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# Turning Streets

*How to recode urban space and redefine streets as green spaces? The landscape architects of bauchplan envision Melbourne's streets turned into parks. Their entry for "The Future Park Design Ideas Competition" held by the University of Melbourne and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects reflects this utopian vision. But how utopian is it? If cities redesign streetscapes and rethink mobility for pedestrians and bikers, the greenness and democratic spirit that come with such reforms might be rewarding.*

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BAUCHPLAN | (TOBIAS BALDAUF, RUPERT HALBARTSCHLAGER, MARIE-THERES OKRESEK, TATJANA OSHIMA, FLORIAN OTTO)

# into Parks

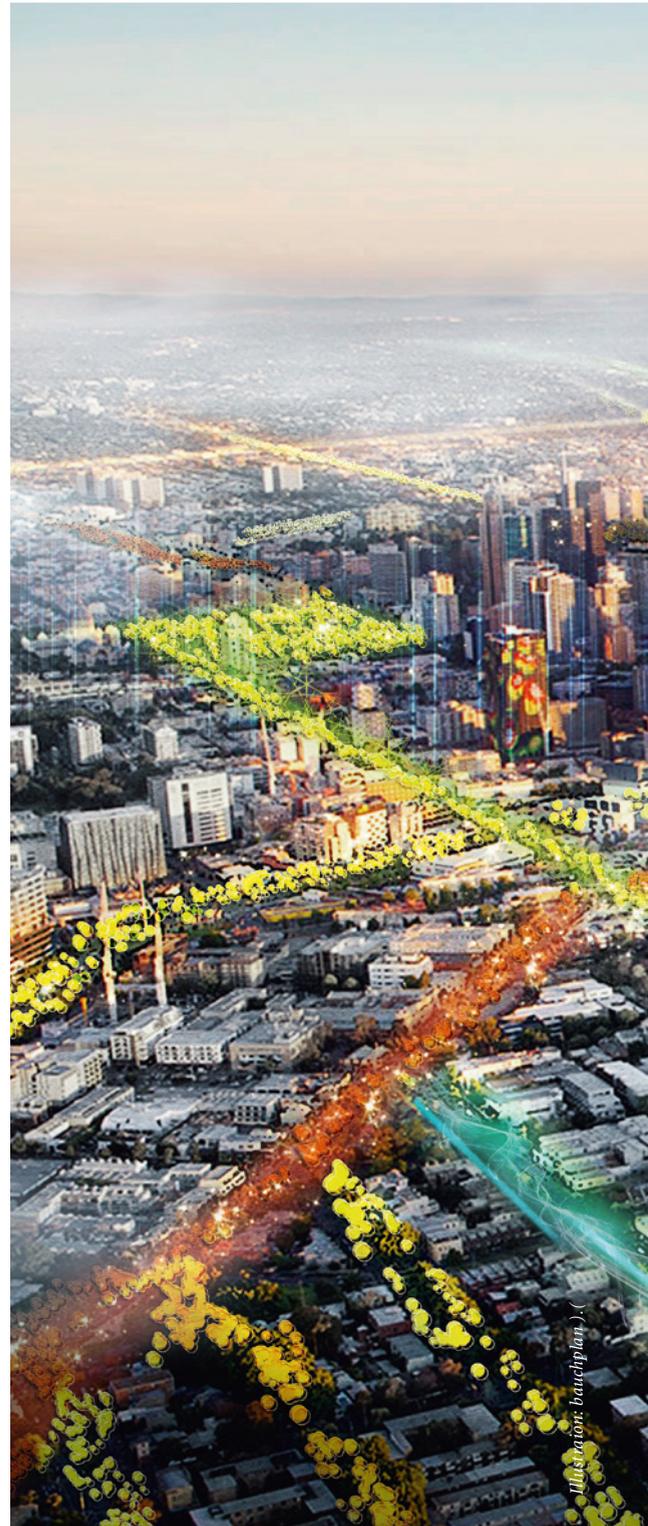


Illustration: bauchplan

Climatic structural axes: activated streetscapes supplement urban open spaces, creating a woven climate-conducive network.



