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Social Climate of Cities
November 27, 2002

Bicycle Lifecycle: Amsterdam's Two-Wheeled Culture

Of the many unique aspects of Amsterdam's culture, the abundance of bicycles cannot be missed. Over every bridge, at every intersection, young and old alike make their way on top of two wheels. Bicycling is an integral component of almost every Amsterdammer's life, an assumed component of childhood, romance, adulthood and everyday transportation.

Lifecycle

Infancy: Strapped to Mama or Papa

Babies as young as a few weeks old can be seen tucked into little wraps cuddled at their parent's chest as they ride about. Sometimes all that is visible from these little sacks is a single leather slipper or a tiny hand peeking out. A few times I have seen an infant basket propped seemingly precariously on top of the handlebars. The parent never seems the least bit phased by on-coming traffic.

Toddlerhood: Blowing in the Wind

As a baby reaches toddlerhood age in Amsterdam, they are placed in their own little seat, with their own little footrest right behind the handlebars. I have rarely witnessed an unhappy child accompanying his parent on their ride. In fact, the child often seems gleeful and quite content to be able to have such a view, their hair blowing freely in the wind. This early experience clearly shapes Dutch children's balance, coordination, and comfort with biking themselves along the harried streets of Amsterdam.

Childhood: Making Room for Number Two

As the child grows, and a younger sibling comes along, he graduates from the front seat to the back. It is not unusual to see a parent with one baby in their own little seat in front of the handlebars facing out, and another older child in yet another seat on the back. I have observed children doing everything from reading comic books to eating a snack on their parents' bikes. At a certain age, and a certain level of balance and coordination, some children are permitted to stand on the back rack of the bike holding onto their parents' shoulders for balance, and towering above. By age five or six, they are trying out a bike of their own.

Adolescence: A Bike of One's Own

In just a few years after the child has outgrown the backseat of their parent's bike, they then, perhaps, don't want to be seen in public as often with their parents. This is the beginning of adolescence, when it's time to get their own proper bike. On weekday mornings, youth can be seen cycling to school and piling their bikes into the parking racks. As they venture out into new extra-curricular activities, young Amsterdamers carry everything from cellos to soccer balls while they bike. As they grow, they may decorate their bike with special paint, flowers, or other nick-knacks to distinguish it from the other thousands of bikes, and to express their individuality.

Dating: How Deep is Your Love?

Unique traditions around dating and bicycling have emerged in Amsterdam. When a couple starts dating, the young woman sits side-saddled on the back rack, often with her arm gently wrapped around the young man to hold on. (I have yet to see the guy on the back – a clear sign that certain gender roles are still distinct in Amsterdam.) As the romance evolves, she progresses to the front bar, where she is enveloped in her lover's arms. Riding side by side on two different bikes holding hands is also a common sight. Making plans or just touching base with love interests and friends on the cell phone, while biking, has become increasingly common. On the other hand, if it is the end of a date and he says, "My tires are a little low, you should probably take the tram home," it's a clear indication that the relationship is over.

Housewarming: Everything, Even the Kitchen Sink

As Amsterdammers settle into their own homes away from their parents – which can be quite late into their 20's because affordable housing is difficult to find – they carry an extraordinary variety of items on their bikes: everything from mattresses to kitchen chairs. Most of these items are strapped to the bicyclist's body or strapped to the back rack. They gracefully balance these items with one hand, holding them onto the back rack or over their shoulder, and steer with the other hand. In some cases, special carts are attached in the front or back, sometimes carrying kids or dogs, in addition to purchases. Even in the rainy fall and winter, while bicycling drops off somewhat, Amsterdammers bring out their raincoats and rain pants and keep on riding. They commonly carry an umbrella in one hand while they ride.

Old Age: Bike as Camel

As the first inventors of the wheel noted, humans' lives can be greatly eased with a few simple rotations. Elderly in Amsterdam know this well – instead of walking or taking the tram to the store, they often take their bicycle. But this time the bicycle is not for riding; it is simply for transporting goods. Instead of the difficulty of carrying items by hand, the elderly in Amsterdam pile their groceries into the bike baskets and simply walk it all home, using the bike as a camel. Amsterdam elderly are also some of the most healthy and fit in the world from a life time of bicycling.

