

Walking and cycling – how can we deliver the infrastructure to support Dutch style growth?

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The Netherlands is characterized by its cycling culture, a place where cycling is not just an alternative amongst modes but the first choice for journeys under 7.5 km (Grous, 2011). It is a country where the regular, utility cyclist wears ordinary, everyday clothes, not the customary high-tech, lycra attire seen in the UK. Even the bicycles used by the urban cyclist in the two countries tend to be markedly different: the Dutch on sit-up bikes, the British on a mix of commuter bikes described as ‘urban’, ‘folding’ and/or ‘multi-use’ (www.wiggle.co.uk). Even cycle helmet use varies between the two places – people in the cities of the Netherlands preferring not to with the cyclists in UK cities much more likely to. This set of accoutrements of cycling can be seen to be outward facing symbols of the cycling culture in the two countries and individual attitudes to bicycle use that have evolved in the heterogeneous cultural contexts.

Kuipers (2012:18) suggests that Dutch style cycling is related to ‘national habitus’. He describes the national culture of cycling as non-state led, indicating further that:

Most people in the Netherlands use a bicycle simply because this is what one does when going from one place to another. Cycling is part of the Dutch national habitus. It is neither a conscious lifestyle nor a political statement. It is not associated with a particular social class or region. In the Netherlands, the bicycle is a means of everyday transportation, not just for students, sportsmen or the ecologically-minded, but for everyone: for men in suits, professionals, officials—even the Queen and her family (Ebert, 2004; Stoffers and Oosterhuis, 2009). This particular understanding of cycling ends at the Dutch border.

While it would appear that there is an inherent propensity to cycle in the Netherlands [with 31.2% reporting that cycling is their main mode of transport, while in the UK, 2.2% did (European Commission, 2012)], this cannot be attributed simply to organic growth as Kuipers seems to imply. Indeed, it was a conscious decision taken around 40 years ago, in response to problems such as fatalities and oil dependence of car travel, which resulted in conscious choice of cycling and walking as solutions to the burden of traffic. Taking Groningen as an example, filming liveable cities, Eckerson (2013) visited this northern city which he describes as ‘bicycle nirvana’. He reports that

...Groningen decided in the 1970s to enact policies to make it easier to walk and bike, and discourage the use of cars in the city center. By pedestrianizing some streets, building cycle tracks everywhere, and creating a unique transportation circulation pattern that prohibits vehicles from cutting through

the city, Groningen actually made the bicycle -- in most cases -- the fastest and most preferred choice of transportation.

While there is a tendency to associate the Netherlands with cycling, places that directly, or indirectly, subjugate the car's position in a hierarchy of mode choices are spaces where walking also becomes a viable option. Together, these non-motorized travel options offer solutions that address concerns about environmental impact of emissions, desire for more egalitarian and socially equitable access and unhealthy lifestyles. In addition, they have economic benefits which extend beyond these categories (e.g. in attracting tourists and lowering sickness absence rates in employment). Reporting on the Visions 2030 project¹, Tight (2013) explored different ways to increase the amount of walking and cycling in the UK suggesting that current UK journey patterns reveal there is great potential for change (with nearly two thirds of trips under 8km in length and 38% under 3km, while 6% of car trips are under 1.6km). On such short trips, a car's efficiency is at its lowest, and the potential to easily swap it for other modes of transport is greatest. The rationale is partly to do with sustainability, but also improving the quality of life in urban areas.

However, it is not necessary nor, arguably, desirable to invest in mega-projects if the objective is to improve quality of life and well-being. Discussing the planned £600m 'floating' cycleway along the River Thames in London, Tight (2014) cautions about the merits of investment in one grand infrastructure project versus the potential in geographic distribution of such a large sum to achieve more beneficial, equitable outcomes for many:

The £600m might be better spent elsewhere in the country, or even perhaps in London's suburbs, areas where fewer people cycle and where dedicated cycle infrastructure is poor or non-existent. In the UK, aside from a handful of urban areas which perform as well or better than London, much of the country has lower levels of cycling and could benefit from investment.

In any case, is this the kind of infrastructure cyclists really want? Recent research has clearly shown that cyclists do not fit neatly into a single category and that their views and ideas for what works best for them cover a wide spectrum. A single, expensive and very geographically focused piece of infrastructure is unlikely to appeal to large numbers and, more importantly, is unlikely to be of practical use to many cyclists.

Perhaps the proposers should start to talk with cyclists and those who currently do not cycle (but might be persuaded to do so) to gain a better understanding of what they want. The answer is likely to be rather more

¹ EPSRC research to assess the potential in the UK for achieving substantial increases in walking and cycling by 2030 (further information @ <http://www.visions2030.org.uk/>)

mundane: better cycle paths, lighting, signposting and possibly further controls on aggressive driving.

At a smaller scale, different forms of financing such as social enterprise, crowd funding and philanthropy can all be bundled together to design and deliver new cycling and walking infrastructure. Nevertheless, it is a step change in the way these modes are regarded that is really needed. Attitudes and other psychological factors can influence policy, practice and behaviours and, in so doing, drive up demand for walking and cycling which in turn necessitates an upscaling in infrastructure supply. This works both ways: investment in infrastructure can also increase the attractiveness of these two modes. For example, smaller scale infrastructure innovation can encourage substantial change such as the promotion of bike-rail interchange through the opening at the Leeds' mainline railway station of Dutch-style cycle storage, hire and maintenance facilities called Leeds Cyclepoint or the employer provision of cycle storage and showers at large organizations in the Netherlands (Grous, 2011).

Advocates argue for grassroots interventions and there is a place for this at local level. But, for large scale change, it is a process of evolution in our collective attitudes that is needed. With shared attitudes and values, a firm base for cultural change with respect to walking and cycling can be established. It is from this construction that the infrastructure for Dutch style growth can mature. The shoots of interest in walking and cycling are definitely beginning to show – these now require nutrients, in the form of investment that is appropriate to the local growing conditions, to combine with the sunshine and warmth inherent in actually walking and cycling which provides the energy, well-being and positive fuel to sustain the growth.

References

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