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## NEW CHALLENGES FOR CITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Regenerative Design - Climate Adaptation & Mitigation  
Circular Economy - Citizen Agency - Urban Livability

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TeMA Journal has the objective of fostering and integrating studies on urban transformation and urban mobility, within a scientific context focused on adapting cities to global warming and oriented towards economic, social and environmental sustainability. The three issues of the 2026 propose articles that deal with the effects of climate change adaptation, reduction of energy consumption, AI-driven solutions to support urban planning, immigration flows, optimisation of land use, analysis and evaluation of civil protection plans in areas especially vulnerable to natural disasters.

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- Urban Livability

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## **REVIEW NOTES - Urban strategies, programmes and tools**

# Governing the transformations of public space: active travel policies for people's health and well-being

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### **Abstract**

Starting from the relationship between urban planning and mobility management, TeMA has gradually expanded the view of the covered topics, always remaining in the groove of rigorous scientific in-depth analysis. This section of the Journal, Review Notes, is the expression of continuously updating emerging topics concerning relationships between urban planning, mobility and environment, through a collection of short scientific papers written by young researchers. The Review Notes are made of four parts. Each section examines a specific aspect of the broader information storage within the main interests of TeMA Journal. In particular, the Urban strategies, programmers and tools section presents the different strategies and tools that guide the governance of the transformations of public space.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the solutions and policy tools used to transform public space to promote an active lifestyle and collective well-being.

An optimal urban configuration, where public space design is oriented toward movement, encourages active travel and generates public health benefits. This paper illustrates several public space planning and transformation strategies aimed at designing urban environments that encourage daily walking and cycling, combining public health, sustainability, and the quality of the built environment.

### **Keywords**

Policy tools; Urban strategies; Public space; Active mobility; Health; Well-being

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## 1. Public urban space for an active and healthy life

Public spaces - sidewalks, streets, playgrounds, plazas, public gardens, parks, beaches, libraries, art museums, historical monuments, and more - represent the beating heart of a city's urban fabric, serving as vital infrastructure for socialization, play, and learning, as well as for the circulation and movement of people (Low, 2023).

Every urban context has a specific identity and development potential, so every urban planning intervention must therefore be adapted to the particular characteristics of each city, with the ultimate goal of converting inert and lifeless spaces into dynamic and welcoming public spaces (Yaseen & Bostan, 2024; Chow et al., 2016) where urban design becomes the primary tool for promoting an active society and widespread well-being.

Quality of life, well-being, and public health are now cornerstones of a new vision of public space, where proximity to services and zero-emission travel not only ensure accessibility but also restore public spaces to their fundamental human and social dimension (Carra et al., 2022).

In many urban contexts, public space is still unbalanced in favor of motorized mobility—reaching peaks of 60% in cities like Barcelona—which takes away vital areas for the community and also represents a high cost to health due to smog and noise generated (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2020).

Conversely, an urban environment that fosters active mobility makes the city more attractive and accessible for residents and visitors, triggering a virtuous cycle of economic attractiveness and social excitement, restoring the centrality of public space as a meeting place and a collective identity (D'Amico et al., 2026). Furthermore, the scientific literature widely recognizes active mobility as a powerful catalyst for public health because it can potentially reduce dependence on cars for daily travel and enhance physical activity, reduce air pollution emissions and improve mental health (Kong et al., 2024; D'Amico, 2024b). Protecting public health is an essential prerequisite for building resilient and prosperous communities, representing one of the most significant parameters of sustainable development (UN, 2016). Goal 11 of the Agenda2030 “Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (Fig.1) encompasses the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and focuses specifically on the urban context, identifying Goal 11.7 as an absolute priority, ensuring every citizen's right to safe, accessible and green public spaces (UN, 2015).



Fig.1 Sustainable Development Goals (European Commission, 2019)

The New Urban Agenda of Habitat III promotes "safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces" as multifunctional areas designed for social interaction and inclusion, health and human well-being (NUA, 2017). Equally important is the WHO's call to create urban environments conducive to health (WHO, 2022) and the Global Plan (2021), which emphasizes that land-use planning must create infrastructure and services that encourage the choice of alternative, sustainable, healthy, and clean transportation modes, such as walking, cycling, and public transportation.

Public spaces can be considered a powerful tool for urban sustainability, providing environmental, social, economic, and health benefits to cities (Vukmirovic et al., 2019). Far beyond its function as a connection, public space constitutes the infrastructure where public, environmental, socio-cultural and economic needs converge and coexist (Bocca et al., 2024).

