

NEW VISIONS FOR PEOPLE-FRIENDLY CITIES

New Year's card and photo-essay by Iván Tosics¹

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Since the 1950s our large cities have been suffering from the **intensification of road traffic**. Although in the last 20-25 years growing number of interventions were made against the dominance of cars, the situation did not improve substantially. Then came COVID: **two years ago cars practically disappeared from cities**, replaced by biking, walking people. This relief, however, did not last long, **by today the cars and congestions have returned again**.

This photo-essay addresses the question: **what can cities do**, learning also from the pandemic experience, **to make urban areas liveable again?**

HOW DID CARS TAKE OVER OUR CITIES?

Today's cities suffer from a lot of **problems**, which are deeply rooted in their **past and the earlier urban development principles**. One of these was the physical separation of functions within the city, creating the need to move longer distances, which made the use of cars a necessity, not an option. The combustion engine cars became affordable for middle class families in the 1920s, when the mass production of the Ford model T started in the USA. However, **it was not the car itself, but the systematic political and planning interventions favouring car use** that has led to the **car-oriented urban development** in the second half of the 20th century.

In the **USA**, 44 thousand miles of **publicly-funded motorways** were built in the 1950s, interlinking large cities and splitting their city centers. In many cases, like in Detroit, new highways were constructed through the historically "non-white" neighbourhoods. For the planners, the highway was a tool to intervene and "regenerate" these neighbourhoods, intentionally producing massive displacement of citizens to other areas and increasing the socio-spatial distance between communities. Moreover, the **price of oil** was kept artificially low, **large mortgage subsidies** were given to builders of **single family houses** and **infrastructure subsidies were provided to the new suburban areas**.

¹ This photo-essay is based on my joint work with Béla Kézy, Claus Köllinger, Roland Krebs and Joan Caba Roset. The output of this cooperation is the URBACT Walk'n'Roll Cities Guidebook: Innovations in mobility and public space (with Stela Salinas, illustrations by Ivan Bravo), to be published in January 2023 on <https://urbact.eu/>



Detroit, construction of the first Expressway, 1949.
<https://skyscraperpage.com/forum/showthread.php?t=122541>



Construction of the Boston Central Artery around 1951, destroying the densely built inner city.
<https://hu.pinterest.com/pin/48906345925773502/>

The **consequence of these public policies in the USA was widespread suburbanisation and urban sprawl**, followed by the **car-oriented redevelopment of downtown areas**: public transport systems were reduced and **roads were widened for cars**.

In many **European countries** the public sector managed to retain some control over land-use changes, and public subsidies for car-oriented development were less direct and followed the American example with some delay. Even so, the results of the interventions were dramatic, for example **wide streets replaced demolished historic areas** in central Stockholm, in northern Brussels and in most British inner cities.



Gamla Enskede, a **garden city suburb of Stockholm**, where in 1958 a six-lane motorway was built, slicing the neighbourhood in two, severing the organic pattern of streets and squares. Dan Hill: Cities captured by cars, Nov 2019

<https://medium.com/butwhatwasthequestion/cities-captured-by-cars-part-1-of-and-you-may-find-yourself-behind-the-wheel-of-a-large-949cc00dd2bd>



Newcastle city centre, Pilgrim street, where the A187 motorway (in tunnel, below the large building) crosses the A186 highway. Pedestrians are totally lost in this junction – on the lower right side the entrance of a quite unpleasant pedestrian underpath can be seen.

Photo by Iván Tosics, 2022

By the 1960s and 1970s, the car-oriented urban development radically changed the way cities were built and functioned in the free market dominated European countries. This **“new modernity”** has spread quickly, although its problems have become more and more visible. **Traffic jams, air and noise pollution, loss of walkable public space** were some of the tangible consequences: the quality of life has deteriorated dramatically in dense urban areas.

Due to the mounting problems, **from the last decades of the 20th century onwards, cities gradually turned towards more sustainable forms of urban transport**. Previously liquidated tram lines were rebuilt (see e.g. my [New Year’s photo essay from 2011](#)), and underground transport started to be developed. Public transport slowly regained its priority in the eyes of city administrations, and also the infrastructure for the active travel modes, such as biking, started to be promoted. All these changes, however, had limited effects, while **car owners preserved their earlier privileges**.

