

Cycling in Amsterdam

Developments and policies

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,
I would like to give a brief account of bicycle use in Amsterdam, based on the following topics:

- The history of cycling in Amsterdam. Here I shall examine reasons for the initial popularity of the bicycle, followed by the supplanting of the bicycle by the car and the subsequent reappraisal of the bicycle by the City Authority and Amsterdam residents, influenced by social organisations.
- I shall then go on to discuss bicycle ownership and use, the modal split and problems in the current situation.
- Finally, I would like to say a few words about our plans for the future, which include the promotion of the bicycle as an alternative to car use within the city, and a strengthening of the role of the bicycle in the mobility chain.

1. The development of bicycle use in Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a city particularly suited to the bicycle. In particular, its physical structure (the compact semi-circular form), the absence of any great variation in height and the many bridges make cycling a very convenient form of transport. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the bicycle was the primary means of transport, both for travelling to and from work and for social and recreational purposes. Until 1955, the proportion of journeys undertaken by bicycle remained extremely high, at over seventy-five per cent. Thereafter, the bicycle's share declined, as a result of increased prosperity and the resultant growth in car ownership. Furthermore, Amsterdam expanded considerably in the late 1950s and 1960s. Many residents chose to move to the outer suburbs or to other cities altogether. The car enabled them to commute the greater distances involved, while those greater distances and longer journey times made the bicycle a far less attractive option..

The rapid increase in car traffic, especially in the 1960s, caused serious congestion in the city centre. Amsterdam soon proved to be less suitable for intensive motorised traffic. Many roads were too narrow and it was impossible to ensure efficient through flows of traffic at many junctions. Businesses moved to the fringes of the city and into the greater Amsterdam region. Employment in the city centre and the harbour districts declined. The 'suburbanisation' of the previous years continued. This led to further shifts in commuting patterns and the distances involved, whereby car ownership and usage once again rose significantly, with a proportional decrease in bicycle use.

The City's policy plans aimed to improve accessibility through investments in public transport, to include the construction of a metro network. Bicycle use was to be encouraged, discouraging car use at the same time. In the 1960s, the parking problem developed into the main traffic issue: should the city adapt itself to accommodate motorised transport, or should

it consciously avoid doing so? 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.

In response to the strong growth in motorised traffic and the associated congestion, the reappraisal of the bicycle started. Local actors like neighbourhood committees, Provo and the Cyclists' Federation once again made the public aware of the bicycle and its possibilities. In a desire to conserve the historic centre of the city, these inspired groups launched a variety of campaigns and demonstrations designed to make the city authority and policy-makers think again about separating traffic flows, or conversely, combining traffic flows.

Alongside the traditional acceptance of the bicycle, its image enjoyed a further boost as an environmentally friendly, healthy means of transport which does not demand much space and which helps to improve urban accessibility. Unlike the Swiss city of Basle, Amsterdam has never had a strong and active pro-car lobby.

In 1978, a new City Council took office. It opted to conserve the cultural and historic value of the city centre and to encourage the use of the bicycle and public transport. Soon measures to encourage the use of the bicycle were taken. These included the construction of a 'Main Bicycle Network', the improvement and expansion of facilities for cyclists, and the removal of physical obstacles within the cycling infrastructure.

The Main Bicycle network is a finely meshed system of cycle routes between major residential districts, employment areas and the city centre, usually along the quieter roads. The routes of the network were chosen with the requirements of comfort, road safety and social safety in mind.

In the 1980s, a working party was set up to oversee the realisation of the cycle infrastructure. In addition to city officials, the group included representatives of the Cyclists' Federation. An additional annual budget was made available to help resolve problems. In the 1990s, the City Authority continued to put extra amenities for cyclists into place, including some outside the Main Bicycle Network itself, such as storage facilities at railway and metro stations.

2. Current situation and future policy

Today, Amsterdam has a population of approximately 730,000. There is a high rate of cycle ownership among adults over twelve, at around eighty per cent. This is due to such influences as the introduction of paid parking in large parts of the city, whereby the bicycle is once again seen as an attractive alternative to the car for short distance trips. In Amsterdam, the preferred mode of transport is currently 35 % bicycle, 40 % car and 25 % public transport. These statistics have changed very little since 1980. The number of journeys made by bicycle is greatest in the city centre and in the pre-war districts. Although the policy adopted has certainly contributed to the renewed popularity of the bicycle in the city, there remain a number of problems. These include:

- too few storage/parking facilities;
- the nuisance caused by bicycles parked in public areas (including the eyesore factor);
- bicycle theft;
- low use of the bicycle among the ethnic minorities;
- too much time spent waiting at traffic lights;
- lack of road safety.