A large body of multidisciplinary research, ranging from urban planning to public health, natural sciences and epidemiology, has thoroughly analyzed the correlations between the environment and health or well-being (Krefis et al., 2018; Jabbar et al., 2022; Andalib et al., 2024).

Urban environments and transportation policies influence people's behaviors, for example by promoting cycling and walking as modes of transportation, developing safe infrastructure, and encouraging the creation of accessible green spaces where people can engage in leisure time physical activity. Equally important is to recognize that green areas and open spaces act as crucial infrastructure to combat the climate crisis in urban environments, thanks to their ability to regulate the microclimate and lower urban temperatures, positively influencing the energy efficiency of cities (Stiuso, 2025; Zhang et al., 2014).

In the public health landscape, active mobility is recognized as a fundamental strategy for encouraging physical activity, reducing sedentary lifestyles, and combating chronic diseases (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2022). This vision is supported by a growing scientific consensus, which sees active movement as an essential driver for people's physical and mental well-being (Groves et al., 2024; Granero-Jiménez et al., 2022).

However, urban policies fail to always meet health standards, fueling settlement patterns that instead encourage car dependence and penalizing pedestrian, bicycle, and community access to essential services and public spaces.

An optimal urban configuration, where public space design is oriented toward movement, encourages active travel and generates public health benefits. The next section illustrates various public space planning and transformation strategies implemented in international contexts, aimed at designing urban environments that encourage walking and cycling every day, combining public health, sustainability, and the quality of the built environment.

## 2. Integrated urban policies for people's health and well-being

Urban policies influence urban lifestyle, health and sustainability. Truly sustainable urban management requires strategies and policies designed to influence and guide citizen behavior and mobility within urban environments. To achieve future cities that incentivize active travel, cities must focus on long-term planning that invests in active mobility infrastructure, promoting clean, zero-carbon modes of transportation, integrating traditional tools and participatory practices (Papageorgiou et al., 2024; Khavarian-Garmsir et al., 2023).

Promoting active modes requires bold actions and a cross-sectoral vision that connects urban planning and mobility systems through multi-sectoral cooperation.

This contribution aims to provide an overview of the solutions and policy tools used to transform public space to promote an active lifestyle and collective well-being.

Below are some of the international best practices that redefine the concept of public space in favor of active life and sustainable mobility.

Among the most significant European experiences are Barcelona's Superblocks model (D'Amico, 2024b), which reorganizes the street grid to create traffic-free inner oases, and Paris's 15-Minute City with the "Plan Vélo

2021-2026" (D'Amico, 2024a), which emphasizes proximity to services to eliminate car dependence; Berlin's 2018 Mobility Law (Von Schneidmesser et al., 2020) demonstrated the potential to transform mobility policy by integrating citizens into political processes; Utrecht (Netherlands) incentivizes intermodality by promoting the creation of park-and-ride areas on the city's edges, which become intermodal hubs and facilitate resident initiatives to redevelop residential streets, transforming parking spaces into play areas, bicycle parking, and green spaces. It also introduces traffic-free zones where pedestrians and cyclists have priority (Utrecht Mobility Plan 2040, 2021); Vienna experiments with Supergrätzl to combine pedestrianization and climate resilience (Tiran et al., 2025); London's financial district, with its "City Cluster Vision", demonstrates this common trend toward more efficient and effective use of road space and the densification of green spaces and pedestrian and cycle paths (The city cluster vision, 2019).

### London (United Kingdom) – CITY CLUSTER VISION (CITY PLAN 2036)

The City of London's City Plan 2036 defines urban planning guidelines for the next twenty years, identifying the "City Cluster vision" as one of the key areas for strategic transformation (The city cluster vision, 2019).

At the heart of this vision is the "The Healthy Streets Approach", a framework that prioritizes active mobility—walking, cycling, and public transport—to create a more welcoming and healthy urban environment. This model informs the Transport Strategy, placing citizen well-being and the quality of the street experience at the heart of every decision.

In the City Cluster, this translates into a coordinated approach that integrates the enhancement of public spaces with structural changes to traffic flow. The goal is to rebalance the use of urban space, making walking and staying in the neighborhood safer and more enjoyable (Fig.2). Strategic proposals that directly relate to the feasibility of public space include:

- Increasing pedestrian priority streets and improved pedestrian crossings;
- Providing more public space and delivering world-class public realm;
- Incorporating more greenery into the City's streets and public spaces;
- Reducing rainwater run-off on City street and public realm;
- Ensuring street space is used more efficiently and effectively;
- Using timed and temporary street closures to help make streets safer and more attractive places to walk, cycle and spend time;
- Undertaking traffic management measures through the development of Healthy Streets Plans and targeting Local Zero Emission Zones for City Cluster by 2022.

