# **Technical Excursion Jan van Galenstraat**

#### Cycling trough the nineteenth century districts; Amsterdam's bicycle policy in practice

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#### 1 Introduction

This presentation serves as an introduction to one of the 'technical excursions', a tour which gives an impression of how Amsterdam's bicycle policy works in practice. The most important topic to be considered is the 'Main Cycle Network', a network of through cycle routes. That the improvement of Amsterdam's cycle routes often requires several different approaches is amply demonstrated by the Jan van Galenstraat, a major thoroughfare to the south-west of the city centre. Other topics to be considered include bicycle parking and storage, signposting and traffic lights. Much of the route of the excursion is within the nineteenth-century areas of the city (including the Vondelpark and the newly redesigned Museumplein), where a number of major cycle routes have recently been established. However, it also takes in the new commercial district to the south (the 'Zuidas') and part of the city centre itself. Along the way, various technical improvements both great and small for are to be seen. These have been implemented with cyclists in mind. Often, it is the small details which determine the quality of a cycle route. A booklet describing the route of this excursion is available.

## 2 The Main Cycle Network

In the Amsterdam of the 1970s, increasing car mobility gave rise to serious traffic congestion. The traffic and transport policy of the time was very much directed towards the car. In 1976, the Amsterdam division of the national Dutch Cyclists' Union (Fietsersbond) was set up, its primary aim being to demand more attention for cyclists within traffic policy. This it did by means of demonstrations and blockades of streets.

It was not possible to separate the cycle routes from the traffic routes in every case. In practice, most problems occur where cycle routes do coincide with those used by motorized traffic. In



Fig.1. Photo: Vinkeleskade, cycle route in 30 km/h zone

general, it is on such roads that the most accidents involving cyclists will occur. With a view to road safety, separate cycle paths are therefore essential. However, there are often many competing claims on the public space. The interests of cyclists must be balanced against those of motorized traffic, the requirement for parking space (especially in shopping streets), tramlines and bus lanes, space for pedestrians, and green amenities. In the nineteenth-century districts and the city centre in particular, there is often not enough space between the buildings on either side of the road to meet every requirement. Despite problems of this nature, many cycle routes within the Main Cycle Network have been improved in recent years.

Although even today, twenty years after its inception, the Main Cycle Network is still not complete, it does continue to form a sound basis for further bicycle policy. The current City Council has set itself the objective of completing the Network by 2002. However, a complication has arisen in that since 1990 Amsterdam has been divided into a number of decentralized administrative districts, the 'urban boroughs'. These boroughs are now responsible for the implementation of cycle policy, and hence for the construction of cycle routes. The central City authority's role has become one of supporting and subsidizing various cycle amenity projects.

#### 3 Jan van Galenstraat

That the construction or improvement of a 'Main Cycle Network' can be a long-term undertaking, subject to many problems, is amply demonstrated by the case of Jan van Galenstraat. For almost twenty years, the Amsterdam division of the Dutch Cyclists' Union has been engaged in improving this route. For both cyclists and motorists, Jan van Galenstraat is an important route from the city centre to the residential areas in west Amsterdam. Originally, this street was not included in the Main Cycle Network, the plan being that the cycle route should take a parallel along the less busy streets to the north. However, this alternative route proved so difficult to realize that the City Council of the time abandoned the plan and decided to include Jan van Galenstraat in the Main Cycle Network. This was by no means the end of the problems. Jan van Galenstraat was a particularly dangerous route for cyclists, due to a combination of factors. Not only were there large volumes of traffic moving at high speed, but double-parking in the street would often force cyclists to move out onto the carriageway itself.

Council officials devised a plan for cycle lanes (i.e. a section of the road marked off for the use of cyclists), there being insufficient room for separate cycle paths. The Cyclists's Federation objected to this plan, since it did not address road safety problems adequately. Experience has



Fig. 2. Photo: Overtoom. Twenty-five per cent of all cycling accidents involving personal injury are caused by illegal parking.

shown that marked cycle lanes do not discourage double-parking. In Amsterdam, twenty-five per cent of all cycling accidents involving personal injury are caused by illegal parking.

The Cyclists' Union took a tape measure to the street and devised a plan which would include separate cycle paths. The plan was followed up and further elaborated by council officials, but the decision-making process was subject to many years' stagnation because the plan would entail the loss of too much space for motorized traffic. An impasse had been reached. Matters became even more complicated when the system of decentralized administration by urban borough councils was adopted in 1990. Responsibility for the plans was shifted onto the newly-created boroughs of De Baarsjes and Bos en Lommer. The boundary between these boroughs runs down the very centre of Jan van Galenstraat. Furthermore, the central City authority retained responsibility for the street insofar as it formed part of the 'Main Car Network', Amsterdam's network of through routes for motorized traffic. The Cyclists' Union immediately entered into talks with the urban boroughs, but to no avail. The plan was too far-reaching for the inexperienced councils, and far too complicated from the administrative point of view.