Bike-Car Conflict on Weesperstraat

Most of the time, bicyclists appear to seamlessly mingle with the rest of the traffic: lots of pedestrians, cars, and the speeding taxis. Professor Soja accurately describes the streets of Amsterdam as “highly regulated urban anarchism.”¹ Occasionally you hear a bicycle bell delicately (rarely forcefully) ring, usually warning the pedestrian of an on-coming, otherwise silent, bicyclist.

¹ Soja, Edward “The Stimulus of a Little Confusion: A contemporary comparison of Amsterdam and Los Angeles” edited by Deben, Heinemeijer & van der Vaart, Understanding Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 2000, p.120

Generally, the Dutch tend to be quite mild-mannered and undemonstrative. However, in my four months in Amsterdam the one serious confrontation I witnessed was between a woman on her bicycle and a driver in his car. The woman had two children; one on each end of her bike, and the driver nearly ran into her at an intersection while she was crossing in front of him. Clearly, she believed that he was going through a red light, as she first spoke fiercely and ended up crying. The driver got out of his car to argue with the woman. By this time, the smaller child in the front seat had started crying too (also a rare site in Amsterdam).

Immediately, there in the middle of the street, a small crowd of bicyclists and pedestrians gathered around the upset woman to help mediate the situation. The driver was unable to move his car because of all the people in his way. Several people delicately tried to comfort the woman and the upset child. Some of them confronted – or merely discussed – the problem with the driver. One bicyclist took out his cell phone and appeared to report the license plate of the driver to the police. Soon the driver got back in his car, backed up enough to turn, and drove away (as it was clear the demanding group of bicyclists was not going to let him pass).

I was struck with how instantaneously strangers came to help this woman in danger. It contrasted so starkly with simultaneous events in my home country, the United States. Bicycle culture is more public, social, and safer than car culture. By definition with bicycling, people are literally within centimeters of each other much of the time, much more conducive to human – and humane – interaction than a freeway. On their bikes, they can easily stop to chat without disrupting traffic.

The intersection where the confrontation took place, interestingly enough, was on Weesperstraat – an area that is now universally proclaimed one of the city's 1960s planning disasters. Before the sixties urban renewal period, this area was similar to its surrounding neighborhoods: dense, quaint, human-scaled, narrow streets, built in the 18th century (and earlier). However, the 1950s and 1960s planners tore down this historic neighborhood and replaced it with what was planned as the first of many large, auto-

dominated boulevards into the center city. The social protests of the 1970s prevented any further demolition of the compact, urban center – protests that went hand-in-hand with the bicycle movement.

Amsterdam’s Bicycle Social Movements

There are 750,000 bikes in Amsterdam – more than the population. They are multiplying at the rate of about 15% annually. Ninety percent of Dutch households own at least one, and some 16,000 km of dedicated paths honor them in the Netherlands. I have summarized the bicycle lifecycle of Amsterdammers. However, when I have asked the Dutch – even transportation experts – how Amsterdam became such a bicycle paradise, I have received many blank looks and mystified responses that can be summarized as: “Why doesn’t everyone ride a bike? It’s just normal and makes sense.” I have encountered a lack of appreciation, perhaps a taking for granted, of this unique aspect of Dutch culture. For most Dutch people, cycling is a common and everyday thing, and there is little emphasis on bicycle policy. As one planner said: “With good reason: You cannot ride on policy.”²

My mission here is to explore the factors that have led Amsterdam to be the bicycling capital of the Western world. I argue that it is a combination of cultural factors and policy – and, of course, the policy is a reflection of, and has responded to, culture. I analyze the relationship between bicycle social movements and government policy. First, I question some of the commonly held reasons for bicycling in Amsterdam.

De-Mystifying Amsterdam’s Bicycling Factors

There are some frequently quoted reasons that try to explain the high bicycle use in Amsterdam – which I would like to challenge:

1. It is the mild weather. – Amsterdam has much higher bicycle use in weather that is worse than many American cities, and higher use than in sunny Spain or Italy.

