



Photo: Fietsersbond

02. The Cycling History: Cycling in Response to Crises

With over 37,000 kilometres of fully segregated bike lanes, the Netherlands is widely regarded as the world's most successful cycling nation. More than one-quarter (28%) of all trips are made by bicycle, covering 17.6 billion kilometres each year, which equates to 3.0 kilometres of cycling per day per person. The Netherlands is also one of the safest countries in the world to ride a bicycle, with a fatality rate of just 0.9 per 100 million kilometres cycled.

But that status was never a given. Instead, it was the result of a difficult, decades-long process that began in response to a pair of converging crises in the early 1970s, leading to a more systematic approach to safer, more sustainable, equitable, and efficient street design.

In 1972, the Stop the Child Murder (*Stop de Kindermoord*) movement formed in reaction to a road safety crisis that was killing 3,000 people per year, including 450 children. Named by journalist Vic Langenhoff, whose six-year-old daughter was killed while cycling to school one morning, their goal was "to break through the apathy with which Dutch people accept the daily death of children in traffic."

Langenhoff was enraged at the minuscule fine imposed on the driver and the flawed street design that prioritized speed over human life, arguing that "this country chooses one kilometre of motorway over 100 kilometres of safe cycle paths."

One year later, the Dutch were the target of an OPEC oil embargo, resulting in an abrupt gasoline shortage and compelling its three million motorists to reevaluate their relationship with their cars.

A dramatic spike in fuel prices forced many to reacquire themselves with their bicycles—the sales of which doubled—producing a collective desire for safer streets. This shift was reinforced by the national government's 'Car-Free Sunday' policy. Suddenly, cities went completely quiet, as their normally unsafe avenues were returned to the public realm. It was an eye-opening moment in history, when residents realized they could not take safe cycling for granted, unless their cities' car-centric design was dramatically transformed.

Applying concepts that came out of that decades-long trial-and-error process, the CROW Design Manual for Bicycle Traffic is now widely regarded as the best bikeway engineering guide in the world. Critically, it dictates any successful cycling infrastructure network must reflect five design principles: cohesion, directness, (road and social) safety, attractiveness, and comfort.

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The COVID-19 pandemic was another, similar crisis that challenged cities everywhere to think about how their mobility networks might operate differently. It became a time for cities to experiment, using their streets as testing grounds for change. Many global metropolises—including Bogotá, Kampala, Sydney, Berlin, and Paris—built entire networks of "pop-up" cycling infrastructure; not one or two routes, but dozens that would connect as many origins and destinations as possible, in an effort to keep their streets moving post-lockdown.

Like the 1970s crises were for the Dutch, the COVID-19 crisis may be a tipping point for the rest of the world; revealing solutions that have far-reaching benefits long into the future, and pointing the way to more resilient, accessible, and safe urban transport. After all, a city with more cycling is a city with healthier people, safer streets, cleaner air, and better connectivity.