

Paper for Expert Group on Urban Mobility

Urban Space Initiative

Urban street space as a key to sustainable mobility and quality of life in cities



Public street space: the heart of our neighbourhoods and the subject of many demands.

Many of the problems we face in cities today are related to the current use of public street space, which we have filled to overflowing in recent decades with (ever-larger) cars. These problems include high levels of air and noise pollution, lack of independent movement for young children due to the danger created by car drivers, inability to move freely for people dependent on wheelchairs or walkers and the heat effect created by too many sealed surfaces and too little greenery.

There are current and new demands for street space. They include:

- charging infrastructure for e-mobility
- innovative logistics solutions (micro-depots, micro-hubs) and loading zones
- high quality pedestrian spaces and routes that allow wheelchair users, those pushing prams and those dependent on walkers to participate in society at all ages
- space for greening, cooling and absorption of rainwater (sponge city)
- space for modern mobility services like shared bikes, cargobikes, e-scooters, mopeds or cars to reduce the need for private ownership
- space for social interaction and play
- safe and convenient bicycle parking to promote active mobility



Cars – both moving and parked – consume valuable street space. The ever-increasing size of cars only exacerbates the problems. The growth of about 50 cm in length and 20 cm in width reduced the availability of parking space. The tension among different demands for public space will not be solved until we acknowledge that space is a limited resource and that parking is only one of many demands on our finite public space.



Space Dimension

In many European neighbourhoods, the space demand of parked cars has blocked much needed improvements, but urban mobility projects often fail to address this “space dimension”. And because the problem has been growing over decades and, at least in some places, rules have not been enforced, many people see (free) car parking in urban streets as a right that is being threatened, which can lead to emotional discussions.

There are some excellent examples of how street space has been reallocated – from the conversion of Boulevard Anspach in Brussels from a 4-lane street to a pedestrian area to the dedication of former car space in Paris to cycling and walking, to many small-scale interventions in many European municipalities.



Some aspects of potential solutions

European transport policy needs to better account for the role of street space for citizens, for mobility and for climate adaptation – and find ways to communicate the positive aspects of such changes so as to gain buy-in from citizens. This requires a better combination of regulatory, behavioural and technological measures. Current and future mobility projects need to focus more on reducing the pressure of car parking in our neighbourhoods so that space can be reclaimed for a wide range of needs.

Improve alternatives to car ownership

Real alternatives to car ownership need to come more in focus to reclaim street space from parking in an efficient way. The promotion of car sharing is still very limited in European cities. The European momo project demonstrated that 600,000 cars could be replaced in European cities by putting car sharing strategies in place on the level that some advanced cities have already done.

Use technology to improve the management of public space and increase safety

While it was addressed in the 1996 EU Green Paper “Citizens Networks”, later policy documents focussed more on technological improvements to the car than on putting the role of car ownership into question. But technological advancements could play roles both in managing public space and in making it safer.

Dynamic kerbside management – where fees are dynamic and collected electronically – can help make efficient and equitable use of public street space. Digital tools from the CCAM and UVAR toolboxes can support enforcement.

CCAM and ISA could be used to help to keep vehicle speeds low to improve safety for people walking and cycling and quality of life in general in neighbourhoods.

Work with carrots and sticks in parallel

Walking and cycling are climate neutral, healthy and space efficient. But it is disingenuous to promote these modes without providing the space and safety they need in cities. That space is currently taken up by parked and moving – indeed sometimes dangerously fast moving – cars. The “stick” of making car access to neighbourhoods difficult should be accompanied by the “carrot” of attractive walking and cycling facilities, car sharing and high quality public transport.

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