Reconquista St. has created an Elysian Field where commerce, domestic life and social intercourse co-exist in an easy, aesthetic harmony unlike around the corner in Viamonte St. where the writer lives which is chalk to Reconquista's cheese.

By comparison Viamonte St. is a dystopian, apartheid world straight out of Hieronymus Bosch's imagination where walking five metres away from its corner with Reconquista is to enter a heart of darkness, a parallel city that endures from a despised, unlamented past.

City Hall has laudably pedestrianised all of San Nicolas except Paraguay, Tucuman and Viamonte Streets which still function as feeders between the 9 de Julio and Leandro N. Alem avenues and they are vile reminders of the how congested and unpleasant the whole of San Nicholas used to be.

These three streets are much of a muchness in their narrowness, in how their sidewalk paving is dangerously broken and loose and in how an endless streams of raucous colectivos, trucks and cars pump an enormous miasma of exhaust gases into the neighbourhood.

A horrendous, unrelenting cacophony of car horns erupts every time traffic lights interrupt the flow of traffic as there must be a peculiarly Argentine belief that if you blast your horn as long and as loudly as you can at a traffic light it will change to green faster than otherwise.

Readers might think the writer is a little 'soft' or needs to "toughen-up" because he can't handle a few blasts on a car horn but I invite doubters to come to any of Viamonte intersections and see how long they can last as it is not just one or two offenders but practically every car when it comes to a halt begins to blast its horn and the cumulative effect is like an overture to Armageddon, day in, day out, a reprehensible, constant wall of sound that poisons the quiet enjoyment of everything.

The total lack of concern on the part of the impatient drivers for the discomfort their horns cause to the people who live and work in the vicinity is astounding in its unfeeling arrogance apart from the fact that blasting your car horn at a traffic light speaks volumes about your mental capacity and indeed adds rich new meaning to the term 'braindead'.

Returning to Rebecca Solnit's observation about walkers being the practitioners of a city it's clear that if walking is indeed to be the *lingua franca*, the practice of everyday urban life in San Nicholas whereby its habitués can use peaceful tree-lined streets, window-shop, take the air, dog-walk or head to kerbside cafes for refreshment and a side order of people-watching then it is a mystery why City Hall has not finished what they started and made Paraguay, Tucuman and Viamonte Streets Prioridad Peatón.

Thanks to City Hall's inspired changes most of San Nicolas' denizens have enjoyed a quantum leap in the quality of their lives but there is a substantial minority still consigned to live in a parallel city where the motor vehicle is still king and the mayhem, air pollution and danger the traffic brings makes life intolerable.

The sooner the whole of San Nicholas is exclusively Prioridad Peatón the better.