By today the threat of **environmental collapse** has become more evident than ever, and it is clear that greenhouse gas emissions have to be cut dramatically. To achieve this, and in order to improve the air quality, urban mobility has to be changed fundamentally. **New visions and a new wave of urgent systematic political and planning interventions are needed to reduce car use in urban areas**.

VISIONS TO RECLAIM THE CITY FOR THE RESIDENTS

Challenging the dominance of cars in our cities is not impossible: **systematic political and planning interventions are necessary, this time in the opposite direction to the 1950s' public policies.**

Parallel and interlinked changes in mobility, urban planning and public space development are needed, aiming for reducing travel distances by creating a **more appropriate mix of functions** (residential, work, leisure and public facilities), **limiting car use**, supporting **active mobility and public transport**, while also **transforming public space** to benefit citizens.

For such a re-humanising agenda, the overarching concept of "**accessibility shift**" can be a starting point. The idea is that transportation planning and the transportation dimensions of land-use planning should be synchronized, interconnected, and based on **people's ability to reach destinations, rather than on their ability to travel fast**. The primacy of **mobility** – how far you can go in a given amount of time – should be replaced by the priority of **access**: how much you can get in terms of services within your vicinity in a given amount of time.

The new approach should be based on **connectivity**, like being connected to online tools and networks, which enables some activities to be done remotely; **proximity**, as bringing city services closer to each other and to citizens in space; and **innovative mobility**, taking an integrated approach to promote active mobility and public transport as a backbone for the remaining mobility needs.

In the following, the concepts of **proximity and innovative mobility** are discussed, showing the most important **visions** of how to approach these aspects.

1. The proximity/15-minute city vision

The **concept of the 15-minute city** claims that **all basic functions people use regularly** – living, working, shopping, education, healthcare and leisure services – can be provided **within a 15-minute walk or bike ride**. This can be achieved by **creating dense and mixed-use urban neighbourhoods**, by mixing how space is used in a neighbourhood, and also by **using the same space or building for different purposes** over the course of a day. It is important to apply this principle **to most parts of the city**, not only some selected neighbourhoods.

Paris is the forerunner and originator of the 15-minute city model, based on ideas to transform **streets, squares and school yards into centres of neighbourhoods.**



Paris as a 15-Minute City. Paris Commun

The drawing illustrates a street which can become the **center of a neighbourhood**: there is no car traffic, only public transport and biking, parking spaces are replaced by leisure, commercial and greening functions, shops and all groundfloor premises become more accessible and some of them change functions for evening and weekend use for the general public.

Source: <https://www.treehugger.com/the-15-minute-city-is-having-a-moment-5071739>



The 'OASIS' program of Paris (since 2018) aims to adapt schoolyards and buildings to climate change, **transforming schoolyards into 'islands of freshness'** with plants for shade, natural materials, permeable soil, installation of fountains. Some oasis courtyards are **open to city residents** on Saturdays, activities can be proposed online to strengthen social relations and local associations. **Schools**, which are evenly distributed across the territory of the city, **can in this way become the centers of the neighborhoods**, in the spirit of the 15-minute city.

Schoolyard OASIS, Infant school Emeriau – July 2021 –
©Théo Ménivard / CAUE de Paris.

2. The vision of citywide pedestrian priority

In people-friendly cities priority should be given to **walking, cycling and public transport, at the expense of cars**, both in terms of use and space. The share of car-use within the mobility mix should be drastically reduced by banning them from certain areas, severely limiting their access to other areas (only for delivery, loading-unloading, transporting people with mobility impairments, etc.), reducing their speed and limiting their parking options. Besides making car use less convenient, the conditions of public transport and active mobility have to be improved, together with widening the sidewalks, expanding street furniture and greening.

