

Denis Bocquet

THE CAR-FREE ZONE

Denis Bocquet is a Professor of Urban and Architectural History and Theory who researches, among other things, the history of urban planning. In the following essay, he writes about Oslo municipality's urban environment initiative "Bilfritt byliv," which had a special significance as the backdrop for Ed D'Souza's project.

Following decades of policies that have tended to facilitate access by car, contemporary efforts to reduce the spatial imprint and environmental impact of traffic in city centres are becoming a marker of progressive urban policy. Oslo has gained international attention thanks to its dedication to this ambition, by trying to combine innovation and creativity in order to invent a new form of urbanity, in which diminishing the space allocated to cars, their parking and circulation is seen as a vector of liveability enhancement. *Bilfritt Byliv* (car-free city living), due to its combination of practical measures and social and political thinking, is among one of the most interesting among such experiments worldwide. The quality, focus, coherence and ability to foster debate that this initiative is displaying are useful to many cities, and have been acknowledged internationally. Some potential ambiguities however, are worth addressing critically as part of the stimulating and thought-provoking debates the initiative is promoting.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, pedestrian zones were a kind of mirror of the modernist ideal of the separation of movement flows. Pedestrian streets, or portions of streets, counterbalanced the more numerous spaces in which cars had been given priority and had even been made a strong determinant in basic planning choices. From Rotterdam to Rouen and from Montréal to Darmstadt, such pedestrian spaces, partially protected from the urban ubiquity of cars, were abundantly served by surface and subterranean parking spaces, and were in no way elements of car traffic reduction. On the contrary, their economic function, explicitly negotiated with local associations of shop-owners, was to *attract* more motorized customers into city centres. Pedestrian zones were part of the *autogerechteStadt* (car-friendly town). In the early 1990s, the Italian experiment at creating ZTL (*zona a traffico limitato*; limited traffic zone) implemented by the city authorities in Bologna, Florence, Rome, Turin and Milan symbolized the emergence of a pioneering vision that set out to tackle the question differently and to pursue efforts to reduce traffic. But in spite of technological innovation for monitoring entrance gates, *fewer* cars in tiny medieval streets are still *too many*, and in the absence of massive investments into public transport, the prohibited cars have often been replaced by other individual means of transportation such as scooters, thus relativizing the effect of the measures. Systems based on taxing access, as in Singapore or London, while contributing to a reduction in traffic congestion, have not always been linked to a process of reducing the space allocated to cars. Their influence on urbanity and liveability is limited. Fewer cars circulating in the same space might be positive for the reduction of air pollution but not necessarily for the invention of a new urbanity.



Eddie Kings Workshop, Markveien, Grünerløkka, May 2019

Based on different principles, many French cities, from Grenoble to Strasbourg and Nantes to Bordeaux, have implemented tram networks, which are not only a tool of mobility but also constitute a strategy for reducing the spatial imprint and environmental impact of cars. The construction of tram lines provided an opportunity to do away with numerous parking spaces in streets and to reduce the number of streets and lanes dedicated to private circulation. This strategy also reformed the very definition of pedestrian zones inherited from the previous period and their articulation with other urban zones. In the case of regional metropolises, it has proved efficient as a means of boosting the commercial attractiveness and urban liveability of city centres. But inventing the next step represents an obstacle that many cities have faced over the last two decades: how to eliminate the presence of private cars almost completely? How to reduce the environmental impact of deliveries? In the 2000s, Paris, through the *Paris-Plage* (Paris-beach) initiative, has used temporary urbanism to progressively adopt the idea of a definitive expulsion of cars from the banks of the river Seine, a measure that was finally implemented in 2018.

