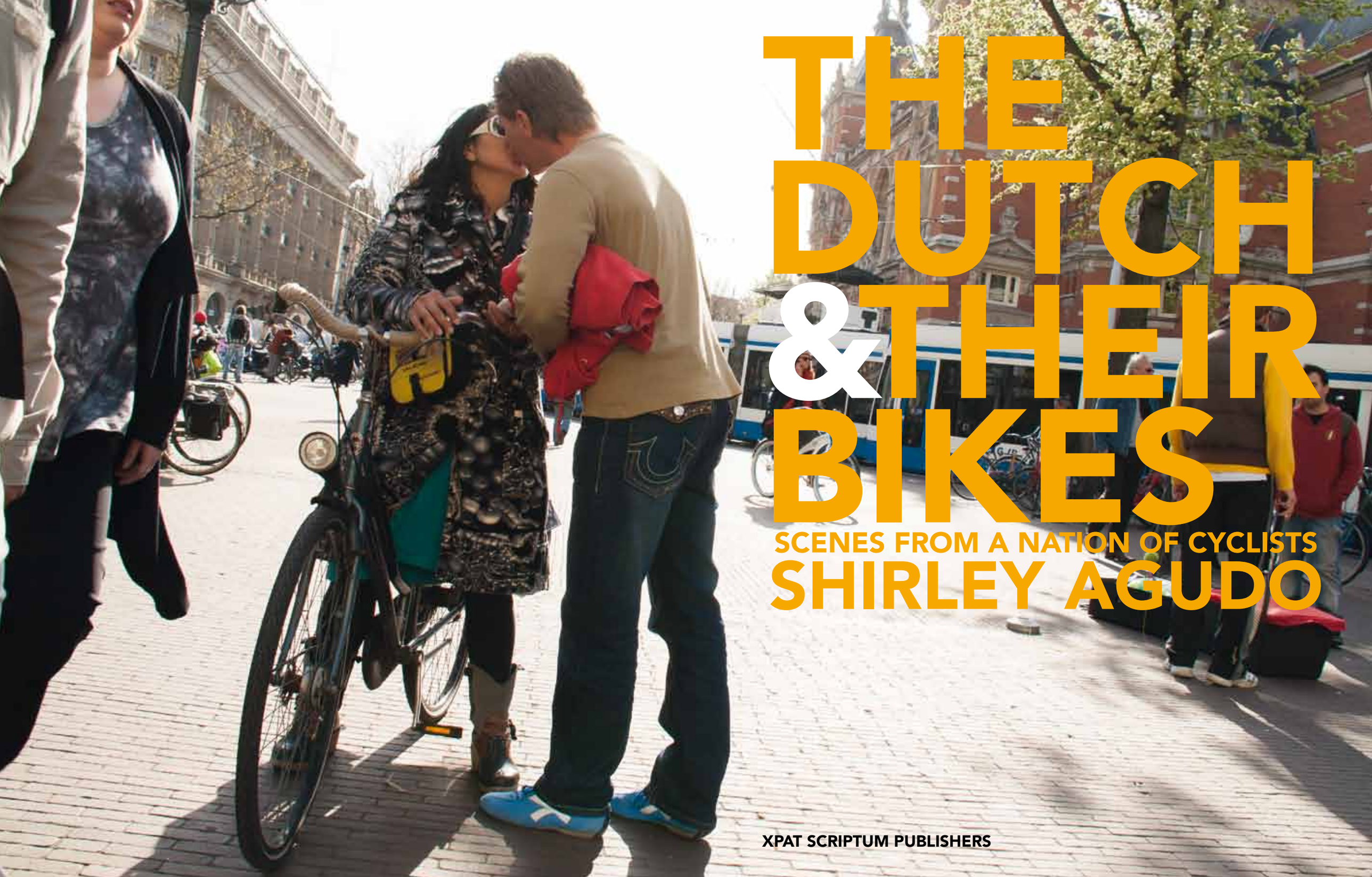

THE DUTCH & THEIR BIKES

SCENES FROM A NATION OF CYCLISTS

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PERSPECTIVE
WHY THE NETHERLANDS BECAME A COUNTRY OF CYCLISTS

by Guido van Woerkom, President and CEO, ANWB, The Royal Dutch Touring Club*

In mid-August (2013) the British Prime Minister David Cameron presented a new national scheme to promote cycling in urban areas and promised to spend 77 million pounds sterling on cycle infrastructure in the UK. In this presentation he pointed to the Netherlands as a role model to follow.

