View from the streets of Ottawa

T2M Secretary and soon-to-be-finished PhD student Sjoerd van der Wal offers us his take on Ottawa, following the recent conference there.

The last T2M conference was held in Ottawa, Canada. Only being familiar with the view of North American streets coming from movies and tv series it was an interesting experience for me to have a look around in the New World and to compare it with the street views in Europe and especially the Netherlands.

The first thing that struck me when looking at the streets was the size of the vehicles. Of course cars in Europe tend to be smaller in general, but I arrived at the airport and saw so many large trucks, vans and stretched limos. In the last 10 years the Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) has become quite popular in Europe, although not without controversy. Some Dutch politicians even suggested that we should ban these vehicles from city centres because of environmental and safety issues. But the ‘European SUVs’ are small cars compared to the Northern American SUVs and Pick-Up Trucks. However, a brief look at car advertisements in the Canadian media showed that SUVs in Canada are also point of discussion, as they are no longer promoted because of their size or power, but for some special types with fuel efficient engines that have less impact on the environment.
The Netherlands doesn’t have a mass producing car maker of its own; as a result you tend to see cars from all over the world here, with maybe German and French cars as slight majority. In Ottawa, the countries of origin are more limited; I saw mainly American (Canadian), a lot of Japanese, some German and a couple of Swedish cars. Another size difference can clearly be seen in the size of the trucks. In Europe, most trucks are restricted by to a maximum length of 18.75 metres, therefore most trucks are built to make maximum use of space by putting the cabin on top of the engine, a so-called front-steer-truck. In Canada, maximum vehicle length differs per area, but even the shortest maximum limit is 31 meters. As a result, not only the loads are longer, but also the trucks. The majority of the trucks tend to have a torpedo nose (engine in front of the cabin) and a long trailer.

One of the most apparent modes of transport in Ottawa, besides cars, is the bus. Streets are filled with buses. Some of them are equipped with a bicycle rack, where cyclists can place their bicycle when they travel part of their journey by bus. In some areas of the city there are even dedicated lanes for bicycles, something that we in the Netherlands are only all too familiar with.

From what is on the road, towards the roads themselves. The layout of the streets is different from the European streets. This city is clearly planned ‘from scratch’ in an open space, as all the streets cross each other or run parallel. In Europe many cities are build around an ancient medieval town centre, which causes a lot of challenges for city planners to adjust cities to cars without destroying the city. The relatively new town of Ottawa (which finds it origin around 1800) clearly accommodates the automobile much more than the European towns. To make a small comparison, European cities are round; North-American cities are rectangular. This phenomenon is best to be seen while doing something simple like crossing a street. In Europe, it’s best to wait for the traffic light, because cars can show up from at least 4 different directions. In Canada however, a junction consists of two roads crossing each other. So traffic will only come out of two directions at the same time.

Ottawa also shows a clear division of districts: a historical part around Parliament Hill, a business district with office buildings made of shiny glass, a shopping area with a market, a sector for the University and (sub)urban living areas with houses.
This division of purposes of areas give the city a multitude of identities, whereas cities in the Netherlands don't have these strict divisions, although of course they also have different areas for different purposes.

Overall, my main impression was that although Ottawa is very different from European or Dutch cities, there are also similarities (and I don't just mean the tulips in Ottawa). Some traffic signs (bi-lingual in Ottawa, English and French) are international, the shops are not that different, and the whole atmosphere on the street is somewhat the same. But the layout of the streets in straight lines and the size of the vehicles on it made it different from the view from the street Eindhoven and much of Europe.

Don’t forget that we are always looking for more ‘views from the street’ – transport and mobility themed thoughts, preferably from places that you aren’t familiar with and might have visited, or if you suddenly see somewhere that you are familiar with through fresh eyes. It doesn’t have to be long, but it would be good if you had an illustration or two to go with it.