

FIVE MINUTES WITH...

# GOING DUTCH



Five minutes with  
Sarah Wigglesworth

BY DAVID TAYLOR

**David Taylor talks to architect and keen cyclist Sarah Wigglesworth about her practice's latest project – the Go Cycle hub and bridge scheme in Kingston upon Thames. Could this bit of city-making be replicated elsewhere? Will it help usher in more active travel, and less dependence on the 'entitled' car?**

**DAVID TAYLOR: Sarah, Hello. I'm interested in your new scheme in Kingston, the Go Cycle Hub. Can you tell *Velocity's* readership all about it? What is the scheme, essentially?**

**SARAH WIGGLESWORTH:** Well, the Go cycle scheme itself is a broad initiative for Kingston and surrounding boroughs to connect up the riverside communities of Kingston, Wimbledon, Richmond, Ham – and obviously Hampton Court and so forth on the other side of the river – via a network of cycling and walking routes. It's quite comprehensive. And our little component of it is about trying to encourage commuters and people moving around in Kingston town centre to navigate their way better using those kinds of mobility patterns. So walking, cycling, skateboarding, rollerblading: whatever is self-propelled, really. Getting exercise, getting fresh air, and not polluting the planet.

Our scheme consisted of three components. One was a cycle hub – a parking space on three storeys for bikes. The second was an urban realm component, about trying to make a better introduction to Kingston as you arrive at the station. And part of that is about wayfinding. Intuitive wayfinding through the way the public realm is organised so people understand where the centre is. It's just difficult to do. Or was difficult to do. Because you can't really guess where it is. And then the third component was a new bridge, which took you over an underpass, and towards the river.

Kingston has been a town since Saxon times, and it was where eight Saxon kings were crowned. So it was

an important river crossing, right up to the 19th century. It also had the last bridge before London Bridge as you came from the southwest into London. So, it was a really busy market town and bridge crossing. And on the other side of the Thames, there was a pastoral landscape that is celebrated by people like Pope, in his villa, and Marble Hill House, and all of these productive, but pastoral landscapes – the breadbaskets for London.

So what we wanted to do was to try and make a green route that would anticipate this beautiful, pastoral landscape on the other side of the river, and which still exists in Hampton Court, actually.

Another component was, then, that the bridge is part of a beautiful landscape, which is drawn into the town centre in front of the hub.

So those were the components. It was really a larger kind of public realm operation, which re-used the boundary along the railway line all the way to the river and connected it up with the park there. This park had been just abandoned and was full of shopping trolleys and rats – it was a really horrible space. By clearing it all out, and making this link and landscaping it, we've managed to bring it back into the public realm, and really make it very aesthetic. In the process, this bridge is much, much wider, so that it makes a much clearer route to the river. The landscape continues until you reach the Thames. So, it's made it so much more pleasant as a place to move around. And most of the Go Cycle network is now connected up to it, so that it's working really well.



**Opposite: the new bridge. Top: Sarah Wigglesworth tests out the new facilities. Above: The Kingston Go Cycle site**



Right: ramping up.  
Below: 'V' nice facade  
– the three storey  
Cycle Hub. Opposite:  
new cycle path and  
planting



The project, part of Kingston upon Thames's Go Cycle scheme funded by the Mayor of London's Mini-Holland programme, was created by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects and Buro Happold.

It includes:

- **A new station plaza**
- **Three-storey cycle hub with capacity for 398 bikes**
- **New steel cycle/pedestrian bridge over the A307**
- **All three united by new crossings at the station forecourt and a newly landscaped green route to the riverside**

**DT: I don't want to put words into your mouth, but do you think this is more of a city-making or placemaking scheme than what it is being pigeonholed as – a cycling scheme? Is that in the background there somewhere?**

**SW:** I think that *is* in the background. I think it's about rebalancing, yes. Let me put it this way. I think there are lessons to learn from it for all cities, because it's really perhaps about shifting the balance away from the predominance of cars and the sense of entitlement that cars have to all urban space, which I think is quite prevalent in cities. And you probably agree with me about that.

**DT: I do!**

**SW:** Away from that, and more towards people that are moving at a slower pace. I think that's really important, because if you think about who's moving around generally on the

ground, it might be people pushing kids' buggies, it might be older people who might be on a Zimmer, or they might be in a mobility scooter. It's more cyclists, young people, people walking, because they know that's good exercise, and so on. And often, it's the people that can't afford cars, or the women who are walking around and using the public realm at times different from the commuters, because that's their work pattern for taking kids to school and that kind of thing. So, I think it is really important, and it's a lesson for elsewhere.

The other thing I would say about the hub, and the bridge actually (they form a sort of family of structures), is that we don't really have a typology of architecture which we could feel proud of for cycle storage. And that's a really interesting challenge. Now, you will be aware that we designed a cycle storage place for Bermondsey Square. And that was the first time that I think a really beautiful little building which celebrated the act of cycling was in an urban public realm. This is an opportunity to do that again, and I think that's really nice. It signals something, perhaps more lightweight than your typical multi-storey car park, that kind of thing. And it challenges what sort of aesthetic and kind of technology it needs.

