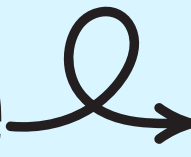


SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

THE GREAT REALLOCATION

GIVING URBAN SPACE BACK TO PEOPLE



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

THE GREAT REALLOCATION

GIVING URBAN SPACE BACK TO PEOPLE



The global pandemic has accelerated initiatives to get cars out of towns and cities – but the battle is far from over

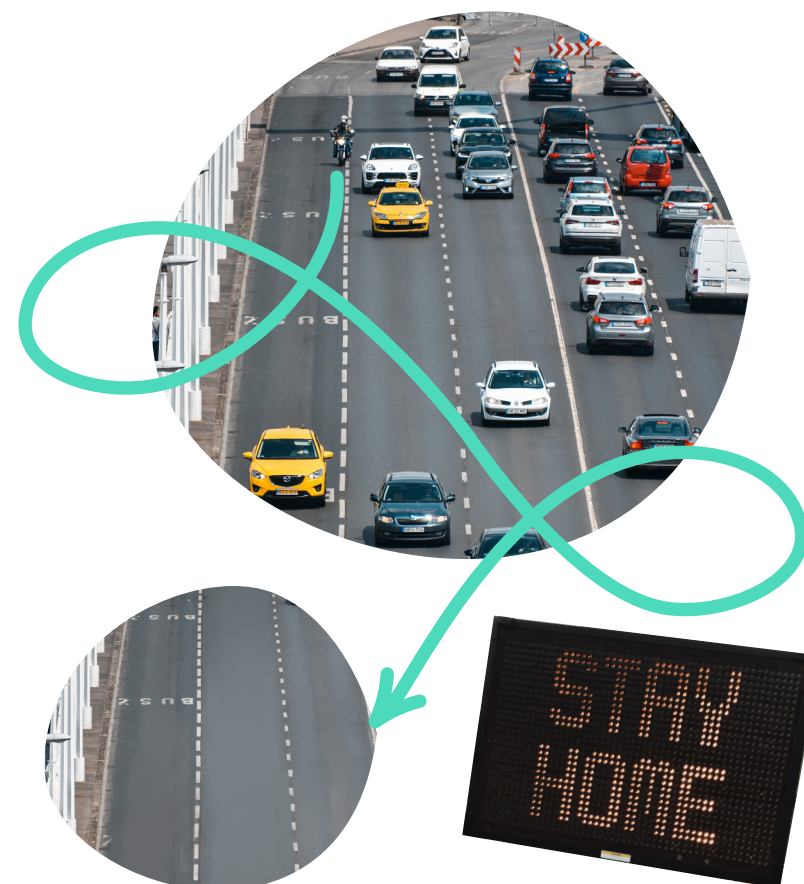
High levels of polluting car use have been locked into the lives of many because towns have been planned to favour and encourage cars. But, when the pandemic took hold, the amount of public space we dedicate to cars throughout our towns and cities suddenly became clear for all to see. As traffic numbers plummeted in response to 'stay at home' orders, and social distancing measures were introduced to limit the spread of the virus, pedestrians struggled to pass each other on the pavement and councils found it necessary to create temporary cycle lanes, while roads stood empty, under-used and over-resourced. In many cases it **accelerated existing plans**¹ to reduce car numbers.


Local and national governments were quick to respond to this pro-car bias in public space with a range of pop-up cycling and walking initiatives. According to research from the science think-tank **MCC**,² these temporary infrastructures boosted cycling levels across European cities by between **11% and 48% in the first few months of the pandemic**³ at a cost of **€1.7 billion**.⁴ The same study concluded that, in the space of just a few weeks, the European continent surpassed many of the active travel goals that **were set for 2025 and beyond**.⁵



The city of Rome, which was hit hard in the first wave of the pandemic, climbed to the top of the table for active travel infrastructure, **putting in place 150 kilometres of temporary and permanent cycle infrastructure**.⁶ Rome is in good company, with London, Paris, Milan, Brussels, Lisbon, Barcelona, Berlin and others all reallocating significant space for active travel and permanently expanding pleasant, separated, and protected infrastructure. Berlin created new cycling and walking infrastructure at breakneck speed throughout the German capital. Within **just 10 days**,⁷ new measures were introduced to make cycling more accessible and safe for Berliners, using the shifts in mobility patterns as an opportunity to re-think how people move around and interact with the city.

