

WINNIPEG'S PLAIN BICYCLE PROJECT

How the Omafiet Can Open the Door to Cycling For All

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ABSTRACT

Biking is an effective and efficient mode of transport. In Canadian cities, however, it is often difficult and unsafe to bike. As a result, there have been increasing efforts to develop bicycle infrastructure such as protected bike lanes which would improve safety and comfort levels. Perhaps equally important, though, for creating a culture where biking is an 'everyday' form of transport, is that people have access to bicycles that allow them to make these biking trips comfortably. When comparing cycling in bike-friendly countries such as the Netherlands to Canada, this becomes apparent.

This Case-In-Point looks at how the Plain Bicycle Project addresses this challenge for cycling in Winnipeg, MB. By providing a type of bicycle built for comfort, utility, and functionality, the writers believe that more people can use these bikes than those who usually identify as 'cyclists.' This has equity implications since the demographics of cyclists in Canadian cities don't tend to match cities' overall demographics.

The report begins by providing an overview of equity in Canadian cycling. Afterwards, the Plain Bicycle Project is introduced, with a description of the benefits it offers. Recommendations are then provided for other cities that may benefit from their own Plain Bicycle Project. Lastly, the implications of this project on active transportation planning are considered.



1.0 / INTRODUCTION

To support utilitarian cycling, cities across Canada have, to differing extents, expanded their bike infrastructure networks. As a result of this and other macro-level trends, more Canadians are cycling today than twenty years ago (Assunção-Denis & Tomalty, 2019; Verlinden et al., 2019). At the same time, bicycling is still often not safe or enjoyable for a lot of people, and therefore only a relatively small portion of the population bikes for utility. For example, in Vancouver and Montreal, two cities recognized around as being bike-friendly (Copenhagenize, 2019), only 6.1% and 3.9% of the population bike to work (Statistics Canada, 2016). These numbers are relatively small compared to other bike-friendly cities around the world, like Amsterdam and Copenhagen, where 30% and 53% of trips are taken by bike, respectively (CIVITAS, 2020).

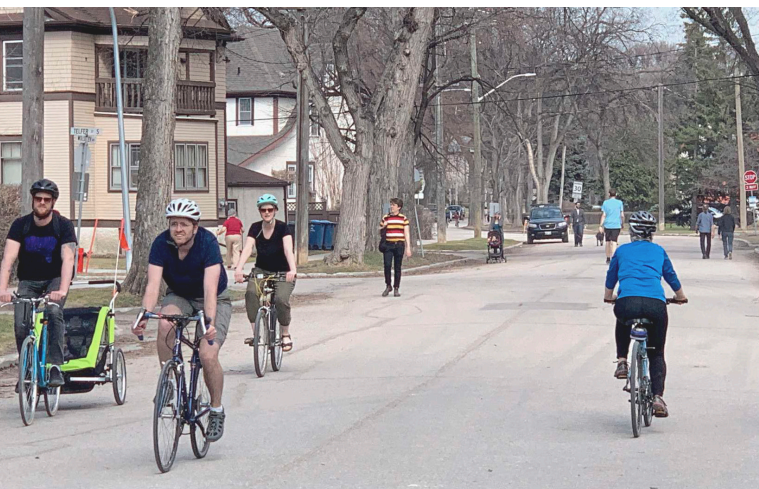


FIGURE 2 | People biking in Winnipeg

One gap that has been identified in cities like Winnipeg is the lack of a 'casual biking culture.' In countries where biking is a more popular mode of transport, like the Netherlands, it is characterized as an 'everyday' and 'normal' activity. People of all ages, genders, races, and body types bike because it is the most convenient way to get from point A to B (Robert, 2018). This culture contrasts to the bike culture in cities like Winnipeg, where biking is not 'mainstream,' specific demographics bike more than others and a substantial portion of those who bike here do so for exercise and recreation instead of transportation.

2.0 / BACKGROUND

Inequities in Cycling in Canada

One characteristic of cycling in Canadian cities is that specific groups are underrepresented among the group that does bike. A 2014 study found that the percentage of the Canadian population that had biked in the previous 12 months was roughly 47% for males and 34% for females (Statistics Canada, 2017). This difference contrasts with high-cycling countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, where women tend to cycle more than men (Cycling Embassy of Denmark, 2020; Harms & Kansen, 2018). This Canadian study also found that older age groups cycle less than younger ones. In high-cycling countries, age gradients also exist, but the proportion of trips in the older age groups is still high, with 12% of all trips for Germans 65 and older being taken by bike and 24% for the Dutch elderly (Pucher & Buehler, 2008). Lastly, a diversity of body types has also emerged as an area where cycling does not reflect society's overall diversity. While this does not appear to have been the focus of much scholarly literature, there are increasing efforts to change the perception of who rides bikes (Hansen-Gillsi, 2021).

