

# HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association  
Hawaii Chapter

*Making Great Communities Happen*

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

## Woonerfs – the Natural Progression of Complete Streets- Jeff Merz, e-Blast Editor and Planner with AECOM

I have been following the popularity and evolution of woonerfs of late. I really like Dutch ideas on urban planning and many other societal issues, plus I am reading more and more about the concept being applied around the world. In Dutch, a woonerf is a living street, as originally implemented in the Netherlands and in Flanders. Techniques include shared space, traffic calming, and low speed limits. Under Article 44 of the Dutch traffic code, motorized traffic in a woonerf or "recreation area" is restricted to walking pace.

- The Netherlands feature over 6,000 woonerf zones.
- Around 2 million people live in these Dutch woonerven.
- Traffic accidents dropped by 40% or more in woonerf zones.
- Over 70 of these zones exist in England and Wales, called "home zones." The concept is also popular in other European countries, especially Germany.
- Over 400 US cities have or are implementing woonerf-inspired complete streets.

Source: <http://www.canin.com/world-woonerf/>



Source: [Boston Globe](#)

In Provincetown, Mass, pedestrian, bicycles and cars peaceably co-exist on Commercial Street, the main drag through town

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A main feature of woonerfs is that they allow cars, but they are generally restricted to walking speed. Legally, the automobile driver is liable for an accident. Amazingly, studies show that woonerfs have fewer traffic mishaps precisely when cars, people and bicycles mingle in close proximity.

One noticeable feature of many woonerfs is their lack of curbs and demarcated areas for different mobility options. Another feature of woonerfs is their general lack of so much prescriptive signage, lane markings, traffic lights and directives. While seemingly counterintuitive, this ambiguity in the space forces the driver of vehicles to slow down, be constantly aware and poised to react to children playing, bikes approaching and pedestrians crossing.

In America especially, we have been lulled into driving complacency by a road system which has taken more and more personal decision-making away from the driver. Stop-go lights, left turn only lights, designated turn lanes, bike lanes, stop signs, no right on red signs. While there is certainly good reason for providing clear and prescriptive driving commands for the greatest number of driving actions, there is now strong evidence that taking too much decision making away from the driver can result in worse drivers, higher vehicle speeds, and more dangerous streets.



The Wharf development with a woonerf, under construction on Washington, DC  
Source: Biznow.com



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As our public right of ways continue to evolve to best serve our changing mobility needs, I am frequently surprised by the veracity of opposition to the introduction of complete street concepts in Hawaii and around the country. Roundabouts, bike lanes, raised pedestrian crossings, bulb-outs, bus lanes. These are all good ideas that improve mobility for all citizens of a community. But I see many car drivers resisting these concepts. Why? Complete streets, woonerfs etc, introduce uncertainty to the driving experience and require the driver to actually pay attention and apply mental bandwidth to their decisions ie; gauging distances and speeds, looking around for people in other modes approaching, anticipating other vehicles moves and being a truly defensive driver in the best sense and slow down, all things a complacent driver distains.

My husband and I do a home exchange with a couple in a small town outside Rotterdam, Netherlands in what is turning out to be an annual event. The small town our friends live in is basically one big woonerf system paralleled by canals and short bridges. People certainly still drive around the village and most Dutch in general, own cars. But the car does not dominate the landscape like it does in the U.S. The village has very little traffic signage and no traffic lights. The system seems to work.



Maasland, Netherlands

Source: [hollandhappy.wordpress.com](http://hollandhappy.wordpress.com)

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Are woonerfs the end-all solution in Hawaii to taming traffic and turning our streets over to the full range of users for which they should be designed? No. But woonerfs can be appropriate in many urban and higher density, walkable areas around our state such as Lahaina, Waikiki, Kakaako, Hilo, Wailuku, Hawi, Kailua and many other communities.

## THE 4 PRINCIPLES OF A WOONERF

VISIBLE  
ENTRANCES

PHYSICAL  
BARRIERS

SHARED AND  
PAVED SPACE

LANDSCAPING AND  
STREET FURNITURE



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Source: static1.squarespace.com