



Pedestrians, cars and the city

From opposition to cohabitation

Cédric Ferial

Pedestrianisation and the ability to get around the city on foot are key considerations in contemporary projects for public spaces – and yet the very first pedestrian zones date back to the 1960s, not just in Europe but also in the United States. Cédric Ferial re-examines this important legacy in the light of current thinking on the subject.

Since the early 2000s, pedestrians have regained their place at the heart of debates on urban development in Europe and the United States (*Urbanisme* 2008; Terrin 2011), as evidenced by, for example, the imminent inauguration of the Place de la République in Paris, renovated in spring 2013. Similarly, part of Times Square in New York City has been pedestrianised, initially for a trial period in May 2009 and then permanently from February 2010, leading to a refurbishment of the square.

This tendency is today presented as a discovery of the needs of pedestrians in the city after a long period of car-based dominance. However, between 1960 and 1980, the issue had already given rise to intense debate and numerous projects in Europe and, it is often forgotten, in the United States. In New York, for example, an ambitious project to pedestrianise Madison Avenue was promoted by mayor John Lindsay between 1971 and 1973, but was ultimately thwarted, in particular by traders.¹ Here, we shall focus on the history of this first phase of pedestrianisation, with the aim of not only re-examining a movement that is little-known today, but also highlighting differences with regard to current approaches. For instance, projects today encourage the cohabitation of different transport modes, whereas the first forays into the field of pedestrianisation were based on a separation of pedestrian and vehicular flows.

¹ In fact, the experimental pedestrianisation of Madison Avenue between 42nd and 59th Streets was trialled as early as April 1971.

Kettwiger Straße, Essen, Germany.



Source: Brambilla and Longo 1977.

The 1960s and 1970s: the rise of international enthusiasm for pedestrianisation

If a pedestrian street² is defined as the closure to traffic of a city-centre street and its complete redesign for the convenience of pedestrians (including the removal of any distinction between the roadway and the footway), then there were no pedestrian streets in Europe and the United States in 1950. It was in a context of city-centre decline that the first pedestrian zones emerged, taking over parts of the former “domain” of the motor car. The first projects were completed almost simultaneously in Germany and the United States, with the pedestrianisation of Kettwiger Straße in Essen in 1959 and of Burdick Street in the small town of Kalamazoo, Michigan (Kalamazoo Mall, by Victor Gruen Associates) in 1959–1960 marking the beginnings of the pedestrianisation movement in Western cities. From the outset, the development patterns were radically different between the two continents. The German pedestrian street offered a modern vision of the city, in the spirit of major post-war reconstruction projects such as Lijnbaan in Rotterdam (1951–1955): highly geometrical paving was used to “correct” the irregular course of the old street. In the United States, on the other hand, “malls” (i.e. pedestrian streets in traditional downtown areas, not to be confused with the more recent use of the term to refer to indoor shopping centres or out-of-town retail areas) were designed more as a negation of the city: landscaping features dominated and smooth curves

² Sometimes referred to as “foot streets” in British urban planning contexts (notably by Alfred Arden Wood in the 1960s), although this term is rarely employed today. “Pedestrian street”, “pedestrian precinct”, “pedestrian zone” and, in the US and Australia, “pedestrian mall” are far more common terms.

were used to “correct” the excessive regularity of gridiron street plans. The development of Fresno Mall (in Fresno, California, by Victor Gruen Associates) in 1964 was the most publicised example at the time.

Although the projects on either side of the Atlantic were very different in terms of their design, they nevertheless followed a similar dynamic between 1960 and 1980. Studies and inventories of pedestrian zones made in the early 1980s in Germany, the United Kingdom, France and North America indicate the extent of the movement. The 1970s were a key period: for example, it was during this decade that most French cities designed their pedestrian zones, a decade or so after their German neighbours.³

The spread of pedestrian zones: numbers of towns and cities that created pedestrian zones in their central areas in three European countries and in North America.

