

DUTCH NEIGHBORHOODS: A European Model for Sustainable Communities

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Two years ago I moved to The Netherlands, and was surprised in many ways to find myself in what might be called an urban model for sustainable living. The Netherlands has the second highest population density in the world (Hong Kong has the highest), and the bulk of the Dutch population is concentrated around the urban centers of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague. I had previously lived in a suburb of Los Angeles, an urban area of roughly equivalent population and land area to The Netherlands, yet with an urban landscape that could not be more different.

I moved into a largely working class and immigrant neighborhood in the medium-sized city of Nijmegen, situated in the eastern part of the country. The design of Dutch cities is premised on the concept of neighborhoods, each with its own center of social and economic activity. The neighborhoods all feed into the "city center", a centralized area of even larger social and economic activity. My neighborhood is a very typical one. In the center was a small shopping center, bus stop, and schools, and every house is at most a 15-minute walk from this center. This means that everyone can easily get to the grocery store, bank, post office, and local schools without having to drive a car, with the larger city center and train station easily accessible by bus. Within my relatively small neighborhood are five parks, four of which are equipped with children's playground equipment, as well as a few acres of woods with walking paths and a "kinderboerderij", a farm for children to learn about animals. The kinderboerderij is something of an institution in Dutch cities designed to maintain a connection to agricultural and rural life for urban children. Another important design elements for Dutch neighborhoods are the non-vehicular pathways. The streets are narrow by American standards, but every street has sidewalks for pedestrians, and most streets have bicycle lanes as well. In addition, there are many pedestrian and bicycle paths that cut between or behind houses, across parks, and behind the shopping center, offering short cuts that are inaccessible by car.

All of these design elements add up to neighborhoods that are designed more for walking, cycling, and public transit than for automobiles. The result is that people walk and bicycle much of the time, neighbors get to know each other, and the streets are far less congested. Indeed, there is a far greater sense of community than any other place I have lived.

I am constantly struck by the fact that the population density is extremely high in the Netherlands-obvious by the fact that most people live in 3-story row houses or multi-story apartments-yet the neighborhoods are surprisingly quiet and peaceful. And more importantly, it doesn't feel crowded. In spite of having to contend with the second highest population density in the world, The Netherlands has far less congestion and has preserved far more greenspace than, say, the greater Los Angeles area. Even around the larger urban centers of Amsterdam and Rotterdam there is significant land area set aside for parks, dairy farms, tulip fields, woods, and wetlands.

Dutch society is very concerned with the function of landscape, both urban and rural, and their approach to urban planning is very pragmatic. Key to their design of more functional, livable, and sustainable communities is the viewpoint that reliance upon the automobile is an infringement upon personal freedom. Designing more functional neighborhoods, and preventing reliance upon the automobile for necessary daily activities, makes cities more sustainable and affords citizens more freedom in their daily lives.