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## **Roads vs Streets: the Economic and Social Cost – By Martin Mendelsohn**

A few years ago, I read that Namibia has the highest number of deaths per capita from vehicle accidents in the world. I decided that there probably aren't statistics for the worse off places, but it's something that's been bothering me ever since... I've slowly come to realise why Namibia may have such a high traffic fatality rate. It's our streets. They aren't streets actually; they're roads.

Take a walk down Robert Mugabe Avenue and you will clearly see that most vehicles drive much faster than the legal speed limit. Then take a walk down a residential 'street' and you're likely to see the same thing. If you walk often enough you'll soon realise that our streets aren't safe for anyone and are largely empty. A busy street would be a safer street. This means that much of our public space is not public space but excluded, empty space. Places in the city where no one really wants to be or go to, that aren't comfortable, or safe, great places for crime where there are only walls to watch you and a BIG waste of space! Of course, I'm not only talking about roads. River beds face the same challenges. To fix these spaces we need people to use them, but no one is going to use places that are not designed to be comfortable.

But "so what!" you say, "It is important that cars can move quickly to get to the distant places they need to go, so that people can do things". To this I say that these places are so far away, in part, because of how wide our 'streets' are. The more space they take up, the more spread out and distant everything becomes. The more spread out everything becomes, the more cars are needed and are on the roads for longer. The more cars on the road for longer the more our roads become congested. This is induced demand, and it's only going to get worse in Namibia.

Another common argument is that our roads need to be wide for engineering services, but numerous studies across the world have shown that the extra cost of maintaining and installing all those extra miles of engineering services cost a great deal more in the long run than building more compactly. Emergency vehicles also need wide roads to get from place to place, but other studies have shown that more people die from wide roads catering for emergency services than are saved by them, and prevention is far better than treatment!

Do a calculation- decreasing the width of a road reserve and you'll soon realise that in Windhoek we waste tens of square kilometres on residential streets that will never need to be as wide as they are. This cost most affects the vulnerable and majority of people; those that spend large amounts of their incomes on transport, and who have to travel farther to get to work than the wealthy. So building like this creates and sustains inequality. It also affects the economy of the country as a whole because of the amount of money that we need to spend importing all this extra fuel, in past years this has been the second largest import cost to Namibia!

New roads are built all the time, wide and fast and are planned to be wider than ever in Windhoek. After building them we inevitably realise that traffic is too fast, so we spend more money building speed humps which do little to calm traffic

except over very short distances. Studies have also shown that the ideal width of large arterial roads are between 2.8 and 3.0 meters per lane, but even Windhoek's smallest streets have lane widths of 3.5 meters. Such wide lanes actually create more traffic and increase road fatalities! If we made roads narrower they would slow traffic, making them safer for everyone, saving money, and space. Many of the most successful and beautiful cities on the planet have 10 times as many people living in them in the same area as Windhoek and have narrower roads, so it is feasible! The structure that a city has affects a great deal more than we realise on a daily basis.

If we think about the most comfortable and successful spaces for business and society they are places for walking. In Namibia, they are the malls, markets or arcades. These are some of the few places that provide opportunities to entrepreneurs. They are great for people because the widths between shops are designed to make you feel comfortable; something you won't easily find on a Namibian street! It is possible to make streets like this; where cars can go, but that are public spaces for people to enjoy. Roads with fast cars are walls, and our city is built to support these walls and keep people separate. That time should have passed 26 years ago, let's start building to bring people together. We have so much potential to change things for the better, to innovate and use the latest ideas to create spaces which encourage economic growth and social interactions, places for people to live, work, and play in.

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Martin Mendelsohn is a Namibian urban planner. He completed his masters in urban and rural planning in 2015 at the University of Cape Town and has been living in Windhoek since. His dissertation explored the socio-economic situation of street traders around the informal market of Congolenses in Luanda. He spends his time on various planning projects throughout Namibia and is currently employed by Urban Dynamics in Windhoek. Martin is a particularly passionate advocate for the deregulation of town planning and the untapped opportunities that this presents in Namibia for economic and social growth. He is a member of the Economic Association of Namibia (EAN).