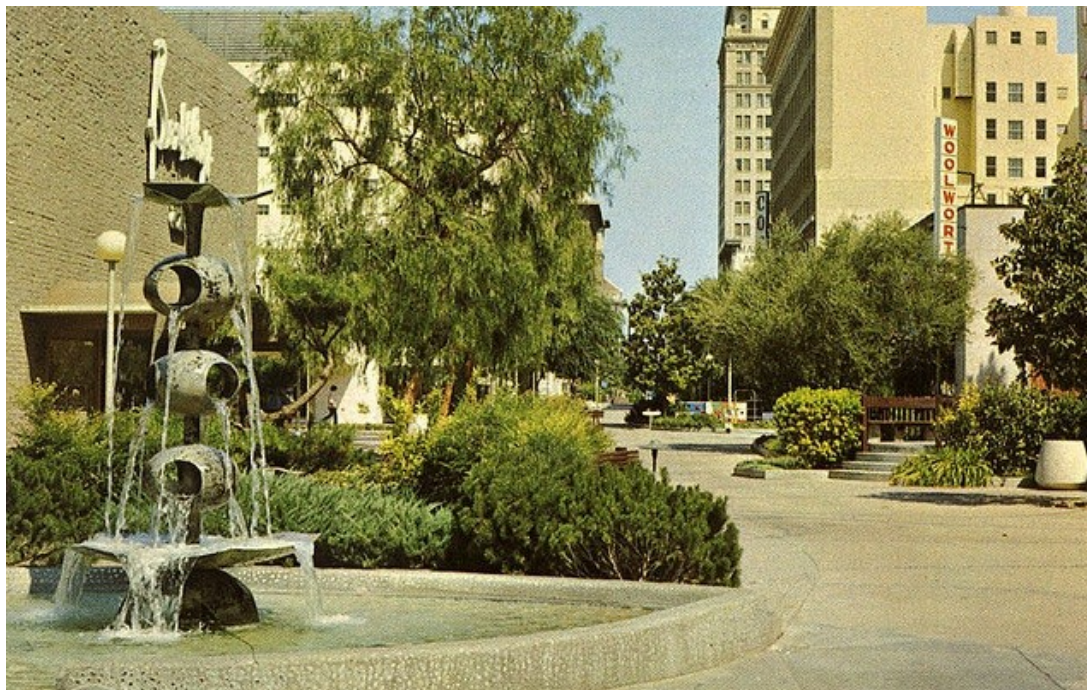
	1960	1970	1980–1982
West Germany	35	110	300
United Kingdom	0	20	108
France	0	7	266
USA/Canada	2	28	70

Sources: Monheim 1980; Roberts 1981; CECOD 1982; Brambilla and Longo 1977.

It is possible to talk about an international movement because, although the first projects seemed isolated cases at the time, there rapidly followed all sorts of exchanges, research trips and literature in the field that disseminated examples of pedestrianisation which subsequently became models for municipal authorities and local decision-makers. Among the multitude of titles published during the 1970s, one in particular became an essential reference. This was the summary work published by the OECD in 1974 under the title *Streets for People*, based on the work of the organisation’s Sector Group on the Urban Environment. It is an overview of the most emblematic projects of the period, including cities that are still very active today on the issue of walking in the city, such as Vienna, Copenhagen and Amsterdam.

³ In France, it was the *Contrat ville moyenne* (literally “Mid-Sized Town Contract”), launched in 1973, that led to increasing numbers of pedestrianisation projects.

Fulton Mall, Fresno, California.



Postcard, 1960s. Ektachrome by Arnold Compotongo, published by Scope Enterprises, Clovis, California.
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Fulton Mall, Fresno, California. One of the two play areas.



Postcard, 1960s. Mirro-Krome by H. S. Crocker Co., Inc., San Francisco, California.
Published by Heilbron-Jones Film Service, Fresno, California. © William Bird
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From the separation of functions to the sharing of public space

The question of how the city should be shared between pedestrians and motor vehicles was raised as early as the 1950s. The 8th International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) organised in 1951 in Hoddesdon (Hertfordshire, UK) was of key importance for a new approach to Western city centres. Following on from the “194X” project initiated in 1943 in *Architectural Forum Magazine*, CIAM called for the heart of the city to be redefined as an “artefact” that focuses all functions and which is strictly separated from vehicular traffic: in other words, as a pedestrian zone. Consequently, the North American pedestrian malls and European pedestrian precincts developed from the 1960s to the 1980s shared a similar radicalness in their approaches to urban problems that unexpectedly referenced deck-access developments and functionalism, where different user flows are strictly separated. Pedestrian streets in historic city centres and 1970s deck-access housing estates drew inspiration from the same sources and ultimately developed the same sort of approaches to the city, tending to separate, rather than articulate, different modes of transport in the public space. Moreover, neither model fundamentally challenged the issue of car use in the city.

