

The Bicycle as 'polder-model'

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In a land like the Netherlands, where space is scarce, there is a strong influence of the government on spatial planning. Local authorities have an important influence on the planning of residential and working areas. Developments are usually being planned according to the principle of 'compact towns'. This policy is also based on the thought that this should make a contribution to reducing the growth of auto mobility. That way the bicycle is supposed to get an exquisite opportunity. Therefore livability, economical land use, public health and environmental protection are stimulated.

Practice now shows that, despite all good intentions, the position of the bicycle is still hard won. It appears that a typical cycling country has no standard procedures in favor of the bicycle in spatial planning. This contribution examines the causes of this controversy.

Points raised include: a strong automobile lobby versus a weak bicycle lobby; the financial feasibility of developments; the lazy way politics and authority deal with contributions of civilians and pressure groups; the ideals of the town planner versus the cycle-minded traffic expert; the choice for ease of reach for automobiles versus ease of cycling and the struggle of finding the right moments for participation.

In this contribution concluding remarks will be presented on the planning process, possibilities for improvement of the lobby for the bicycle and opportunities for the bicycle in spatial planning.

Personal introduction

The author is 49 years old. He gained ample experience as a planner with local and regional planning. The latest years he has affinity with transportation. Bert Kunnen was for 15 years in local politics of a medium size town, of which 4 years as alderman for town planning, traffic and transportation. Nowadays he is department head in the council of a medium size town.

Planning

In the Netherlands the government is keen on the planning procedures for any kind of land use. National, regional as well as local authorities have tools for planning. Local authorities take care of the important final piece in planning. They draw up plans for land use (so called 'bestemmingsplannen') in order to constitute a juridical whole.

That authorities have an important role in planning is not illogical. In a crowded land space is scarce, there are many claims on space while valuable nature and landscapes have to be saved. An important identifying mark of the Dutch planning is the bundling of living and working near each other. Towns are held to build according to the principle of 'compact towns'. Little villages can only expand in a limited way, in order to make sure that the landscape will not be fragmented.

The concentration of buildings in urban areas offers a better support for services that are spread over the area, such as hospitals and theaters. Furthermore the idea is that by concentrating build up areas there should be less auto mobility. This has partly proved to be an illusion. The current pattern of mobility of the Dutch has taken unknown shapes. Both because of increased participation of women in the working process and acceptance of longer distances to work, a striking pattern of travelling has evolved: the man works in A, the woman works in B and the choice for living in C, somewhere between A and B. Kids go to school in D, parents and family live in E and F, while vacations are passed in G to Z. The total alphabet results in a huge mobility and especially auto mobility.

Terms like traffic jams and ease of reach make authorities shiver. Although lip- service is paid to the importance of the bicycle as an important part of mobility policy, the policy especially pays attention to the automobile and so a lesser degree to public transport. National authorities made the 'Masterplan for the bicycle' ten years ago, in order to stimulate the use of the bicycle. Local and regional authorities were urged to adopt policy and also financial means were offered. The mission was to improve the position of the bicycle. This not only meant that infrastructure was offered, but also that fiscal regulations on behalf of the bicycle. National authorities also offer means for transportation management by companies and subsidize company transport.

New build areas

The concentration of living and working got a strong impulse by the so called 'VINEX- policy': bigger towns were ordered to take care of shortage in public housing and new claims for working areas in or near the towns. The expectations for the improvement of the position of the bicycle in these VINEX-areas were high held. The intentions were positive and the bicycle was to make it to the top. It seems reasonable, regarding that distances up to seven kilometer are still within reach for the bicycle. And that is where the chances for the bicycle are, because about fifty percent of the rides within that reach are still covered by automobile. By building compact and creating towns where services are offered within easy reach in the town center this was bound to succeed. An invitation for using the bicycle.

If there was to be an important role for the bicycle, one should expect that spatial planning also contribute to stimulating bicycle use and to reduce the use of the car. Measures could be straight routes for the bicycle, for example to the town-center. Diversions for the automobile, so this gets a somewhat different position. And also the early realization of bicycle facilities in new build areas, so people will not get accustomed to using cars.

The Dutch Cycling Union (DCU) has accurately monitored the development of the VINEX-areas for the last one and a half year. In many towns there are volunteers of the DCU who are trying to keep up with local authorities. If necessary they try to influence the process in favor of the bicycle. DCU has monitored about ten local authorities.