The intentions appeared noble when the now defunct Greater London Council was planning to build a system of separate pedestrian pathways in the 1970s. They were to be elevated above the ever-expanding car traffic, hovering above the tumult of the city. The real – and only – reason, however, for building the so-called pedways was to keep motorized traffic as undisturbed by pedestrians as possible. As in all industrialized countries in that era, personal motorized transport in Great Britain was growing at a staggering pace. Citizens loved the convenience of their fashionable vehicles on four wheels. In the early 1960s in Great Britain there was one car per every 13 people; the ratio halved within the next five years. Pedestrians were not only viewed as a source of danger, they were also seen as slowing down the traffic flow due to the crossings and walking spaces they required. These considerations were behind the London city government's firm resolve to relegate ordinary pedestrians to a second level by creating an independent network of pathways that would function parallel to the privileged road system. Yet, as many studies and observations of city traffic have shown, humans wanting to get from A to B tend to seek the shortest way possible; even railings and barriers are unlikely to deter them when it comes to saving time or distance. The pedways were no big success. As it soon became clear that people were hardly using them, the planned network was never completed. Only recently city planners made a new attempt to breathe life into these unused urban spaces. This time, their intentions are different. The

idea is to give the elevated pathways a new image by turning them into architecturally pleasing spaces at heights that offer additional allure.

Ours is a time when the 1970s' euphoria about highly car-friendly cities has been replaced by severe disenchantment. It has been sobering to realize what vast amounts of space have been taken up by what was considered progress. The price we have been paying for the enlargement of our radius of activity is too high; the endurances that come with motorization in ever denser populated urban agglomerations are too hard to bear.

Soon two thirds of the global population will live in urban areas. Cities across the world are struggling to come up with sustainable solutions. The challenges they face are not only about complying with climate goals and counteracting the consequences of global warming, which particularly affect cities. The demand for more green space and local recreational areas has grown and become more urgent. Simultaneously the open space that should be available for such uses has diminished. Given the ongoing densification of cities, streets will soon be the only remaining spaces to consider and negotiate over when it comes to making urban life and mobility more sustainable.

#### **Open space as a democratic factor**

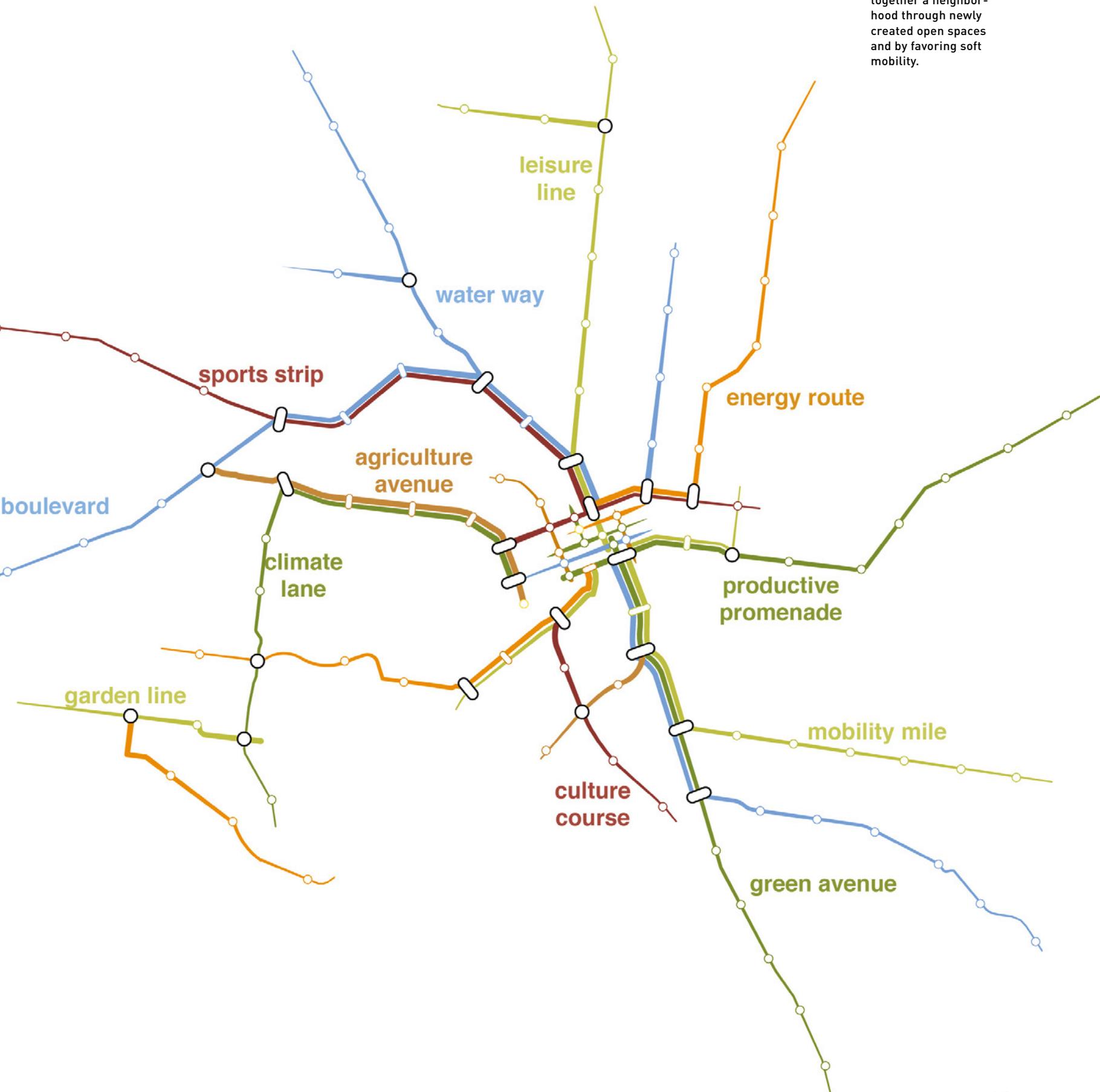
Worldwide one third of cities' territories are consumed by surfaces sealed for driving and parking. If Manhattan, for example, opened up these spaces for recreational uses, there would