The Netherlands is definitely a country of cyclists. There are more bicycles than inhabitants in the country. And for distances of up to 7.5 km (4.7 mi), the bicycle is the most frequently used mode of transportation. But in what way did the Netherlands develop into a 'biker's country'? Was this built into our genes? Or can it be traced to geographical factors such as the absence of hills or slopes of any importance? I would argue that the answer could be found in our history. The Netherlands became a nation of cyclists due to the actions of specific groups, with a most prominent role being that of the ANWB.

INTRODUCTION OF THE BICYCLE IN THE NETHERLANDS (1870–1895)

The bicycle was not invented in the Netherlands. The first bicycles used in our country were imported. They arrived in the Netherlands in the second half of the 19th century, first from France and later from the UK. In this period, Dutch blacksmiths started to copy these imported bicycles and a national bicycle industry gradually emerged.

Bicycles were first mainly used by young men between the ages of 12 and 25. These youths used their cycles for touring and for racing. The speed of these new machines was very attractive to these young men, but dangerous as well. Contrary to what one might expect, this lack of safety was also an attraction. By riding such an unstable machine, one could prove one's courage.

These young men organized themselves in local bicycle clubs – the first established in Amsterdam around 1870. In 1883 these local bicycle associations decided to form a national cycle association in the form of the ANWB. The British Cycle Association, founded in 1878, was a role model for the Dutch in the years to come.

The ANWB developed as an association that promoted the use of bicycles in the Netherlands. It organized tours and bicycle races and it even stimulated the construction and the exploitation of a race course in the city of Nijmegen. Following in the footsteps of its British example, from 1884 on, the ANWB annually published handbooks containing the addresses of hotels and restaurants worth visiting by cycling tourists, and it also published cycling maps.

Another facility introduced by the ANWB in the Netherlands was the bicycle repair box, which the organization placed at approved hotels and restaurants from 1896 on. These boxes contained not only repair sets, but medical first aid material as well, including material to splint broken bones. In about 1900 the ANWB started to introduce insurance for cyclists to soften the financial pain caused by cycling accidents.

THE BREAKTHROUGH OF THE BICYCLE (1895–1920)

The ANWB was keen on measures to improve the safety of bicycles. The association was very enthusiastic about the so-called Safety Bicycle, which was introduced in 1886. These bicycles, with wheels of the same size, a chain to drive the machine, and other new accessories, were an important step in improving the safety of cyclists and an effective means of increasing the popularity of cycling. After the breakthrough of the Safety Bicycle, increasingly more women and older men also started to ride bicycles. Other types of bicycles fell into disuse within a few years. The effectiveness of the Safety Bike was further improved by the introduction of pneumatic tires and the back-pedal brake as well as by a step-by-step development of bicycle lights. In the 1890s the number of cyclists in the Netherlands started to increase steeply, and membership in the ANWB started to grow steadily as well.

The ANWB also influenced the use made of these machines. From the early 1890s on, the association campaigned for the work-related use of bicycles. In its periodical *De Kampioen* (The Champion) there were articles on the usefulness of bicycles for telegram deliverymen, doctors and army messenger couriers.

In 1900 the ANWB transformed itself from an association of cyclists into a tourist organization aiming to serve tourists traveling by whatever means they wanted to use. The decision to transform was inspired by the introduction of the first motorcars on Dutch roads

*The Royal Dutch Touring Club ANWB, founded 1883

in 1896. Beginning in 1902 the ANWB supervised quality controls of the petrol sold in the Netherlands and soon started to organize the distribution of petrol themselves. Other facilities for motorists followed suit. The ANWB ceased to be an association of cyclists only. But the ANWB also continued its activities aimed at cyclists. The association advised the Dutch cycle industry on ways to improve the safety and the user-friendliness of the existing models of bikes. The ANWB also stepped up its efforts to make the very strict municipal cycling regulations more lenient. It advocated more relaxed speed limits on inner city streets and drafted parts of a new national traffic code in 1906 to encompass all local traffic legislation.

The ANWB also focused on cycle paths. From the late 1890s on, the association advocated the construction of special cycle paths since the surface of many main routes was not fit for cycling. It experimented with new, more cycle-friendly types of road surfaces and even bought its own steamroller to facilitate the construction of macadam cycle paths. From 1908 on, it engaged in a growing network of local and regional cycle path associations in the Netherlands with the aim of constructing a national network of recreational cycle paths. The association even had special road signs designed for these cycle paths in the form of so-called 'paddenstoelen' (mushrooms). These days, more than 5,000 of these mushrooms continue to decorate all of the important recreational areas in the Netherlands. These road signs are one of the most celebrated symbols of the ANWB. When in the 1920s the number of bicycles rose further to more than two million, hundreds of thousands of cyclists flocked to the countryside or the seaside on spring and summer weekends.

