

Bijna 20 jaar geleden, maart 1993, probeerde Dick de Jongh namens de Fietzersbond Sven Ingvar Andersson te bewegen z'n voor de fietsers onzalige plannen met het Museumplein te veranderen. Die hielden o.a. in de afsluiting voor fietsers van de onderdoorgang van het Rijksmuseum. Hij vond bij Andersson geen gehoor, maar het stadsdeel haalde de afsluiting uit het plan. In z'n argumentatie wijst Dick de Jongh o.a. op het belang van de onderdoorgang voor fietsers. Inmiddels zijn er nieuwe plannen voor het Museumplein waarin – althans in sommige schetsen – de belangen van de fietsers beter tot hun recht komen.¹

Dear Mr. Anderson,

Last time when we met here, I told you how beautiful it is in the evening when you return home on your bicycle and on the Museumplein you see the Concertgebouw lying in the distance. You really have the feeling then that it is good to be in Amsterdam and to live in this area. Of course, this last week, after I had seen your plans, I thought back about what I had said to you and whether the times that I would make this ride would be over in a year or so, and I was not too happy.

Certainly your plans are beautiful and will, I am sure, whatever further happens, be an important part of the face of Amsterdam for years to come. But, if they are executed, as they are now, they are a major disaster for bicycle traffic in this city. This is the more disappointing as beforehand we all hoped that Amsterdam would be a much better place for bicycles after the closing of the Museumplein for cars.

For me and many other bicyclists who now have the Museumplein in their route from their homes to the center of the city and who are happy about that the plein will be a place they will see much less of, if your plans come through.

Going from the Beethovenstraat to my work in the University area at the Binnengasthuis (I hope you have seen it, it is really a nice adaptation of existing buildings to a new purpose) I have now the choice between two ways of around equal length, the Spiegelgracht to be reached by way of the Museumplein, and the Vijzelstraat to be reached by way of the Ferdinand Bolstraat. As the Museumplein is much more pleasant I, of course, take that way.

By your plans this would greatly change for several reasons. This will be clearest if you realize that to reach the Spiegelgracht by bike I have at present on my way three sharp turns of around 90 degrees. After your plans will be realized I will have nine. Some others will be luckier: from the Willemsparkweg the number will only be raised from 2 to 4, but most will be not. From the Minervalaan, for example, the number will be raised from 3 to 12, from the Lairessestraat from zero to seven. As the distance the bicyclists will have to travel will also increase, the places they will go through will be less pleasant and they will have longer waits at traffic lights this will without a doubt mean that a very considerable number of them, possibly half or more, will choose a completely different route into the city. This will be then, instead of the Spiegelgracht: the Vijzelstraat or the Leidsestraat area.

¹ Almost 20 years ago, Dick de Jongh, on behalf of the Amsterdam chapter of the Cyclists Union (Fietzersbond) tried to convince Sven Ingvar Andersson to allow cyclists more, and more appropriate space in his layout of the 'New Museumplein'. His plans included closing the passage under the Rijksmuseum for cyclists. In his argument Dick de Jongh pointed out the vital importance of the passage for cyclists. To no avail, though the city council ultimately didn't close the passage.

Nowadays almost everybody is aware that Anderson's plan was a mistake and has to be corrected. Guiding principle should be that cyclists are allowed the space they are entitled to in what is generally considered to be known as the most bicycle friendly city in the world (cf. www.virgin-vacations.com).

This is extremely unfortunate. For many years now the city in cooperation with the Union of Bicyclists have been improving the Spiegelgracht, Nieuwe Spiegelstraat, Herengracht, Koningsplein, Spuistraat route into the city. Close to 2 million guilders have been spent improving this route. And what are the alternatives? There are two: one is de Vijzelstraat with many cars, smoggy and dangerous, too narrow for bicycle lanes, the other is the Leidsestraat. The Leidsestraat is forbidden for bicycles, and rightly so, I think, it is a shopping street for pedestrians and has a tram. However, many bicycles use it illegally already now. The city has made attempts to put a stop to this (with full agreement of the bicycle union by the way), but, up to the present, has failed miserably. To repeat, it is a very unfortunate consequence of your plans that the pressure on bicyclists to use the Vijzelstraat and the Leidsestraat, or the legal alternative which I personally always use, the Leidsegracht that is still farther away than the Leidsestraat.

