

Pontevedra, Spain: pedestrians rule the roads, relegating cars to the sidelines

Interview with
Miguel Anxo Fernandez Lores,
Mayor of Pontevedra, Galicia, Spain.

La Santé en action: What are the main measures you have implemented?

Miguel Anxo Fernandez Lores: We have implemented measures that restore public possession of the spaces previously invaded by private motor vehicles. We sought to democratize the use of public spaces, to put an end to road rage, to promote social cohesion and a healthy urban environment, and to reclaim a chaotic and grim city. We wanted to assert that pedestrians and cyclists who had been “expelled from the roads” have a right of access to the city. To do this, we used a gender-aware approach, paying equal attention to the expectations of women and men, and we focused on urban planning that fosters proximity in a dynamic and lively city where the streets are living spaces.

S. A.: What is your landmark measure?

M.A.F.L.: It's a holistic process founded upon pedestrian travel being the cleanest, cheapest, most active, healthiest and most inclusive mode of transport, with mechanized travel (cycling) in second place. This lends support to measures that are simple, sympathetic to the environment, and that place human beings at the heart of urban planning decisions. These are relatively straightforward measures that reorganize spaces, calm traffic and rationalize the use of private vehicles, but which result in a radical transformation of the transport paradigm and habits. This process



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identifies car traffic and reduces it to what is strictly necessary for the city to function, favouring a strategy of non-segregation and diversity of uses.

S. A.: How did the different departments concerned work together on the process?

M.A.F.L.: Urban reform with structural and legal measures – defined as an integral, flexible and comprehensive process – has been implemented street by street, which makes it possible to take advantage of synergies, bring consistency and see the progress made; our design is inclusive in the sense that we sought a balance of uses and safe-to-use public space. The three pillars of the process were unwavering political will, coordination of all municipal administrative bodies and citizen participation. Global and cross-cutting management with coordinated efforts from staff in municipal services at every level (technical, legal, economic promotion, culture, social services, sports, education, police, transport, etc.) was fundamental. This action was mainly financed by local government funds. European funding and additional funds obtained through agreements with regional government have also provided ad-hoc assistance.

S. A.: How was the public involved?

M.A.F.L.: There has been a shared commitment to pedestrian mobility because it offers individuals greater autonomy and promotes lifestyles beneficial to health and social cohesion while reducing noise and air pollution, deaths and serious road traffic accidents. Our slogan “walking is the solution” has been applied in a compact city where it is possible to travel on foot, by public transport or by bicycle from one point of interest to another. This slogan also has health benefits in terms of the fight against a sedentary lifestyle, which is the cause of many problems in modern societies, especially among children. We worked in the spirit of a co-build with interested parties. However, we encountered reluctance from certain sectors, either for partisan reasons or to defend privileges in the use of public space. This is why fully committed direct participation, cooperation and assistance from various social collectives, professionals and neighbourhood associations, mainly the most active or those who need to use and preserve public space, are fundamental for educating others and improving the approach. The model triumphs when citizens take ownership of it and defend it. Pontevedra has become a

KEY POINTS

- The Spanish city of Pontevedra in Galicia has drastically reduced city-centre motor traffic in favour of pedestrians and cyclists. Two out of three journeys are made on foot. This shift in paradigm has reduced fuel consumption by 67% and made the city safer: zero deaths by road accident were recorded between 2011 and 2020.



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world leader and an example of good practice in terms of travel, safety and urban planning that puts people first. Everything that has been done has improved the quality of life, health and happiness of the citizens of Pontevedra.

S. A.: What results have you obtained, using which drivers and with which difficulties?

M.A.F.L.: To name a few results: a 67% reduction in fuel consumption and a 65% reduction in CO₂ emissions, 365 days a year of clean air. Zero deaths in traffic accidents between 2011 and 2020; two out of three journeys are made on foot; walking as a healthy means of transport; less noise pollution; greater autonomy for residents in their travel options; 80% of pupils go to school on foot, and half of them independently. The main driver pushing the changes was wide support from the public, who noticed and appreciated the comfort, safety, and quality of life offered by the model. We got great results through working on road safety, accessibility, diversified use of public space, social support, shifting travel habits and even the “taming” of private vehicle use. The main difficulties to overcome have been the partisan opposition and the attitude that defends the privileges or conveniences that benefit only one section of the population. We also lack a

flexible and liberalized regulatory framework that would facilitate other travel measures. We have adjusted our actions according to these results: while applying the principle of flexibility – a constant evaluation and improvement of solutions (e.g., looking at some of the collateral effects of traffic calming, such as noise), which is the outcome of the intensive and tireless participation of citizens – we never lose sight of the objectives and the political programme.

S. A.: What is the return on investment of this action?

M.A.F.L.: The recovered space is transformed on a daily basis for commercial, sports, recreational and tourist uses. It's a living space that generates net economic profitability. There has been economic growth in the tertiary sector, in particular an increase in the number of companies from 10,641 in 2005 to 15,215 in 2015. The model implemented in Pontevedra made it the one of the areas of Galicia that suffered the least impact on business creation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. I can conclude that, in the future, all cities will find their feet in models like the one applied in Pontevedra. ■

Interview recorded by the editorial team

For more information:

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