# SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:
# 64. HOW TO MAKE BIKING MAINSTREAM: LESSONS FROM THE DUTCH[1]

**Jay Walljasper©**

Last spring, public officials from Madison, Wisconsin, returned home from a tour of the Netherlands, and within three weeks were implementing what they learned there about promoting bicycling on the streets of their own city. This month, I joined a similar group of latter-day explorers on a quest to discover what American communities can learn from the Dutch about transforming bicycling in the U.S. from a largely recreational pastime to an integral part of our transportation system. My fellow explorers on this journey included elected officials, traffic engineers, and business leaders from the San Francisco Bay Area, all in search of what Patrick Seidler, vice chairman of the Bikes Belong Foundation, sponsor of this fact-finding mission, called our own "27 percent solution" (in the Netherlands, 27 percent of all daily trips are made by bicycle, with enormous health, environmental, economic, and community benefits). A commitment to biking is not uniquely imprinted in the Dutch DNA. It is the result of a conscious push to promote biking.

The Netherlands resembles the United States in many ways: It is a prosperous, technologically advanced nation where a huge share of the population owns automobiles. The difference is that the Dutch don't drive every time they leave home. Their 27 percent rate dwarfs not only the measly 1 percent of trips taken by bicycle in the U.S., but also the rates of many, much bike-friendlier nations (12 percent of trips in Germany are by bike; in Denmark, it's 18 percent).
But a commitment to biking is not uniquely imprinted in the Dutch DNA. It is the result of a conscious push to promote biking, which has resulted in a surge of cycle use since the 1970s.
So what did we learn from their example?

## Start Bike Education Early

Our trip started in Utrecht, where our group marveled at the parade of bicyclists whizzing past us all over town. But what really shocked us was a visit to a suburban primary school, where principal Peter Kooy told us that 95 percent of older students—kids in the 10 to 12 age range—bike to school at least some of the time. In the U.S., roughly half that percentage (50 percent of kids) walked or biked to school… back in 1970. Since then, the rate has dropped to 15 percent, according to the National Center for Safe Routes to School program. "I came to the Netherlands to have my mind blown about biking," declared Damon Connolly, vice mayor of San Rafael, Calif. "And that sure happened when I heard that 95 percent of kids bike to school."

A large part of that success can be attributed to what happens in school. Kids learn how to bike safely as part of their education, said Ronald Tamse, a Utrecht city planner who led our group on a two-wheel tour of the city and its suburbs. A municipal program sends special teachers into schools to conduct bike classes, and students go to Trafficgarden, a miniature city complete with roads, sidewalks, and busy intersections where students hone their pedestrian, biking, and driving skills (in non-motorized pedal cars). At age 11, most kids in town are tested on their

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cycling skills on a course through the city, winning a certificate of accomplishment that ends up framed on many bedroom walls.
"To make safer roads, we focus on the children," Tamse explained. "It not only helps them bike and walk more safely, but it helps them to become safer drivers who will look out for pedestrians and bicyclists in the future." These kinds of programs would make a huge difference in the United States, where intimidating street conditions mean that, while 60 percent of people report that they would bike regularly if they felt safer, only 8 percent are regular cyclists.

## Bikers—and Bikes—Need to Feel Safe

Next stop was the Hague, where bikes account for 27 percent of all trips around the city of 500,000 people—exactly the average for the Netherlands as a whole. But not content with being merely average, the Hague is spending 10 million euros a year (roughly $14 million) to improve those statistics. Hidde van der Bijl, a policy officer for cycling in the Hague's city government, outlined the strategy for improving bicycle speed and safety: The city is working to separate bike paths as much as possible from streets used by cars and trucks, which in some cases means designating certain streets as bike boulevards where two wheelers gain priority over automobiles. Bike boulevards are gaining popularity in the U.S., and are now in use in Portland, Ore., Berkeley, Calif., Minneapolis, and other cities.

Physical separation from motorized traffic on busy streets is the single most effective policy for getting more people to bike. These are practical innovations that could make a dramatic difference in nearly every American town: Research on this side of the Atlantic shows that physical separation from motorized traffic on busy streets is the single most effective policy for getting more people to bike.

But it's not only the safety of the rider that's important, which is why officials in the Hague are also tackling the problem of bike parking, a significant issue in any large city. Access to safe, convenient bike storage has a big impact on whether people bike, van der Bijl explained. Without it, "the car is parked right out in front of the house on the street, while the bike is stuffed away out back in a shed or has to be carried up and down the stairs in their buildings. So people choose the car because it is easier." "It's an issue for me personally," agreed Ed Reiskin, San Francisco's director of Public Works, "because I always have to carry my bicycle down to the street."

People also worry about their bike being stolen off the street at their home or job. That's why creating more secure bike parking in residential neighborhoods, commercial districts, and workplaces is a priority for Hague's transportation planners. The city is busy building parking facilities in the basements of new office developments and at strategic outdoor locations throughout the center city, many of them staffed by attendants, much like at a parking garage. You can park your bike for a nominal fee, confident that it will still be there when you return. (Groningen, the Netherlands biking capital—where 59 percent of urban trips are made on two wheels—debuted the first guarded parking facility in 1982 and now sports more than 30 in a town of 180,000.) Meanwhile in high density residential neighborhoods, the city is installing bike racks or special bikes sheds to make life easier for two-wheel commuters, sometimes taking over auto parking spaces to do it. One car parking space can be converted to 10 bike spaces, says van der Bijl.

