



# Who Clogs Up Our City Centres?

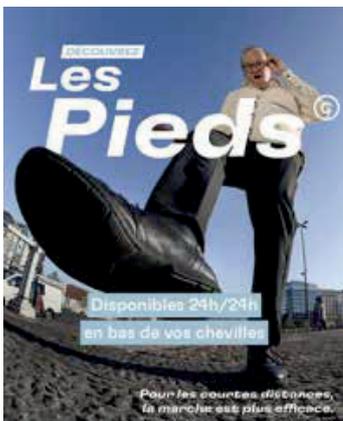
**“In Brussels we have a special taxi department, which looks after licensing and training and safeguards the interests of the taxi trade. As soon as there are redevelopment plans, this office gets involved and the trade’s views are taken into account...” – Ed: “Hmm, London could do with one of them...”**

## International correspondent

**A**re ‘Streetscape’ and ‘Bishopsgate’ becoming the bywords for limiting the traditional taxi trade’s service to passengers? And in doing so, excluding all public transport providers? Corona saw cycle lanes and pedestrianised areas mushroom – and not just in London...

## On yer bike – or not?

If the appeal by TfL is successful, the terms ‘Streetscape’ and ‘Bishopsgate’ may well become ‘shorthand’ for referencing plans in many cities to curb car (and taxi) road space in favour of cycle lanes and pedestrianised areas. Since the start of the corona pandemic, when nobody was really looking, these and other ill-advised street schemes have ‘popped up’ at an alarming rate. Despite the term ‘pop up’ and the air of being temporary, many of these road ‘improvements’ are here to stay. In my quick (virtual) look around Amsterdam, Berlin and Brussels, I learned that this is becoming a truly international approach. A week ago, the Brussels mobility people launched ‘Feet©’ as preferred mode of transport.



BRUXELLES MOBILITE  
SERVICE PUBLIC REGIONAL DE BRUXELLES

On your feet, recommends the Brussels Region. Photo Brussels Mobility.



Some Berlin bus lanes were widened, so that buses could safely overtake cyclists. Photo Axel Rühle.

Apparently, these feet can be recharged everywhere.

## A quick look abroad

Cycling and walking are to stay. Promoted as healthy mobility options (true) and facilitated by new dedicated cycling and walking areas. That’s fine, as long as these measures include input by stakeholders like public transport and the taxi trade. Let’s have a quick look abroad. Together with Copenhagen, Amsterdam is the leading city when it comes to bike ownership and riders. The 800,000 locals own 881,000 bicycles – four times as many as cars, and in the Danish capital, the 520,000 locals own 675,000 bikes – five times as many cycles as cars. In both cities, most of the cycling infrastructure hasn’t happened overnight. It was extensive, well-planned and well-built years ago, keeping pace with mounting traffic numbers.

## Special, colourful expletives

In numbers, Amsterdam cyclists vastly outnumber local cabs and (even) Uber & Co. And the defensively aggressive way Amsterdam cyclists ride around in their city, means that there’s definitely no love lost between cab drivers and cyclists.

Years ago, when I published a local taxi mag in the Dutch capital, cab drivers would often regale me with hair-raising stories about aggressive cyclist behaviours, near-misses and accidents in the city’s many narrow streets. Many local

cyclists have reserved a special vocabulary of colourful expletives for taxi drivers. Fortunately, local cab drivers can use an extensive network of tram and bus lanes.

## ‘Cycling safer than taking bus or tram’

In 2016, the Greens came to power in Berlin and took the reins of the traffic department, starting a green wave aimed at diminishing car use. Yet, the taxi trade didn’t suffer too much, says journalist Axel Rühle, who is also a taxi driver. Taxis can still use 90 to 95% of all bus lanes. The various traffic measures have only slowed the taxis slightly: “*Suddenly, at the start of the Covid-19 crisis, lots of pop-up bike lanes were created. Biking for a reasonable distance was seen as safer than taking bus, tram or metro.*” But the legal people saw some of these ‘pop-ups’ as illegal and wanted them gone. The traffic people promptly appealed and the impromptu lanes are still there. “*Some bus lanes were even widened, so that buses could safely overtake cyclists,*” says Rühle. He adds that ‘corona’ was a welcome opportunity for the Greens to boost their new traffic future.

## ‘Build more bike lanes and the cyclists will come’

The Brussels recipe for change is quite simple, as Elke Van den Brandt, Brussels Region’s minister for mobility, recently told a German cycling conference: “*Build more bike lanes and the cyclists will come.*” Since the start of corona 40 km of bike lanes were

built – many of them of the pop-up variety. Before corona, Brussels had hardly any decent and safe cycling spaces.

The clear goal in this car-dominated city is to redevelop space in favour of cycles and pedestrians. But Brussels Mobility underlines that the local taxi trade is not suffering, even if the different road users are increasingly going head-to-head: “*In Brussels taxi drivers are not treated the same way as other car drivers,*” says a spokeswoman for Brussels Mobility. “*We have a special taxi department, which looks after licensing and training and safeguards the interests of the taxi trade. As soon as there are redevelopment plans, this office gets involved and the trade’s views are taken into account.*”

## Which cars stifle city centres?

Stark rises in the numbers of PHV’s circling around in city centres exacerbate the mobility (car) problem. Are licensed PHV’s to be treated the same way as licensed taxis when it comes to access? The reason I’m mentioning PHV’s in relation to bicycle and pedestrian areas, is the increasing pressure of traffic in city centres. A recent international scientific study carried out by universities in the USA, Singapore and Japan proved (again) that ridehailing does not reduce car traffic in cities (as its backers often claim) but increases road congestion by 1% and the duration of traffic jams by 8.9%. The research group also found an 8.9% decrease in public transport use linked to TNC’s and an “*insignificant decrease of only one percent in private vehicle ownership.*” Based on US data the researchers found that “*the substantial deadheading miles (miles traveled without a passenger) by TNCs (Transport Network Companies) could contribute to the TNC’s negative impact on road congestion. According to some other studies, approximately 40.8% of TNC miles are deadheading miles.*”

Now make the link between creating space for bikes and pedestrians and the stifling pressure of... cars in the city centre. Which cars? **TAXI**