The main objective of the City's traffic and transport policy is to improve accessibility and the quality of life in Amsterdam. The long-term policy (to 2010) is described in the Amsterdam Traffic and Transport Plan (in Dutch AVVP; Amsterdamse Verkeers- en Vervoerplan), which is to be ratified by the City Council later this year. The plan sets out the City's intentions with regard to the integration of cycling policy in general traffic and transport policy, physical planning and environmental policy. Further, a number of spearheads are to be followed with regard to cycling policy. These are:

1. Encouraging switching from car to bicycle.

The City wishes to restrict all unnecessary traffic. The bicycle should be used more frequently than the car for all short distances, that is to say five to ten kilometres. Not only will this result in less environmental impact, it will aid the flow of through traffic and will safeguard accessibility for essential traffic such as goods transport. Appropriate measures are to be taken, including the completion, improvement and expansion of the Main Bicycle Network, and the construction of a second 'Core Bicycle Network'. This new network will be different from the first in that it will provide fast routes for medium-distance journeys (minimum of seven kilometres) on which the cyclist has priority. For example, cyclists will have right of way at traffic lights, guaranteeing efficient throughflow.

In order to tempt Amsterdam residents and visitors to the city onto bicycles for relatively short distances, an experimental 'White Bike' scheme was set up in 1999. This scheme was inspired by a similar communal use system devised by the radical group 'Provo' in the 1970s, and comprises a network of unmanned cycle depots throughout the city centre.

The trial is shortly to be evaluated. If it proves successful, the number of depots will be significantly increased. At this conference a workshop has been devoted to the Amsterdam White Bike project. You will be able to obtain further information there.

2. Encouraging switching from car to bicycle and public transport, to strengthen the role of the bicycle in the mobility chain.

Here, the new 'Core Bicycle Network' will play an important part in that it will interconnect the main public transport interchanges such as railway stations, the major employment areas and various city amenities such as hospitals, institutes of education and shopping centres. The number of secure cycle storage facilities is also to be expanded. Those at the public transport interchanges will serve to encourage cyclists' use of the train bus or metro, as well as passengers' use of the bicycle to reach the stations. Furthermore, such storage facilities will reduce bicycle theft. There will also be more storage room at the busier public transport stops. The combination of the Core Bicycle Network's rapid, comfortable and safe routes with adequate storage capacity and the ability to take ones' cycle onto the train, tram or metro, will make the bicycle an attractive option for the initial and final legs of longer journeys. This will strengthen the position of the bicycle in the mobility chain. Furthermore, drivers arriving at one of the Park & Ride facilities within ten kilometres of the city centre will be offered easy access not only to public transport, but also to cycling facilities. This has been dubbed 'Park & Bike', whereby the driver's parking fee entitles him to hire a bicycle at reduced rates. Park & Bike, in combination with a reduction of the number of parking places and an increase in parking fees elsewhere in the city, will further contribute to a strengthening of the bicycle's position in the mobility chain.

3. Improving road safety

Between 1997 and 1999, 24% of all traffic accident casualties were cyclists. The aim is to reduce this figure by such means as segregating different types of traffic, restricting speed of cars with new roundabouts, increasing the number of 30 km/h zones, and increasing police enforcement action, with more speed and alcohol checks.

4. Prevention of bicycle theft

In Amsterdam every year around 150,000 bicycles are stolen. The City Authority aims to reduce this figure by at least 25 %. The number of manned storage facilities at important public centres is therefore to be increased, and there will be more neighbourhood storage facilities. The police and courts will take firmer action against thieves and those trading stolen bicycles.

5. The creation of recreational cycle routes in and around Amsterdam

Recreational cycle routes, connecting with the city's greens and water structure, have a higher attractive value because the emphasis is on the activity of cycling itself and the enjoyment of the surroundings.

6. Encouragement of bicycle use among the ethnic minorities.

The main reason for ethnic minorities not to use the bicycle so much seems to be the lack of any cycling culture or tradition. Children don't see their parents use the bike. In collaboration with schools, community centres and special interest groups, the city is now trying to change this situation.

7. Promotion and information

Residents, commuters and visitors are informed extensively on the pros and cons of cycling in Amsterdam. This is achieved through an active public relations policy paying particular attention to such 'milestone' events as the opening of new cycle routes and storage facilities, through the distribution of the 'Amsterdam Cycling Map' and other promotional material, and through a special Internet website (www.fiets.Amsterdam.nl)

Conclusion

Amsterdam is well on the way, but there is still a long way to go. A conference such as Velo Mondial 2000 is extremely important in enabling us to exchange experience with others. Even Amsterdam can still learn! However, what it comes down to is the willingness of the authorities to give space, funding and priority to cyclists wherever possible. Let us lead the way together!