In Europe there are many good examples on **favouring pedestrians with acupuncture-type interventions** (see e.g. the case of Mariahilfer strasse/Vienna in my [2020 photo-essay](#)). There are less cases, however, where pedestrians were prioritized on a **city-wide scale**. **Pontevedra**, a city with 83 thousand residents in Galicia, northwestern Spain, can be considered as a prime example for an overarching approach. This city introduced dramatic changes since 1999: the whole inner city was transformed into **coexistence streets with 6 or 20 km/h speed limit and max 15 min parking time for cars**, and public space was drastically reallocated, **devoting at least half of all street space to people.**



This place in **Pontevedra** was once a very busy crossing of car-dominated streets, now turned into a **pedestrian priority area** with 20 km/h speed limit and total absence of on-street parking. Photo: Iván Tosics, 2022



Free municipal parking in 10-15 minutes walking distance from the center. Within the central area only underground parking is available, for a fee. Photo: Iván Tosics, 2022

3. The vision of a city-wide network of calmed-down places

Places which are “calmed down” from motorized traffic are predominantly **pedestrian-priority squares and streets**, serving as oases where people can unwind from the everyday nervousity of urban life. If such high quality, liveable places are organized into a **connected and coherent system across the whole city**, all aspects of the quality of life might improve in the urban areas.

Among the good European examples, the case of **Barcelona** can be highlighted as it implemented many innovative ideas, both on a micro and macro scale.



One of the **Superblocks** of Barcelona in the Sant Antoni market area. This used to be a busy crossing of streets, now it is an oasis for the residents. All the inner streets within a 3x3 quadrant of blocks are calmed down, the through traffic of cars is forbidden and most on-street parking spaces are eliminated. Photo: Iván Tosics, 2022



The map shows the whole urban area of Barcelona, highlighting the existing and the planned superblock areas. In a relatively short time **all neighbourhoods of the city will have such calmed-down areas**, which will be connected to each other through 21 **green streets**. Source: Barcelona city council.

4. Metropolitan vision for mobility and public space

A large share of congestion problems in cities is caused by **cars coming to the city from neighbouring settlements**. To fight this, it is of key importance to develop an **overarching mobility concept for the whole of the metropolis**, in which public transport serves as the backbone of the whole system. Good connections have to be established in mobility terminals, such as **railway stations or public transport hubs**, promoting active modes of transport. The task is to **connect different mobility**

services, such as P+R, public transport, e-scooters, bikers and taxi-providers into one integrated system, serving the individual needs and preferences of the people.

The examples below show a well-developed **intermodal hub** in Rotterdam, and an attempt to **turn highways into boulevards** in Barcelona, allowing for public transport and biking to partly replace the use of cars.



The new Central Station of **Rotterdam** is a prime example of a **well-developed multi-modal hub**. Besides the trams in the forefront of the picture there is the entrance on the left side (only partly visible on the photo) to one of the largest **underground bike parking** facilities of the world. Photo by Iván Tosics, 2022.



Barcelona offers several examples of **radical interventions to turn highways into urban boulevards**. One of these is Avenida Meridiana: the originally 2x4 lane motorway is in the process of being refurbished into a 2x2 lane boulevard, with widened sidewalks, and bus lanes at the two sides and a central median with a segregated two-way bike lane, lined with trees. Source: Barcelona city council.

FROM VISIONS TO REALITY: INTERVENTIONS

The briefly described visionary ideas towards proximity and innovative mobility have to be translated into **concrete interventions** which can be considered by cities to implement. The most important of the potential interventions are the following:

- Reducing car access to city centers
- Introducing a 30 km/h speed limit in the cities
- Applying a consistent parking management strategy
- Developing an overarching cycling strategy
- Turning highways into boulevards
- Integrating public transport with micromobility in mobility hubs
- Calming down traffic in residential areas with superblocks
- Reducing traffic around school areas
- Regenerating commercial activities with shopping streets

These interventions are discussed in detail and illustrated with examples in the **URBACT Walk'n'Roll Cities Guidebook**. Those interested in these issues can read more about them in the Guidebook that comes out in **January 2023** and will be accessible through the URBACT website: <https://urbact.eu/>.

Needless to say, **cities are in very different stages on their way towards more sustainability and less car use**. While some cities, e.g. those quoted in this essay as examples of different visions, have overarching concepts and also some practical experiences about limiting car use, others are just at

the very beginning of their journey. This photo essay and the URBACT Guidebook aims to support them in their future endeavours.