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This is a preprint. Longer academic material was removed in the final version accessible for the general audience, but it is included here. We have provided some of our references at the end.



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¹ Disclosure statement

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Introduction

Cycling [reduces greenhouse gas emissions](#) by [decarbonizing road transport](#), brings myriad [health benefits](#) and reduces traffic.² But urban planners and policymakers often struggle to get more people on bikes.

To increase urban cycling, we need more than extra cycling infrastructure; we need a culture change. A worldwide movement of community bike workshops, also known as Bike Kitchens, can help.

Bike kitchens offer tools, [second-hand](#) parts and bikes, and convivial help with repairs. They are also hubs for community development.

² Riding generates about 1/10 of the CO₂ emissions of driving a car ([at 21g/km](#), including the food needed to fuel the rider), and its major health benefits have been appreciated during the COVID pandemic. Different bike designs work well for local journeys and leisure, commuting, travelling with kids, and making deliveries ([Nurse, 2021](#)). Modern electric bikes extend range (to over 60km and with 14.8g/km CO₂) and improve accessibility, although with environmental impacts particularly from lithium battery production.

Since 2014 we have [visited over 50](#) bike kitchens around the world – in the US, Australia, NZ, UK, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, Mexico, and Belgium to research how they operate. We have also volunteered and led student projects at several workshops.



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Building a culture of cycling

The fight for cycling infrastructure in cities will be familiar to many. There is conflict over re-directing urban transport budgets to challenge what John Urry called the “[system of automobility](#)” that dominates our streetscapes. But nonetheless, dedicated bike lanes, road treatments, and bike parking are relatively cheap to build and maintain compared to more roads, car parks, and major public transport schemes. Key authors Pucher and Buehler find [some correlation](#) between better bike infrastructure and more riders.

But better infrastructure alone, the "hardware" of cycling provision, does not solve the problem. In Paris, with its pro-bike mayor and traffic calming initiatives (including closing the rue de Rivoli to most cars), [a recent explosion](#)

[in bike use](#) has led to accidents and clashes, suggesting other factors like social acceptance and up-skilling need attention.

In the pandemic lockdown in 2021, Sydney experienced a [78% increase in cycling injuries](#) when more people took to their bikes.

As Batterbury and Manga (2021) argue, cycling in cities is a [social practice](#), and building a *culture* of cycling ("software") is essential – especially where bike use has traditionally been low. It's essential to cycling culture that a critical mass of people obtain and use riding skills [for safety, for essential trips, and for pleasure] and bike maintenance skills too, all leading to more social acceptance of bike riding in our contested streetscapes.

That's where Bike Kitchens or Community Bike Workshops (CBWs)³ come in.



WeCycle, a workshop in Gumbri (Batman) Park, Melbourne gives free bikes to asylum seekers, refugees, and people in need. Simon Batterbury, Author provided

³ *Ateliers d'autoréparation de vélos, ateliers collectifs de vélo*

Convivial places to build and repair a bike

Bike Kitchens and workshops are initiated and run by activists and socially-minded cyclists. Most teach, and assist, hands-on [self-repair and maintenance](#) skills to people who want to learn. Others give away free bikes to those who need them.

Workshops extend the use life of bicycles and components. They are part of what J.K. Gibson-Graham calls the [community economy](#), which has social dimensions but also means interrupting the waste stream; most parts come from donated or scavenged bikes and are re-used creatively and cheaply with a DIY ethos, avoiding new consumption.

Workshops numbers have grown since the 1990s, and are widespread across Europe, the [Americas](#), Australasia, and the rest of the world.

The largest concentration is in France. Most there are networked through [l'Heureux Cyclage](#), which coordinates events, logistics, and learning between 250 workshops, assisting well over 110,000 people yearly [and in the 2020 pandemic, also 50 Euro government grants to get more bikes out of storage and back on the on the road, Abord de Chatillon 2020]

Brussels has at least 20 (in 2021, up from 11 in 2015), like [Cyclooperativa](#), spread across the city's *arrondissements*.

Ten bike workshops operate in Austria, with at least four in Vienna. They include [Flickerei](#) and [WUK](#) which, established in 1983, is probably the world's oldest.



Workshops extend the use life of bicycles and components.

How bike kitchens work

There are two main types of bike kitchens:

- 1) Places where tools, parts and bike stands are offered for anybody to use, assisted by workshop volunteers and sometimes by paid mechanics. Most are social enterprises or non-profits, promoting what's known in French as *vélonomie*: the ability of a cyclist to maintain a bicycle and ride safely and with confidence.
- 2) Those that fix bikes for others – often for the disadvantaged – such as [WeCycle](#) in [Melbourne](#) which offers bikes to refugees and asylum seekers. [Working Bikes](#) in Chicago is one of the world's largest, and sends bikes to the Global South as well as supporting local people.



Récup'R in its former premises in Bordeaux, France. Simon Batterbury 2020

There are often [fixing sessions](#) and other activities for specific ages, [genders](#), and groups. At one of the oldest French bike workshops, [Un p'tit vélo dans la tête](#) in Grenoble, one volunteer explained the different maintenance sessions they offer, some limited to women only.

Workshop rules vary, but almost all [forbid](#) racist and sexist behaviour and support [conviviality](#), diversity, and respect. The main goal is “integrating a community”, the same French volunteer told us.