In the mid 1990s, Jan van Galenstraat became due for major maintenance work. In preparation for this, a Project Manager answering to both urban boroughs was appointed. The central City authority had imposed a condition on the street's redesign, namely that existing capacity for motorized traffic must be maintained. However, one of the urban boroughs' prime considerations was the improvement of road safety, especially for cyclists. They held that separate cycle paths should be created along the entire length of the street, and they were supported in this view by a road safety study. The street proved to include no fewer than seven accident blackspots: hazardous junctions at which six or more accidents involving personal injury had occurred within the previous three years. Furthermore, there had been many accidents on the carriageway itself. Half of those injured had been cyclists. And yet it seemed impossible to reconcile the ambition to have separate cycle paths along the entire street with the City's condition of no loss of traffic capacity. The most serious problems with regard to this capacity were to be seen at two junctions, that with Hoofdweg and that with Admiraal de Ruijterweg, the very spots at which most accidents occurred. It was even investigated whether the road could be widened by moving back the buildings on either side. For architectural reasons, such action was, quite rightly, discounted: Jan van Galenstraat is part of the city expansion scheme designed by the famous architect Berlage.

After much administrative discussion, it was eventually decided to adopt various physical measures to improve road safety. By prohibiting traffic from turning left at one junction (whereby a filter lane became unnecessary) it proved possible to maintain capacity as required by the City.



Fig. 3. Jan van Galenstraat following its redesign

The redesigned Jan van Galenstraat was completed in 1999. Not only has road safety for cyclists been significantly improved, the situation for pedestrians is also noticeably better. We may conclude that, although the implementation of Amsterdam's bicycle policy may have been made rather more complicated by the division of the city into individual administrative districts, these districts have been able to play a decisive role in the construction and improvement of the routes within the Main Cycle Network.

## 4 Direction signs for cyclists

Good signposting is essential to the recognizability of the cycle routes. In recent years, direction signs for cyclists have gradually been introduced throughout Amsterdam. These show the main destinations, reference points, local sights and outlying districts and villages. In many cases, a distinction has been made between a recreational ('scenic') route and a direct utilitarian route. The system of signposting was completed within the last year and is now being evaluated.



Fig. 4 Direction sign for cyclists

# 5 Traffic lights

Almost all traffic lights in Amsterdam have separate lights for cyclists. In theory, cyclists approaching the lights are detected by loops under the road surface. However, because many modern bicycles are too light to be detected, cyclists' traffic lights are also equipped with a push-button. Experiments are now being conducted with 'waiting time indicators' whereby LEDs not only show the cyclists that their presence has been detected, but also indicate how long they will have to wait for the green light.

A safe and efficient throughflow of bicycle traffic demands proper coordination of the traffic lights. Amsterdam policy is geared towards high priority for cyclists on the main cycle through routes. However, here too, cyclists' interests have to compete with those of public transport and motorized traffic, which means that it is by no means possible to give cyclists priority in every case.

#### 6 Bicycle parking and storage

Bicycle theft is a major problem in Amsterdam, with an estimated two hundred thousand bicycles being stolen every year. Research suggests that the risk of theft is one of the main reasons people choose not to use the bicycle. In the nineteenth-century districts in particular, many bicycles are stolen from outside homes because there is often no opportunity to store them indoors. Although Amsterdam has various covered bicycle storage facilities, many residents must rely on the bicycle racks on the streets. It is important that these should be equipped with some solid structure to which the cycles can be securely locked. At the insistence of the Cyclists' Union, those currently being installed do have such a feature.

Proper parking and storage facilities are required not only close to homes, but also at the cyclists' destination. Major destinations include the city's railway stations. Around forty per cent of those travelling to a railway station in the Netherlands do so by bicycle. One station which is growing in importance is Amsterdam Zuid/WTC, in the new commercial district to the south of the city centre. Both the secure cycle store and the racks on the street at this station are full for most of the year. A plan is now in development whereby the number of bicycle parking places, both secure and on the street, will be dramatically increased. Further, efforts are being made to create more secure storage facilities in the city centre. There is currently a lack of good storage facilities, particularly in the main entertainment areas, whereby people are forced to resort to the bicycle racks.



Fig. 5. Traffic light with waiting time indicator for cylcists