² Welleman, Ton, Ministry of Transport, “Dutch Experience with Government Bicycle Policy” presented at the Velo Mondial conference, Amsterdam, June, 2000

2. It is a flat country. - Of course, this does not hurt, but it is not the only precondition: inhabitants of flat areas outside the Netherlands cycle much less. And bicycling rates in mountainous Switzerland and Austria are higher than flat parts of America.
3. Distances are short. - In many European countries that bike less, the average trip distances are completely comparable to those in the Netherlands.
4. There is a lack of alternative modes of transport. - This may be a historical factor – mass motorization got started late in the Netherlands. But, Amsterdam does have an extensive public transit network, and yet people still bike in outstanding numbers.³

So, my question still remains: How did Amsterdam become such a bicycle paradise? I would like to briefly summarize the story of the bicycle in Amsterdam, and then make some speculations about the relationship between Dutch culture and bicycling.

Pre-WWII: The Rise of the Bicycle

For 400 years prior to the invention of the bicycle, Amsterdammers were able to make most local trips on foot or by wheeled carts (boats, and then trains, for longer distances). The bike, as we know it, was invented in 1890 and swiftly became popular in Amsterdam. Between 1900 and 1940, the number of bicycles in the Netherlands grew from 100,000 to four million. Early on, Dutch trade in bicycles came from England, but England could not keep up with the demand, so bike imports were expanded to America. As early as the late nineteenth century, Dutch bike companies sprung up, including Simplex and Gazelle.

During WWII

During the occupation, bicycle use decreased by 55% because of rationing and regulations. On a fateful day in July 1942, the Germans took 50,000 Dutch bicycles. About this incident, one German service man stated, “The Dutchman, who is practically born on a bicycle, views the seizing of his bicycle to be nearly the worst thing that could

³ Welleman

ever happen to him.”⁴ Though the war brought a momentary decline, bicycle use remained extremely high until 1955, at over seventy-five percent of trips.⁵ However, the government played almost little role in promoting bike policy before the 1970s.

Post WWII: The Rise of the Automobile

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with suburbanization, increasingly dispersed housing and jobs, and the building of the A10 motorway ring, the picture of Amsterdam transportation changed. There was a shift to car usage, and a dramatic decline in bicycle traffic. Policy makers were primarily occupied with cars, and the construction and widening of roads. Bicycle traffic was expected to be marginalized. The bicycle was seen as old-fashioned, a vehicle for the poor. The car symbolized the future, mobility, and freedom. But – and this was crucial – cycling was recognized as a mode of transport “that is also part of life”, as a mode of transport “that also uses and may use public space”, as a mode of transport “that other traffic participants have to take into account.” So, as opposed to many European countries, in the Netherlands, post-war transportation policy meant pro-car policy, but in general not anti-bicycle policy.⁶

As the post-war years progressed, the annual number of traffic casualties increased rapidly, by 250% between 1950 and 1975.⁷ Traffic congestion occurred more often and the space that parked cars were occupying formed an increasing problem in Amsterdam.

1970s: Social Movements Promoting the Bicycle

Use of the bicycle continued to decline, reaching a low point in the 1970s with fewer than 25% of all journeys being made on two wheels.⁸ Road victims reached an all time high in 1972. At the same time, and in response to these trends, the environmental movement

⁴ Directorate-General for Passenger Transport The Dutch Bicycle Master Plan, Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, 1999, p.20

⁵ Langenberg, Pex, Department of Infrastructure, Traffic & Transport, “Cycling in Amsterdam: Developments and Policies” presented at the Velo Mondial conference, Amsterdam, June, 2000

⁶ Welleman

⁷ Directorate-General for Passenger Transport The Dutch Bicycle Master Plan, Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, 1999, p.29

⁸ Langenberg, Pex, Department of Infrastructure, Traffic & Transport, “Cycling in Amsterdam: Developments and Policies” presented at the Velo Mondial conference, Amsterdam, June, 2000

was born. With the oil crisis, people rediscovered the bicycle as an efficient mode of transport. In cities, policy makers realized that the bicycle might contribute to solving the traffic problems that had arisen.⁹

In 1975 the Fietsersbond (Dutch Cyclists Union) was founded. This group was a key player in drawing attention to the negative effects of mass motorization: pollution, noise and danger. In the 1970s the Fietsersbond demonstrated for more bicycle parking at railroad stations, succeeded in getting better conditions for traveling by train in combination with cycling, successfully fought to reduce the maximum speed for all traffic in the inner-cities from 50 km/hr to 30 km/hr, and lobbied for more right of ways for cyclists.¹⁰

In 1978, Amsterdam's city government shifted from "large scale Left" to "small scale Left," meaning from big-growth, metropolitan-solutions to the social democratic party that introduced the "Compact City Policy," emphasizing: proximity above accessibility, maintaining the attractiveness of the city, and the re-prioritization of the bicycle.¹¹ Soon measures to encourage the use of the bicycle were taken. These included construction of a "Main Bicycle Network" and the improvement and expansion of facilities for cyclists.