be room for several dozen additional Central Parks. Indeed, concepts for the city of the future along these lines already exist. Only recently, the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels revealed his plans for Toyota Woven City, a prototype ecological city at the base of Mount Fuji, commissioned by the automobile manufacturer. The design includes a network of pathways based on the so-called shared space principle where three categories of users move around at different speeds. A more radical approach is pursued by Google through its cooperation with the Sidewalk Toronto urban development project. Here the focus is exclusively on pedestrians. The internet giant plans to create a high-tech data and communication infrastructure to improve urban life.

Global walk conferences have addressed visions of a "walkable city," meaning a city that invites people to go on foot. In many places commissioners for pedestrians have been appointed to evaluate foot traffic. What they ascertain nearly everywhere is the fact that pedestrian traffic continues to be subordinated to automobile traffic. Across the world, traffic light circuits alone testify to who calls the shots in cities. Why is it so tremendously difficult for us to get out of our own way and implement changes? Why are we blind to the enormous potential that a city radically privileging foot traffic would have?

Cities need new guiding principles that emphasize open spaces. Urban planner Jan Gehl is among those who demanded early on that cities be built at "a human scale." His much-quoted book *Cities for People* not only denounces solutions

Network plan of public good amenities: new typologies of urban boulevards displaying a variety of identities tie together a neighborhood through newly created open spaces and by favoring soft mobility.





mobility

Harmonious mobility embedded in sustainable urban design. Urban agriculture, water gardens, and greened railway lines create the set-up for urban water circuits. A sponge city system and shade trees add to the cooling effects.





that have failed but provides guidelines for exemplary urban planning. Gehl stresses repeatedly that cities are only worth living in if humans are the focus of planning. As early as 1977, in an essay titled *A Pattern Language*, the architect and architectural theorist Christopher Alexander comes to the conclusion: “Cars give people wonderful freedom and increase their opportunities. But they also destroy the environment, to an extent so drastic that they kill social life.”

The era of adapting to the requirements of cars is over. It is time to review the parameters of democratic practice as we decide on how to use our cities’ last remaining open spaces. It is a unique opportunity to win back urban space as true living space. It is also a huge chance to implement sustainable solutions to a number of pressing problems.

We need to rethink urban flexibility and strive for a kind of social mobility that will do justice to an individual’s range of motion and the degree of personal freedom connected with that. Instead of viewing our streets as the reserved territory of motorized traffic, let’s rethink them as a playing field for connecting neighborhoods through generously dimensioned green and social spaces; let’s rethink the city as a unity.

### The Park of the Future

In the past summer, the University of Melbourne together with the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects launched “The Future Park Design Ideas Competition” for the city of Melbourne. Based on the insight that road networks

will play a very different role in the future, bauchplan’s competition entry reconceptualizes the city’s streets as park spaces. The goal is to reduce car traffic, counteract urban heat island effects and make the city greener, healthier and more pedestrian-friendly.