Further afield, local governments gave roads back to people. In the Californian city of Oakland, **74 miles of city road was given over to cyclists and pedestrians**.⁸ Bogota, in Colombia, **opened up 76 kilometres of bike lanes**⁹ to help ease congestion and relieve the pressure on public transport.





"One of the strongest impediments to changes in consumption patterns is the social and physical contexts that shape our everyday lives. In the case of transport, infrastructure lock-ins have made it easier to park a car than to find a bus stop and safer to drive rather than cycle. What the pandemic has shown us is that we have prioritised the wrong type of infrastructure. All of that needs to be reversed, so we start investing in future proof infrastructure – not just because of the climate emergency, but because walking, biking, taking public transportation, and investing in and appreciating local communities, improves our wellbeing and social cohesion."

Lewis Akenji, managing director at the Hot or Cool Institute

Reorienting infrastructure towards walking and cycling presented 'win-win' opportunities for governments. Before the arrival of a working vaccine, governments were desperate for policies that would slow the spread of the virus and help keep citizens safe and healthy. Helping to encourage and maintain outdoor travel and social distancing measures provided a quick way of slowing the spread. **Multiple studies concluded**¹⁰ that transmission of the virus was incredibly unlikely when travelling by foot or bike, compared with the potential for spreading within passenger vehicles or on public transport.

In addition, encouraging physical exercise through active travel **increases vitamin D intake**¹¹ and **strengthens the immune system**¹² – both of which are important for fighting off COVID-19 and any future pandemics. Studies also **linked exposure to air pollution**¹³ with experiencing more severe impacts from the virus, and **higher death rates**¹⁴ among those infected.

Further public health gains were made by the drastic and sudden improvement in air quality in cities around the world. As the public limited car use, energy demand dropped and infrastructures pivoted to support cycling and walking, the air became clearer.

According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), air quality in South East Asia saw a **40 per cent reduction**¹⁵ in the level of harmful particulates in 2020. Across Europe, the illnesses and disease linked to exposure to high levels of air pollution cost society **approximately £10 billion in 2018**,¹⁶ which highlights the vast opportunity to lock-in savings by permanently reallocating space to people rather than cars. **China and North America**¹⁷ also saw drastic improvements in air quality during the onset of the pandemic, although some of these gains were undone by the return of traffic after the peak of lockdowns.

Giving public space back to pedestrians and cyclists has also saved lives. Low-traffic schemes installed during the pandemic in the UK, for instance, **halved the number of traffic accidents**.¹⁸ At the same time, these schemes have been proven to increase the uptake of cycling, **especially among inexperienced cyclists, women and younger cyclists, while actively discouraging the use of cars**.¹⁹ In fact, just by removing cars and limiting their road access makes everyone feel safer because, as **one UK survey found, 66% of respondents felt it was normally too dangerous for them to cycle on the roads**.²⁰ It shows how, to rapidly reduce transport emissions as part of transitioning to a low carbon economy, making people feel safe to walk and cycle around their local areas is vital.



But it's not just about travelling from A to B. The reallocation of streetspace during the pandemic created space for that most human of endeavours: play. Lockdown restrictions were particularly tough for those in cities and towns without access to any private green space. In the city of London, 21% of households have no garden. Aptly named 'Play Street' initiatives, where roads are closed off from cars and dedicated to play, improved the physical and mental health of children, which both suffered throughout the lockdowns. **One study in Bristol**²¹ found that children were three to five times more active during play street days, compared to a normal day. It's also been suggested that introducing permanent play streets would be a way to keep children active, as the return to schools has seen an **increase in lethargy and anxiety among the young**.²²

The pandemic marked the beginning of a 'Great Reallocation' – where city streets were given back to people. While some of these pop-up schemes have since had funding reduced or completely removed, many have stood the test of time, shown how quickly people can adapt, set a new normal and continue to deliver palpable benefits for people and planet. Milan followed up with approval of a plan to provide Italy's most populous metro area with 750 km of separated bike lanes and Paris is considering regional expressways for bikes that could make longer distance commuting for suburban Parisians both feasible and desirable. We have an opportunity now to capitalise on what we know about reducing congestion by cutting space for cars to **'evaporate traffic'**,²³ and improving both our health and air quality by cycling and walking more.



**roads are closed
off from cars...**

**... and dedicated
to play**

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Re→set

lessons from lockdown

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