The city has for many years now had the clear policy of having as its main route for cars from the South to the Centre the Vijzelstraat, for pedestrians the Leidse Straat and for bicyclists the Spiegelgracht-Nieuwe Spiegelstraat, and has arranged for cars as well as for bicycles the routing structure in the South and Centre to this purpose. The Nieuwe Spiegelstraat route has a weakness that makes it rather vulnerable, if this whole structure is tampered with. This is the fact that, whereas the Leidse Straat and the Vijzelstraat have straight continuations to the important parts of the Centre and the Central Station, the Spiegelgracht has not. It stops at the Herengracht: there the main continuation is to the left the Koningsplein, but also the move to the right to the Munt area is important. This means that, if bicyclists want to go to the Munt or the Koningsplein from the South of the city and they are being driven far to the right or to the left at the Rijksmuseum it is very illogical for them to return to the Spiegelgracht, because the other route is then practically straight.

It is very ironic that in your plans you spend a very high amount of money on bicycle traffic too, we estimate certainly a million guilders, to get them around the Rijksmuseum, but you spend that money not for the bicycles that there are now, but for the 50% or so that will be left. Of course, it does not matter how many there are, you will have to spend that money anyway, because even a few bicycles will need a reasonably safe way to cross the Stadhouderskade, however unpleasant it is. It seems clear to me that not allowing the bicyclists to continue their way under the Rijksmuseum will be very damaging to the efforts of the city to promote bicycle traffic. That is to say, unless some very dramatic new plan is going to be developed. The plans that have been drawn up so far are totally insufficient to undo the damage that is being done by the closing of the gates. That is especially so on the East side where the bicycles are drawn to a place where you will at present hardly ever see a bicycle at all due to the density of cars and smog: the crossing of the Hobbemakade and the Stadhouderskade. (Whether you are right or not that there will be fewer cars there in the future is practically irrelevant here, that can at most make a small difference in degree.)

On the Museumplein itself you have with some ingenuity succeeded on the drawing table to get the bicycles off the plein. This will meet some success as I have explained. But it will not be a complete success story, the people from around the Laïressestraat and the Johannes Verhulstraat area at the very least, will not be deterred. For them it is the only reasonable way to the city, and they still add up to a considerable number. Remember also that one of the basic tenets of the plan is to have fewer cars on the de Laïressestraat to make that street more pleasant. That part of the plan will most certainly succeed and for that very reason may attract more bicycles to the de Laïressestraat. Those people, after having explored a few times the one tortuous way you have designed for them on the East side of the plein will give up and start using all kinds of illegal crossings in various ways over footpaths or, diagonally, wherever else the surface is good enough for their purpose. I predict that, in a few years, alterations will be made to your plans by other people to try to get rid of the resulting chaos caused by bicyclists on the Museumplein.

You may think that I have mentioned just a few unpleasant side effects of your plan and that you are so basically in the right that only pedestrians have a real right to the beauty of the Museumplein that the bicyclists will have to be sacrificed. I think you are not right here. Bicycles are an essential part of Amsterdam scene that ought not be simply wished away. Moreover, the Museumplein belongs to the people of Amsterdam in a wider neighborhood than the ones that live just around it, and the ones that live farther will easiest come by bicycle. The way you have designed it there is a clear danger that the Museumplein will mostly be a plein for the tourists instead of for the people of this city. It will mean then that in the off season it will be rather a dead place, and also, and this is even worse, that in the evenings it may threaten to turn into a black hole that even people from the neighborhood will tend to avoid. It is important to make the place livelier, and how can be done better it by allowing bicycles to use it. I am certain that this can be designed in a way that does not detract much of your plan, and in a way that will still make the pedestrians the most important and dominant inhabitant of the new Museumplein.

To recapitulate, for the Union of Bicyclists and for many bicyclists personally, a very momentous decision will be taken in the next few weeks or months. Either the bicyclists will get their rightful place in your plans, and in that case a tremendous improvement for the bicycle will have been reached, or they will not and the situation will worsen considerably for them. I have very good hope that when you think again about your plans you will realize that in your first set up you made a mistake and that you will rectify it and keep the Museumplein as a place also for the bicyclists who are so happy to pass through there.

Dick de Jongh
March 1993