Addressing Inequities in Canadian Cycling

To address these inequities, those involved in active transportation planning are increasingly considering where the quickest and most significant impacts can occur. For example, the Health Promoter and Scarborough Cycles Coordinator at Access Alliance, Dr. Marvin Macaraig, noted the following (Buchanan, 2020):

"In Toronto's inner suburbs, there is much that can be done quickly, and relatively cheaply that will get more people riding. Many major roads in these areas are wide and can likely be reconfigured with bike lanes and/or multi-use paths beside the existing sidewalk, with virtually no impact to existing traffic."

— Dr. Marvin Macaraig, Health Promoter and Scarborough Cycle Coordinator

In a study that looked at how equity is addressed in official cycling plans across Canada, Doran et al. (2021) found that some but not all plans addressed equity in a meaningful way. The researchers identified opportunities to pursue greater equity, with recommendations including greater local engagement and decision-making processes to address local residents' needs and concerns, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

Lastly, the Toronto Centre for Active Transportation provides several actions to "make trends more inclusive and ensure that all groups have access to cycling." (Toronto Centre for Active Transportation, n.d.). These actions are as follows:

- Establish a community identity as a place where people cycle. Create a program name, logo and brand elements to unify efforts to promote cycling and build a compelling and positive media and marketing presence.
- Promote diverse images of cycling through social marketing, including people of different races, genders and ages using different types of bicycles in both urban and suburban environments.
- Collaborate with public health authorities, community health centres, parks and recreation and environmental groups on programs that encourage cycling as part of a healthy, sustainable lifestyle.
- Recognize that cycling is increasing in popularity with populations outside of the young, urban professional category, and tailor programming to reach these groups, including women, older adults, newcomers and those living outside of downtown.
- Analyze your existing and planned cycling network through an equity lens to identify potential disparities in access based on income, race, neighbourhood, immigration status, etc.
- Provide programs to increase access to bicycles in lower-income neighbourhoods.

Not-for-profit Bike Providers

Interestingly, providing bikes to people does not appear as a standard action listed to address inequities in cycling. However, this is not to say that there are no organizations that provide bicycles to promote equity. Cyclo Nord-Sud, for example, is one of Canada's oldest cycling institutions and has sent more than 60,000 used bicycles to partners across Africa and Latin America (Canadian Cycling Magazine, 2019). Bikes Without Borders is

another charity that provides individuals in marginalized communities bicycles to increase access to community services and networks that allow individuals to meet their basic needs (Bikes Without Borders, n.d.). There are likely dozens more organizations across Canada that provide similar services. Nonetheless, the major focus for equity and cycling appears to address cycling infrastructure, the promotion of cycling and collaboration with organizations dedicated to these populations.

3.0 PLAIN BIKE PROJECT

Similar to Cyclo Nord-Sud and Bikes Without Borders, the Plain Bicycle Project also provides bikes to people. What makes the Plain Bicycle Project unique in North America, however, is that it provides a specific type of bike, the omafiet, or "grandma bicycle" in Dutch (referred to as "plain bikes" by the organization). Omafietsen (plural of omafiet), in short, are bikes that are designed for 'everyday' and 'normal' transport, like getting from A to B. Because of this, people who would not usually identify as 'cyclists' are often more drawn to omafietsen since they offer an easy and efficient way to achieve mobility. As a result, these bikes are often used by people underrepresented in Canadian cycling, such as women, the elderly and people with diverse body types. The table on the following page demonstrates some of the benefits of the omafiet's design.

Another key beneficial aspect of the omafiet's design is that it can allow users to engage in 'conversational' or 'sociable' cycling (cycling side-by-side and holding a conversation) more easily. The Plain Bicycle Project views this as an important trait of the omafiet since holding a conversation is an essential behaviour that can make cycling more enjoyable. Additionally, the bike's design forces the bike user to have their head up, enhancing their field of vision. This can be helpful for overall safety, as well as important for teaching children about biking.