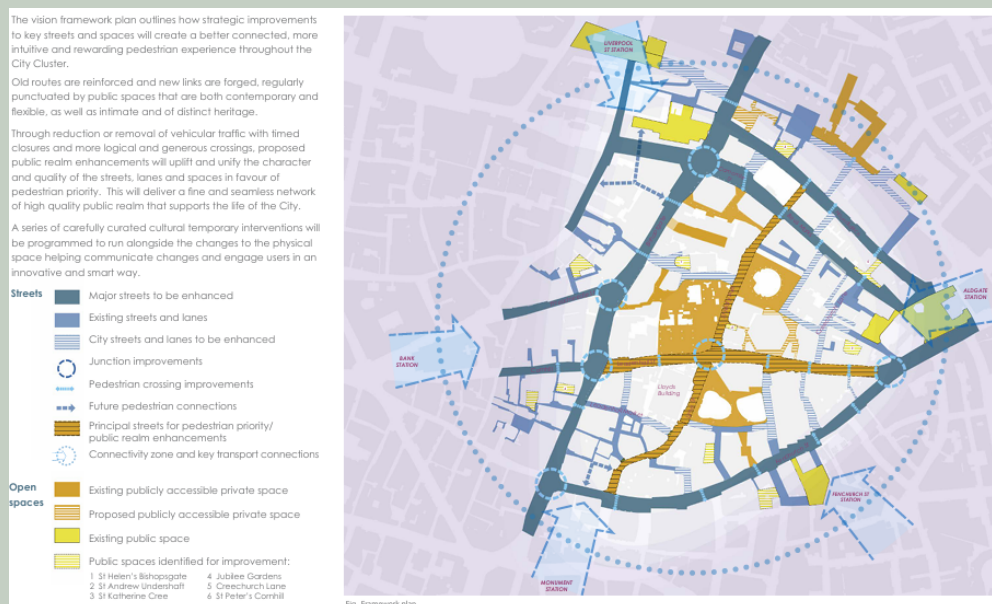


Fig.2 Vision Framework Plan (The city cluster vision, 2019)

In North America, Vancouver's "Transportation 2040" (2012) promote and encourage creative uses of streets and public spaces through pilot projects and competitions. For example, it launched the "parklet program" to

promote the conversion of on-street parking into low-cost public spaces (Transportation 2040, 2012). Sidewalks and streets are not just places of passage, but places to spend time, where transportation needs are met and a vibrant public life that benefits commerce and the community is supported. Walkability and how to transform public spaces for community life should be considered objectives of urban planning (Tan et al., 2024). In New York, the "Open Streets program" transforms streets into public spaces open to all, where the community (associations, schools, businesses, etc.) becomes the steward of their own streets and reinvents them as a valuable local resource. For example, the program allows certain streets to be temporarily closed to vehicular traffic to support schools, particularly those without a gym or dedicated play area: the street in front of the school is used during certain hours of the day to offer safe outdoor spaces as a versatile venue for recess, outdoor learning, lunch, assemblies, graduations, and safe pick-ups and drop-offs.

### Vancouver (CANADA) – TRANSPORTATION 2040 PLAN

Transportation 2040 (2012) is a long-term strategic plan for the city that will guide transportation and land-use decisions, as well as public investments, for years to come. It defines long-term goals and includes both high-level policies and specific actions to achieve the vision.

Vancouver is a multimodal city as people often use more than one mode of transportation within a single trip, and in recent years its policies have focused on supporting transportation modes that use renewable fuels and transport more people with less pollution, such as electric cars, public transit, and active transportation modes like walking and cycling. One of the first goals set by the 2040 Plan is that at least 60% of all trips will be made on foot, by bicycle, and by public transport.

The city implements urban design guidelines to promote the safety and attractiveness of the street environment, for example by encouraging building facades with many windows and doors that put "eyes on the street"; to minimize conflicts with cars, driveways are placed in alleys and away from bike paths and pedestrian walkways, wherever possible; The plan supports programs that encourage creative uses of the street, including temporary and permanent public spaces created by reallocating street space; the city is also evaluating options for making certain streets and plazas pedestrian-priority public space and for transforming some less frequented streets into low-cost squares, with potential locations identified through community planning processes. Some of the Walking actions to be taken by the city (Fig.3):

- implement an ongoing spot improvement program to address pedestrian safety and accessibility issues;
- provide additional amenities such as benches and enhanced lighting along priority walking streets;
- make the False Creek bridges and other deficient areas safer and more accessible on foot;
- launch a parklet program to foster the conversion of on-street parking spaces into low-cost public spaces;
- implement signal measures to prioritize pedestrian movement at intersections.