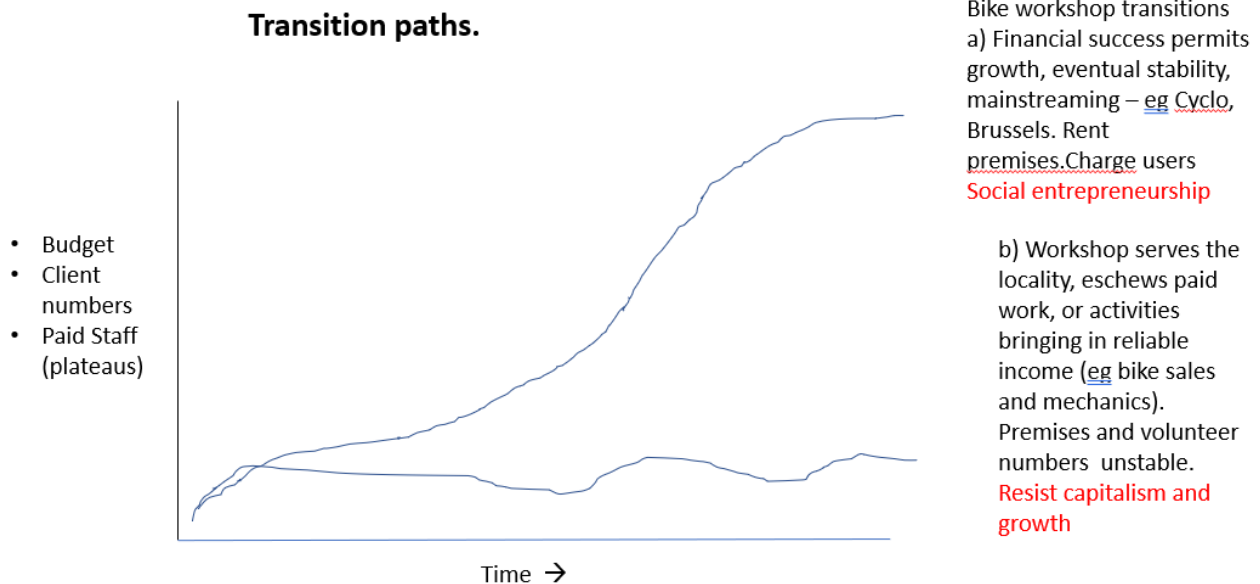
For members of the public without money, there are options too. Unless a workshop is prepared to give you a bike, there are a number of 'earn-a-bike' programs where the volunteer hours you put in can be converted into ownership. No money changes hands.

Over time, a few diversify to become big social enterprises, like [Cyclo](#) in Brussels, and [Back2Bikes](#) in Melbourne [type a on the figure below]. In France, workshops charge annual memberships fees of a few Euros, providing a small financial base. Users may pay for 'stand time' if they come to do their

own repairs, and pay below-market prices for parts. Several workshops sell secondhand bikes, again below-market prices.

The money, particularly from the latter, can build up enough that a staff member or two can be hired on a long- or short-term basis. In France and some other countries, government employment schemes pay minimum wage to the unemployed, to gain professional skills like bike mechanics in a workshop setting. One or two such employees can be stationed in a workshop, alongside the volunteers.

Others like [Atelier Vélorutionnaire](#) in Paris reject commercial or government support entirely, championing a more militant stance against cars and capitalism [type b on the figure].



Over time, bike workshops tend to follow one of two routes: a or b. Source: Batterbury SPJ. 2021. Community bike workshops: place-based organisations and the culture of active travel. Decarbon8 international conference, UK. Sept. <https://www.simonbatterbury.net/decarbon82021.mp4>

Bike kitchens in Australia

Australia has had many community bike projects dating back over 30 years, with [The Bike Shed](#) in Melbourne being one of the first - we think dating to the early 1990s in different locations. Workshops come and go, but there are at least 18 in the country, with seven in Melbourne and four in Sydney.

Many smaller initiatives have operated in schools, universities, churches, Men's Sheds, or at recycling centres. They are networked through a Facebook group, [BiCANZ](#).

[WeCycle](#) in Melbourne is a workshop focused on fixing bikes for others. Founders [Gayle Potts](#) and Craig Jackson [RIP] have supplied refurbished bikes to asylum seekers, refugees, and people in need since 2016. Across town, [Back2Bikes](#) is a larger social enterprise dating from 2012, offering training, repair, sales of refurbished bikes, and free bikes for those in need.



Donated bikes accumulate in a workshop, ready for repair and re-homing. Simon Batterbury, Author provided



Back2 Bikes, Melbourne. From <https://back2bikes.com.au/our-mission/>

Conclusion - a community approach to sustainable transport

Community bike workshops are frequently overlooked as agents in the circular economy, even by well-known bike-friendly urban planners like [Pucher and Buehler](#), but they extend bicycle lifespans and promote and sustain a community approach to sustainable transport, reaching hundreds of thousands of participants.

They are initiated and run by activists and socially-minded cyclists, and are established in towns and cities across the world. They are nodes of bike "software" – or what Alejandro Manga calls the "Bikespace" (Batterbury and Manga 2020; Manga 2020, 2021). They harness and teach skills that many people have lost or never learned, forming part of an alternative economy focused on re-use rather than new consumption. They work with other organisations that promote the circular economy and active travel, and are part of a slower way of life based on principles that value justice, community, and self-reliance.

In terms of practicalities, we found that workshops need volunteers and secure premises with power and light, on or off-grid. Limited budgets make this a challenge, especially in cities with lucrative real estate markets. While workshops can be co-housed with other activities, secure premises is the key area where support from government and bike-friendly donors is welcome. Tools, racks and spares are also needed.

Community bike workshops extend bicycle lifespans and promote a community approach to sustainable transport and active travel (Rissell 2009)– all while promoting [conviviality](#) and making our cities more livable.

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