

VIEWPOINT

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Cars Were Guests on Amsterdam's Streets Even Before the Pandemic



Amsterdam has steadily been introducing car-lite measures in its quest to create a liveable and accessible city. Former Deputy Mayor Sharon Dijksma shares how the city's forward-looking actions gave it a headstart in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Amsterdam's measures to shape a liveable and accessible city predate the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has presented the city with challenges, it has also accelerated our plans.



Building a liveable and accessible city, with clean air and more space for pedestrians, cyclists and children to play on the streets—this has been the main objective of my work for the city of Amsterdam.

Like many other cities in the world, we face a major planning challenge in the Metropolitan Area of Amsterdam. To accommodate growth, we need to build 290,000 more homes by 2040. Building this liveable and accessible city involves making the city future-proof. This is not an easy task because it consists of many smaller, interrelated sub-tasks.

To tackle these issues, we have developed a couple of agendas, one of which is to make the city car-lite. We will be removing about 10,000 public parking spaces by 2025. We also introduced what we call “knips”, where some main roads that run through the city are cut in two. This makes routes that would previously

have passed through the city centre much longer, and directs more cars to stay on the peripheral roads of the city.

Importantly, creating a car-lite city is different from pursuing an anti-car-policy. We are not against cars and we know that we have many inhabitants who are dependent on their vehicles. That is why we are investing heavily in public transportation for the years to come. In fact, public transport is at the heart of our policies because it creates access to mobility for all. In 2018, the opening of the Noord-Zuidlijn, a metro connecting the northern part of the city with the centre and the southern part on the other side of the River IJ, led to huge social and economic benefits.

Other alternatives, such as walking and biking, are on our agenda as well. When redesigning streets, we made more space for pedestrians where possible. We created many “Fietsstraten”

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or bicycle roads. These roads used to be for cars, with a narrow biking lane next to it, and are now transformed into much broader “bike-first roads”, where cars are allowed as “guests” and can only drive at a maximum speed of 30 km/h.

Car-sharing is another important measure. We give car-sharing companies a permit; in turn, they pay the city to be able to deploy a fleet of shared cars on the streets of Amsterdam. Together with these companies, what started as car-sharing is being transformed into a much broader system of shared mobility and mobility as a service. This ensures that in the future, more people will not have to own a car, a bike, an electric scooter or their own cargo bike. Instead, through a monthly payment plan, inhabitants can have access to mobility as and when they want it.

Our Action plan on Clean Air is crucial as well. We want to reach our goals in this field by investing in good charging infrastructure for electric cars, among other measures. Amsterdam already has one of the highest densities of charging stations in the world and we are working to expand the

network. Creating more strict environmental zones, where more pollutive cars are not allowed, also makes it possible for us to enhance the air quality further.

These measures predate the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and while the pandemic has presented Amsterdam with many challenges, it has also accelerated our plans. These are health-related in the first place and for the short term but had social objectives for the longer term.

We found that many of our goals and measures we had taken were applicable in responding to the pandemic as well. This enabled us to act quickly when the pandemic broke out.

This stands out most clearly in the creation of public space. More space was needed to prevent the spread of the pandemic, but this also intensified Amsterdam's space crunch and prompted us to reorganise our public space. As creating space was already at the heart of our policies, we were familiar with the measures needed.

The pandemic has been an urgent call to action for people to change their behaviour. People will work at home much more often and use public transport in different ways compared to previous years. Amsterdam's pandemic measures in the public space ultimately favour pedestrians and cyclists over cars, and aligns with plans to reduce space for cars. Because so many people already cycle or are pedestrians, there is a great acceptance that cars should be guests on the streets. 📍

This article was written in November 2020, when Ms Sharon Dijksma was Deputy Mayor for Traffic and Transport, Water and Air Quality for the City of Amsterdam. Ms Dijksma is currently the Mayor of the City of Utrecht.