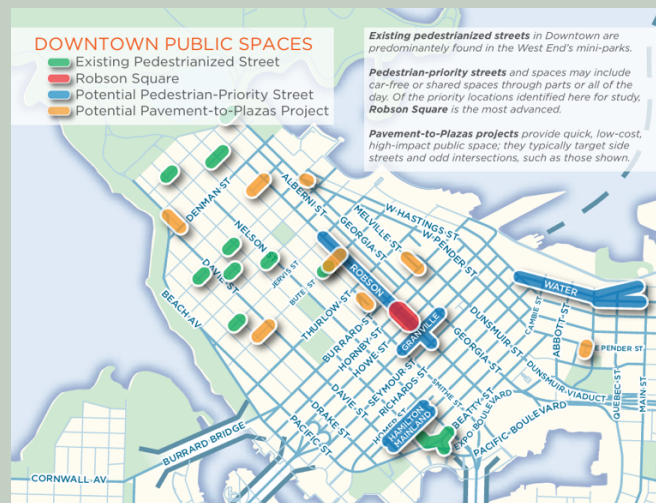


Fig.3 Public space in downtown Vancouver (Transportation 2040, 2012)

Asian metropolises also offer cutting-edge solutions, such as the 2030 "Seoul Plan", which, from a city oriented towards infrastructure development, it is instead revolutionizing its urban policies to restore ecological corridors, or Singapore's system, which integrates active mobility with a vast network of covered sidewalks

and interconnected parks (Park Connector Network). The transformation of public spaces to encourage micro-mobility and pedestrianization becomes a driver of economic vitality and social well-being, and also a valuable tool for encouraging the urban resilience needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The common trend is the inversion of the mobility pyramid: space is being taken away from asphalt and cars to be given back to people, replacing it with green areas, cycle paths, pedestrian paths and squares. In accordance with these principles, the city of Melbourne, Australia, is implementing a series of strategies to become a "20-minute city", integrating sustainable transport, redeveloped public spaces and accessible car-free services (Plan Melbourne 2017-2050, 2017).

#### **Melbourne (AUSTRALIA) – PLAN MELBOURNE 2017-2050**

The plan outlines an integrated urban vision focused on proximity and sustainability (Fig.4). Massive investments in infrastructure and public transport will support the transition to a city of "20-minute neighbourhoods", where essential services are accessible without a car. The strategy aims to create safe pedestrian and cycle-friendly neighbourhoods, strengthening local connections and ensuring short, sustainable and accessible journeys for all residents in the vicinity. Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 (2017) aims to strengthen the city's identity by expanding public spaces, including the selective redevelopment of underutilized areas within existing communities. Melbourne is renowned for its buildings, parks, creative culture, and quality of life. The city aims to further enhance public space by integrating urban planning practices into the management of street space, the boulevard network, and green river corridors for a more livable and sustainable metropolis. Regarding the goal of creating connected communities and an integrated transportation system, the city aims to improve local travel options to support neighborhoods within a 20-minute drive. Actions include pedestrianizing spaces, developing a comprehensive network of bike paths, and optimizing public transportation, locating schools and strategic facilities in accessible and safe hubs to encourage short and sustainable trips.



**Fig.4 Plan Melbourne (2017)**

### **3. Conclusion**

Contemporary urban planning is changing the way we think about road networks, not just as a "motorized flow channel" but as a public space intended for social life and active mobility.

This transformative vision manifests itself through heterogeneous strategies that, despite originating from distant geographical and cultural contexts, share the goal of restoring public land to pedestrians and cyclists. New strategies and "visions" for the city of the future, such as London's "City Cluster Vision" or "Melbourne's Plan", seek to combine public space planning and transformation strategies with the need to foster environmental sustainability, social interaction, and active mobility.

Although each city adopts different tools, the review of these best practices clearly highlights a common denominator: the desire to transform the city into a place where walking or cycling is not only an ecological choice, but the simplest, safest, and most enjoyable way to experience the urban environment.

This strategy responds to current challenges and ensures the prosperity, sustainability, and livability of our cities.

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## Image Sources

Fig.1: European Commission (2019). Reflection Paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030. Retrieved from: [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/3dab8f75-8c9d-4cf2-b215-;](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/3dab8f75-8c9d-4cf2-b215-)

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Fig.3: Transportation 2040 (2012). Transportation 2040. Moving Forward. Retrieved from: <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/transportation-2040-plan.pdf>;

Fig.4: Melbourne Plan 2017-2050 (2017). PLAN MELBOURNE 2017-2050. Retrieved from: <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/guides-and-resources/strategies-and-initiatives/plan-melbourne/the-plan>.

## Author's profile

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