

# Planning for Car-Free Development

## Historic and Modern Examples from Europe and the United States

by Fran Levy, 2011

### INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows that cars generate pollution. But what many people don't realize is that cars perpetuate social norms and dramatically shape the built environments in which we live. As the problems associated with private automobile ownership have become more well-known throughout the world, many people have asked why we don't remove cars from cities altogether. Many more people laugh at this idea, but the advocates for car-free living are gaining momentum. This paper illustrates examples of historic and modern car-free development in Europe and the United States, and explores why differences exist in such developments between these two parts of the world.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

#### European case studies

*Marbella Old Town, Spain*

The historic "old town" center of Marbella, Spain, contains buildings that have survived for an incredible 2,000 years. Yet by the 1980's, this remarkable historic core was degrading physically, economically, and socially. To save their town, an association of merchants and professionals

from the old town banded together to form the Asociacion de Comerciantes y Profesionales del Casco Antiguo de Marbella (APCAM), through which they developed an action plan that detailed their understanding of the old town's problems as well as their goals, ideas, and solutions for how to invigorate the neighborhood. At the core of this strategy were four main plans:

1. Create pedestrian priority. This would preserve the town's original road network and allow for its restoration without automobile interference.
2. Renovate private and public spaces.
3. Manage and maintain the old town area.
4. Render utilities such as overhead electrical poles "invisible" by moving them underground.

Today, Marbella Old Town is a car-free area filled with historic building restorations, mixed land uses, and well-maintained public spaces. APCAM presented their strategy to the City of Marbella, which has worked with them to achieve these improvements. For the final step of APCAM's main plan, Marbella Old Town hopes to bury its utility infrastructure to render it truly "invisible," adding an even more attractive and historic aura to the neighborhood. (Hazel & Parry, 2004)



*Marbella Old Town, Spain.*



*Copenhagen, Denmark*

In Copenhagen, Denmark, beautiful old city streets and squares became overrun with cars throughout the 20th century. Renowned resident architect and planner Jan Gehl began to work with the city and with residents to remove cars from individual squares and streets over several years. By giving residents a chance to grow accustomed to the changes gradually, Gehl ensured that they came to support and even request more car-free areas on their own. The pedestrianized spaces have become so popular among residents, tourists, and even the business community, that the city continues to expand their pedestrian networks today. (Hazel & Parry, 2004)

*Public Realm, Glasgow, Scotland, UK*

The heart of Glasgow, Scotland, has had a fairly generous network of commercial pedestrianized streets for years. By the 1990's, however, it had fallen into such disrepair that the city embarked upon a Great Street Project to clean it up. The Project connected 3 major areas of the city: Princes Square, Italian Centre, and Royal Exchange Square. These areas were enhanced with detailed street paving, furniture, and public art, while attractive old buildings and warehouses were refurbished to maintain Glasgow's heritage of great art, design, and architecture. Beyond these physical improvements, the Great Street Project added new programming to the pedestrianized areas of Glasgow in the form of a greater mix of land uses, street activities, and long-term management and maintenance. (Hazel & Parry, 2004)



*Left: Car-free plaza in Copenhagen, Denmark. Right: Car-free area in Glasgow, Scotland.*

#### American case studies

*Mackinac Island, Michigan*

An island and resort area covering 3.8 square miles of land in Lake Huron, Mackinac Island is part of the U.S. state of Michigan. Mackinac Island was home to a Native American Settlement until the 17th century, when colonial settlers claimed the land for themselves. Since then the island has been continuously occupied by European descendants and their associated urban development styles. (Mackinac State Historic Park Commission, 2011)

In 1896, Mackinac Island officially banned "horseless carriages." That ban remains in effect today, with the exception of emergency vehicles' residents and visitors still travel the island on foot, bicycle, or even horse-drawn carriage. An 8.5-mile highway encircles the island, but it is one of the few in United States that has no automobile traffic at all. (E-Mackinac Ltd, 2011)

By the late 19th century, Mackinac Island became a popular tourist attraction and summer colony (E-Mackinac Ltd, 2011). Interestingly, this was when the ban on cars was implemented. The residents must have understood then, as we are beginning to realize now, that their visitors enjoyed the absence of road noise and fumes, and the relaxed street atmosphere afforded by the car's absence.

In the 20th century, much of the island underwent extensive historical preservation and restoration; as a result, the entire island has been listed as a National Historic Landmark since 1960. More than