MASSIVE BICYCLE USE (1920–1940)

More striking, and even more important, was the rise of bicycle use in the urban environment. In the 1920s, streets in Dutch cities were filled with tens of thousands of cyclists. Rush-hour traffic counts revealed that about 80% of all urban traffic at this time consisted of cyclists.

Workers, clerks and office girls plied the streets together with businessmen or bankers. The ANWB was very instrumental in this phenomenon. The association advocated the use of the so-called 'Dutch bike', a black bicycle with a sturdy frame and suitable safety accessories enabling its riders to bike in a straight, upright way in contrast to the more sportive way of riding a bicycle 30 years earlier. This type of bicycle, advocated in the ANWB periodical *De Kampioen*, was a type suitable for all classes and walks of life. It

became one of the features of Dutch society. Not only did Dutch ministers bike to and from their work at the ministries, but the Dutch queen and her daughter also adopted the bicycle in this period. When the German prince Bernhard had to be presented to the Dutch population as a suitable husband for princess and future queen Juliana, a bicycle ride was chosen. In 1939, one out of every two Dutchmen possessed a bicycle.

When in the 1920s plans were drafted to modernize national, provincial and municipal road networks to accommodate the increasing numbers of motor vehicles, cyclists were not forgotten. Cycle paths were constructed in new urban districts and next to new provincial roads and national highways. When the first motorways were constructed in the Netherlands from 1934 on, accompanying cycle paths were an integral part of these schemes. Perhaps even more importantly, planners entitled the cyclists to a continued right of way and conceived of streets as spaces where different modes of traffic, including bicycles, would mix. Traffic regulations reflected this notion. At junctions, traffic from the right had the right of way, regardless of whether the traffic participant drove a car or rode a bike. In 1941 the German occupiers changed this rule into a priority for motorized traffic to facilitate their motorized columns.

UNDER PRESSURE (1940–1970)

In the course of the 1950s, the existing traffic situation in the Netherlands changed completely due to the start of mass motorization. From a mere 47,000 passenger cars in 1946, the number of motorcars in the Netherlands increased steeply in the 1950s, under the influence

Prinses Juliana
– former queen
of the Netherlands
(1948–1980)

of economic growth and rising wages, to a level of 500,000 passenger cars in 1960. In 1970, 2.5 million cars were registered in the Netherlands. The national government reacted to this growth with an accelerated construction of motorways, and municipal authorities initiated the construction of ring roads and new parking facilities.

For bicycle users, less street space was available and road safety declined. For the first period in Dutch history, the number of people using bicycles decreased. The car replaced the bicycle as the most frequently used mode of transportation.

But the rising tide of automobile traffic in cities with the related congestion and air pollution immediately attracted its counter forces. In 1965 the Amsterdam movement Provo put forward a scheme to introduce white bicycles for free general use on the streets in order to combat the increasing air pollution and congestion. They stated: "The asphalt terror of the Amsterdam petit bourgeoisie must be halted." The initiative attracted much publicity and even resulted in similar initiatives in British cities such as Oxford and York. In Amsterdam, meanwhile, white bicycles distributed by Provo were soon stolen or otherwise disappeared. But the scheme struck a chord and its memory stayed in the collective conscience, both in the Netherlands and abroad.

THE BICYCLE RENAISSANCE (1970–1990)

The 1970s can be seen as a period of the renaissance of bicycle use in the Netherlands. Publications in the ANWB periodical *Verkeerstechniek* (Traffic Engineering) revealed an emerging awareness among traffic engineers of the need to pay more attention to the bicycle. Traffic counts convinced them that bicycle use had decreased less than expected. Traffic engineers working for local authorities stressed the urgency to address the needs of cyclists in addition to the attention already given to the needs of motorists.

The staying power of the bicycle in Dutch cities also was a cause for alarm among traffic engineers. With the growing dominance of motorized traffic on urban streets, the average vehicle speed increased as well. The result was an increase of casualties among cyclists.

