



UNIVERSITY  
OF AMSTERDAM

**Urban  
Cycling  
Institute**

# Unraveling the Cycling City

## FINAL ESSAY

Let's all cycle! Historical and sociological aspects of urban cycling.

The expression 'Cycling here is truly mainstream' from *Why We Cycle*, can summarize exactly, in my opinion, the concept of cycling in the Netherlands. It is a lifestyle, a simple action that has repercussions on almost every aspect of society, from mobility to welfare and health. There are many interesting data and statistics that show that for the Dutch cycling is a sign of identity. For instance, The Netherlands has 17 million inhabitants and they own a whopping 22 million bicycles. I have had the opportunity to visit several cities in the Netherlands and experience this great sustainable ecosystem in person. I was able to take part in a Cycle Rush in Amsterdam, enter the world's largest bicycle parking garage in Utrecht, cycle along Eindhoven's 'Slowlane' and ride the F325 Fast Cycle Route Arnhem - Nijmegen.

However, I have found it very interesting to know (and very encouraging for countries that are still far from having a mobility like the Netherlands) that this has not always been the case. It is not a 'heritage' from centuries ago, which is impossible to reproduce. It has been necessary to fight to achieve this objective, it has cost efforts and many citizen demonstrations have been necessary.

What has fascinated me the most in these weeks of continuous learning, are the sociological studies on cycling culture. Thanks to numerous research studies it is emerging that the cyclist uses numerous criteria that until recently were not taken into consideration when planning a cycle path. Forsyth and Krizek (2011), for instance, highlight the importance of the "view from the bicycle" in mediating the relationship between cyclists and the environment, and argue that cyclists' experiences should be taken more seriously by planners.

Thus the daily cycle trip is not simply time spent travelling through space, monotonous and always the same every day of the year. For the cyclist it is an experience that enriches the day. The cyclist usually chooses the route guided by his or her instinct, not always because it is the shortest or has the widest or flattest lane. The cyclist wants safety, but they also want

to be entertained, they want to stimulate their creativity. It has been observed that, although having a newly made, safe and straight bicycle lane, many cyclists prefer to pass through the city centre, near neighbourhood shops, parks etc. Sounds, smells, the possibility of stopping at shops, bars etc. are variables that must be taken into consideration when trying to predict the most common route for cyclists.

Another aspect I would like to highlight is the way in which cycling in the Netherlands is seen as a means of unifying social classes and removing inequalities. In The Netherlands, the bicycle is a means of everyday transportation, not just for students, sportsmen or the ecologically minded, but everyone: for men in suits, professionals, officials, even the Queen and her family (Ebert 2004; Stoffers & Oosterhuis 2009).

I liked very much this concept because it perfectly highlights the bicycle as a democratic, apolitical means of smoothing out social differences. This has been my key takeaway of this course. I am an Italian guy from Milan, living in Valencia, Spain. Unfortunately here cycling is very politicised—the general opinion is that cycling is associated with left-wing politics and is for 'poor' people, since they don't have money to buy a car.

For two decades until 2016 there has been a conservative administration, which has built the city only for cars. In the center of Valencia there are streets with 4 or 5 lanes, no bike lanes and sidewalks of just over a meter. A whole generation has gotten used to using the car for any kind of commute, even though the city is quite small. Luckily, four years ago the administration changed and quite an important campaign towards sustainable mobility has been made. Many bicycle lanes have been built and several squares and streets have been pedestrianised, so now almost all neighbourhoods are linked by the bicycle infrastructure.

Undoubtedly it is a job that has to be done by the administration, but citizens also have a duty to 'do our bit'. An active citizenship is essential to change things for the better, exactly as it happened in the Netherlands in the 70s. We need citizens' projects and initiatives.

A few months ago I started a personal project, called Viu la Bici, which means Live the Bicycle in Catalan (check [viulabici.com](http://viulabici.com) for more information). The goal is to open a little bicycle parking garage in Valencia. In a neighborhood full of old buildings, with small flats and most of them without an elevator, carrying your bike up the stairs is very hard. Besides, leaving your bike on the street at night is unadvised because of theft. All these things mean that many people have to give up the idea of using the bicycle as a means of daily transport. The project, which is non-profit, has started with a Crowdfunding campaign, which has ended successfully. The aim of this project is to promote the use of bicycles in Valencia and facilitate the transition to sustainable mobility.

Regarding this transition, I would like to finish the essay leaving some questions that remain unanswered.

What are the factors that have stopped the advance of bicycle use here and in most of the countries of southern Europe in recent decades? Something is on the move, but what will be the keys to a complete change of direction and to bringing us closer to Dutch mobility? As in the 1970s child accidents and the oil crisis contributed to the change in the Netherlands, will the pandemic caused by COVID19 and the beginning of the 'new normality' do the same here?

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