# Cycling in Amsterdam

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**Summary**

Cycling is important in Amsterdam. The city is heavily built-up, the functions are mixed. Many destinations are therefore within cycling distance. The dense building dates from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. There are no high-rise buildings as in other major cities, but compact building, five storeys high, with narrow streets or quays alongside the canals. This arrangement, with streets fifteen to twenty metres wide with buildings fifteen metres tall on either side, provides a favourable wind-free climate for the cyclist. In some new expansion areas, such as Oostelijk Havengebied and IJburg, these same characteristics are observed, but now with the additional factor of the car to be considered. Along the busier streets are separate cycle paths, while different types of traffic are mixed in the quieter streets, sometimes with special amenities for cyclists, as in the plan for IJburg's Haveneiland. Cars are to be parked under the houses.
When redesigning the streets of the existing city, it is sometimes difficult to provide separate lanes for each type of traffic: pedestrians, cyclists, cars and trams. The streets are simply too narrow to allow this. The choices made are usually at the expense the pedestrian. Pavements are made narrower, trees are felled. This contribution is a plea for a different approach.

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## Cycling in Amsterdam

My contribution to the Velo Mondial conference is, as the title will tell you, about cycling in Amsterdam. Not in Paris, Tokyo, Surhuisterveen or Basingstoke, but in Amsterdam. The combination of climate, lack of hills and the density of building makes cycling a very popular pursuit in Amsterdam. The bicycle is also an important means of transport. One of the reasons that many people, including myself, like to live in Amsterdam is that, with a little bit of luck, one's work is within cycling distance of home. In the west of our country, driving a car is not particularly attractive, given the traffic jams and speed limitations. Public transport, where it exists at all, lacks the glamour of that of Japan or even the United States. Dutch public transport, with the exception of flying, can be summed up in two words: sloppy and sullen. So long live the plane and the bike! Even the ten times a year that the heavens open and I get absolutely drenched while on my bike have yet to persuade me to buy a rainproof suit.

*Figure 1. A one-way cycle path in the centre of Amsterdam.*

And then we have Amsterdam. What is Amsterdam? It is part of a major conurbation, a world-famous city, a popular tourist destination, an airport, a harbour. The first of these - part of a major conurbation - is most relevant to this piece. The western part of the Netherlands is developing to become one large and contiguous urban area. The officially viewpoint is that the centre of this area should remain 'green'. But in practice, even here there are buildings going up at an alarming rate. Almost all new construction - let's say 95 % - can be described as ‘suburbia’. The free-standing houses, offices and factories are detached from one another and the space in which they stand. This happens because people are used to building in this way, and because it is assumed that the average Dutch citizen wants it this way. Perhaps the 'average' Dutch citizen is indeed happy with this arrangement, but average is purely a statistical concept. Happily, the real world is rather more varied. There are people who would like a bigger garden than the 'standard issue' five metres by ten now provided in new residential areas. They would like more greenery in the neighbourhood, and would like to have a traffic-free neighbourhood, with the cars confined to the periphery as is already the case in some holiday bungalow villages.

Sometimes, these holiday villages are transformed into permanent housing estates. The bungalows, long since written off, are suddenly worth 300,000 guilders and are soon snapped up by eager buyers. Officially, this is not allowed but the familiar Dutch 'tolerance policy' comes into play.

There are also people who prefer the hustle and bustle of the city. Some may stay for a period of their lives, others for the rest of their lives. Like most Dutch people, they were born and raised in quiet residential districts in small towns or villages. They now want to leave behind the rigid organization of everything, temporarily or permanently, and move to the big city. They may choose to study in Amsterdam rather than in Delft, Utrecht or Leiden, or they may come to Amsterdam to seek work. That is why we now see a situation in which half of all Amsterdam houses are occupied by just one person, while a quarter are occupied by couples. 'Normal' families are only to be found in the other quarter. Amsterdam is therefore also the Netherlands' largest 'singles club', with many people seeking a partner, and so the process is yet further reinforced. When raising children, people prefer to move to suburbia, but once the children have left home (or the marriage fails) the big city once again becomes an attractive option. Living in the city provides a sense of adventure. Anything goes in the city - you can do everything you were never allowed to do at home, and everything you never dared to do because everybody knew you. One has freedom.

That freedom does not stop at the door of the coffee shop or the night sauna. Driving through a red light, illegal parking, cycling along the pavement, cycling the wrong way down a one-way street - suddenly anything goes! The problem of illegal parking was solved relatively recently, when the local authority appointed a special team of wardens to enforce a strict parking policy. But all those other things are very hard to change: there would have to be a policeman at every set of traffic lights, and the Amsterdam people are unlikely to stand for that. Most fatal traffic accidents on the ring road which runs around the centre are caused by people 'jumping' the red lights.