FIGURE 3 | A Winnipegger riding an omafiet

Bike Component	Description
High handlebars	These allow the user to have their back upright. This position is more similar to sitting in a chair and provides greater comfort, allowing for conversation between people biking side-by-side and greater visibility for the bike user, enhancing safety.
Curved handlebars	Handlebars curve in towards the rider to make for a more comfortable, relaxing ride.
Step-through frame	Unlike most North American bikes, which have crossbars that force the user to swing one of their legs up, omafietsen have a step-through frame, making getting on and off the bike easier and potentially less revealing if the user is wearing a skirt or dress.
Front and rear-fenders	Fenders block water and other materials splashing from the bike tire to the user's clothing.
Skirt guard and chainguard	The skirt guards prevent articles of clothing from getting in the spokes as the user rides. The chain guard also provides a barrier between the user's clothes and the chain and helps protect the chain from the elements, making it last longer.
Rear rack	Racks allow users to carry objects on their bikes. In the Netherlands, it is common to see cyclists carrying another person on the back of these bikes.
In-hub gears or no Gears	Gears are internal, meaning there is less need for maintenance than derailleurs which can often go out of alignment.



FIGURE 4 | Omafiets or 'Plain Bicycle'

Lastly, all omafietsen are unisex and the same shape with at most a colour difference. As a result, they do away with the peer pressure aspect of choosing the type of bike to ride and a particular style. One implication of this is that children ride the same kind of bike their parents ride, allowing for a seamless transition to adulthood. Additionally, these bikes can suit people with a diverse range of height and weight.

While omafietsen provide several benefits to the user, some aspects may be considered negative. Most significantly, because of the omafiets's various features and low-maintenance design features, the bikes are composed of heavy materials, making them built to last instead of speed. As a result, omafietsen are relatively heavy and more challenging to ride in hilly terrain.

Overall, however, omafietsen are essential for the Netherlands' casual bike culture since the bikes allow for a comfortable, easy and safe ride while using the country's relatively high-level bike infrastructure. As shown in the images below, it is quite common to see more 'everyday' types of cyclists, such as people in work clothes or people on a dinner date, on omafietsen. Additionally, because these bikes are so sturdy, pragmatic and comfortable, they are often perceived as bikes anybody can use. As a result, it is common to see everyone from teenagers to working adults to retirees using them.



FIGURE 5 | Dutch schoolboys on omafietsen

Access to Omafietsen

Canadians interested in purchasing an omafiets will find them relatively expensive, often over \$1,000 (Amsterdam Bike Company, n.d.) and hard to find. Within most stores that sell bicycles, commuter bikes tend to be much more "sporty" than omafietsen. Illustrating this, the photo below shows the listings that come up when searching for "commuter bikes" on the Walmart website. Most of these bicycles are more similar to sporty hybrids and road bikes than omafietsen considering many come without a rack, fenders or a kickstand. As a result of this gap in the market, the Plain Bicycle Project started importing new and used omafietsen from the Netherlands.

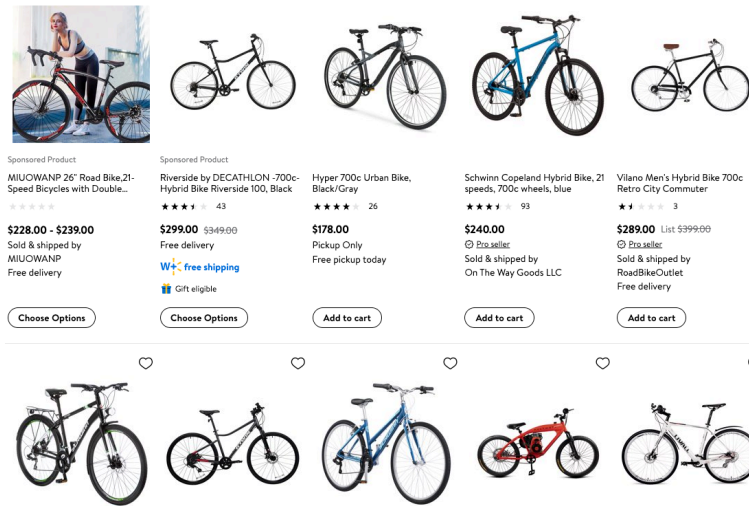


FIGURE 6 | Most commuter bikes in Canada don't provide the same levels of comfort as omafietsen

Plain Bicycle Project's Mission

According to the Plain Bicycle Project's mission statement, they aspire to, among other things, "dismantle barriers and spread this secret [of] a sustainable transportation culture everywhere." While the bikes are not given away freely, they are sold for a substantially cheaper amount than new ones, \$360. This is done by buying the bikes in bulk at a used omafiets auction in the Netherlands and transporting them to Winnipeg in a shipping container. Further, the sales go directly into developing more bike trails, bike advocacy, and purchasing more omafietsen. The following quote explains the choice of name as "Plain Bicycle Project":

The most common type of bicycle in the Netherlands is surprisingly hard to find [in Winnipeg]. That doesn't necessarily make them special. They are certainly no more/no less special than a ubiquitous grey Honda Civic, for example. Ironically, while this project has bicycles and technology at the heart, it is actually about the exact opposite. It is not about bicycles at all, rather about the lack of need to think about the bicycle."

