

Hans Monderman

Dutch traffic engineer and placemaker who pioneered a fresh approach to street design and traffic in towns.

Hans Monderman, who has died from cancer at the age of 63, inspired and developed a fundamental change in thinking about the relationship between people, places and traffic. Working in the towns and villages of his native Friesland in Northern Holland, and from within a traditionally conservative and cautious profession, Monderman succeeded in challenging many long-established assumptions about safety and the relationship between pedestrians and traffic. In so doing he initiated a new approach to the creation of civilised streets and public spaces.

During a time when the impact of traffic on communities and public life has become a major concern, Monderman's close observation of human behaviour, combined with a willingness to challenge convention led him to explore ideas that ran entirely counter to established practice. Intrigued by the complexities of human interaction and the ability of people to respond to their surroundings, he pioneered an approach that respected the driver's common sense and intelligence instead of reliance on signs, road markings, traffic signals and physical barriers. He recognized that increasing control and regulation by the state reduced individual and collective responsibility, and pioneered a fresh understanding of the relationship between streets, traffic and civility.

Hans Monderman was born in Leeuwarden in 1945. The son of a school headmaster, Hans retained a passionate enthusiasm for knowledge and teaching throughout his life. From an early age he was renowned for his practical skills and love of technology, but it was the seemingly limitless breadth of his knowledge and enthusiasms that surprised his contemporaries. Friends and family found it difficult to explain his work, which always seemed to expand beyond established professional boundaries. His early career as a civil engineer building roads was followed by work as an accident investigator. In his spare time he trained as an advanced driving instructor and helped establish new driving schools. Combining knowledge of how roads are designed and constructed, with an understanding of how people respond to them, prompted his interest in psychology and urban design.

In 1982 Monderman was appointed to head the road safety team for the Province of Friesland, following growing national concern about road deaths and injuries. Always doubtful about the conventional armoury of signs, speed bumps and chicanes, Monderman began to explore the potential for influencing driver behaviour through stripping out highway paraphernalia, using instead simple design measures that emphasized the distinctiveness of each and every place. An early scheme applying these principles in the village of Oudehaske was successful in reducing speeds well below those achieved by conventional traffic calming measures. Determined to follow his hunch that drivers could respond to social and environmental clues, Monderman went on to develop the ideas in more than 100 towns and villages, removing road markings, traffic signals and highway measures and using landscape, lighting, public art and local materials to redefine the language of urban streets and spaces.

Throughout most of the 20th century, engineers and planners had assumed that efficient traffic flows and road safety could only be achieved by separating vehicles from the civic spaces of towns and villages. Monderman's work challenged this assumption, demonstrating that vehicles could be successfully integrated into the social fabric of communities by treating drivers as intelligent citizens rather than as

mindless automatons. It was an insight that raised important questions about the role of the state and regulation, and its effect on social behaviour and collective responsibility. Not surprisingly, Monderman's work caused discomfort amongst governments and civil servants, but the ideas gained credence amongst local communities who benefited from reductions in accidents and delays, as well as much greater quality of space.

By the turn of the century, organisations such as The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), together with bodies such as the Prince's Foundation in the UK and the Congress for New Urbanism in the USA, were reflecting an increasing recognition of the social and economic value of streetscapes. Relatively unknown outside Friesland throughout most of his career, Monderman's work suddenly became the focus of attention for professionals, politicians, researchers and journalists from around the world. Particular interest centred on his redesign of a series of complex intersections in the town of Drachten, as well as the remodelling of the High Street of Haren, a suburb of Gronigen. The European Union launched a research programme on "shared space" to build on Monderman's expertise.

Such public attention did not always suit such a quiet, self-effacing character, but Hans received the scores of visitors with patience and generosity of spirit. Television journalists were encouraged to carry out interviews in the middle of busy intersections while Hans stood confidently and impassively amidst passing cars and lorries. He would often test his own schemes by walking backwards into dense traffic, confident that he had created the right circumstances for drivers to adapt to unusual events.

Monderman's influence in the UK can be seen in schemes such as Kensington High Street in London, New Road in Brighton and many other urban regeneration projects. An imaginative and articulate public speaker, his last lecture in London's City Hall in November 2007 drew a packed audience of engineers, urban designers, planners and politicians. At the time of his death he was working to establish a new research institute to refine his ideas and resolve the technical, organisational and political obstacles standing in the way of a more inclusive and civilised public realm.

Hans Monderman is survived by his wife Tineke, whom he married in 1970, and by their two sons Leonard and Johan.

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Johannes (Hans) Iebe Monderman, traffic engineer and social innovator, born 19th November 1945 in Leeuwarden, died in Drachten on 7th January 2008.