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Oslo's radical push towards a car-free city centre

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Putting people first makes cities work better for everyone. It is not an easy task, but Oslo has done important work to show that it is possible. Disagreement and conflict is a part of the story, but there is also a lot of common ground to be found. Everyone wants to live in a happy, healthy, attractive city. Working together is the only way to make that a reality.

Knowing that Oslo is expected to see an almost 30 percent increase in population by 2040, the Norwegian capital is worried about its carbon footprint. When the City of Oslo launched the Car-free Livability Programme in 2017, a clear goal was to make Oslo city centre greener and more inclusive for everyone.

The streets are where you meet people

«Our main objective is to give the streets back to the people», said Hanna Marcussen, Oslo's vice mayor for urban development in a BBC Future comment in 2019. She went on talking about how Oslo wants to use the streets and what they should be used for. «For us, the streets should be where you meet people, eat at outdoor restaurants, where kids play and where art is exhibited». To do this, Oslo has closed off certain streets in the city centre to cars entirely, removed all ordinary 760 on-street parking spots within the area of the inner ring road, and replaced them with cycling lanes, benches and miniature parks.

The physical changes

Physical measures have been important in transforming the city's urban spaces. Oslo has opened a new pedestrian street and upgraded one street to a mixed-use street where two thirds of the street space are reserved for pedestrians and city life. The city has been provided with a lot of new benches, drinking water fountains, and four new playgrounds for children and families have been opened. Both permanent and seasonal lighting has been put up in several streets and urban spaces. These are just a few of the measures implemented. By turning the traditional planning pyramid upside down – putting people's needs at the top and private cars at the bottom – Oslo has managed to prioritize pedestrians, bikes and city life in streets and squares that were formerly dominated by private cars.

Change can hurt

Co-creation has been important for the programme. NGOs and companies have been involved in the physical design, upgrading and conversion of streets. Piloting has been an important tool in the programme. It's not a secret that Oslo also has faced some challenges regarding opposition against



[FIG. 1]

[FIG. 1] Playground at Langkaia, one of four new playgrounds inside the Car-free Livability area in 2019. Facilitating children and young people is essential to creating a good living environment. (Photo: Kevin Dahlman)

the programme. When the initiative was announced and the first major interventions came, the municipality was met with considerable opposition. Stakeholders such as shop owners and trade associations feared the consequences on customer access to shops in the city centre. As driving a car in Oslo has become less attractive, the city also sees the importance of ensuring city logistics and accessibility to properties, and the need to continuously improve access to the city centre for marginalised groups like people with disabilities.

Important lessons learned

Understanding the views, perceptions and experiences of individuals and organisations is very important when conducting such a project. It is important to be sensitive to the needs of stakeholders, covering everyone from trade associations, commercial property owners, organisations and groups with special needs. All the good thoughts and ideas about what the inhabitants of Oslo would get with less cars in the streets have been hard to communicate because of the term «car-free». A lot of time has been spent on social media explaining and discussing the aim of the programme. Nonetheless, knowing that the political coalition was re-elected in September 2019, the name of the programme seems to have reinforced a commitment among the people of Oslo to move the city in a clearer, more sustainable direction.



[FIG. 2]



[FIG. 3]

[FIG. 2+3] During the summer, Oslo closed several streets for cars for one day and filled them with activities so that people could glimpse into the future when many streets in the centre will be pedestrianised. (Photos: Christoffer Krook)

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Oslos radikaler Effort hin zu einem autofreien Stadtzentrum

Ein attraktiveres und lebendigeres Stadtzentrum ist zum Vorteil der ansässigen Geschäfte und komfortablere städtische Räume ermöglichen kulturelle Aktivitäten sowie Spiel oder Entspannung in der Stadt. Davon profitieren sowohl die Bevölkerung von Oslo als auch Gäste. Das Stadtzentrum muss für Personen von 8 bis 80 Jahren attraktiv sein. Oslo hat die herkömmliche Planungspyramide umgekehrt und die Bedürfnisse der Menschen an die erste Stelle gerückt, die Autos kommen zuletzt. Dadurch konnte die Stadt Fußgänger*innen, Velofahrende und die Animation auf Strassen und Plätzen priorisieren. Auch wenn sich das Zentrum heute in Richtung einer belebteren Stadt entwickelt, dürfen die Bedürfnisse wichtiger Gruppen und Dienstleistungen nicht vernachlässigt werden. Die schnelle Einführung von Massnahmen zur Verkehrsreduktion, eine neue Verkehrsführung sowie eine grosse Bautätigkeit stellten für Unternehmen, den Lieferverkehr und das Handwerk eine grosse Herausforderung dar. Für die Akzeptanz eines solchen Projekts ist es wichtig, die verschiedenen Sichtweisen, Wahrnehmungen und gemachten Erfahrungen zu verstehen.

RÉSUMÉ

L'offensive d'Oslo en faveur d'un centre-ville sans voitures

Un centre-ville plus attractif et animé est bénéfique pour le commerce local. Des espaces urbains plus confortables offrent la possibilité de profiter de la culture, jouer ou se détendre en ville, tant pour les habitants d'Oslo que pour les visiteurs. Le centre-ville d'Oslo doit être attractif pour une personne de 8 à 80 ans. En inversant la pyramide traditionnelle de la planification urbaine, c'est-à-dire en mettant les besoins des personnes en premier et ceux des voitures en dernier, Oslo a réussi à donner la priorité aux piétons, cyclistes et à l'animation dans ses rues et ses places. Bien que le centre-ville se développe désormais dans le sens d'une plus grande animation urbaine, il ne faut pas négliger certains groupes et services. L'introduction rapide de mesures de réduction du trafic automobile, un nouveau schéma de circulation ainsi qu'un développement immobilier important, ont été un défi pour les entreprises, les fournisseurs et les artisans. Pour que les gens adhèrent au projet, il est vital de comprendre la diversité des points de vue, des perceptions et des expériences.

RIASSUNTO

La scelta radicale di Oslo per un centro città senza automobili

Un centro città attrattivo ed animato è un bene per il commercio locale, ma non solo. Sia per i residenti che per i turisti, spazi urbani confortevoli offrono l'opportunità di approfittare di eventi culturali, giocare o rilassarsi. Il centro di Oslo deve risultare ugualmente attrattivo sia per i bambini che per le persone meno giovani. Mettere al centro le esigenze della gente a discapito delle auto, capovolgendo così la tradizionale piramide urbanistica, ha permesso ad Oslo di dare priorità a pedoni, ciclisti e alla vita cittadina nelle strade e nelle piazze. Sebbene il centro si stia chiaramente sviluppando verso un aumento della vita urbana, creare consenso è difficile; è quindi necessario tenere conto delle esigenze di tutte le categorie di utenti. La rapida introduzione di misure di riduzione del traffico automobilistico e la nuova regolazione della circolazione, insieme a un'intensa attività edilizia, hanno rappresentato una sfida per fornitori, artigiani ed imprese. Per creare consenso, la comprensione dei diversi punti di vista, delle percezioni e delle esperienze è vitale quando si conduce un progetto di questo tipo.