

# “Bike ‘em all”

Report of the ThinkBike Design Atelier  
in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 5 and 6 February 2013



## Introduction

The Netherlands Embassy in Bulgaria has identified 'cycling' as a proper subject for public diplomacy to profile Dutch culture and Dutch expertise. In order to give substance to the subject the Netherlands Embassy has assigned Taofes BV to organise the project "Bike 'em all". The "Bike 'em all" project seeks to strengthen the position of the Bulgarian cycling NGO Bike Evolution. Experiences from the Netherlands and elsewhere learn that the efforts of a strong and committed civil society can help a lot to set certain issues (in this case 'cycling') on the agenda. In the framework of this "Bike 'em all" project the Dutch Cycling Embassy (a public private network organization of stakeholders of the Dutch cycling culture) was invited to conduct a ThinkBike Design Atelier in Sofia, Bulgaria, The design atelier was intended to add credibility to activities of Bike Evolution by the sharing Dutch experiences and expertise on 'cycling-inclusive' planning and design with city officials. Bike Evolution activists were involved in the set up and organization of these workshops.

## Report of activities

### Monday 4<sup>th</sup> of February

The Dutch team of experts consisted out of Tom Godefrooij, senior policy advisor at the Dutch Cycling Embassy, and Wim van der Wijk, traffic engineer and consultant at Royal HaskoningDHV. They arrived in Sofia on Monday 4 February 2013. The afternoon was used to explore the existing cycling facilities in Sofia and to have some press contacts. Members of Bike Evolution accompanied them. First impressions were that the biggest challenge in Sofia is the lack of connectivity of existing cycling facilities. Bicycle tracks and bicycle lanes seem to go "from nothing to nowhere" and just stop at intersections where they are needed most urgently. On the other hand it looked like that most car drivers are reasonably tolerant towards cyclists. The evening diner was used to exchange background information about cycling in Sofia and related challenges.

### Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> of February

The official workshop programme was opened by Riny Bus, Deputy Head of Mission of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bulgaria, who shared with the audience the self evident position of cycling in the Netherlands. Thereupon the Chief Architect of the City of Sofia Petar Dikov underlined the relevance of cycling for modern city development. Subsequently the Deputy Mayor for Transport Lyubomir Hristov announced the support of the city government for cycling promoting interventions.

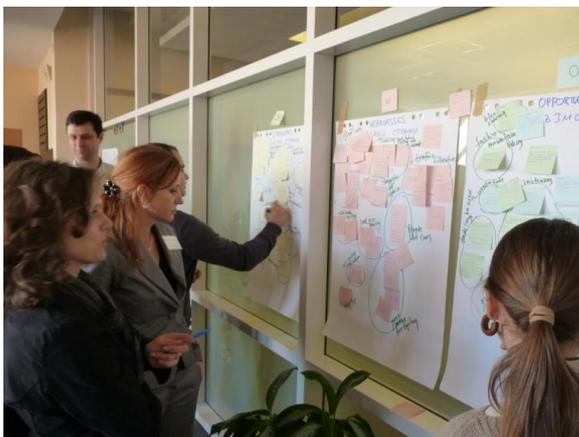
After the official introductions Tom Godefrooij gave a comprehensive presentation in Cycling Mobility in the Netherlands, including some statistics, the (recent) history of Dutch policy developments and explanation about specific themes such as bicycle parking and intermodality (see annex 1).

The remaining morning programme was used to make a SWOT-analysis of cycling in Sofia. The atelier participants were asked to write down their assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the City of Sofia with regard to (the potential of) cycling in Sofia. The individual inputs of the participants were clustered, resulting in the following overall 'picture' of Sofia as a city for cycling:

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Geography: dense and flat city</li> <li>&gt; Good weather conditions</li> <li>&gt; Good basis for intermodality (cycling as a feeder mode)</li> <li>&gt; Growing awareness</li> <li>&gt; Nice streets and parks</li> <li>&gt; Supportive forces: universities and advocates</li> <li>&gt; Existing facilities and bicycle users</li> <li>&gt; Tolerant traffic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Sidewalk cycling</li> <li>&gt; Bad air quality</li> <li>&gt; Lack of proper infrastructure</li> <li>&gt; Planning not taking cycling into account</li> <li>&gt; Traffic situation</li> <li>&gt; Struggle for space</li> <li>&gt; People like cars / poor image for cycling</li> <li>&gt; No cycling education</li> <li>&gt; Theft</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Existing initiatives</li> <li>&gt; International exchange</li> <li>&gt; First measures to restrict car parking</li> <li>&gt; Regional &amp; state funds that can be used</li> <li>&gt; Role models using bicycles</li> <li>&gt; Existing problems for which cycling can be presented as a solution</li> <li>&gt; Plan bike sharing project</li> <li>&gt; Fashion of mountain bikes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Conflicts of cyclists with pedestrians and buses</li> <li>&gt; Inappropriate infrastructure</li> <li>&gt; Conflicting policies</li> <li>&gt; Existing road behaviour disrespectful for cyclists</li> <li>&gt; Mentality not ready for cycling</li> <li>&gt; Negative safety perception</li> </ul>

In the table we have included everything that was mentioned, but we listed them (from top to bottom) in the order of importance based on a quick vote amongst the participants of the design atelier. Also it should be noted that some participants mentioned strengths and weaknesses of cycling instead of the strengths and weaknesses of Sofia as a city for cycling.

