

1. Opinions



French 2020 municipal elections: why the pedestrianization of city centers isn't enough

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Mobile Lives Forum

As Green parties recorded historic results in the second round of the French municipal elections in June, walking will be an important topic in the coming months for many French communities whose newly elected officials campaigned on this issue. In this context, the Mobile Lives Forum warns us against seeing the pedestrianization of city centers as the only or even correct way of promoting walking as a mode of travel in its own right. We have to think of largescale, uninterrupted pedestrian pathways at the level of cities, towns and metropolises. The pedestrianization of Brussels' city center, which was the subject of a research project, provides us with many lessons.

Paris, Nancy, Villeurbanne: the various candidates to the municipal elections put the pedestrianization of city centers at the heart of their policy commitments. Before the first round, political platforms already called for “giving the streets back to pedestrians,” “letting cities breathe” and making them “greener” by reducing the negative impacts of cars and encouraging walking. Since then, the lockdown gave people an opportunity to experiment a drastic, full-scale reduction of motorized traffic and the emergence of new practices in the public space: playing sports in the middle of the street, letting children play in a square, enjoying one's balcony or an open window without suffering from pollution or noise...

But is pedestrianization a measure that truly rises to the challenge of the environmental crisis, or is it first and foremost a matter of enhancing the attractiveness and image of a city center? On the eve of the second round of the French municipal elections, as many cities have decided to give more space to pedestrians as they ease the lockdown measures, there are many lessons to be learned from the case of Brussels, where the pedestrianization project of Anspach Boulevard between 2015 and 2020 has made it the largest urban pedestrian zone in Europe.

Is pedestrianization an eco-friendly measure to reduce cars in the city?

Excluding cars from a city-center: this is a drastic measure that allows pedestrians to reclaim a calmer public space, free of car-related noise, visual inconveniences and pollution. In Brussels, the residents, workers and users of the “Piétonnier” (the name given to the new, enlarged pedestrian zone) enjoy being able to stroll along Anspach Boulevard, sit on a terrace or even watch a street show. But who really benefits from such pedestrianization? Brussels, the European capital, needs to present a calm and attractive city center for visitors, whether they come to shop there, visit the future “beer temple” due to open in the Stock Exchange building or stay in a luxurious hotel in the city center. In this quest for attractiveness, the presence of cars isn’t challenged beyond the restricted space of the city center. Indeed, since 2015, cars haven’t really disappeared from Brussels’ city center: they have largely just been transferred to the surrounding streets, which are narrower and less adapted to heavy traffic. This project thus doesn’t really offer an alternative system to cars, it just removes them from certain spaces to make them more attractive, to the detriment of surrounding areas. Yet, pedestrianization could have been an opportunity to connect the City of Brussels’ project to the wider plans for mobility and sustainable development undertaken by the Brussels-Capital Region, thereby truly questioning the place of cars on a metropolitan scale.

The researchers clearly identified this phenomenon: in major European cities, centers are pedestrianized in order to enhance their image and attract visitors. This requires that such visitors be able to reach the center easily! Pedestrianization therefore goes hand in hand with efficient roads and the development of car parks near the city center, not to mention airports allowing foreign visitors to reach the country. Thus, pedestrianization and improved accessibility are two sides of the same coin, which is the quest for attractiveness. One may then legitimately wonder: is pedestrianization really an eco-friendly process when it actually encourages greater car use and more tourism - two of the greatest sources of greenhouse gas emissions?

Pedestrianize to get people walking?

We should be very careful not view pedestrianization as a policy that seeks to promote pedestrian mobility! Its goal is more about getting people to stroll and shop, which is something very different from getting them to view walking as a legitimate mode of transportation. Indeed, despite the numerous pedestrianization projects carried out since the 1970s in different cities such as Rouen or Grenoble, household travel surveys have shown that the modal share of walking in people’s overall movements has stagnated or even decreased.

However, pedestrianization could yet be an excellent opportunity to strengthen a city’s walkability, provided a change in ambition! Some cities, such as Paris, closed a few streets or widened sidewalks to accommodate the new pedestrian conditions and social distancing requirements of the lockdown period. This is a good start, but we should go even further, beyond this approach where walking is only practiced in archipelagos of isolated pedestrianized zones, in order to ensure largescale, uninterrupted pedestrian pathways. In order to do this, there would need to be, not only in cities but also in suburbs and rural areas, a coherent network of secondary streets that can be closed to motorized traffic, in order to enable slow modes of transport such as walking all the while granting exceptional access to certain essential motor vehicles (deliveries, firefighters, etc.).

We call for these municipal elections to be the first step towards implementing a national walking plan, which would be applied at the city or metropolitan level. This plan should be designed in consultation with citizens and associations and would take into account all members of the public, including children, the elderly and the disabled. It would be based on measures aimed at making crossings easier and safer both day and night, especially at junctions with traffic lights which are often stressful for pedestrians. To encourage people to opt for walking, it is also necessary to communicate effectively on the routes that pedestrians can take and at what times, and to make these routes more attractive with trees and facilities (benches, rest stops...). One of the key remaining issues is promoting the habit of walking as a mode of travel in its own right, one that helps combat the effects of a sedentary lifestyle (which can cause heart problems and Alzheimer’s), that empowers both the younger and older members of society, and that limits the use of cars.

Cherish the positives of walking, slowness and proximity

There is an urgent need to move away from the dominant model of center vs periphery, which implies that the city center is an attractive and peaceful destination that cars can reach via rapid infrastructures. Another model is possible, more polycentric, where slowness is no longer the prerogative of the pedestrian center, where speed and cars are no longer indispensable, where new and more localized lifestyles can be deployed in all territories - lifestyles in which walking and soft modes would have their place.

At a moment when transport-related greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise and the effective fight against climate change is still being pushed back, it is time for cities not just to signal their environmental virtue by making their centers pedestrian, but to effectively participate in this collective struggle by rethinking their territorial model and finally integrating walking in the realm of public mobility policies.

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Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people's freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people's lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

En savoir plus x

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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City-centre, pedestrianization and lifestyles

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