

Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Curbing Traffic: The Human Case for Fewer Cars in Our Lives

By Melissa Bruntlett and Chris Bruntlett

Curbing Traffic: The Human Case for Fewer Cars in Our Lives is 218 pages, including an introduction, conclusion and 10 chapters. There are also authors bios, acknowledgments and a bibliography. It was published in 2021.

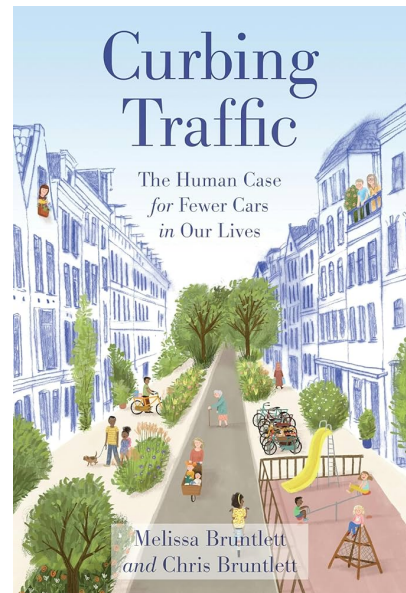
Melissa and Chris Bruntlett are Canadian authors who live in the Netherlands, where they work for organizations involved in urban mobility issues.

This is a book about what the Bruntletts and their children found when they moved to a city that had become a world leader in creating alternatives to automobiles. The city is Delft, a midsize city between Rotterdam and The Hague.

What did they find? A safer, kinder, quieter, more connected and less polluted city than the one they had known in Vancouver. It was a place where they felt secure letting their children, ages 10 and 13, explore the city on bicycles. The family shopped, commuted to work and traveled to schools and other cities on foot, on bikes or by transit. In their first five years in Delft, the Bruntletts report, they rented a car only once, to return a bed to an IKEA store.

In a sense, then, *Curbing Traffic* is a vision of what a “car-light” or “low-car” urban area looks like and works like. Atlantans have little experience with such places, so the book can help them visualize a city with few cars and see its benefits.

But the book has a second purpose, which is to explain how Delft got to this place. And here’s the surprise: Until the 1970s, Delft and the rest of Holland were headed down the same road as the U.S., Canada and Great Britain, surrendering huge amounts of land to cars. But while other countries accepted automobiles as the sole transportation choice of the future, the Dutch did not. And Delft became the place where many of the alternatives to automobiles were tried first and then perfected. The book tells us how this happened.



The book has a third purpose. It tells us how the parts must fit together to create alternatives to cars. Example: We need good street design to make cyclists safe. But people will not take to bikes in large numbers unless the streets also form a network that moves cyclists efficiently to the places they need to go. Put another way, safe infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient. The bike lanes and paths must also take people about the city in a direct way.

So why did the Netherlands turn against the car and toward bikes, transit and pedestrian travel? It began in 1970 when there were rising concerns about children's safety in streets. Delft's answer was a mobility plan based, the Bruntletts write, on "the fundamental idea that every child should be able to walk safely to school, a shop or a friend's house without crossing a busy (and dangerous) arterial road."

The plan created separate but interconnected networks for bikes, transit and cars. The best way to keep children safe, planners felt, was to keep most cars out of neighborhoods. So, they made it easy to drive on outer ring roads but difficult to cut through residential areas. Once they were in such places, motorists found that speeds were slow, streets were winding, and drivers had to yield to pedestrians and cyclists. The Dutch planners called this "filtered permeability."

And as they were making it harder to drive through these neighborhoods, planners were making it much easier to cycle through them, with bike lanes painted bright red that were wide enough so people could ride two abreast or pass slower cyclists. They also installed signs warning motorists that cyclists and pedestrians were the main users of these streets, so motorists should act accordingly. Again, "filtered permeability."

Eventually, Delft developed three types of cycling networks, called "urban," "district" and "neighborhood" networks. Urban networks were for trips of two miles or so and were aimed at getting people to work. The district networks were for a trips of a mile or so and were for shopping trips. Neighborhood networks were for journeys of a half mile or so. They were aimed at getting children safely to school and back.

A key was building the infrastructure that connected these networks, using tunnels, bridges and roundabouts designed for cyclists, not cars. The result: a huge upsurge in cycling, which allowed Delft authorities to turn suddenly unused car parking spaces into hundreds of bike racks.

The Bruntletts make it clear that none of this came about without careful planning, a high degree of public participation and extensive collaboration among public agencies.