The relevance of this SWOT analysis is that it can help to draft a successful strategy to improve the position of cycling in Sofia. Any strategy should use existing strengths, try to improve existing weaknesses, utilise opportunities as they arise and avoid or counter threats when they occur.



The afternoon was used for technical issues and started with an introduction of the Dutch approach of designing for cycling infrastructure (see annex 2). The presentation included issues like :

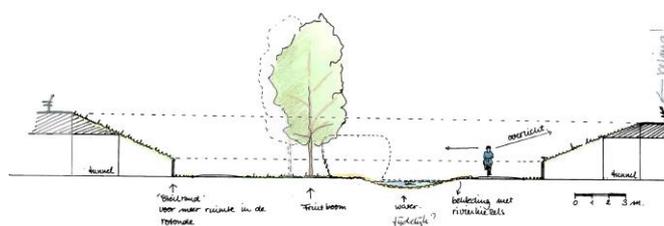
- > the cyclist as starting point for design;
- > the five main requirements coherence, directness, safety, attractiveness and comfort;
- > principles of functional design;
- > application of the quality requirements at different levels of design (network, route and road sections and intersections).

After this presentation the atelier participants discussed on two tables concrete design problems in Sofia. One table concentrated on road sections and the other table mainly looked at intersections. The main barrier that needed to be tackled was the attitude of Sofia officials to reason from existing limitations rather than from the aspiration to create cycling friendly road conditions. The Dutch experts had to explain that experts aren't magicians who can conjure extra space for cycling. Choices have to be made and change is not possible without affecting the existing situation. Space for cycling infrastructure could be created by a re-allocation of road space e.g. by taking out car lanes, or by choosing a more quiet route where traffic calming can be an option. The question is how to create a better balance between the different modes of transport to improve the overall performance of the urban transport system.

### Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2013

The morning started with 2 presentations by Wim van der Wijk on the issues of network design and how to design cycling infrastructure in the vicinity of bus stops (see annexes 3 and 4).

Subsequently the participants continued the interactive discussions on specific situations in Sofia. Issues discussed were, amongst others, different options for a cycling route from southern parts of the city to the city centre. Also the issue of underpasses at busy intersections was discussed. The current pedestrian underpasses are difficult to use for both pedestrians and cyclists, and don't provide an attractive environment for them. Thus it is obvious that they don't meet the main requirements for good cycling infrastructure. This doesn't imply that grade separated solutions should be avoided. But the design should take into account the quality requirements for the intended user groups. For inspiration Wim van der Wijk showed a number of examples of recent Dutch designs with grade separated facilities for cycling and walking at busy (large scale) intersections. These are often designed as two tier roundabouts with as short as possible underpasses.



Another issue that came to the table is the question what of the design is technical and what is political. The role of the transport professional ideally would be that (s)he elaborates the various options and their implications on various aspects like cyclability, road safety, congestion, liveability, air quality etcetera. The professionals should enable the politicians to make an informed decision, i.e. a decision in full awareness of all implications and effects.

When it comes to policy making it is worthwhile to explore interests of various stakeholders and their power to influence decision making. Making a so called 'actors analysis' can help to identify most relevant stakeholders, both on the partner side and on the opponent side. Knowing your partners and your opponents is essential for knowing what needs to be done to win over the relevant decision makers.

At the end of the design atelier all participants received a certificate of participation. Tom Godefrooij thanked all participants for their involvement, expressing his hope that the atelier has been useful, and wishing the participants success in developing Sofia to a more cycling-friendly city.

## Presentation at the University

The work visit of the Dutch Cycling Embassy to Sofia was concluded with a lecture for the students and staff of the department of Architecture of the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG) in Sofia. The presentation given on Cycling-inclusive strategic planning (see annex 5) was providing a theoretical back ground for making urban development and transport planning more cycling-inclusive.

## Thoughts about potential follow up activities

The design atelier as conducted in Sofia as reported above is only one element in a long term process the eventually could result into more attractive road environments in Sofia and Bulgaria. The Netherlands Embassy in Sofia has funded this design atelier in the framework of their support of civil society organisation Bike Evolution. The design atelier should contribute to a certain level of understanding between Sofia officials and Bike Evolution and subsequently in the development of more consensus on what is needed to accommodate cycling properly as a vital element of Sofia's urban transport system.

Yet we must realise that professional traditions in transport planning and design don't change overnight, and that the same information and arguments probably will have to be repeated over and over again towards different target groups to become part of a shared vision on urban transport in Sofia. Committed civil society organisations are indispensable to push this agenda.

Given the participation of Dutch civil society in the Dutch Cycling Embassy we can imagine that Dutch counterparts of Bike Evolution can share knowledge and experiences as a part of the support programme for Bike Evolution.

At the level of the transport planning profession we can think of two potential follow up activities:

- > Organising professional training courses for transport professionals on cycling-inclusive planning and design. We could explore possibilities for cooperation between Dutch and Bulgarian universities on this issue with involvement of 'daily practitioners' i.e. Dutch municipal officials and consultants involved in cycling-inclusive urban development;
- > Establishing contacts between Dutch and Bulgarian consultancy firms that have a stake in urban planning so as to explore opportunities for co-operation and joint ventures.