



CAN CYCLISTS AND PEDESTRIANS FORM A POLITICAL PARTY? EXAMPLES OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN TRANSPORT AND TRANSFORMATION PROCESSES

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In 2023, while living in Boston, Massachusetts (USA), I was trying to find the most efficient way to commute to the university where I worked. A trip that took 25 minutes by car could take up to two or even three hours one way using a combination of subway and train. Trains that were supposed to depart hourly sometimes never arrived, or the subway could be delayed by half an hour. While searching on my phone's map application for alternative routes, I realized that I could reach my destination by bicycle in 50 minutes one way. I bought a bike, and except during the months of heavy snowfall, I commuted to work by bike along the Charles River, accompanied by magnificent scenery.

Boston was not a bicycle-friendly city until about 15 years ago. Transformation began when a doctor told the mayor that he needed to move more. The mayor tried commuting by bike and experienced firsthand the poor treatment cyclists receive from cars. Seeing the daily struggles that cyclists in Boston face, the mayor began allocating funds to improve the city's bicycle infrastructure, sparking a city-wide mobility transition.

As the population of urban centers continues to grow, the climate change-related challenges cities face have brought the need for a mobility transition to the fore. Why is a mobility transition necessary? Is it only so that cyclists can move comfortably in cities? Or is it because of the problems created by car-oriented urban planning? What are these problems?

Beyond carbon dioxide emissions and air pollution—which play a major role in climate change—drivers in car-oriented cities can spend a significant portion of their lives stuck in traffic. In Istanbul, for example, drivers lose time equivalent to “3.5 years of a human lifetime”¹ on the roads. Each car occupies an average of 14 to 28 square meters, and parking areas take up a substantial portion of cities, preventing public space from being designed in a more human-centered way. Due to the density and speed of private vehicles, walking and cycling in cities are often dangerous activities.

Over the past century, we have designed cities for cars rather than for the well-being of the people who live in them. Changing this is not easy, but it is not impossible.



Those who advocate for transformation do not argue that cars should disappear completely. The goal is to eliminate car dependency. People should be able to reach where they want to go in their daily routines by choosing transportation methods other than private cars. The problem is not the existence of private vehicles but the fact that alternatives are either unsafe due to traffic speed and density or very slow and inefficient because of insufficient investment. In other words, when active modes such as cycling are perceived as dangerous and public transportation is irregular and slow, people choose private cars. The perception that this system cannot be changed and the discourse of “no alternatives” further increase inertia. Yet change is not as impossible as it is often portrayed.

The Netherlands, which we all associate with cycling today, was not always bicycle-friendly. Before the 1940s, bicycles were widely used as a mode of transport, but in the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise of private car use as the foundation of the development model of the time, cycling’s importance gradually declined. Cities began to transform with regulations that increased highways and car traffic. In the 1970s, the rising number of children killed by car accidents on their way to and from school mobilized parents. Under pressure from the “Stop the Child Murder” movement, urban design began to be reconsidered. In the same years, influenced by the global oil crisis, both local and central governments supported cycling as an alternative to reduce oil dependency. From the late 1970s onward, central and local governments began transforming cities through bike lanes, traffic reduction measures, and pedestrianization projects.

Although the emergence of green cities through green funds and projects that promote transformative climate policies offers hope, it remains uncertain whether these efforts will evolve into permanent policies. As seen in the Netherlands, pressure from civil society is crucial for change. Another good example is the Slovenian city of Maribor.

In the post-Soviet era, Maribor, like other former socialist cities, began transforming into a car-oriented town. In response to this transformation, Josip Rotar and his friends established the Maribor Cycling

Network over 30 years ago. As a civil society organization, the network aims to build and improve bicycle lanes in the city. Thanks to its efforts, the city now has 11 bicycle corridors, a well-functioning and affordable bike-sharing system, pedestrianized areas, and a more livable city. Members of the Cycling Network regularly inspect bike lanes and corridors built by the municipality, report problems, and request maintenance and repairs.

Josip Rotar has also been a member of the city council since 2014. While continuing to apply pressure through his civil society organization, the network collaborated with other associations to establish a local political party: the Cyclists and Pedestrians List. Believing that civil society activism alone would not be sufficient, they pursued change from inside the system. Using a mix of diplomacy and activism, the party aims to transform the car-oriented structure of the city. This is a slow process that requires persistent struggle. For example, although 68% of Maribor residents supported closing a historic street to car traffic, implementing this transformation took several years.

Institutional change is difficult and slow. Resistance can emerge, most often from car owners and shopkeepers. Complaints typically focus on fears that bike lanes and pedestrianization projects will reduce the number of customers and parking spaces and increase traffic. Ensuring citizen participation and coordination is also challenging. Yet in Maribor, civil society went beyond activism and formed a political party. In Turkey, there are also associations working on these issues, such as the Association for Developing Bicycle Transportation, the Pedestrian Association, and the “The Street Is Ours” Association. Could these groups evolve into local political movements and more effectively influence decision-making?

Urban mobility transformation is not limited to small-scale cities. We see many large cities undergoing effective change. In a city like Paris, closing streets around schools to traffic, increasing bicycle use, and reducing air pollution has been possible thanks to the determined efforts of Mayor Anne Hidalgo and her team. Hamburg has also succeeded in encouraging more people to use public transpor-



tation and bicycles by facilitating different transport options. After a group of shopkeepers took legal action against the pedestrianization of a street in the city's Altona district, the Altona city municipality fought and won the case to keep the street open to pedestrians. They established an expert team and conducted comprehensive research, which showed that 75% of residents supported the pedestrianization of that particular street. This experience highlights the importance of designing participatory processes more effectively and clearly communicating with the people. Otherwise, a small but organized group can block the transformation process.

Barcelona has also made serious efforts toward building a more pedestrian and bicycle-friendly city in recent years. The "Superblock Model" is an urban design strategy that limits speed on neighborhood streets and creates public spaces within a "Superblock," where pedestrians' and cyclists' access is prioritized. This model has not only reduced noise and air pollution but also strengthened neighborhood culture. Children can play or cycle more safely in the streets, and more public space is created. Additionally, the city-wide bicycle network has been expanded, and the car-dominated urban structure has been gradually transformed.

I can almost hear what you are thinking: perhaps you are saying that these things are easier to do in small, flat cities. However, when we look at what has been done in many large cities in recent years—such as Paris and Barcelona—we see that even small but consistent and flexible creative interventions can pave the way toward healthier, more human-centered cities. It is possible to address obstacles in this transformation process through creative and participatory methods. The key to transformation seems to be taking small steps, making the right interventions, and communicating the progress to the people.

We know that when the right conditions are created, people can change their habits. A simple example is the increased use of the newly built funicular and the ferry service on the Aşıyan–Üsküdar line by many employees and students of my former workplace, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. Many peo-

ple who used to commute by car now use this line to connect to the Marmaray train, enjoying a more pleasant journey while reducing their car dependency. A meal at the famous Üsküdar Kanaat Restaurant, which is very close to the Marmaray and ferry stop, is an added bonus.

Notes

- 1 Gamze Arman, Melis Oguz-Cevik, and Belgin Okay-Sommerville, "Psychological mechanisms of commuting: A cognitive dissonance approach to intercontinental commuting discomfort in Istanbul," *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 195 (May 2025).

* *This commentary was translated into English using AI-assisted language support (ChatGPT, OpenAI). The original commentary was published in Turkish here.*