The central government also supported this process in the form of subsidies for the construction and improvement of bicycle facilities by municipal and provincial authorities. For the first time, a Traffic Management Scheme was drawn up that looked at alternatives to the car.

1980s: Response to Bicycle Social Movements

In the 1980s the Fietsersbond moved from primarily a reactive, protest-based group, to experts in traffic problems. The staff and members became respectable so-called "ervaringsdeskundigen" meaning: experts by experience. As a result of the

⁹ Welleman

¹⁰ Ensink, Bernhard, Fietsersbond, "The Experience of the Dutch Cyclists Union" presented at the Velo Mondial conference, Amsterdam, June, 2000

¹¹ Le Clercq, Frank, University of Amsterdam, interview, October 29, 2002

Fietersbond's influence and the growing concern about mass motorization, bicycle paths increased from 9300 km to 16100 km in the Netherlands, a 73% increase in the 1980's. In the 1980s, a working group was set up to oversee the realization of the cycle infrastructure. In addition to government officials, the group included representatives of the Fietersbond.

The Fietersbond is careful to note that their strategies are not primarily focused on stimulating people to use the bike, but instead on stimulating politicians, authorities, and officials to create more and better facilities to cycle. Simply asking people to use their bicycle more often is not seen as an effective action.¹² This is an important lesson for social change: simply talking is not enough – it must be coupled with concrete alternatives to the way things are, a building of counter-institutions and activities that everyday people can participate in and experience the world in a new way. This is what Amsterdam does.

1990s: Institutionalization of Bicycle Policy

The Ministry of Transport initiated the Bicycle Master Plan “Masterplan Fiets” in 1990. Today, the Dutch government has embraced the bicycle as a major element in providing mobility. The 2nd scheme for Traffic & Transport, launched in 1988, has the explicit goal of increasing bike use by 30% by 2010. Extensive bike connections between cities make bicycling a realistic option even for larger distances.¹³ In the 1990s attention was also focused on bicycle parking, bicycle theft, and the combination of bicycle and public transport.¹⁴

Today, the network of bicycle paths and the density of cyclists in Amsterdam is probably the highest in any major industrial or even post-industrial city. Urban planners routinely maintain their distaste for automobile traffic while flexibly accommodating its inevitability.¹⁵ Public buildings, parking facilities and public service vehicles are all designed with the bike in mind. Most major roads include a lane “fietspad” for cyclists.

¹² Ensink

¹³ Beatley, Timothy, *Green Urbanism*, Island Press, 1999, p.168

¹⁴ Welleman

¹⁵ Soja, p 125

Whenever and wherever possible, this lane is a separate thoroughfare, complete with its own road signs and traffic lights.¹⁶

All these actions, in turn, have helped to nurture a culture that values the bicycle and sees it as a legitimate form of mobility.¹⁷ These investments have paid off in real numbers: in Amsterdam as a whole bicycling increased from 30% of trips in 1980 to 35% of trips in 1997. In the historic inner city, bicycle trips leapt from 42% to 53% during this same time period. And car trips have declined.¹⁸ This is the reverse trend of any other European city, and the reverse trend of the majority the Netherlands as a whole.

The Fietersbond has evolved to become a partner with the government: In Amsterdam, the city government contributes 70,000 a year to help fund two Fietersbond staff people. These staff people accompany the city planners to problem-solve at “black spots” and “red lines”, the nicknames for, respectively, road crossing and road routes where the most bicycle accidents occur. As a cyclist in Amsterdam, it is clear that bicycle comfort and safety have been anticipated, and appropriate infrastructure and markings implemented, at nearly every corner and street. Every year, the city of Amsterdam creates a plan and a budget for improvements, the “Jaar Plan Fiets.”¹⁹

Discouraging Driving

Coupled with pro-bike infrastructure and policies, Amsterdam has also simultaneously made driving less and less attractive: “The police are always ready to arrive with those great wheel clamps and the spectacle of their attachment usually draws appreciative, occasionally cheering crowds, of onlookers. Traffic is nearly always jammed, yet (most of the time) the Dutch drivers wait patiently, almost meekly, for they know they are guilty of intrusion and wish to avoid the steel jaws of public approbation.”²⁰

