



Safer Calgary Submission on 1st Street SE Cycle Track

*Safer*  
— CALGARY

In November of 2013 I travelled to Breda in the Netherlands to kick-off the second year of Safer Calgary's 'Safe and Smooth' project. A key part of this project is having the final year students in land use and transportation at the NHTV University of Applied Sciences turn their attention toward Calgary and the challenges a rapidly growing North American city faces trying to move people around from place to place. And by 'place' I mean a fairly loaded concept that I will return to in a few moments.

The reason for my travel to Breda was to work with the faculty and students there to start the project that culminates with a symposium here in Calgary on March 13th of this year. I'd been away a lot before this and so my wife, two young daughters and my in-laws decided they would come along on the trip. We expanded it a bit to cover some other parts of Europe but eventually ended up in the Netherlands.

I warned my family that, if we were to visit the Netherlands, we would have to do things the Dutch way. On bicycles. My wife loved the idea, the girls had mixed feelings, and the in-laws looked terrified - no longer certain of what they had signed up for exactly. We started cycling in Amsterdam and that experience featured many hilarious adventures on cycle tracks and elsewhere - everyone survived and no one (or their bike) ended up in a canal.

We ended up in Breda (took a train from Amsterdam, didn't cycle - you can, but it's very far) and there, the comfort with bicycles set in. To the point that my in-laws (car dependent small town living 70-ish couple in average health who won't even drive a car in Calgary if it can be avoided) were taking cycle tracks on their own to meet us in various places. If you were to ask my ten year old daughter, as I did, what her favourite part of our two week trip to Europe was ... would it be the Eiffel Tower, chocolate shops in Brussels, canals in Amsterdam? No, it would be cycling in Breda.

I share this story because I notice that consultation with cyclists and cycling groups was a highlighted part of the approach that has got us this far on the Calgary cycle tracks. I think that it is great that this community was approached but I need to emphasize that the vast majority of future users of these cycle tracks will not be attached to a cycling club or identify themselves as 'cyclists.' They will be young children and older adults like the ones I took to Europe. In fact, if all that happens is the increased use of the tracks by existing cyclists, the project would be unsuccessful.

So why do these tracks matter and why does the track on 1st Street SE in particular matter as an early step?

My background is in ergonomics. I know that when that word gets mentioned, most people immediately begin to think about chairs and computers, but ergonomics embraces all interactions that we have - including in traffic. Good ergonomics has a keen and realist eye on human nature and the associated limits and opportunities. There are some things that we know about people that transcend all ethnic origins and geographic locations. One of those things is the effect of 'place' or context. Place exists in two ways - physical and cultural. And it influences us in almost exclusively unconscious ways. We bristle at this suggestion of unconscious influence because it undermines the sense that we control everything that happens to us and that we deliberately make our choices. The important lesson from this is that if we want to change the way people behave - say, have them ride their bicycles to work, school, shop and more - then we have to invest in creating a place that encourages that behaviour. The presence of the track in such a prominent space makes a physical statement - 'It is right here and it is made for me to use.' It also makes a cultural statement - 'It is cool and encouraged and a priority for people who live here to use this infrastructure.' In other words, it communicates importance.

So once we establish a place, we need to think about it's character to make sure it will be a useful place. Another couple of things we know about people helps with this. One is that we care disproportionately about things that are close to us in time and space. A track on 1st Street SE meets this need because of

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how close it is to places where people work, live, play and shop. A second feature is that we are pretty economical . . . which is to say lazy-ish. So the track needs to connect things in a straight line that keeps travel times down and route-finding to a minimum. It also needs to connect to the places we want to go - which it does. The 1st Street SE track will form a keystone axis of the future cycling infrastructure and rapidly connects the already brilliant recreational paths following the two rivers. These concepts apply in the cycling hotbeds of the Netherlands as much as they do here.

For a bit further elaboration on these points, two years ago I visited with the municipal leaders in the Dutch city of 'den Bosch. They were in the midst of a concerted effort to increase the modal split associated with cycling because it had fallen to an embarrassingly low level of (cough) 20% or something . . . they wanted to get it up over 30% to be competitive with other cities in the Netherlands. Part of their process was to ask people why they cycled - and these questions will be familiar to people who have read the background documents on the Calgary cycle tracks - improved health, decreased cost, benefit to the environment, etc, etc. The funny thing was, most people there just looked at the researchers like they had three heads. They just cycled because it was the natural thing to do - in other words, it was convenient and enjoyable. So the city started a campaign that used a Dutch word I won't try to use here that basically means 'nice cycling' and worked to make sure the infrastructure made that possible.

This is also what we need to strive for in Calgary. The 1st Street SE track is an important anchor step for creating this. The track by itself is not enough since we should have ways of addressing the culture of cycling in workplaces and schools but the track is necessary in the way it has been proposed. Straight, fast, connected. We should also do everything we can to make it pleasant and attractive because that matters too. Unconsciously like most everything else but powerfully.

Some people will express concerns about how the removal of a lane of car traffic will increase congestion in peak times. Congestion is a red herring. There will ALWAYS be congestion at peak hours. Even if a lane were to be added. The solution to congestion is to get people who don't need to be in cars out of their cars and using other modes of transportation. They won't do this if we don't establish the physical and cultural 'place' that supports this choice.

Others will cite research about how these tracks improve the safety of all road users, diversify transportation options, increase social interaction, increase health, decrease costs, improve retail businesses and much more. Safer Calgary has spent a lot of time looking at that data and we agree completely and without reservation. Our Safe and Smooth initiative is born of the realization that traffic deaths and injuries (as we are so frequently reminded) are a leading cause of preventable harm in our city. We also know that the increased socialization of space that comes with bicycles reduces other harm opportunities and increases livability. Mostly, we want it to be a safe and smooth experience for all users. The cycle track can make driving better too. They usually do.

Finally, I will mention that we find ourselves in the Decade of Action on Traffic injuries at the World Health Organization. Not the decade of thinking about it or the decade of handing out pamphlets. Action. This cycle track is a concrete action that is worthy of an internationally designated safe community that Calgary is. I look forward to seeing many people who today are not on bicycles using this track for all sorts of reasons but mostly because it's just nice and natural - safe and smooth.