## It's Never Too Late to Be a Bike City

On our third day in the Netherlands, we biked across the Atlantic—or at least it felt that way. We headed into Rotterdam, a city whose streets seemed almost American. We came face-to-face with familiar road conditions: 4-lane roads, heavy traffic, aggressive drivers. Bob Ravasio, a Marin County realtor and city council member in the town of Corte Madera, Calif., quipped: "Utrecht seems like a fantasy land now. This is what we're up against at home." Though its bicycle infrastructure is much less obvious than in many parts of the Netherlands, Rotterdam heightened our optimism about boosting biking in the U.S. Even with the car-focused streets, 22 percent of trips around town each day are made on bicycles—below average for Dutch cities, but more than double the rate of any major American city. If they could do it here, we thought, so could we. "Rotterdam could be San Francisco or Oakland with more bikes," observed Damon Connolly.

Even more encouraging was the news from Tom Boot, a member of the city's planning department: Rotterdam has been increasing its share of bike traffic by 3 percent annually for the last several years. They've achieved this phenomenal growth by expanding and improving the network of bikeways—separating them from car traffic whenever possible and coloring the asphalt bright red everywhere else to clearly mark bike lanes for motorists to see. "Good things are happening here," observed Bruno Maier, vice president of Bikes Belong, "and you can really envision it happening back home."

## We Can Plan Now for a Car-Sparse Future

The experience of biking through four Dutch cities provided our team of Bay Area transportation leaders with plenty of ideas for making cycling more safe, popular, and pleasurable back home. For instance, Bridget Smith, director of San Francisco's Livable Streets Program, is excited about using more color on the roadways as an inexpensive but dramatic way of making sure everyone can tell bike lanes from car lanes.

The experience also fueled our imaginations about the future of cities. We saw one glimpse of what's possible on Java Island, a cluster of neighborhoods constructed over the past 10 years in what was once Amsterdam's harbor. It's a scenic waterfront location with strikingly handsome modern architecture in a pleasing variety of styles that is linked to the rest of the city by tram, road, and bike paths. Although brand new, it exudes a charm reminiscent of the city's famous canal neighborhoods—which, for my money, are some of the most vibrant and downright pleasing urban quarters on Earth. "Imagine," said Bruno Maier of Bikes Belong, "if all the bikes we saw in the Netherlands were single-occupancy vehicles. It would not be the same place."

Like old Amsterdam, Java Island enjoys a picturesque waterfront setting. But it shares another trait with the city's medieval districts that you would never expect in a newly built housing development—it accommodates bicycles more easily than cars. Motorized traffic is shunted to the side of each cluster of apartment buildings in underground parking garages, while pedestrians and bicyclists have free reign of the green courtyards that link people's homes. We saw a bold new vision of urban life where people matter more than motor vehicles. As in the rest of the country, a robust public transit system supplements the biking infrastructure: Millions of Dutch commuters combine bike and train trips, merging the point-to-point convenience of the automobile with the speed of transit.

This result of this visionary planning is more than just lovely—Java Island represents a bold new vision of urban life where people matter more than motor vehicles. You feel a liberating sense of ease moving about these new neighborhoods. I've never seen kids—even really young ones—who

look so completely comfortable running around their neighborhoods; not even during my own childhood, in the days before autos completely ruled the road. We passed two sets of young girls staging tea parties, one of them taking place on a blanket just inches from the joint biking/walking trail that served as the neighborhood's main street.
Pascal van den Noort, a transportation consultant leading our tour through the city, urged the group to "imitate this in California, please." Amsterdam city council member Fjodor Molenaar, who met up with us on Java Island, explained that the Dutch call this an "Auto Luw" development, which translates as "car light" or "car sparse." This planning idea is now the official policy of the city.

## Bringing It All Back Home

After five days of biking around Dutch cities, the Bay Area delegation was fired up about the potential of bicycling to improve life in U.S. cities. On our last day, after a lengthy jaunt through Amsterdam—covering medieval and modern neighborhoods, rich and poor ones, all of them full of bikers—we dismounted for one last discussion at an outdoor café overlooking the waterfront. The next day, most of us would be headed back to our homes and jobs and cars in the U.S., where most people would dismiss the idea of bikes making up a quarter of urban traffic as science fiction.

One question the whole group struggled with was how to reconcile our amazing experience of biking in the Netherlands with the auto-choked streets of San Francisco, San Jose, and Marin County. But as Hillie Talens of C.R.O.W. (a transportation organization focusing on infrastructure and public space) reminded us, it took the Dutch 35 years to construct the ambitious bicycle system we were enjoying. In the mid-1970s, biking was at a low point in the country and declining fast. In fact, Amsterdam turned to an American for a plan to rip an expressway through its beautiful central city. But the oil crises of that time convinced the country to instead work to lessen dependence on imported oil.

We could accomplish something similar in the United States by enacting new plans to make urban cycling safer, easier, and more convenient… and ultimately, mainstream. The Dutch gradually turned things around by embracing a different vision for their cities. While the country's wealth, population, and levels of car ownership have continued to grow through the decades, the share of trips made by cars has not. We could accomplish something similar in the United States by enacting new plans to make urban cycling safer, easier, and more convenient… and ultimately, mainstream.

"It's one thing to read statistics about the Dutch biking at ten times the rate we do in the U.S," remarked David Chiu, the president of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors. "It's another thing to see it happening; not just for hard-core bicyclists but as an everyday way of life for the majority of citizens."