This radicalness also explains the limitations of these pedestrian zones in European and North American cities: streets that are strictly traffic-free need to generate their own activity (typically of a commercial nature) so as not to become deserted. From the early 1980s, the question of sharing public space between pedestrians and motor vehicles began to emerge under the influence of the *woonerf* experiments conducted in the Netherlands in the previous decade. In these Dutch streets where pedestrians have priority, all vehicles are allowed access, but traffic speeds are limited and the principle of absolute priority for pedestrians prevails. These kinds of developments were no longer about creating pedestrian islands in the heart of the city, but instead reclaiming space for pedestrians in extensive car-dominated residential neighbourhoods.

The idea gradually caught on elsewhere: for example, in Paris, the pedestrianisation of Rue Montorgueil and the surrounding area in 1991–1992 saw footways and the idea of shared streets make a comeback, but with traffic still strictly controlled by rising bollards at entry and exit points. The Montorgueil neighbourhood is quite different from the nearby Halles–Beaubourg area (redeveloped in 1977–1979), which is entirely pedestrian-only, based on the model of the first generation of pedestrian streets. This contrast reflects a paradigm shift that has heralded the present trends in the field: the cohabitation of transport modes is actively encouraged, as illustrated by the current redevelopment of the Place de la République in Paris (2013).⁴ Furthermore, this new approach opens the door to citywide developments, as opposed to projects restricted to isolated sectors only.

⁴ The official project website cites the following as one of the three main objectives: “to integrate new forms of mobility and share public space more effectively” (<http://www.placedelarepublique.paris.fr>).

Burdick Street Mall, Kalamazoo, Michigan.



Water Wonderland Card Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Dexter Press Inc., West Nyack, New York.
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The contrasting fates of first-generation malls and pedestrian precincts

The destinies of the pedestrian spaces created in the '60s, '70s and '80s vary considerably between Europe and the United States. In the former, pedestrian precincts have become well established, so much so that they now seem intimately associated with the very concept of the European city. And yet these areas are creations no more than 40 or 50 years old, with no comparably radical historical precedents. As zones that occupy very small amounts of space in the city overall, municipal authorities tend to lavish disproportionate amounts of attention and resources on them: they do not hesitate to change paving materials in order to renew the image of the city; in this way, the street space can be adapted to suit changing tastes.⁵

The fate of the North American pedestrian malls was quite different. As they were much more closely tied to retail functions than their European counterparts, most went into decline in the 1980s in the face of competition from out-of-town shopping centres. Most North American pedestrian malls, with some rare exceptions, did not manage to act as poles of attraction. As a result, they almost all disappeared, or were severely amputated, at the request of traders in the 1990s. Over half of the Kalamazoo Mall has been converted into a conventional street with wide footways and motor-vehicle access. The mall in New London, Connecticut, has entirely disappeared: State Street, today open to traffic, is now no different from any other street in the town. This trend, which contrasts starkly with the situation in Europe, means that America's 20-year role in the pedestrianisation movement is now all but forgotten, even if it is true that these malls remained very much marginal examples in the urban fabric of North America as a whole.

The 1960s and 1970s played a crucial role as a laboratory for urban public spaces; however, the radical choice of a strict separation of user flows necessarily limited the options for alternative

⁵ For example, most large French cities entirely renovated their central pedestrian zones in the 1990s and 2000s, leaving no trace of the original pedestrianisation schemes.

solutions in Western cities, and failed to satisfactorily resolve the issue of the place of the motor car and other modes of transport in the city; consequently, this issue is once again on the agenda today.

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Cédric Ferial, having obtained the prestigious *Agrégation* teaching qualification in history, is working towards a PhD in contemporary history at the Université Versailles–Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ), under the supervision of Jean-Yves Mollier (of UVSQ), Catherine Bruant (of the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Versailles) and Jean-François Sirinelli (of Sciences Po Paris). His thesis concerns the contemporary history of central urban spaces in Europe and is entitled *Urbanités européennes : les secteurs-piétons en Europe, politiques municipales et échanges transnationaux (1960–1980)* ("European urbanities: pedestrian zones in Europe, municipal policies and transnational exchanges (1960–1980)"). He is currently a temporary lecturer and research assistant in contemporary history at the Université Paris-13.

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