

Dubai path to pedestrian-friendly future with 3,300km of walkways

Dubai Walk project, starting next year, is aimed at getting residents out of their cars, writes **John Dennehy**

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 promoting active lifestyles among the emirate's surging population.

The initiative is also seen as echoing other successful schemes around the world – from New York to Seoul – that have reclaimed 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.

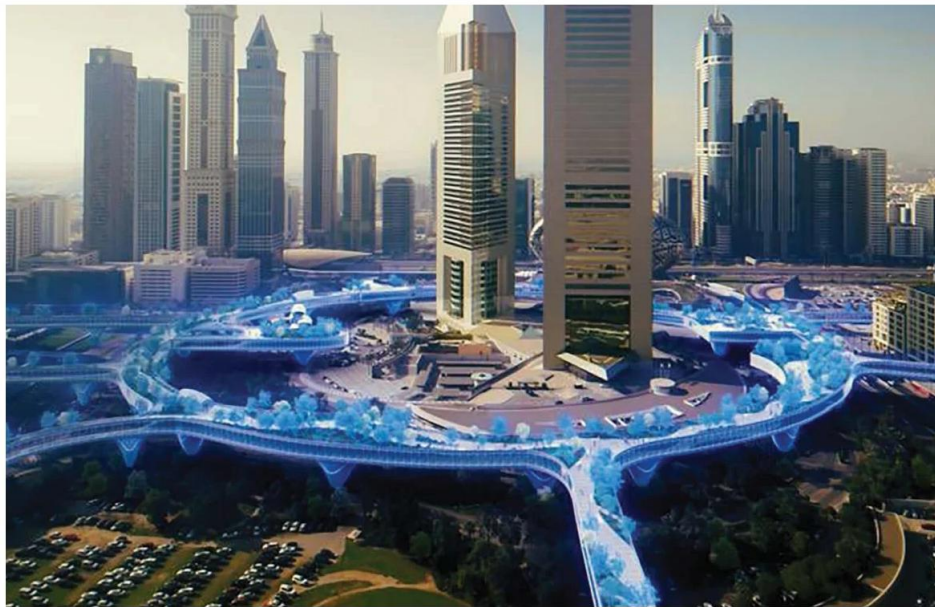
Get Dubai residents walking more

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, announced the plan to transform the emirate into a "year-round pedestrian-friendly city", with 3,300km of new walkways and 110 new bridges and tunnels.

A pilot phase will run from next year to 2027, with the plan due to be complete in 2040. More details will be announced in due course, but Dubai Media Office said the scheme aims to increase the city's pedestrian and environmentally friendly transport use "from 13 per cent to 25 per cent".

Two key routes are highlighted in the plan. One runs along the Dubai Creek area, which is already accessible for walkers.

The second is called The Future Loop – running around the Museum of the Future, and featuring new elevated paths and an "air-conditioned zone". It will



A rendering of part of the the Dubai Walk project, which will feature 110km of bridges and tunnels @HSHkMohd / X

connect Dubai World Trade Centre, Emirates Towers, Dubai International Financial Centre and the nearby Metro stations.

From car-centric past to walkable future

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 welcomed efforts to increase walking and highlighted how much can be done even through small improvements, such as providing 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 get around the city. "[They are] particularly sensitive to aspects such as steps and short crossing times," said Paulo Ancaes,



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Apostolos Kyriazis
Abu Dhabi University

senior researcher in transport 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 the Dubai Walk scheme could be an "enabler of public transport, if the connectivity is there" and people can walk between stations.

"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 not easy, said Prof Kyriazis, but doing so along with more public transport could cut congestion.

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

Improving pedestrian access and well-being

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 South Korea's capital was repurposed to create 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."

Mr Ancaes said the scale of

the Dubai plan is "unprecedented anywhere" but similar schemes such as The High Line, Paris's Promenade Plantee and Hong Kong's 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."

While projects like The High Line tend to be geared more towards leisure than pedestrian access, authorities in cities such as Barcelona and Copenhagen are trying to wrestle back space from cars.

Prof Menendez said planners in the UAE are also aware of health benefits such schemes offer.

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

Sustainability amid scorching heat

The Dubai Walk aims to encourage pedestrians all year round, even in the scorching summers.

"The biggest challenge is weather," said Prof Menendez. "Greenery 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.

Prof Kyriazis warned against outdoor air conditioning, as it was not "sustainable or logical". He said: "The hot weather should be converted from an excuse to air-conditioned 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's more than enough for people to walk with cooling air breezes as they pass."