

Medieval Town Making and Sustainability: A Return to the Center

For decades, planners and designers have looked to traditional town-making as a model for sustainable development in planning new or retrofitting existing communities. Attributes of traditional towns developed before the advent of automotive travel include compact development, a mixture of land uses, multiple modes of transportation, and street networks that are scaled for humans. These qualities are of particular interest in that they are believed to contribute to more livable communities and promote less of a reliance on single-occupant automobile travel at the exclusion of all other modes (Cervero & Radisch, 1996).

This study aims to expand upon the understanding of traditional town-making practices by examining historic medieval Dutch towns which have been successful at retaining the scale and character of livable communities while limiting intrusions of automobile travel (Pressman, 1987). The Dutch report the lowest level of sedentarism in Europe in part due to travel choices that are more centered on walking and biking. Indeed it is in highly urbanized areas of the Netherlands that walking and bicycling present themselves as a significant method of mobility (Racioppi et al, 2005). What elements in Dutch town making, both historical and current, have contributed to these choices? This paper examines historic Dutch town-making methods along with past and current transportation and land use policy to determine what efforts have most contributed to this condition of higher than normal uses of alternative transportation modes among its populace. Dutch water towns, settlements that were created during the middle ages upon reclaimed marshes and water bodies, form the focus of this examination in that these towns show a higher level of planning and care at their inception when compared to other medieval towns from the same era (Burke, 1956. Gutkind, 1971). These findings may be useful in the planning of new communities or retrofit of existing communities that promote more sustainable, livable communities.

References:

Burke, F. (1956). *The Making of Dutch Towns*. London: Cleaver-Hume Press.

Cervero, R. & Radisch, C. (1996). Travel Choices in Pedestrian versus Automobile Oriented Neighborhoods. *Transport Policy*, 3(3), 127-141.

Gutkind, E. (1971). *Urban Development in Western Europe: The Netherlands and Great Britain*, Volume VI. New York: The Free Press.

Pressman, N. (1987). *The European Experience*. In A. V. Moudon, (Ed), *Public Streets for Public Use*. New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc.

Racioppi, F., Dora, C., & Rutter, H. (2005). Urban Settings and opportunities for healthy lifestyles: Rediscovering walking and cycling and understanding their health benefits. *Built Environment*, 31(4), 302-14.

--Associate Professor Beverly Bass