Greenery is not evenly distributed in the urban space: many residents are forced to cover considerable distances to reach one of the city’s recreational spaces. Generally speaking, in many cities noise and air pollution levels are too high to allow people to find sufficient relief within the fabric of their city. If we do not succeed in re-allocating the surfaces taken up by streets, we will cut ourselves off from using the last available coherent, larger-scale open spaces as potential places of retreat. Ultimately, such a limitation would also affect our personal freedom.

The green street concept that bauchplan developed for Melbourne defines pedestrians as individuals that move through public space seeking to reach a multiplicity of destinations. As social beings, the residents of a city do not only use public space to reach their destinations as quickly as possible, but they also make use of it by engaging in leisure and recreational activities, depending on the available amenities of their neighborhoods. In their proposal, bauchplan therefore designed each street in such a way that residents of the area will be able to move around primarily on foot and with as few hindrances as possible. Individual street sections provide recreational amenities and spaces for leisure that previously would have been available only at designated green spaces or in the countryside. Among these

are spaces for social encounter in the neighborhood that are unrelated to consumerism, for open-air sports activities or urban agriculture. Children will find spaces for movement in an entire given street section, i.e. beyond designated playgrounds. Numerous events that so far are restricted to indoor locations due to traffic noise or a lack of appropriate outdoor spaces, can now be moved into the street. Going to work on foot or by bicycle will be pure pleasure – and provide the added value of physical exercise – instead of being characterized by wariness and fear of overwhelming motorized traffic. The path will become the goal as passing through streets will fulfil many more functions than getting from A to B in the shortest amount of time. On the contrary, residents will gain time because they can now combine different kinds of tasks. The public space will become a space for all. In addition, public transport will be expanded by offering more efficient connections through intelligent infrastructure axes.

In this scenario, a given neighborhood will regain relevance as an area that is able to meet the recreational needs of its local population. Transformed in character, the public space will revive the surrounding quarter's social fabric. Among the salutary effects to be expected are a reduction of urban loneliness, lack of physical exercise, obesity and vitamin D deficiency. Likewise fine particulate air and noise pollution will decrease. As our radius as adults is scaled down, that of our children will expand, increasing their safety and the variety of services available in the immediate vicinity of their

residences. The proposed design is not unlike the utopia of “a city within the city” propagated by architects and urban planners of the Red Vienna of the 1930s. In that era, the residents of social housing complexes like the Karl-Marx-Hof rarely had to saunter beyond the walls of their “fortification” as it offered all essential amenities. In a similar manner, a city redesigned as a park will provide many new services the convenience of which residents will only forego for indispensable errands. Vacant apartments or houses will become an absolute rarity in the same manner that shopping centers on the outskirts will be assigned new functions or become obsolete altogether.

There exists by now a vast number of examples of newly created green space or reallocated road and street space that have become best practice cases. The observation they confirm is that wherever streets, bridges or crossings are closed down for cars for the sake of pedestrian traffic, the latter will occupy these spaces almost immediately and claim them permanently. The worldwide success of Car-free Days and Park Days proves how much urban populations long for a more democratic and autonomous use of the urban space. The unprecedented success of the Highline in New York City as an elevated, linear park space, and of the Coulée verte – René Dumont in Paris and the Luchtsingel in Rotterdam points to the immeasurable value of car-free local recreational spaces. Success comes particularly with spaces that not only invite users to linger but entice them into walking through engaging and attractive landscaping.

Predictions that car-free city quarters would have adverse effects on the economy have been proven wrong by a number of showcase projects. Cases in point are the northwestern Spanish town Pontevedra, where traffic is strictly limited to delivery vehicles and the cars of neighborhood residents; the Mariahilfer Strasse in Vienna, which has been turned into part shared space and part pedestrian zone; and the inner city of Ghent. Since 2017 only emergency and support service vehicles, taxicabs and the cars of handicapped individuals are permitted to drive there. While pedestrians have complete priority in all these places, economic growth does in fact count among the numerous positive effects of the new regulation. A further aspect to be considered: salvation will not come from electric cars. They will merely slightly reduce fine particulate air pollution as well as noise pollution in dry weather and with cars at slow speed. Yet the demand for electric cars is growing constantly, and there is reason to fear that cars will be replaced by cars.

Metropolises such as Tokyo focused on foot and bike traffic early on in order to prevent a looming total traffic gridlock. Now it is time to go a step further, reclaim lost recreational space and turn it into true social places where people can meet and interact. So far, the space to be used for these plans is still there; it lies directly in front of our doorstep. It is up to us to occupy this space, make it green and democratic, and strive to create the most livable cities of the future.