The reason we call it a cycle hub, by the way, is because it is much more than just a park. It's got a space for cargo bikes, it's got a place to store Bromptons, it's got a little space for a cafe, it's got a vending machine for all sorts of things...

**DT: Puncture repair kits...**

**SW:** Yeah. Yeah. It's not for drinks! (laughs). It's for tools and things like that, which is really lovely. It's got a toilet, and there's a lift if you are not terribly mobile, or you have got a bike and a whole family to go upstairs. And it's got free air pumps, it's got a vending station on every floor, so that if you've got a puncture, or you want to tweak around with your gears or something, you can do that. So, there's a lot more to it than just micro-parking. And I think that's really great. Those are the places that, typically, cyclists are quite drawn to.

There are well-known cafes and cycle shops that people flock to because they know they're going to give them what they need. And I think it's really nice to give that a presence in the urban realm.

**DT: How was the consultation in terms of, and in the light of, London being slightly plagued by anti-low traffic neighbourhood (LTN) people, or at least reports of people?**

**SW:** How was it received? Well, nobody had a bad word about it yesterday, but yesterday was to celebrate its opening. This has been a project in our office for five years now – the LTN thing has cropped up only recently. But I think most sensible people take the view that this form of transit is really good for you in the city. To be honest, it's an absolute no-brainer. And I think that the hysterical reaction by lots of car drivers, personally, is due to this issue that we have already mentioned, which is the sense of entitlement that car drivers seem to have; that they can go anywhere, and pollute and take up too much space and all the other things. I just think we need a big shift in perception about that. It ought to be seen as a privilege to drive around the city and it ought to be returned to people at ground level, I think.

**DT: Can you foresee these appearing elsewhere in London, or even across the country? Is it a replicable model?**

**SW:** Oh, goodness, there's so much need for them! Yeah, really. I think it's fair to say that there are lots of quite swanky offices that now do provide this kind of operation, but it tends to be in a basement and it's only for those who work in that office. I think we need more of it in the public realm, for everybody, and to dignify the bicycle a bit more. I was very interested that when they introduced the Boris Bikes (now, Santander) in London, they managed to magic a lot of space in the public realm for them in. So I have always felt that it's a bit of a shame that there wasn't more attention given to parking people's bikes everywhere. If you can do that, you can find space in the public realm for something like this. I think the greater visibility, and the

possibility for really beautiful structures is quite attractive, to be honest.

**DT: Yeah. Last question, because we're just up to time. 'Mini-Holland': did you find yourself channelling your inner Dutch person in this project?**

**SW:** (laughs) Well, we were working with OKRA, a landscape architect from Utrecht, and we went over there and were bowled over by the facilities that they have in Holland. So yeah, I don't think I really had an inner Dutch person in me before. But I must say, I was very, very envious of the dignity, and the respect, given to the cycle as a really great way of getting around.

**DT: Sorry, final, final question: How do we adjust our culture here, then, to be more Dutch?**

**SW:** I don't know how different we are mentally and culturally from the Dutch. I think there's a certain kind of pragmatism in Dutch culture which we perhaps don't quite have. Just the facility being able to get on and off really easily or do an errand. Obviously, it's a flat country, on the whole, but I don't think that's the major barrier. I think the major barrier here is, perhaps, individualism and a sense of status around the car, which I think should change. There are notices on railings saying 'don't park your bike against this railing'. Yet there's a crappy car park in the street outside of it. And there might be a very dilapidated car in that car park (laughs). I mean a parking space in the street. And I think, well, why would you *not* want a nice bike attached to your building, but you don't mind a really crappy car parking space outside? I think that says everything about our prejudice, really. It's very, very deep-rooted. And I think it's made worse by this sense of entitlement. Obviously, the car does go with glamour, and status, and all those kinds of things. But I mean, bikes can do that, too. So, I think we just need to keep chipping away.

I think it has changed. I've been cycling for 40 years, since I went to university. And I think the difficulty there was, in those days there were very, very few people on bikes in London,



Dr Will Norman, London's walking and cycling commissioner, said:

**'The past year has seen a huge growth in walking and cycling across the capital, and as we look to the future it's vital we avoid a car-led recovery from the pandemic. Kingston's new 'Mini-Holland' scheme is providing improved cycling infrastructure and a wonderful new landscape, enabling more people to walk or cycle safely around the area, driving down traffic and getting active at the same time.'**



and you just weren't even noticed. And that led to all sorts of problems, believe me. You still get that a bit, but I think just the *presence* of more bikes around, has made people wake up and take a lot more notice. And I think that cannot but be a good thing. So it is shifting...

**DT: Good!**

**SW:** ...even if it's quite slow. It helps having people in power who are gunning for it, like the GLA and so on.

**DT: Yeah. Well, congratulations on this and well done on continuing to chip away, and I hope you get more of these across the city and country.**

**SW:** Thank you, and thanks for covering it, David. Anything we can do to promote cycling I'm up for totally. Good to talk. Bye! ◊