

Is a town safe without traffic lights?

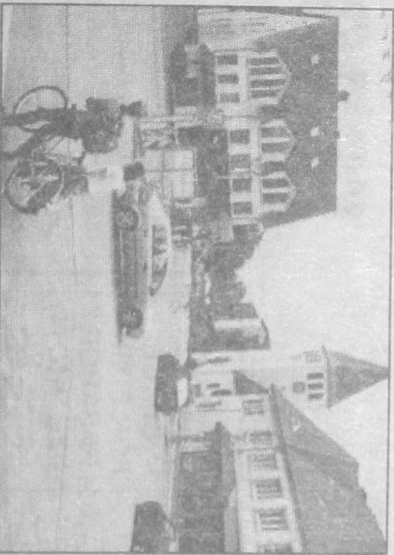
A German Community Removes Traffic Signals & Witnesses Accident Rates Decline

Isabelle de Pommerau

Bohnte (Germany): When Ulrike Rubcic heard that her town would take down all of its traffic lights, she rolled her eyes in disbelief.

Tucked between cornfields and cow meadows, the main street in this bucolic northern German community was also a thoroughfare with thousands of cars and trucks zooming to or from nearby Osnabruck. "Are we waiting for the first accident?" she thought then. But this summer the town reworked its downtown thoroughfare, not only scrapping the traffic lights but also tearing down the kerbs and erasing marked crosswalks. The busiest part of the main street turned into a "naked" square shared equally by bikes, pedestrians, cars, and trucks. Now, there is only one rule: Always give way to the person on the right.

Two months into the experiment, "Instead of thinking, 'It's going to be red, I need to give gas, people have to slow down, to look to the right and the



left, to be considerate," says Rubcic.

The bonus? Town people recognize they have become a bit closer to one another. "The whole village has become more human. We look at each other, we greet each other," she says.

In recent years, initiatives that aim at rescuing streets from the hegemony of cars, giving more space for pedestrians and cyclists and combating increased speed, traffic, and trouble have popped up in cities across Europe.

In a new experiment, "Paris respire," the banks of the Seine are

Bohnte has scrapped its traffic lights, torn down the kerbs and erased marked crosswalks. The main street is now shared equally by bikes, pedestrians, cars and trucks. Initiatives like this which aim to break the hegemony of cars are popping up across Europe

closed to traffic on sunny days. Switzerland has set up "zones of encounter" where playgrounds or landscaped areas force cars to slow down and pedestrians have priority. Hundreds of Dutch neighbourhoods have successfully done away with traffic signs.

But Bohnte broke new ground. In Germany, a country fond of rules, Bohnte did what politicians had hitherto not dared to do.

"What's revolutionary about Bohnte is that it took off its signs on a state highway with a lot of traffic,"

says Heiner Monheim, a traffic management expert at the University of Trier. Beyond that, Monheim says, the model's real legacy is to have brought people closer to "rediscovering and appreciating cities not only as traffic places but also as human, social places."

The idea took root when mayor Klaus Goedejohann heard of a radical traffic-management philosophy called "shared space". Pioneered by Dutch engineer Hans Monderman who thought towns were safer with fewer rules, it envisioned open surfaces on which motorists and pedestrians could "negotiate" with one another by eye contact, other signals, and a greater consideration for one another.

Goedejohann is confident. His town averaged 50 accidents last year. Since the shared space concept was enacted, there haven't been any, he says. And other city governments are reacting. In Hamburg a new coalition of green and conservative politicians have pledged to design shared space streets in every neighbourhood. CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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