

## Streets of the people, by the people, for the people

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I had one of my most memorable “urban” experiences in Dhaka on Election Day. I roamed aimlessly around the city. The streets were filled with relaxed pedestrians. It was probably psychological, but the air felt fresh, even a bit aromatic! The usual cacophonous soundtrack of Dhaka streets was absent. There was no menacing truck to overrun me as I walked, no incessant honking to make me neurotic. Rickshaws appeared like the chariots of utopia. I saw carefree birds in city trees, chirping. It was an incredible feeling in the midst of our familiar congested and chaotic Dhaka.

How was this “miracle” possible? As one would imagine, it was just one thing: the absence of motor vehicles on the street. If taking the car off the street for one day improves civilian experience so drastically, why don't we try it out once a month as a pilot project? The city administration should explore this opportunity to sensitise the city people about the benefits of a car-free day (cars will be allowed only on arterial roads). If popular and successful, it could be tried twice a month.

Why would this be important? Dhaka's elevated Metro Rail is coming soon, thanks to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's unwavering focus on developing transportation infrastructure across the country. It is time to devise and popularise different travel options, including walking and riding water taxis, that would complement the prospective network of public transportations. The time to plan a car-free pedestrian city is now.

It may seem like an absurdity, particularly when the rising middle class would increasingly demand personal cars as the safest mode of transportation and a symbol of their social status. However, an actual demonstration of what it would feel like without cars on the street may convince people, particularly the youth, to view car-free streets as a sustainable way of life. A

monthly car-free day would be the first step toward a healthy, carbon-neutral, and diabetes-reducing lifestyle. This approach could be implemented in phases, engaging a few roads at a time.

This proposition is not utopian. In fact, it is a new norm in many European cities. Consider Copenhagen: the central area of the Danish capital is now off-limits to cars, while cycling infrastructure takes over as a carbon-free travel option. During my last visit to the city, I felt that Copenhagen's title as the “bike city” is entirely justified. The spectacle of men, women, and kids riding their bikes on dedicated bike lanes in a mutually understood disciplinary atmosphere couldn't be more inspirational. The plan is to make Copenhagen completely carbon neutral by 2050.

Great things are also happening in Madrid. The city government is now reimagining the central district as the capital's “lung”, the place responsible for circulating clean air to keep the city's urban anatomy operational. This is both a literal and symbolic gesture for establishing a low- to zero-emissions zone at the heart of the city and beyond. Only pedestrians, bicycles, and public transportation are allowed in the 472-acre central zone, effectively reducing air and noise pollution. Research undertaken in Madrid shows that there has been a direct correlation between pollution peaks and hospital admissions.

Oslo plans to ban all cars from the city centre, a 1.7 square km area, by 2019 in order to drastically reduce carbon emissions and traffic congestion. If implemented, the ambitious plan would make the Norwegian capital the first major European city to boast a permanent no-car zone.

One could argue that implementing car-free plans in Dhaka would be challenging because the social, economic, and political conditions in Bangladeshi cities are different from those of Europe. But our desire for betterment must be stronger than our inherent reluctance to invoke change. Are we going to surrender to the fuel-based and emission-filled lifestyle that pollutes our cities and harms our health or jumpstart new models of healthy living? We need visionary mayors to stand up and choose what is good for the people in the long run.

Given the politically powerful transportation lobbyists, also known as the “transportation mafia,” the only way to mobilise public opinion is to demonstrate what is good for the people. People need to see, even at a small scale, what is beneficial and healthy. A visionary plan could be half-implemented in the court of public opinion!

Things need to happen on two simultaneous fronts. First, we need to bring the healthcare community and urban-planning community together to undertake empirical research on the health benefits of car-free streets, commuting by walking, and low-emissions. How much are typical household medical bills due to environment-related health hazards? According to a 2017 report of the International Diabetes Federation, 6.9 percent of Bangladesh's adult population suffer from diabetes. We should have a better grasp of how much of this pathology results from a sedentary lifestyle and environmental pollution. We need new insights into how urban planning, footpath design, green space, urban water management, urban vegetation, landscape design, and car-free streets can reduce health risks. The medical community needs to gain a better understanding of the environmental roots of pertinent diseases, so that preventive environmental design can be mainstreamed.

Second, we can identify a few zones and streets for a monthly car-free day as a way to showcase the health benefits of pedestrian-centric, clean-air, and noise-free streets. Let us start this experiment on Fridays or Saturdays. Lake Road (adjacent to Chandrima Uddyan), Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue (connecting Shahbag and Bangla Academy), and Hare Road (adjacent to Ramna Park) could be turned into a pedestrian art bazaar, a handicraft fair, an old-book fair, a stamp collectors' fair, a science-fiction magazine collectors' fair, a political posters' fair, a 1971 memorabilia fair, a musical instrument fair, a children-themed fair, etc. These fairs could be thematic, focusing on different age groups and vocation types.

These inchoate Friday/Saturday pedestrian streets could become Dhaka “icons” that could be replicated in other cities. City people would gain first-hand experience and understanding of how car-free streets can be transformed into vibrant public places. These streets will be Dhaka's Las Ramblas (Barcelona's most vibrant pedestrian-centric street), Agoras (ancient Athenian city-state's public epicentre), or Jemaa el Fna (Marrakesh's magical market centre). Our capital and its people deserve better. Alongside good infrastructure, we also need public places for our mental wellbeing.

We hope that under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership the cities of Bangladesh will flourish as places of people, not cars, noise, and anxiety.