¹⁶ White, Colin & Boucke, Laurie The UnDutchables White Bouke Publishing, 2001, p.136

¹⁷ Beatley, p.183

¹⁸ Bertolini, Luca and le Clercq, Frank “Urban Development with out more mobility by car? Lessons from Amsterdam, multimodal urban region.” Amsterdam Study Centre for the Metropolitan Environment, to be published in *Environment and Planning*

¹⁹ Dalm, Vera, Amsterdam City Council, interview at Stadhuis, November 20, 2002

²⁰ Soja, p.121

Important driving-deterrents include: high gas taxes, high sales taxes for automobiles, and converting auto-parking spaces to bicycle-parking spaces. In much of Amsterdam, bikes have been given flexibility that drivers do not have, such as short-cut routes, going down one-way streets in the opposite direction, and allowing bikes to continue beyond dead-end streets.²¹ All these strategies have further made biking faster and more convenient than driving.

Cultural factors

“In Amsterdam’s Centrum auto-prohibition, second only to Venice, is almost unparalleled. It is not the car but the bicycle that assumes, for the Amsterdammer, a[n]...obsessive symbolic and political role, ... an obsession filled not with individual expression and automaniacal freedom as much as with a collective urban and environmental consciousness and commitment.”

- Edward Soja in “The Stimulus of a Little Confusion: A Contemporary Comparison of Amsterdam and Los Angeles” Understanding Amsterdam

While greatly reduced since before WWII, Amsterdam still maintains a strong bicycle culture. The movements of the 1970s spoke to deep-held values of the population – which led to the institutional responses re-prioritizing the role of the bicycle. I would like to speculate regarding Dutch cultural factors that have fed this bicycle “obsession”:

1. Embarrassment of the Riches. As far back as the 16th century, visitors to Holland noted that the Dutch do not flaunt their riches. Even in contemporary times, modesty is still in fashion, as is obvious from Amsterdammers’ casual dress. Riding a (usually) beat-up old bike certainly fits well within this social system, as opposed to driving a bigger, faster, more expensive car.

2. Socially-oriented. Ever since building the first dike or polder was built centuries ago, the Dutch have been notoriously civic-minded, and organized themselves collectively for

²¹ Beatley, p.173

the greater good. As a country that has one of the most intact social welfare states, bicycle culture goes hand-in-hand with public benefit.

3. Independent. At the same time as being socially-oriented, the Dutch also value personal freedom and independence, as reflected by the highly liberal policies on drugs and prostitution. As for transportation, waiting for the bus or tram can cause irritation. Cyclists hardly have any waiting times.

4. Practical. The Dutch have been successful traders and businessmen for centuries, often credited for their sense of practicality. What could be a more practical transportation solution than jumping on a bike?

5. Corporate accountability. There are no Ford, General Motors, or Volkswagen companies based in Holland. The lobbying power of auto manufacturers has proven to be a disaster for American transportation. In Holland, a different attitude and very strict regulations limit corporate influence – corporations are generally seen to serve, not exploit, the people. A significant financial contribution by a corporation to a politician is culturally and legally unacceptable.

6. Environmental. Along with Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands has been at the forefront of the world's environmental movement with, for example, the largest percentage of Green peace members in the world. No other mode of transportation can boast lower emissions than the bicycle.

Conclusion: Will bicycle culture prevail in Amsterdam?

With the institutionalization of bicycle policy in the 1990s, the Fietersbond and bicycle movements have become partners with government, and no longer see the need to protest. On the one hand they are right: the 1990's witnessed an increase in bicycle use – without an active protest movement. At the same time, many threats to bicycle use remain, including: increasing suburbanization, work distances increasing, increasing car ownership, and the most unknown impact: the decentralization of the central government perhaps threatening the coordination of best practices.

Bicycling is a deeply integrated part of the Amsterdam lifecycle, but it is, perhaps, a fragile cultural component that can be threatened swiftly (as the postwar years showed). To continue to foster this unique element will require due diligence among decision makers and advocates. Perhaps visits to Los Angeles may aid the Dutchman's appreciation for this unique aspect of his culture.