The engineers' favorite solution was the construction of separate bicycle lanes. This was a difficult task in already built-up urban environments, given the scarcity of space. Under these circumstances, traffic engineers decided to also accept streets with a mixed traffic flow of cars and bicycles and they adapted their designs to enable this mixed use. Under the name of *woonerf*, these streets were constructed not only in newly built urban quarters, but also laid out in older quarters. They were designed to slow motorists down in order to facilitate cyclists and pedestrians and the recreational use of the street. Non-motorized traffic had priority on the new streets, and a maximum speed limit of 20 km (12.4 mi) per hour was imposed.

The construction of cycle lanes and *woonerven* was boosted by the growing environmental awareness stimulated by the report of the Club of Rome (1972) and the first oil crisis of 1973. The autumn of 1973 saw the implementation of petrol distribution and the introduction of 'car-free' Sundays, enabling cyclists to cycle on empty motorways. In these circumstances, human-powered cycles seemed a better alternative to the motorcar with its dependency on petrol.

In 1974, white bicycles were introduced for free use by visitors to the National Park the Hoge Veluwe. This policy was directly inspired by the 1965 Provo initiative. In 1975 the ANWB stepped in and donated dozens and later hundreds of white bicycles. Nowadays, 1,700 white bicycles offer free transportation to the visitors of the Hoge Veluwe and they have become almost as much of a tourist attraction as the park itself and its art museum. In the same period the ANWB started the *Nationale Fietsdagen* (National Bike Days), a hugely popular recreational bicycle event held every spring.

In 1977 the budget of the Dutch Ministry of Transport earmarked 30 million guilders for the constructing of bicycle lanes. More than half of this was intended to build two through-cycle routes in the cites of The Hague and Tilburg. The cycle route built in the southern city of Tilburg proved controversial. The ceremonial opening of the cycle route in this city by Minister of Traffic Tj. Westerterp in 1977 was flanked by

PERSPECTIVE
DUTCH CYCLING CULTURE

by Jos Sluijsmans, Fietsdiensten.nl

Bicycle culture in the Netherlands is really becoming mature. Before, cycling was mainly functional. This counts for the bicycles for everyday use as well as for racing bikes and mountainbikes. Nowadays, Dutch cycling is much more influenced by designers, creative entrepreneurs and artists. The bicycle has become a lifestyle product and is not only functional anymore.

A challenge I see is in the rise of cargo bikes. The exponential rise of cargo bike usage on the streets of Europe, combined with the appetite of users to celebrate the use of the humble bicycle for carrying anything from their kids and shopping to commercial freight, will make this niche market more interesting for various commercial parties.

The extended use of bicycles and cargo bikes, e-bikes (electric bikes) and velomobiles makes new infrastructure necessary as well. The amount of super cycle highways, cycling bridges and cycling tunnels is really expanding. For the Dutch, the know-how and expertise of mobility management and cycling infrastructure is, apart from the bikes themselves, going to be a very interesting export product. Cycling will be, in fact, the 10th topsector in the Dutch economy.

According to Global Industry Analysts, Inc., one of the world's largest market research publishers, the global market for bicycles is forecasted to exceed US $78 billion by the year 2015. Today, 50% of the world population of nearly 7 billion people live in cities. By 2050, 70% of the then-expected global population of 9 billion people will live in the cities. When we want to keep on moving, the bicycle is the most energy-, speed-, and cost-efficient method of mobility.

The Dutch spend about €30 per person per year on cycling infrastructure. When other countries would spend the same for their inhabitants that live in the cities, that would come to an investment of 90 to 120 billion euros a year, and 180 billion in 2050.

I believe Dutch business is still not fully aware of the opportunities this opens. To increase this awareness is the biggest challenge for Dutch cycling culture and cycling advocacy for the coming years.