Example: How transit accommodates—and rewards—cycling. If you cycle to a bus stop in Delft, there's a good chance there will be bike parking there. You cannot bring your bike on buses or trains—that would cause delays and inconvenience to other riders—but at your destination there will almost certainly be bike-sharing facilities. So you can begin on your bike, continue on transit and complete your journey on a shared bike that's available for a few Euros.

And if you cycle to the main train station in Delft, where you catch trains to Rotterdam or The Hague, you'll find a cyclist's paradise, enough indoor storage for nearly 11,000 bikes. Having a problem with your bike? There's a service desk at the station offering repairs to private bikes while you're on your trip.

This, in a nutshell, is the collaborative approach toward transportation that the Dutch have become so good at. The Bruntletts write of transit officials, "rather than treating the bicycle as a competitor, it is seen as an ally—one that connects passengers to their origin and destination; a critical component of the seamless door-to-door journey."

What are the benefits of living in a "low-car" city? The authors list them. It's safer. In streets designed for bikes, bicycle accidents are less serious than in places where curbs are high and cars whiz by. And then there are the lives saved by not having so many cars. In the U.S. 10.6 people are killed every year in

traffic fatalities. In the Netherlands, it's 3.4 deaths a year. If America had Holland's fatality rate, the Bruntletts write, it "would save 20,000 American lives per year."

It's quieter. There's less noise in places where bicycles predominate and cars are rare. It's healthier. The exercise that cycling offers is good for your physical and mental health, the Bruntletts say. It facilitates endorphin production, the "feel-good chemicals our brain requires." Also, being outdoors (as opposed to being in cars) connects us with nature and others, reducing feelings of isolation.

It makes life more affordable for families. In the U.S., cars cost owners an average of \$12,544 a year in payments, insurance and maintenance, and car debt is rising fast. Living in a place that allows you to have one less car could easily save families \$1,000 a month. It accommodates aging in place and people with disabilities. Cycling infrastructure is also available for wheelchairs, scooters, e-bikes and adult tricycles.

It uses land in better ways than parking cars, which makes urban areas livelier and more interesting. They point out that in Los Angeles County nearly half of the land is devoted to car transportation and parking. Surface parking lots alone take up 100 square miles of land there or four times the land mass of Manhattan. The Bruntletts add dryly, "That's a lot of public space that could otherwise be used for public parks."

Two other interesting facts from *Curbing Traffic*. First, the Dutch have not eliminated cars. About a third of trips there are made by private automobiles, a third by transit, and a third by walking or cycling. Still, that's vastly different than in the U.S., where five percent of trips are made by walking or cycling, five percent by transit and 90 percent by automobiles.

Second, the Dutch approach to traffic engineering—routing cars away from neighborhoods and onto what are called "flow roads"—actually speeds up auto trips. One reason: There aren't that many drivers, so when you hit a flow road where you can go 60 miles per hour, that's how fast you actually go. It is, the Bruntletts note, "the textbook definition of a win-win scenario."

Are the Dutch highly trusting people, and does this explain why they've accepted so many changes to mobility so freely? Yes and no. International surveys indicate that the Dutch do have high levels of social trust, and the Bruntletts say it may have something to do with how cyclists communicate, with a head nod before making a turn. This constant silent dialogue and cooperation by so many people does build trust, they say.

But it doesn't mean that the Dutch accept government decisions easily. One of the most interesting stories in *Curbing Traffic* is about how city officials removed parking from the center of Delft, where many restaurants and stores were clustered around a historic market. The city wanted to remove 150 parking spots, replacing them with places for outdoor dining.

Restaurant owners and shopkeepers were outraged. Who would want to sit outside in the winter months when it is cold and wet, they wanted to know. "We're not the Mediterranean," they protested.

So city officials made a clever suggestion: Let us run a six-month experiment on one side of the square, where they would remove a few parking spots and replace them with a dozen or so tables. If shopping or dining sales declined for any reason, they promised, they would bring back the parking spots.

Result: The tables were hugely popular, even in the winter. Restaurants set up propane heaters, lent woolen blankets to diners and installed retractable awnings. Sales soared. Soon, all the merchants around the square wanted more tables and fewer parking places. The Bruntletts added, "The rest is history." Delft's historic "living room" had become entirely car free.

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Melissa Bruntlett and Chris Bruntlett's book about life in a "car-light" city and look for lessons for Urban Atlanta.

Our meeting will be **June 3, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There's more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

How to get your copy of *Curbing Traffic*:

- You can purchase a copy from the publisher, [Island Press](#).
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).