



News **UAE**

Dubai set to follow in footsteps of Paris and New York to create pedestrian city

Linking the scheme to public transport networks could help to shift the emirate's car-centric focus



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A major plan to transform Dubai into a “pedestrian-friendly” city could connect inaccessible neighbourhoods, as well as encouraging mobility and healthier lifestyles, experts say.

The [Dubai Walk](#) project could also boost public transport by linking pedestrian routes to existing infrastructure – although questions about sustainability, coping with summer heat and connectivity in a car-centric city remain.

However, the move is being hailed as a step forward in encouraging mobility and championing active lifestyles among the emirate's [surging population](#). And seen as echoing other successful schemes across the world from New York to Seoul that reclaim derelict spaces for pedestrian use.

"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," said Apostolos Kyriazis, associate professor of architecture and urbanism at Abu Dhabi University.



A plan to get Dubai walking

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, on Saturday announced the plan to transform the emirate into a "year-round pedestrian-friendly city", with more than 3,000km of new walkways and 110 new bridges and tunnels.

A pilot phase will run from 2025 to 2027, with the plan due to finish in 2040. More details will be announced, but Dubai Media Office said the scheme aims to increase pedestrian and environmentally friendly transportation use "from 13 per cent to 25 per cent".

Two key routes were highlighted. One runs along the [Dubai Creek](#) area, which is already accessible for walkers, while the second is called the "future loop" around the [Museum of the Future](#), featuring new elevated paths and an "air-conditioned zone", also connecting Dubai World Trade Centre, Emirates Towers, Dubai International Financial Centre and nearby metro stations.



From car-centric past to walkable future

Gulf cities such as Dubai that began expanding in the 1950s were built largely with [cars in mind](#). New developments offered little consideration for pedestrians. Many areas lacked paths, shaded areas and pedestrian bridges. However, this is changing amid the promotion of cycling and public transport.

Dubai's [2040 Urban Master Plan](#) called for developing a "[20-minute city](#)", giving residents access to 80 per cent of their daily needs and destinations within 20 minutes by foot or bicycle.

Experts who spoke to *The National* welcomed any effort to increase walking and highlighted how much can be done even through small improvements such as adding shade.

"City authorities are trying to change tactics," said Prof Kyriazis. "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."

Prof Kyriazis said the Dubai plan could boost safety while closing the division of neighbourhoods that cars sometimes create. "The street network does connect places but can disconnect too," he said. "It creates boundaries not easy to cross and creates social alienation."

It is further hoped the plan could help older people and those with disabilities affecting mobility navigate the city. "[They are] particularly sensitive to aspects such as steps and short crossing times at signalised crossings," said Paulo Anciaes, senior researcher at University College London. "The improvement of walking conditions can contribute to the mobility of those people, and thus to their social inclusion."

How public transport could benefit

Dubai is trying to rebalance the car-centric environment by expanding [Dubai Metro](#) and increasing bus routes. Authorities have also improved bus stations and added shaded areas for passengers.

Monica Menendez, professor of civil and urban engineering at New York University Abu Dhabi, said if walking in Dubai becomes normalised then there could be more public transport use.



"Awareness is increasing and any effort is good. If we manage to increase the share of pedestrians, we end up improving the whole mobility system," she said. "I would like it to be also used for commuting – even part of the journey – and not only by people doing exercise."

Making Dubai more walkable is no easy task, said Prof Kyriazis, but doing so in conjunction with more public transport could cut traffic congestion.

"More roads, more traffic – this is a universal law," he said. Instead, authorities need to offer public transport options and encourage cycling, which could "liberate cities further", he said. "Dubai has the critical numbers to support such schemes."



Walking around the world

The High Line in New York and Seoul's Skygarden are two examples of elevated corridors brought back for pedestrian use. New York's park was created on a former railway, while a derelict highway overpass in the South Korean capital has been revitalised as an urban garden.

"They not only revitalised neighbourhoods but led to amazing architecture and created a real-estate frenzy," said Prof Kyriazis. "People are healthier, more active and are exploring more. It is a win-win situation."

Paulo Ancaes, senior researcher in transport at University College London, said the scale of the Dubai plan is "unprecedented anywhere" but similar schemes such as the High Line and also Paris's Promenade Plantee and Hong Kong's network of connected walkways have proved their worth.

"Cities are increasingly 'competing' for global investment and tourists, and the improvement of pedestrian conditions facilitates mobility, enhances quality of life, and consolidates a positive image of the city," he said. "So Dubai can achieve a competitive advantage in comparison with other cities of the same size."

The city of New York, however, emerged before the era of the car and has an extensive public transport system, and projects such as the High Line tend to be geared more towards leisure than pedestrian access.

However, authorities from Barcelona to Copenhagen are trying to wrestle back space from cars and make the urban core more accessible, pedestrian and bike-friendly.

Prof Menendez said planners in the UAE are aware of the need for more pedestrian-friendly areas, not just for sustainability but also health.

"Initiatives like this might help more active lifestyles and be good for health. I like that," she said.



Sustainability and the summer

The Dubai Walk Master Plan aims to encourage pedestrians all "year-round", even in the scorching summers. Artist's impressions show people walking under green canopies, past water fountains and along elevated pedestrian bridges.

"The biggest challenge is weather," said Prof Menendez. "Greenery is always good and makes walkers feel more comfortable. But there are questions of irrigation and how to make it sustainable. Shading is one basic solution."

Prof Kyriazis highlighted that authorities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi can use native trees, such as sidr and ghaf, that need less water and can withstand heat. "We can choose wisely," he said.

Increased tree cover has benefits such as reducing heat, pollution and flood risk. Mr Ancaies pointed to a report by The Nature Conservancy organisation that showed

increasing tree canopy in hot and arid climates does increase demand but it can be "feasibly met" and is "justified" by their benefits.

Prof Kyriazis also cautioned against outdoor air-conditioning as it was not "sustainable or logical". He said: "The hot weather should be converted from an excuse to air-condition public spaces to an opportunity to revisit passive cooling strategies.

"There is enough shade from a natural source or from a structure such as a canopy. It is more than enough for people to walk with cooling air breezes as they pass through."

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