

# CAR-FREE CITY CENTER: LESSONS FROM BARCELONA AND LJUBLJANA

Just walk or bike to the city center? We can hear the outcry all the way here. And yet there have long been role models that show how a car-free city center can function. We took a look at what cities could learn from the European metropolises of Barcelona and Ljubljana.

A 30 km/h speed limit in built-up areas, extra-expensive parking spaces, pop-up bike lanes or completely car-free city centers - there are currently many concepts under discussion that could help curb car traffic in cities. All these components of the traffic turnaround have one thing in common: **they are not only intended to protect the climate, but also to make cities more livable and safer at the same time.** And, quite incidentally, to challenge the dominance of the car. In view of current fuel prices and the debate about dependence on Russian oil, this may not be a bad idea.

## Car-free City Centers: Potentials and Conflicts

The idea of car-free city centers has gained momentum in recent years - and at the same time has become an irritant. The advantages are undeniable: better air quality, less noise, more space for people to walk or bike, greater safety and more climate protection. At the same time, however, sceptics fear that the lack of parking facilities could make shopping in the city center unattractive and thus harm the local businesses. There is still no evidence of this - but there are still far too few cities that dare to experiment with this, at least with the exception of individual pedestrian zones.

But some European cities, such as Paris, are currently working hard to make the car-free city center a reality. A few others have already gained experience with the concept - for example, the Slovenian capital Ljubljana and the tourism metropolis Barcelona. We can learn from them.

## Ban Cars

Ljubljana already closed the city center to car traffic in 2007. In 2013, another important artery in the city center, Slovenska cesta, was completely closed to cars. It was extensively redesigned so that only pedestrian, bicycle and bus traffic is allowed there. Today, the entire downtown area - which admittedly is not very large in Ljubljana - is reserved for pedestrians and cyclists.

Visitors can park their cars in parking lots outside the city center or use public transportation; residents can use the underground parking garage.

By the way: The ecological transport club VCD considers the concept of "neighborhood garages" - jointly used parking garages for individual neighborhoods instead of individual underground garages - to be forward-looking.

Barcelona is doing things differently: The city is taking advantage of its checkerboard street architecture and has been setting up more and more so-called "superblocks" or "superislands" for several years. This does not involve closing off the entire city center to car traffic, as in Ljubljana, but rather combining several blocks of houses into one largely car-free neighborhood. Within the superblocks, streets are converted into "green axes" on which pedestrians and cyclists have priority. Only residents and delivery traffic are allowed to drive on defined streets and routes - at a maximum speed of 10 kilometers per hour. In this way, new squares are created where previously there were street crossings and new greenery where previously there was asphalt and metal.

## **Make Car-free Zones Attractive**

Simply closing streets to car traffic does not really make a city more attractive. Among other cities, both Ljubljana and Barcelona show how streets can be redesigned to make them attractive not only for pedestrians and cyclists, but also to create more space for recreation and encounters.

In Barcelona's "green axes," the difference in height between the roadway and the sidewalk is being eliminated, flagstones are being laid instead of asphalt, and hundreds of trees are being planted. New public spaces are being created throughout the city. Incidentally, the project has apparently not harmed commerce so far: As many as 30 percent of new stores have been created.

Visitors to Ljubljana also report more peace and quiet, more greenery and liveliness than in the city centers of other metropolises. Here, among other things, the banks of the Ljubljanica River were completely redesigned with a promenade - and car-free - and have since become extremely popular with tourists. In the center of the city, a public park has been created on the site of a former parking lot, which is regularly used for concerts and events. However, there is apparently also criticism from residents in Ljubljana: in 2015, ORF reported displeasure about the commercialization of the city center through advertising posters.

## **Low-cost Bicycle Rentals**

Ljubljana has established a bicycle rental system that - at least for short distances - can be used virtually free of charge. At automatic rental stations in and around the city center, anyone can rent a bike. The first hour is free - and if you return the bike afterwards and wait five minutes, you can rent a bike again for free. The second hour also costs only one euro. All you have to do to use the rental bikes is register online in advance in the rental system and pay a deposit.

The free or extremely inexpensive rental bikes also enable tourists and visitors to Ljubljana to get around the city center in a car-free and climate-friendly way.

## **New Climate-friendly Forms of Mobility**

Ljubljana offers a kind of e-taxi in the city center - completely free of charge. The "Kavalir" looks a bit like a golf cart, there is an open and a closed heated version. You can simply hail the vehicles, which are about 25 km/h fast, and get in, but you can also order them by phone just like a cab. The "Kavalir" vehicles are, according to Ljubljana's official tourism site, "intended primarily for older citizens, people with mobility impairments and tourists."

Ideas like these invalidate the argument of some sceptics that car-free city centers disadvantage physically impaired people. Why shouldn't a similar concept be possible in other cities?

## **Saving Lives**

The European Environmental Agency has calculated that in 2019 alone, more than 300,000 premature deaths in the EU were attributable to particulate matter, and more than 40,000 to nitrogen oxides. It is difficult to calculate how much of this is due to traffic; one estimate, for example, puts the figure at an average of 27 percent in major cities. Either way, as long as the majority of urban traffic is still powered by combustion engines, it will continue to pose a massive threat to the health of city dwellers.

In 2019, a study found that full implementation of the Superblocks plans in Barcelona - more than 500 such blocks - could reduce annual nitrogen dioxide pollution by about a quarter. At the same

time, the concept could avoid close to 700 premature deaths annually, according to projections. Primarily, cleaner air plays a role here, but also the reduction of noise and heat: Less car traffic would curb the heat island effect, which ensures that it is often several degrees warmer inside major cities than outside.

### **Car-free City Centers Are Possible**

The examples of Barcelona and Ljubljana show that car-free city centers or city districts are possible and that they can improve the quality of life. Of course, every city is different and there will be no universal concept. But a lot would be gained if every city would develop measures according to its possibilities to reduce car traffic and strengthen alternative means of transport.

**Car-free - or car-poor - cities would be a major step forward in the fight against the climate crisis, could save many lives, and could also reduce our dependence on oil.**

But no one has to wait until the policy is ready: Even today, millions of travelers have the opportunity to decide every day to leave their cars behind - and prefer to make their journeys by bicycle, on foot or by public transport.

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