

Book Review

Cycling Cities: The European Experience

Reviewed By George Liu

“Fietsfile” is the Dutch word for a bicycle (fiets) traffic jam (file).

In most cities around the world, this would be indicative of a wildly successful sustainable transport policy. Yet for the Dutch, bicycle traffic jams are a problem that is gaining the attention of the media and the frustration of the public. Even when it comes to bicycles, too much of a good thing leads to its own set of problems.

Published in 2016, *Cycling Cities* brings together an international team of researchers to tell the story of cycling in Europe over the past century. Does infrastructure matter? Did automobiles doom cycling? How do bikes fit with public transport? These are the same questions tackled by planners across Ontario and North America today.

“For urban Europe,” the book begins, “bicycle policy expertise has become big business. Cities seeking new businesses, tourists, and expats, now consider a vibrant cycling culture an index of health and prosperity.”

Through a comprehensive survey of 14 European cities, large and small, the book finds that physical infrastructure and distances alone do not fully explain the renaissance in urban cycling. Other factors stem from social movements and cultural change. In recent decades, one can clearly see the rise of cycling’s cultural status in North American cities like San Francisco, Portland, Toronto and Montreal.

What is perhaps most surprising is that the top cycling cities in Europe are not exclusive to large metropolises. The book shows that cycling dominates in quite a few medium and small-sized cities. With a population of under 200,000, Enschede, Netherlands, boasts a cycling mode share of over 30 per cent, yet only 3 per cent for public transport. This bodes well for many of Ontario’s smaller cities wishing to promote cycling as an alternative to the car and as a complement to limited public transit.

The bicycle serves as an example of what an alternative vision of the sustainable transportation paradigm could be. World metropolises such as Paris, New York and Tokyo have

focused on public transportation to take the place of the car, yet Amsterdam and Copenhagen are role models where bicycles serve as the instrument for creating livable cities.

As cycling gains international attention, countries have focused on different approaches to exporting their bicycle expertise. “Since the 1990s, cycling policy expertise has become an export product,” writes co-author Professor Ruth Oldenziel, “Dutch experts focused on infrastructure, planning, and institutions whereas the Danes were more inclined [towards] cycling culture and marketing.”

I would recommend this book for transportation planners, academics, and urbanists seeking to understand the history, culture, and struggles of cycling in Europe. I see value in North American planners sharing their cycling knowledge internationally as well. The growing

popularity of bicycles in cities like Toronto and Ottawa can contribute to our understanding of cycling in cities with much stronger automobile culture than those in Europe.

George Liu, MES (PL.), millennial, is a Candidate Member of OPPI and a PhD candidate studying bicycle infrastructure and urban design at Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. Order a copy of *Cycling Cities: The European Experience* at <http://www.cyclingcities.info/>.



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