



America, The Netherlands, and the Oil Crisis: 50 Years Later

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The 1973 oil crisis caused gasoline prices to skyrocket and supplies to dwindle. Gasoline rationing led to long lines at gas stations and paralyzed car movement. Two countries—the United States and the Netherlands—responded to the crisis in nearly opposite ways. The Netherlands began a long-term policy shift away from the a car-based society. The US, however, doubled down on car culture.

Above: A typical American street in Atlanta, GA. Wide arterials without much thought given to uses other than cars are common in and around cities all over the United States, a direct consequence of policy decisions made decades ago. Photo: Creative Commons

Across the Netherlands, cities built bicycle lanes, people-friendly shopping streets, and spent large amounts of money on high-quality public transport. US cities built new highways and expanded low-density suburbs, car-centric shopping centers, and office parks. American public transit, cycling, and walking infrastructure deteriorated. The share of people using sustainable transport in the U.S. fell from 23% in 1970 to just 15% in 2016 (U.S. Census data). Today, nearly 87% of all trips take place in a private car, and American cities are five of the top ten most congested cities in the world, while Amsterdam does not even break the top 100.

Prioritized bicycle lanes and public transit make sure that everyone, including the poor, small children, and the disabled, have access to safe, efficient, and affordable transportation. A well-used bus is at least 14 times more space efficient than a single-occupancy car traveling the same distance¹, and light rail, bus rapid transit, and metro are even more efficient. Road designs focused almost exclusively on increasing and maintaining high car speeds, have the opposite effect. The proliferation of wide multi-lane roads and cul-de-sac street networks has the effect of cutting off neighborhoods. Today, in many places, few viable alternatives to driving exist. Today, unsurprisingly, most Americans drive nearly everywhere.

In the United States, the average household has 2.3 cars and spends nearly a third of its income on transportation. The lack of viable alternatives places a heavy burden on the poorest members of society, who struggle to afford basic

¹ UITP Europe, "Bus Systems in Europe: Towards a Higher Quality of Urban Life and a Reduction of Pollutants and Co₂ Emissions," 2015, [https://www.uitp.org/sites/default/files/cck-focus-papers-files/UITP_PositionPaper_Bus%20Systems%202015.pdf](https://www UITP.org/sites/default/files/cck-focus-papers-files/UITP_PositionPaper_Bus%20Systems%202015.pdf).



A typical Dutch street in Amsterdam. Cyclists have priority everywhere except the city center, where the tram has priority. These regulations were put in place after the oil crisis, and have made Dutch cities the most cycle friendly in the world.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons



A bus stop in Atlanta. Bus stops along wide roads often have no shelter, and require passengers to wait in a dangerous area next to fast moving cars.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

transportation. Fines for driving without a license—because no other viable transportation options exist—trap many people in a cycle of poverty. While the cost of car ownership in the Netherlands is similar, people rely on high-quality transit, cycling, and walking for half of all trips. This helps poor families access jobs and save money, helping to improve their quality of life.

Good public transit leads to a safer, healthier society. In the U.S., there is a 90% lower crash risk² for public transit than car travel. According to the World Health Organization, U.S. residents are three times more likely to die on the streets than people in the Netherlands. And despite a more sedentary population, U.S. residents are five times more likely to be killed while walking. In addition, most public transit trips begin and end with walking or cycling, making exercise an integral part of daily life. This helps to reduce rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. In the Netherlands, only 18.8% of adults (over 20 years old) are obese compared to 32% of Americans.

The economic benefits of a city built around public transport are manifold. Good transit boosts the economy³ and stimulates economic development⁴ by bringing people together for jobs and opportunities. Public transit uses space efficiently and supports dense development, which reduces travel distances and space requirements. American cities have spent billions creating vast networks of urban freeways, only to find this encourages more people to drive and results in gridlock.

When cities spend money on roads, they are also losing the benefits of more productive land use, like public spaces and housing. Car infrastructure is also expensive, particularly the elevated highways and tunnels needed to move cars around urban areas. In Milwaukee, renovating an existing freeway would have cost \$80 million, but it only cost \$30 million to remove it⁵ and replace it with surface streets. In addition,

² American Public Transportation Association, Public Transportation Benefits, 2018, <https://www.apta.com/mediacenter/ptbenefits/Pages/default.aspx>.

³ Daniel Hertz, "Why Do We Care About Transportation Mode Share," *New Geography*, 2014, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/004466-why-do-we-care-about-transportation-mode-share>.

⁴ David King, "Developing Densely: Estimating the Effect of Subway Growth on New York City Land Uses," *Journal of Transport and Land Use*, 2011, <https://www.jtlu.org/index.php/jtlu/article/viewArticle/185>.



A focus on transit and cycling in Dutch cities makes space for many public squares and an excellent walking environment, such as this square in The Hague. In the US, these urban spaces are often used for parking cars.
Photo: Wikimedia commons

Through the more efficient use of space, transit-oriented cities prevent sprawl into natural areas and resources, protecting them for future generations. The Netherlands, with its cities built around public transit, generates 40% fewer GHG emissions per capita than the United States.

despite the country's enormous wealth, infrastructure in the U.S. is collapsing. The Netherlands, although slightly less wealthy, is managing to maintain and expand its infrastructure.

Cities built around public transit play an important role in protecting the environment. By moving more people per vehicle in less space, transit uses far less energy per kilometer of travel. Public transit cuts pollution and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and prevents premature deaths from poor air quality. Through the more efficient use of space, transit-oriented cities prevent sprawl into natural areas and resources, protecting them for future generations. The Netherlands, with its cities built around public transit, generates 40% fewer GHG emissions per capita than the United States.

Urban populations in the United States and the Netherlands are growing slowly—47% and 50% of people live in urban areas, respectively. In many parts of the world, such as Kenya, urban populations are exploding. While only 20% of residents there live in urban centers, it's not at all clear what shape cities will take when 40% or 50% live in those centers. Will those countries choose the United States' car-oriented model, with expensive infrastructure that punishes the poor, degrades the environment, and fails to effectively move people from one place to another? Or will they choose the Netherlands' transit-oriented model that boosts people out of poverty, protects the environment, and reliably gets people where they need to go? The choices that rapidly-growing cities make today will shape their future for generations.

⁵ Lolis E Elie, "Planners push to tear out elevated I-10 over Claiborne," Nola.com, Jul 22, 2010, https://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2009/07/photos_for_iten.html.