
Mobility transition in the urban context

Thematic report
Resilient Europe

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Introduction

Sustainable mobility and accessibility

Mobility is about accessibility and connectedness. About the need or need to move, and the infrastructures and solutions provided to fulfil this. The current mobility system in cities is clearly unsustainable and non-resilient. This report introduces experiences from three cities that seek to fundamentally change the mobility system; and apply a transitions approach to turn mobility into a catalyst for a sustainable future of their city.

The main issue with the current mobility system is that it is strongly based on the use of fossil fuels, which is not sustainable in the light of climate change, depletion of oil and geopolitical dependency. Other ‘negative’ drivers for change are congestion, poor air quality, the occupation of scarce space and the problem of transport poverty. At the same time, change is supported by ‘positive’ drivers by for example the pursuit active mobility for healthy lifestyles, and innovations such as the electric car, autonomous driving, shared mobility schemes and mobility-as-a-service.

However, changing the mobility system is not an easy endeavour. Culturally, the car (or broader: individual motorized mobility) is highly idealized as a status symbol. Over the past decades, city’s infrastructures became optimized for cars, while promoting the spatial separation between living, commercial and business functions and thus strengthening the dependency on cars. From an institutional perspective, mobility planning has become a quite isolated effort, with a focus on optimizing traffic flows and hardly linking to city’s larger agendas regarding health, economy, public space, etc.

Over the last years, many cities around the world show rapid improvements. The streets are increasingly taken by pedestrians and cyclists. Boulevards transform to pedestrians’ paradise, riversides to recreational delights and road sections to cycling lanes. This is great news, as these transformations makes cities healthier, safer and more thriving.

However, despite many successful examples, such developments are yet far from mainstream. The spatial interventions are often limited to iconic parts of the city; and in most cities the boom of cycling has yet to grow out of the realm of activism or Sunday’s recreation. Now it is time to accelerate the transition by scaling up efforts, linking agenda’s and developing interventions that effectively help to leave the status-quo and tread new pathways instead.

Cities working on mobility transition

Transitions approach

This chapter introduces four examples of how cities are working towards a sustainable mobility system:

1. Thessaloniki: co-creating new solutions at neighbourhood level
2. Rotterdam: change agents rethink mobility
3. Rotterdam: promoting cycling as a means for social-economic development
4. Ghent: pioneering at street level with Living Streets

All these examples explicitly embrace a transitions approach to turn mobility into a catalyst for a sustainable future of their city.

Thessaloniki – co-creating new solutions at neighbourhood level¹

Thessaloniki is the second largest municipality of Greece, its metropolitan area housing 790,000 inhabitants. In its work on urban resilience, Thessaloniki focuses on the issue of mobility within the city, with associated problems of poor air quality and lack of accessibility. The city tries to connect problems of infrastructure failure with broader social, economic and environmental issues, in collaboration with a spectrum of different actors.

Within the framework of URBACT Resilient Europe project, the city of Thessaloniki deployed real-life spatially-explicit experimentation in the area of Toumpa. Cycling was selected as core theme. The aim was to learn new approaches and co-create new solutions together with citizens to bring the bicycle outside the realm of sports into the everyday city life.

¹ This section is based on the policy document “Integrated Action Plan for Urban Resilience through promoting cycling policies and culture throughout Thessaloniki” (February 2018), as well as on insights shared during the exchanges of the Resilient Europe Network.



Use of the cycling infrastructure in Thessaloniki is a challenge (photo: Niki Frantzeskaki)

Based on intensive dialogues with a group of change-agents in the city, complemented with questionnaire research and observations during street activities, four pathways have been formulated as an anchor point for strategies and actions for urban resilience:

1. Citizen participation and dissemination;
2. Traffic education;
3. Bottom up engaging with visions for place and community and establish new collaborative relations between the city and its citizens;
4. Integration of the bicycle at the Urban Mobility Planning of the city.

During 2017, the city of Thessaloniki together with other actors developed a number of interventions in line with these pathways. Most prominent were the three cycling events organized in Toumpla. These were aimed to create a positive atmosphere around cycling, to promote activities of existing cycling associations as well as to engage citizens in developing cycling policies.

The participatory planning exercise linked to the cycling events indicated that the proposed new cycle routes appeared useful, safe and comfortable for daily bike commuting. Concerning the existing bicycle infrastructure, the most important problems proved to be the inadequacy of the current situation (bicycle infrastructure

and parking facilities), the lack of cycling network, the lack of continuity and the bad situation of the existing bike lanes (e.g. narrow lanes). Building upon on this feedback, a list or priority projects has been formed for the bicycle infrastructure network development.

Another key intervention was facilitating traffic education. Raising awareness on traffic education and respect between all the road network's users is of major importance for the improvement of road safety for cycling. The municipality promoted the already existing 'e - drive academy' among teachers and coordinated efforts with the Municipal Police and a local Bicycle Association to organize bike training and road traffic education. Next steps are the integrated of traffic/cycling education as mandatory parts of the school programme, organisation of campaigns and cycle routes and the establishment of a "Ride to School" programme with the contribution of students' parents or teachers.