— Plain Bicycle Project

Plain Bicycle Project and Getting Underrepresented Groups on Bikes

An essential part of the Plain Bicycle Project's mission is getting traditionally underrepresented groups in cycling on a bike. Anders Swanson, the collaborator for this Case-In-Point project and one of the many people behind the Plain Bicycle Project, brought this up during my talk with him when elaborating on how "normal bikes are not for everyone." Reasons for this include how regular bikes can be uncomfortable for older-age people, as they must bend their backs for sometimes extended periods. Many women may not be comfortable with traditional bikes since it requires them to also hunch over, sometimes in a position that could be considered revealing. Swanson also noted the attractiveness factor of omafietsen. He emphasized the idea of riding a bike in a comfortable position, where you have greater visibility and can wear clothing that is geared towards the destination rather than the trip can be appealing to many people. The bikes' design also makes it easier for the elderly and those with diverse body types to cycle than more sporty bikes. This is a result of the bike's design philosophy, which is centred around the idea of the bike as a comfortable, pragmatic and stylish way to get around.

Plain Bicycle Projects in Other Cities?

The Plain Bicycle Project provides many benefits to Winnipeg's cycling environment, begging the question of whether the project can be spread to other cities. The most obvious challenge for omafietsen is their weight and difficulty going up hills, especially if the user carries something with them. When I brought up this concern with Anders Swanson, he noted that even when this is the case, the omafiet model has potential since cities are often only hilly in a small section of the city overall. Vancouver, for example, is often associated with the nearby mountains, but much of the city is relatively flat, including the downtown core and densely populated and bike-friendly West End neighbourhood.

The emergence of new technology to aid riders, such as e-bikes (see Figure 7), was also identified as a possibility to make the omafiet more feasible in hillier areas. Lastly, other models of bikes exist that might be a better fit for different areas. Since Winnipeg's flatness is similar to the Netherlands, the omafiet model is particularly effective. However, other utility models might fit better for other cities, such as the German stadsfiet or the English roadster. It should be noted, though, that utility bikes are standard in hilly cities across Europe, including Basel and Bern in Switzerland, where 23% and 15% of trips are made by bike, respectively (Deksoster & Schollaert, 1999).

It should be noted that the Plain Bicycle Project has received generous local, national, and even international media coverage. According to one organizer with the group, there have been several inquiries from people in other cities across Canada and the US interested in pursuing the same kind of project or opening an omafiet shop.



FIGURE 7 | An electric version of the utility bike

4.0

LESSONS LEARNED

The emergence of the Plain Bicycle Project in Winnipeg and the introduction of omafietsen on city streets transform many status-quo ideas about active transportation planning in Canadian cities. For one, the increased feasibility of conversational cycling suggests that wider bike lanes may be necessary. Rather than bike lanes wide enough for just one cyclist travelling in a direction, lanes should allow for side-by-side riders as well. Additionally, since younger adults and teenagers often use omafietsen, bike infrastructure should safely accommodate these bike users. This might mean taking into consideration them biking in a squiggly path rather than straight lines.

Second, the improved field of vision provides opportunities for wayfinding and bike traffic management to emphasize eye contact rather than signalization and traditional signage. Greater field of visions for cyclists could encourage greater micro-negotiations in the public space, which analyses have shown is how bicyclists tend to act, i.e. more like a flock of birds than the robotic and mechanized landscape created by automobiles.

Lastly, as omafietsen facilitate an 'everyday cycling culture,' it is important to plan all ages and abilities bike infrastructure to 'everyday' destinations. These include but are not limited to grocery stores, pharmacies, schools, workplaces, transit stations, and parks.

As planners try to encourage more city residents to take a bike for utilitarian trips, there might have to be greater recognition of the limitations with most current bike typologies. Many of these limitations likely lead to some of the underrepresentation we see with specific population groups who cycle, such as women, the elderly and people with different body types. Providing more types of bikes, such as the omafiet, is a way to get marginalized populations on a bike and let them enjoy the many benefits of cycling. As more people use omafietsen, planners should make greater efforts to plan for conversational cycling, such as by providing wider bike lanes.

To conclude, this Case-In-Point project identifies some of the gaps in cycling in Canada and looks at one project trying a novel way to address the gaps. By providing traditional Dutch-style bikes in Winnipeg, the Plain Bicycle Project offers a type of product that is more attractive for a large group of people and helps build an 'everyday' or 'plain bike' culture. This has serious implications for making bicycling a normal way of getting



FIGURE 8 | Winnipegger riding an omafiet

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Image Resources

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