GRONINGEN
TEN YEARS TODAY

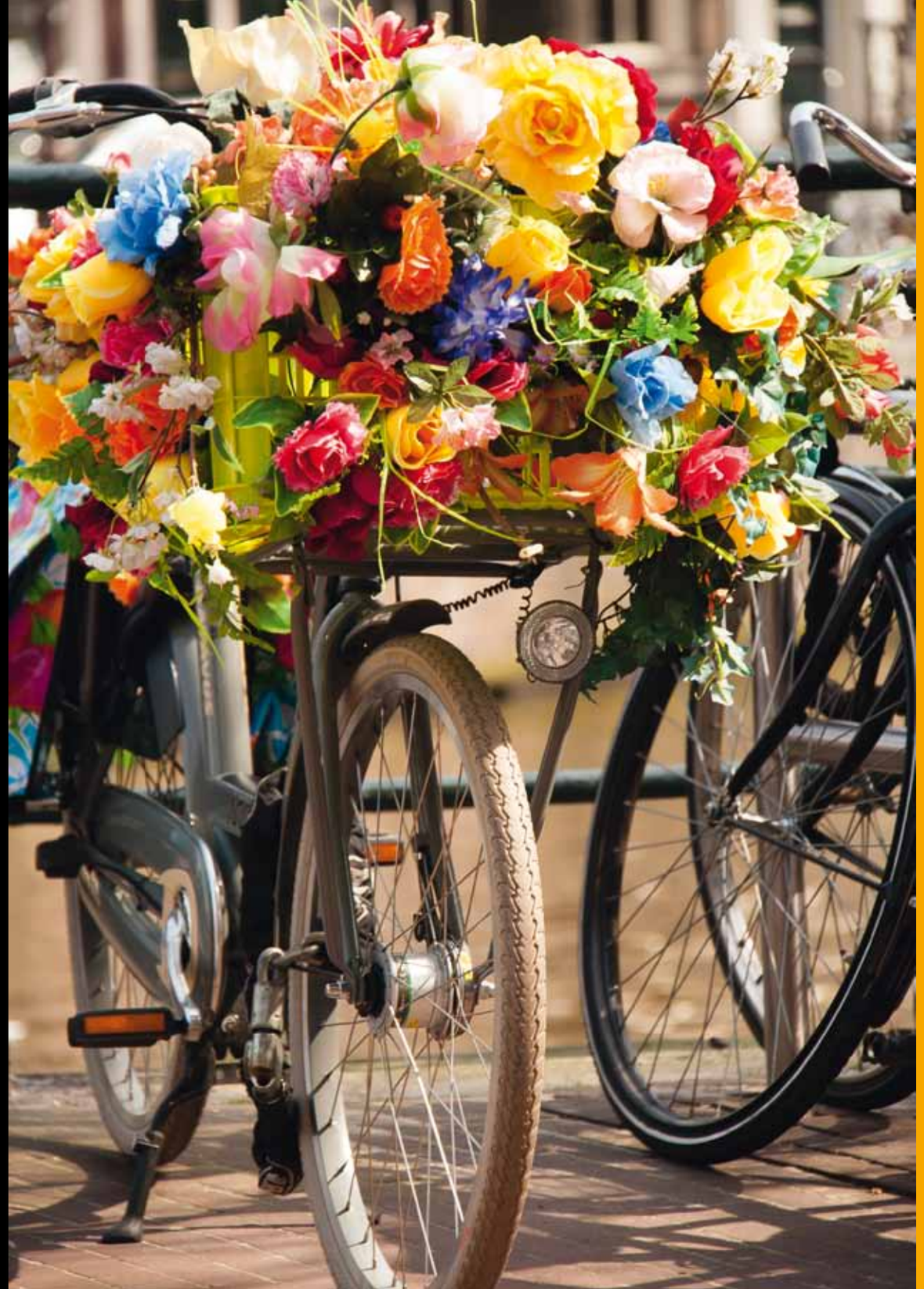
"Few nations are as bike crazy as the Netherlands. The Dutch have long known that bike travel is efficient, friendly and good for one's health. We at the United Nations, and our neighbors here in New York City, are catching on and catching up. …We thank you, the Government and the people of the Netherlands, for yet another display of support for the United Nations and for our efforts to build a sustainable future for all."

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
(at ceremony marking Bike Rack Donation
by the Netherlands, July 31, 2013)

"Amsterdam is a beautiful city with a relaxed pace, a highly diverse population and a million other things I like. But mostly I like it because it's the undisputed cycling capital of the world. Amsterdam, like other Dutch cities, was only able to maintain its charm, history, quiet neighborhoods in the center, and incredible density and compactness because most people ride bicycles instead of driving automobiles."

Henry Cutler, American founder of WorkCycles,
a Dutch bike manufacturer, in an interview
by Alex Armitage for his blog, 'Red Kite Prayer'
(March 25, 2010)

READING IS
sexy



‘WHY IS CYCLING POPULAR IN THE NETHERLANDS: INFRASTRUCTURE OR 100+ YEARS OF HISTORY?’

“It’s not the same in the Netherlands. People of all classes ride bikes. It’s not just because of the joined-up bike paths. The Netherlands isn’t a country of cyclists; it’s a country where people ride bikes a lot. It’s Europe’s top cycling nation. And it’s been top of the pile since 1911.”

Carlton Reid, Executive Editor of Bike Biz.com and Bikehub.co.uk, and author of *Roads Were Not Built for Cars*

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