Road safety lessons for school children in Thessaloniki

Rotterdam: change agents rethink mobility

Rotterdam is the second largest city of the Netherlands, with a population of 640,000 inhabitants. The port city is known as a 'car paradise' in the Netherlands, being rebuilt after World War II according to modernist standards. Pressured by air quality issues and triggered by a sense of opportunity to become a more attractive and smarter city, Rotterdam set high ambitions in its mobility policies in 2014.

In this context, the Rotterdam 'mobility arena' was set up in 2015 as a temporary innovation network. With its own mobility policy as a starting point, the municipality has 'opened the windows' to tap into the dynamics and potential in the city. The mobility arena brought together a 16 change agents, a mix of thinkers and doers with diverse backgrounds. It created space for them to develop ideas and projects about the future of mobility that went further and also broader than the municipal policy.

The mobility arena came together in a series of 5 meetings during 2015. Each meeting was thoroughly prepared by a facilitating team. This facilitating team consisted of city officers from the mobility, economy and spatial planning departments, plus two transition management experts.



Impressions of a meeting of the mobility arena group in Rotterdam

The arena group analysed that the modernist mobility system of Rotterdam had its use in the past, facilitating economic growth and enabling people to pass through the city quickly. But now the high-tide of big industry is over and the city becomes a popular place to live, this mobility system is hampering the development of Rotterdam. In the publication 'Treading new pathways', the group envisions the future of mobility to be people-centred, facilitating an attractive, smart, empowering and involving city.

The vision thus developed has influenced the strategic mobility agenda, most importantly by framing mobility not just as going as fast as possible from A to B but rather as a means for social-economic development of the city. The integral, long-term vision developed by the mobility arena increased the ambition of the municipal mobility agenda and helped to better integrate the mobility agenda with other departmental agendas, in particular with economy and spatial planning thanks to active involvement of city officers from these departments.

Moreover, the mobility arena has strengthened the involved change-agents and led to new connections and collaborations. The most prominent projects that emerged from these new connections are 'Fietsen op Zuid', a project aimed to promote cycling in Rotterdam-South as a means for social-economic development; and 'Happy Streets', temporally closing down parts of the city for traffic to give way for people to play, meet and sport.

The ideas and networks also strengthened projects that were already in development, like the 'BMX-school', 'dream streets' (bringing the 'living streets' developed in Ghent also to Rotterdam, see the section about Ghent below) and MAAS, short for 'mobility as a service', facilitating people to go around the city in whatever way, including for example bike-share systems and water taxis.



Open Streets, a spin-off project from the mobility arena. (photo: Studio van der Poort)

Rotterdam: promoting cycling as a means for social-economic development

The Netherlands is considered to be the main cycling country in the world with a high modal share of cycling in almost every city. However, on Rotterdam's South Bank another reality is noticeable. Biking remains a marginal form of transportation in the low-income and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in this part of Rotterdam, with approximately 240.000 inhabitants. Here, only 25% of the population regularly uses a bicycle, as opposed to 45% at Rotterdam's North Bank. Biking is yet far from mainstream, and many people don't own a bike or simply did not learn how to cycle.

In this context DRIFT and the Dutch Cyclist' Union initiated, together with and funded by the City of Rotterdam, the 'Fietsen op Zuid' ('Cycling at South') program. The program is a spin-off from the mobility arena (see previous section) and aims to promote cycling as a means for social-economic development.

Fietsen op Zuid is set up as a platform for co-creation, involving a diverse group of entrepreneurs, citizens, activists, housing corporations, NGOs, public entities and companies. Since the start of the program, in March 2016, Fietsen op Zuid aims to create a new cycling culture through several (pilot) projects. The program works on mutual learning, for example in communities of practice, to inspire and support others to work on similar initiatives and enable upscaling of the ideas and practices developed.

The pilot projects include:

- **Bike-friendly schools.** An intensive approach, including cycling lessons to school classes, donating refurbished bikes to kids from families that cannot afford to buy one, and redesign of the school yard and public space together with the children and their parents to address physical barriers. After a positive experience at 2 schools, the approach is in 2018 being applied at 5 schools.
- A **neighbourhood-based approach**, introducing a local shared bike system, combined with cycling lessons and other activities. The approach and lessons are taken up in the other developments listed below.
- A **give-a-bike scheme for children.** In collaboration with a national initiative, 400 bikes were collected, refurbished and redistributed in 2017. The municipality is currently evaluating the projects and seeking to give continuity and a larger scale to this project. At the same time, another Rotterdam-based mobility organisation, de Verkeersonderneming, builds upon the results of this pilot in a new project creating a network of local cycle hubs in the city.

