

Congestion-Free City Centres

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By Olivia Chollet

As cities across the world strive to increase livability and sustainability cars have become a key focal point. Many European cities are in the process of redesigning streets to reduce vehicle access and instead make more room for pedestrians and cyclists. In Nordic countries, this is just the latest chapter in a longer history of inclusive urban planning. Oslo's car-free Livability Programme and Denmark's cycle-friendly infrastructure offer useful models of how Australian cities could increase social, health and environmental benefits for all residents.



Above: A temporary car-free conversion of Grønland Street.
Image source: Ida Christine Rydeng, Oslo Kommune³

Oslo's "car-free Livability Programme"

Launched in 2016 as part of Oslo's climate and energy strategy, the Programme aimed at "handing the urban spaces back to the people"² by improving accessibility and liveability.

Instead of a complete ban on cars in the inner-city, street parking spaces were removed to make driving less attractive. Exceptions were made for people with a disability, as well as for deliveries, emergencies, and tradespeople. To compensate for the reduced parking, public transport to and from the city centre was improved.

The space freed up by parking spaces was devoted to improving the quality of city life. Green spaces were expanded, lighting was improved, art was added to common spaces, and public infrastructure such as toilets, fountains and furniture was upgraded.

The programme delivered so many health, safety and environment benefits that Oslo was named the 2019 European Green Capital for its efforts. The programme is now widely considered a blueprint for other city centres wanting to go car-free.³

The success of the programme was underpinned by careful planning and implementation. The public was actively involved through a bottom-up approach to planning changes (this

included workshops, door-to-door and street engagement, and funding schemes for community-building projects). By incrementally implementing the project over three years, planners made room for continuous monitoring and review, as well as any necessary negotiations with local roadside businesses.⁴

Denmark's cycle-friendly infrastructure

In Copenhagen, bicycles outnumber cars in the city centre thanks to a comprehensive network of unidirectional bike lanes and smart traffic lights, which synchronise traffic lights so that cyclists can easily ride through main streets. Denmark also has a network of "superhighways" for bikes, which connect municipalities to each other. Furthermore, public transport is designed in a way that allows users to shift seamlessly between buses, trains and bike lanes. A strong focus on safety also means women, children and older people are more likely to cycle.^{5,6} This infrastructure is the culmination of longstanding public advocacy for cycling facilities and pedestrian-friendly cities.

The Australian context

The examples of Denmark and Oslo both show how essential public support is to developing congestion-free city centres. This could be a challenge in Australia, given the very spread-out nature of our cities, and our car-centric culture.

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world; almost 90% of Australians live in cities.⁷ Nationwide, cars remain the most popular mode of transport. Australian households have an average of 1.8 cars in each,⁸ and 43% do not own a bicycle.⁹ In 2023, an unprecedented record for new car sales was set.¹⁰ A substantial part of street space in Australian cities is occupied by parking areas, and estimates suggest that up to half of the peak time traffic in Sydney's and Melbourne's CBDs could be drivers looking for a spot.¹¹ In many parts of Australia, public transport systems are not sufficiently developed to allow most people to go without owning a car.¹² Out of necessity and habit, Australia is car dependent.¹³

Nevertheless, some Australian cities are working on improving the liveability of their city centres. Melbourne has implemented free public transport in the CBD and is looking to restrict private cars from transiting through it¹⁴, while Canberra and Sydney are considering car-free days¹⁵ and Perth is building bridges for pedestrians and cyclists.¹⁶

To the extent that the Australian Government is talking about cars, the discussion has focused on increasing the uptake of Electric Vehicles (EV), mostly as part of emission-reduction policies.¹⁷ But this approach does not challenge Australia's car-centred lifestyle, and while it will help reduce emissions it won't do anything to reduce traffic congestion. However, emission-reduction legislation should be seen as an opportunity for Australia to borrow elements from successful car-free policies in Nordic countries, which have delivered environmental, social and health benefits for everyone who lives, works, and plays in city centres.

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