

THE EMIRATES

Residents hopeful car-free plan will rejuvenate Dubai's old town

Super Block project could cut emissions, ease congestion and improve quality of life

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An ambitious plan to turn several historic Dubai neighbourhoods into car-free zones could significantly improve quality of life, residents and experts have told *The National*.

The Super Block project is aimed at turning key areas into pedestrian zones with more greenery, shared public spaces and greater opportunities for social interaction.

While more details on when the plan will be implemented are yet to be revealed, historic and residential areas such as Al Fahidi, Abu Hail, Al Karama and Al Quoz Creative Zone will be the first to benefit.

Gulshan Kavarana, an art teacher who works with Emirati artists at a studio in Tashkeel, Al Fahidi, welcomed the move. She said it would draw more people to the heritage district of Dubai Creek, which is home to historic houses, art galleries and museums.

"Tourists are here from 7am, and after that it's non-stop with tourists coming in throughout the day," she told *The National*. "I hope the new plan makes the walking areas really cool so we get visitors all through the summer. Then we could get tourists the whole year round in to this space and our studio."

Ms Kavarana, a special needs advocate, also called for ramps to be built in the planned pedestrian zones to enable easy access for people with disabilities, the elderly and families with young children in strollers.

"They are making an effort to renovate Al Fahidi, and when they add ramps it will be amazing to access the villas that are old," she said. "We have ramps built in our studio so it's easy for people to move around. It should be the same not just in this area but all across Dubai."

Al Karama is already known as a lively shopping district. Huge murals adorn the walls, people sit at cafes sipping karak chai, while some residents play cricket and badminton. It is hoped the plan could encourage this and increase the number of green areas.

"I have always felt Karama has fewer parks," said Dr Madhu Mathews, who owns a dental clinic in the neighbourhood.



Al Karama is known as a lively shopping district with huge murals on its walls and plenty of cafes serving karak chai Chris Whiteoak / The National

"We don't have a walking or running track nearby that is continuous. It's very important to have pedestrian zones and also green areas. When I go to the park, I feel recharged – the greenery makes a big difference."

Dr Mathews' clinic is a seven-minute walk from his home, but he usually runs in a park near the Clock Tower, about 15 minutes away by car.

Parking is an issue in Al Karama. Spaces fill up quickly in the mixed-use area of office and residential buildings. "If there is multistorey parking, then people can access many areas that are a 10 to 15-minute walk away," Dr Mathews said.

"Patients don't mind walking if there are clean pedestrian paths. People actually appreciate it now if you ask them to walk. They like walking if the area is well maintained," Road safety and public transport experts also welcomed

the plan. Thomas Edelmann, founder and managing director of RoadSafetyUAE, said it was "fantastic". "Traffic is building up and people feel concerned," he said. "The initiative ticks a lot of boxes such as quality of life, sustainability, reducing emissions, taking vehicles off the road and increasing road safety."

Mr Edelmann said the latest report from his group showed that UAE motorists appreciate

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road infrastructure improvements in Dubai, but overall concern over dangerous driving and commute times has increased.

Businesses still need to be supplied with goods and cities may never be totally car-free, he said, but the plan is more about creating a different vision. "It is about a high-level vision that cascades down to further projects," Mr Edelmann said. "There is nothing wrong with aspiration."

Paulo Ancaes, a senior researcher in transport at University College London, said that in most cities where this type of policy was implemented, there was a "dramatic increase in pedestrian flows and in the use of streets as social spaces".

"Pedestrian-friendly areas are also good for business, because the higher influx of people leads to an increase in revenue for local shops, restaurants and cafes," Mr Ancaes said.

He said these policies did not imply banning all cars, and pointed to a similar initiative in Barcelona, which studies say could prevent 700 premature deaths a year by reducing air pollution, noise and heat and by increasing physical activity.

He warned that good public transport links were often required in residential neighbourhoods to encourage people away from car use. It is also important not to divert traffic into other areas as drivers use alternative routes, or cruise to find a parking space. "This has been the case of some – but not all – traffic restriction policies in some residential areas in the UK," Mr Ancaes said.

"Pedestrian-friendly shopping streets also need to provide something attractive in order to be competitive. For example, some pedestrian shopping streets in US cities declined because they could not compete with large shopping malls,

which provided better parking space and more attractive spaces to walk."

The initiative comes weeks after Dubai unveiled plans to become a pedestrian-friendly city. The Dubai Walk project includes more than 3,000km of new walkways and 110 new bridges and tunnels.

"There is no going back in terms of a car-centric city, but we can reduce the footprint and impact of cars ... by connecting neighbourhoods and getting people to walk," Apostolos Kyriazis, associate professor of architecture and urbanism at Abu Dhabi University, told *The National* at the time.

"City authorities are trying to change tactics. More and more are trying to turn the priority to ones that need it, such as walking and cycling. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are two of these cities."