However, in the context of strong political controversies on the efficacy of this decision, the city struggles to extend the benefits of the measure into the adjacent neighbourhoods. The new urbanity of spaces without cars is not something that expands naturally into the depth of the urban structure. Barcelona is experimenting with ambitious programmes to reduce the space allocated to cars, even in ordinary residential districts, and with promoting soft modes of transport. But the city also struggles with the heritage of decades of adaptation of its urban grid to cars. In the context of mass tourism and of strong real estate market pressures, there is also the risk that any improvement of the perceived urbanity of space becomes an attack on social diversity, and so against the true urbanity of the city, in terms of combining social inclusiveness, sustainable development and liveability. In other cities, such as Tournai in Belgium or Basel in Switzerland, new versions of the dutch *woonerf* (living street) of the 1970s were tested. This concept, of which the city of Emmen was then a model, promotes the coexistence of cars, cyclists and pedestrians in the same spaces without an explicit hierarchy or separation, involving a process of civilization of the aggressive behaviours often induced by the modernist separation of movement flows. Every user is supposed to take into account the presence of the others and to adapt his attitude accordingly. Such solutions, although promoting a softer approach to transport and the sharing of urban space, generally do not comprise an exclusion of cars and often constitute isolated areas within urban space. The fact of slowing and softening traffic is not always a factor of enhanced liveability. Hence the importance of Oslo as a laboratory. Hence too, the importance of examining the potential ambiguities of the model.

Firstly, there is the question of the quantification of energy consumption derived from the potentially positive effects of the closure of a significant area of the city centre to cars. In many cases in Europe, studies have shown that traffic is rarely suppressed and that compensations on the fringe of a zone in which a new concept applies often cancels most of the benefits in terms of energy consumption. Finding an answer to climate change requires thinking at various scales and addressing the entanglement of scales. This is also true of urban liveability in general: if climate change is the question, the answer must include more dimensions, such as the global energetic landscape, from local consumption to gas exports, and to consumption abroad for the manufacture of objects, or the cultivation of food used locally. To understand urban metabolisms we must look at the whole picture. In the case of Oslo, the present trend towards electrification of the car pool and the future trend towards the automation of driving also question the whole relationship between cars and urban space, and the very notion of urbanity. Energy efficiency and space consumption are increasingly disconnected dimensions.

Secondly, there is the question of the social and spatial equity of measures that tend to generate selective access to the city centre. Residents already living in these areas, who in many cases already enjoy higher standards of urban service than residents in other areas, as well as greater symbolic capital derived from their place of residence, might be favoured, whereas those needing to travel towards the centre might be confronted by new obstacles. Effective measures aiming to reinforce public transport are necessary in order to avoid the risk of social segregation. Experience shows that such measures are always difficult to calibrate and implement. Every weak point in terms of intermodal interchange, time and frequency of travel, availability and comfort is a factor in the potential failure of the whole system. Perceptions of accessibility and availability to inhabitants of other zones is crucial.



Ed D'Souza, *Migrant Car*, street parade, May 2019

The quality of the new spaces that are created is also subject to discussion. The examples of Amsterdam and Berlin illustrate that an intensification of bike traffic is not necessarily a factor of urbanity. When massive, cycling, although green due to its use of muscular energy, is not a soft mode of transport anymore, and sometimes creates hard and conflictual interpretations of coexistence in the urban space. Having walkable spaces in city centres does not necessarily mean that walking as a mode of transport will increase either. Walkability too, has to be planned on a wider scale if it is to constitute a factor of energy use virtue. The relationship between public space and democracy must also be questioned. If the creation of new free seating spaces is a reaction against the commodification of urbanity, issues will arise: what about uses that do not correspond to the behavioural horizon of expectation linked to the fact of being in these new spaces? Homeless people? Members of the *Roma* minority? What about possible appropriations of public spaces by people whose behaviour, physical appearance, or way of dressing do not match the image the city wishes to project, or the social imaginary of the sociological, electoral base of the ruling coalition at the municipal level?

There might be a difference between the imagery and even social imagination of areas subject to restricted access and the reality of their use and interpretation. And if there is no difference, it might be because segregation or gentrification is already happening. As for commercial attractiveness, the closure of city centres to cars will have consequences for the kind of activities that are proposed in the new traffic-free area. In terms of business, the transition is delicate, but does not necessarily mean a loss of substance. Any flight of commercial activities to the peripheries, along motorways, would however completely cancel the benefits of change, in terms both of urbanity and energy consumption. Displacements (of people, traffic, activities, nuisances, socially marginal practices) must be taken into account when evaluating change. In other words, urban liveability as a social and ecological project needs to be explored in all its complexity. Liveability is not necessarily sustainability. It is not necessarily accompanied by social and spatial equity either. That is why Oslo's experiment is so fascinating in the context of the collective and international quest for more sustainable and socially inclusive cities.