*Figure 2. Street in IJburg: cobblestones for the cars, clinkers for the cyclists*

Let us now turn to cycling in Amsterdam. The cyclist is always seen as an important road user. The plans for new parts of the city include separate cycle paths as standard along both sides of the busier streets. Even in relatively quiet residential streets, as this one in the new IJburg district, special facilities may be provided for cyclists. In this case, such special facilities are necessary since the road is paved with cobblestones designed to limit motorists' speed. There is a general 30 km/h limit on all such streets. The motorist's speed must be brought into check, which driving across these uneven granite cobblestones is likely to achieve. This solution was discovered more or less by accident during development of Java island (part of the Oostelijk Havengebied project) where the old cobblestones were recycled. They proved to restrict motorists' speed to an average of 29 km/h. However, cycling across these cobblestones is a far from pleasant experience. The streets in IJburg therefore have a lane of normal paving stones for cyclists. It is possible that motorists will stray onto this lane, two wheels on the rough and two wheels on the smooth, which would obviously be dangerous for the cyclists. There is therefore a trial lane in use in the eastern part of the city, which will show whether this layout will be used as intended or whether further modifications must be made.

Nevertheless, such streets are intended for both cars and cyclists. There will be no separate network of routes for slow traffic such as that in the Amsterdam Zuid-Oost city expansion. With a view to convenient organisation, orientation and a clear distinction between public and private, all traffic has been concentrated along the streets. A rather similar 'mixed' arrangement is to be seen in the Oostelijk Havengebied. Streets have been laid along the piers for communal use by all types of traffic. The busier streets have separate cycle lanes, while at

those points likely to have so much traffic that noise baffles become necessary, the traffic is to be directed through tunnels.

*Figure 3 Oostelijk Havengebied. Mixed-use streets, heavy car traffic in a tunnel.*

The situation is somewhat more difficult in the existing city areas. Following heated debate in the 1970s, the City Council decided that the original urban design of the nineteenth-century districts should be maintained. Proposals made in the 1930s whereby the canals of the city centre would be filled in and replaced by roads for the growing weight of traffic (the seventeenth-century part of the city was, after all, designed for waterborne traffic) had already been rejected, with one or two exceptions such as Raadhuisstraat and Rokin. Now it was decided that the nineteenth-century districts should not be adapted for the benefit of traffic either.
Social developments have their own dynamic. Ownership and use of cars continues to rise. With the exception of a few covered car parks on the fringe of the main shopping area, the authorities have provided no extra amenities for cars since these districts were first built, in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. A private parking place in the city centre now costs more to buy than the average council flat twenty years ago. At numerous locations, people are creating small-scale parking facilities in cellars and basements. This is a good solution, even if the cars have to pass through the nineteenth-century districts to reach their parking place. Public transport uses those same nineteenth-century streets, as do cyclists and pedestrians. These streets were designed with pedestrians, handcarts and carriages in mind. They were designed to allow light and air to reach the houses to the 'lift limit' of four or five storeys, or about fifteen metres. Most of these streets are between fifteen and twenty metres wide, from building frontage to building frontage. A few are somewhat wider, but most of these are in fact filled-in canals, such as Overtoom. The problem of too much traffic for a given road layout is clearly demonstrated here. To create separate cycle paths will require the pavements to be made narrower and trees moved or removed altogether. Note that the space for motorized traffic, whether moving or parked, is not under threat, nor that for the tram lane: it is the pavements and trees which must go! A proposal to create bicycle lanes on the roadway itself rather than separate paths was rejected, partly through the efforts of the Amsterdam cycling lobby.

*Figure 4. Overtoom, the alternative with cycle lanes, wide pavements and existing trees*

Many streets in these areas of the city are to be redesigned in the years ahead. Space will always be too limited to meet all the various claims.

My propositions are:

- Parked cars must be taken off the streets. Small-scale parking facilities are needed in the nineteenth-century districts.

- Trees are part and parcel of an Amsterdam street. The streets must have their rows of trees even after the redesign.

- Redesign of streets must not result in less room for pedestrians.

I would like to thank the organizers of Velo Mondial for their kind invitation to speak here today. I would also like to ask the Amsterdam cycling lobby to give more consideration to the weakest road users, the pedestrians and children. They *need* the pavements. I would also like to ask them to show a little more appreciation for trees.