Volunteers were supported professionally from the national organization of the DCU. Last months I have worked as such a project counselor. I want to share my temporary findings with you. It contains ten new build up areas. The total of the VINEX areas is about 400.000 houses, spread out over about fifty smaller and larger areas. So from now on when I speak of findings and conclusions, they are neither to be generalized nor to be related to other VINEX areas. It comes to conclusions for one or more build up areas. I focus on affairs I have found. Nonetheless these are conclusions of which I –by knowledge and experience with government, spatial planning and transportation- am convinced that they are common. In short: factors for failure that keep the bicycle from becoming a success.

And to be direct: we are seriously disappointed in the way authorities deal with opportunities for the bicycle in many towns. Opportunities are not made the most of, although intentions are good. Possibilities in procedures are not made use of. Spatially speaking priority is given to the automobile. The so-called Dutch 'polder model' is thrown away on the bicycle. In this cooperation model three C's are paid attention to: constructively, compromise and consensus. Give and take for the best result. The bicycle does not seem to fit in very well so far. Despite the saying: 'Still more bikes behind the dikes'.

Authorities and procedures

First of all something about the attitude of authorities and what I found out in several procedures. Also something about the still tough going how an organization of volunteers deals with this matter. A good researcher also makes some suggestions. I will share them with you. They regard both authorities and the DCU. Furthermore I will argue which aspects can contribute seriously in opportunities for the bicycle.

National authorities have made an end to the 'Masterplan for the bicycle', delegating this to regional and local authorities. There is hardly any stimulation by the national authorities, in order to make the most of the opportunities. In the national policy paper (so called 'Nationaal Verkeers- en Vervoersplan' or NVVP) only little attention is paid to cycling policy. Because practice shows that large towns have difficulty with pursuing cycling policy, the national authorities should make a continuation of her influence on cycling on a local scale.

The automobile lobby in the Netherlands is strong and well organized. Countermeasures for the automobile are an uphill combat. Politics tend to the automobile lobby. The bicycle lobby is professional on a national scale in the DCU (with 25 professionals in the central agency), but the representation on a local scale is weak and appears amateurish. From this proportion the bicycle is arrears. More professional local groups are urgently necessary for the DCU to have influence on a local scale.

Local authorities have no appreciation for knowledge and skills that are present at the local groups of the DCU. All of them are professionals by practice, that are hardly recognized. According to my beliefs it is a common practice in politics that ideas and contributions of civilians are hardly heard, not to mention applauded. It is regarded

as difficult and time consuming and contributions upset the balance between official and political processes. This is wrong because credibility of authorities is damaged. Therefore the government should be more aware of those by whom they gain their authority: the civilian.

In the Netherlands we officially direct an important role to civilians and organizations in all kinds of procedures and planning. There are official moments for participation that are used frequently and by many. The civilian stands up for his rights, in procedures based on laws. Interactive decision making this is called nowadays. But the moments for participation are at the end of a procedure in which is quarreled between politicians and officials e.g.. Finally, once a consensus is reached in this procedure, one should have strong arguments to make a change. From the moments of participation there are many reactions that are officially comments are made of. There is only little time for that and comments are superficial. It is very important that the DCU is part of the process from the beginning. This demands a strong and trustworthy relation between politicians and officials. Also being able for the DCU to monitor procedures, preceding to moments for participation. The position of the bicycle has to be gained in alderman's rooms, offices of officials and in politic parties, not by written reactions in the moments of participation.

Planning process

In the planning process of new build up areas many participants play a role. The vision of town planners dominates that process. First of all attention is paid to nice images, for politicians want to contribute a beautiful build up area to the town. Meanwhile market demands a return on investment. Despite the lip-service that is paid to the importance of good cycling routes, it is hardly ever taken as basic structure for the design of new build up areas. After all, this means a huge claim for the design. Traffic experts usually tend to design bicycle-friendly but stand alone in that position. Take the strong automobile lobby in account and the position of the bicycle is back to the margin.