- 'Cycle along' ('Fiets mee!'). Aimed at promoting bicycle use among women in Rotterdam, especially among women with a migration background. The approach includes cycling lessons for hundreds of women and the setup of a special ambassador network. Key words are self-confidence, mutual motivation and making miles. The project stimulates women and their families to use bikes instead of cars or public transport. At the same time, benefits are more healthy lifestyles and empowerment, enabling women to extend their range and undertake activities independently.

A clear lesson from the Fietsen op Zuid program is the importance of focussing on the social and economic benefits of cycling to involve a broad range of actors in the promotion of cycling. Many actors and projects have ambitions for which biking could be (a part of) a solution, whether it is entrepreneurs, citizens, activists, housing corporations, NGOs, public entities or companies. Cities fail to tap into this potential, as often the promotion of biking is treated quite narrowly as a strategy of mobility planning.

Thanks to the approach followed in Rotterdam, all kinds of organizations become involved in the promotion of cycling at the local level. These include the public health department of the municipality, schools, a mosque, an organisation for empowerment of women, local media and store-owners. Together, they are able to put significant resources and effort in the cycling-project; and manage to reach a wider audience. At the same time, they help to shape the projects in such a way that it fits to the needs and perspectives of the target groups.

The case of Rotterdam includes another lesson. In The Netherlands cycling seems to be so engrained in daily life that many of the politicians, policy makers, and cycling advocates take the benefits for granted and tend to forget that for large groups in our society, cycling is not part of their daily practice. This is a more general observation in cities around the world: cycling policies, initiatives, and advocacy often fail to reach low-income neighbourhoods and ethnically diverse communities.



Fietsen op Zuid: children learn how to fix a flat tire. (Photo: Jorn Wemmenhove)

Ghent: pioneering at street level with Living Streets

Imagine your neighbour knocks on your door: “Hi, how are you? Can I talk to you for a minute? I have an idea to share with you... Imagine we could temporarily transform our street into a beautiful green meeting place for the whole neighbourhood to enjoy? We would remove the cars, just for a few months and then see what happens? What do you think?” Precisely these kind of simple questions triggered the imagination of hundreds of citizens all over Europe; and changed dozens of streets in Living Streets over the past years.²

Ghent is a major city in Belgium, with 240,000 inhabitants. The city is characterized by its historic centre, large student population and important port. The City of Ghent has an ambitious sustainability agenda; the city is also home to many strong bottom-up initiatives that strive for a sustainable future. In 2012, the city organized a ‘mobility arena’, bringing together change agents from diverse backgrounds to give an impulse to the mobility transition (similar to the mobility arena in Rotterdam, introduced earlier).

² This is the introduction text of the Living Streets workshop at the closing event of the Resilient Europe project.

The transition agenda developed by this group of change agents included the visionary image of streets for people instead of cars. Just like in other cities, limiting the space for evokes an extremely polarized societal debate. The change agents in Ghent anticipated this resistance and decided to translate their vision in short-term experiments. Through a few years of experimentation, they intended to create support for the tough decisions needed to foster sustainable mobility in Ghent.

The 'living street' is one of these experiments. The group translated their future vision into a feasible and temporary project by making it an event. They invited local residents to use their streets to live, meet and play in, during one month. And to close their streets for cars in this period. This way, the residents could experience their streets in a very different way. Residents were also provided with access to other mobility options like shared cars and a public transport card.

In the first year, 2013, two streets participated in the project and became car-free for a month. In the subsequent years, the number of participating streets increased from 2 to 10 to 16 to 19. The residents of the participating streets were supported by the NGO 'Lab van Troje', founded by participants of the mobility arena. This supporting role is taken over by the City of Ghent in 2017, by the department that is responsible for 'community building' and in this way also starts working together with the mobility department.

The first 2 living streets led to a storm of media attention and intensive discussions about the future of mobility in Ghent among residents. This 'impossible' choice of providing space for people instead of cars suddenly became a possibility. This also influenced the thinking of policy makers and mobility experts, particularly in formulating the spatial vision for the city and the new, ambitious mobility plan.

Many lessons have been drawn from the first years of the experiment: ranging from institutional aspects such as limits of the current safety legislation to cultural aspects such as the motivations behind (not) choosing to become a car-free street. The living streets proved to be a catalyst for social innovation, thanks to the combination of operational (how can I help?), experiential (this is fun!) and strategic aspects (but why aren't our streets always like this?). The living streets also provide an inspiring example of co-creation, joining forces between both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' actors and

between people involved from very different backgrounds. A clear lesson is that this co-creation is not an easy endeavour, but needs intensive facilitation.

The lessons were helpful for setting up new living streets in subsequent years, but also for other cities that wanted to bring the approach to their own city. The living street approach has been applied under various names in other Belgium, Dutch and European cities; and even led to the Living Street Foundation.



One of the living streets in Ghent, edition 2014. (Photo: Leefstraat)