In quite a lot of VINEX-areas there is the tendency first to invest in infrastructure for the car; investments for the bicycle and public transport are made later. Therefor in many new build-up areas there first is a car-friendly relation with for example the town center. Because the use of the car often is related to getting used to car use; the bicycle infrastructure can not change the habits easily. During the realization of new build-up areas frequently priorities have to be readjusted. When at first the opening up for the car is not optimal and traffic jams appear there is a strong tendency to invest in car infrastructure first. Consequently investments in infrastructure for the bicycle are delayed. Priorities of the bicycle in the infrastructure must become a more basic character in investment.

The complexity of our society, social and technical development that are coming up fast, and the will to make the most of money and space, demands professional politicians good officials and a professional cooperation with the market. Daily politicians like alderman and

officials have an advantage on a local councilor, who is supposed to be the highest in the administrative machinery in the Netherlands. They make the final decisions and are responsible. They have no idea of what processes run on the background. They are distant to the daily administration. They are not capable of giving opposition and they follow the professional approach that is shown to them. That makes it even harder for volunteers like the DCU.

Only few politicians are willing and capable to translate the participation of civilians in planning procedures. Local councilors therefor should be in closer contact to the administrative machinery.

All these factors contribute to despondency and resignation by those who should contribute as volunteer. Many enthusiast and capable volunteers do not have the strength, the powers and the time to deal with all this. The way the local authorities deal with contributions leads to frustration and resignation. When the professional central bureau of the DCU creates opportunities a lot is won. There are so many opportunities for the bicycle in new build-up areas that it is necessary to make contributions more professional. The benchmarking project is a good start, but there is more to be done. National, regional and local authorities should be more aware of the position of the bicycle and should be prepared to support local professionalism by subsidizing.

Spatial planning and Mobility

The previous paragraphs have focussed on planning procedures and the role of the bicycle and the lobbyist. This final part focuses on the contribution of spatial planning and town planning to a better position for the bicycle as an important part of local mobility policy.

In town planning the structure is based on the opening up for the automobile as a leading principle. How to guide a car safely through a living area and how to get as direct as possible to the town center and to the highway. However the bicycle should be the leading principle for how to ride as safe and fast as possible in a living area instead. The bicycle should get a head start when going to the town center.

It is no longer common use that Dutch frumpishness is the character of new build-up areas. Straight streets with long walls are entitled as a clear structure. Long straight streets are not safe and vulnerable traffic, as the cyclist becomes the victim of that. In town planning long straight streets should be banished.

Living areas and working areas have become more remote from each other. That seems reasonable as companies may affect livability of a living area in a negative way. More than ever companies should be introduced in living areas: merging functions and living leads to a vivid public domain and also to decreasing auto mobility. Of course this should regard companies that cause little or no harm to livability. Examples like offices, practice at home, handcraft and ICT-facilities. Shopping centers and train stations offer an opportunity to develop these functions.

With a good infrastructure for bicycles, that gives a head start to the bicycle, there is a world to be gained. Open up these areas so that an automobile has to drive a longer way to get to the town center. Many of the rides in town are from living areas to the town center, the meeting place for people. There should be short routes for the bicycle, more direct than the routes for the car. In many towns this principle is brought into practice with success.

Nowadays the chain-philosophy is introduced: think in the way a trip is build up in links of several means of transport. This demands creating good bicycle shelters and transfer points near stations for public transport.

When considering new build-up areas more attention should be paid to the possibilities of the town as it is now. That can prevent mobility. One could think of industrial areas that are no more in use. But also building in high density and urbanizing offers opportunities for more compact building and demand for mobility.

Quite some time is spent on recreation. When recreational facilities are offered in or near towns, there will be less demand for facilities that are at a longer distance, which are usually reached by car. A good opening up of these facilities for the bicycle has to be a sure thing.

In larger towns there should be shopping facilities in the neighborhood. This prevents one from going to the town center by car. In the district this center should be a meeting point. For going out the town center remains with its facilities like discotheques, theatres and other cultural accommodations.

In short, mobility and spatial planning should go together in a marriage of convenience in which they promise eternal faith to each other. Or, in the terms of today, they should make a tandem by which they go either left or right. And go cycling in a rural area. The rural area is harsh, with winds in the opposite direction. Cycling on a rural road with hardly any signposting, and lots of humps and bumps. And with a lot of disruption because of priority for the car.

But the Dutch should not be Dutch if it was not them to ride stubborn, because at the end of the road there is Frau Anttje with cheese and beer. A warmer welcome could not be wished.