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Beyond Leadership: Vienna's Approach to Lasting Mobility Reform

Vienna's interconnected reforms in public transport, parking and street design have helped shift everyday mobility away from private cars while reclaiming streets for public life. The city's experience shows how public engagement, community action and institutional support can help mobility reforms endure and scale.





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Mariahilfer Strasse was transformed from a car-dominated shopping street into a pedestrian-friendly corridor with space for walking, greenery and outdoor life. *Image: © Mobilitaetsagentur/Fuerthner*

It takes vision and leadership to embark on the long, and at times turbulent journey towards transforming urban mobility at scale. Yet getting started does not necessarily lead to successful, lasting change. Transitions often go hand in hand with controversy, and projects may fail or backfire. Drawing from Vienna's experience with three iconic projects, this article examines the factors that allow ambitious reforms to endure.

The Vision: A City of Liveable, Connected Neighbourhoods

Facing and benefiting from rapid population growth, Vienna adopted a polycentric development approach aimed at creating a thriving, liveable centre in every neighbourhood and connecting these centres by public transport, cycling networks and shaded pedestrian walkways.

Defining a liveable city as one that is good for children—and taking child- and family-friendly urban design as a starting point—inevitably leads to rethinking the street as a place for community life. This means understanding urban space as a limited resource and reallocating space occupied by parked cars to placemaking, outdoor activities, children's play and urban greenery.

A city of connected neighbourhoods calls for a people-centred approach to urban mobility: identifying public transport as the city's backbone and key enabler, while putting walking at the heart of its mobility strategy as both a means and an end, and a powerful indicator of lasting success.

The three projects discussed here form interrelated parts of the same strategy: to shift everyday mobility away from private car use towards public transport and walking, while reclaiming scarce street space for neighbourhood life. Expanding parking space management to the outer districts, combined with a significant reduction in the price of the annual public transport pass, provided incentives for commuters to switch from private cars to public transport—thus freeing street space formerly occupied by parked cars. Redesigning Mariahilfer Strasse as a pedestrian zone demonstrated how reclaimed space could enhance urban life.

Three Reforms, One Strategy

1. **Redesigning Mariahilfer Strasse**

Mariahilfer Strasse, one of central Europe's longest and most emblematic shopping streets, was transformed between 2012 and 2014 into one of Vienna's most beloved boulevards for strolling and enjoying outdoor life. Previously, 45,000 pedestrians crowded the pavements daily, while up to 12,000 cars occupied three-quarters of the entire space.

A central stretch of approximately 500 m was pedestrianised, with two equally long stretches at either end transformed into shared spaces. Together, they created a 1.5 km green, shaded and walkable corridor connecting the outer districts with the city centre and improving quality of life in the adjoining high-density districts of Neubau and Mariahilf.

Although initially highly contested, the redesign was acknowledged as a success, attracting well over 60,000 users daily. It became a reference project for street transformation, leading to numerous street redesign and placemaking projects throughout Vienna and beyond Austria.

2. **The €365 Annual Public Transport Pass**

Vienna's decision to reduce the annual public transport pass to €365, allowing unlimited travel for the equivalent of €1 a day, proved to be more than a pricing measure. Introduced in early 2012, it was associated with a major shift in Vienna's modal split: public transport's share of daily journeys rose to 39%, alongside increased walking and cycling, while private car use fell by 6% to 27% that year.

In subsequent years, sales exceeded 900,000 annual passes, with students and young people eligible for even lower fares. More than half of Vienna's population used the annual pass for everyday travel. The measure contributed to improved air quality and lower carbon emissions, while boosting ridership and fostering a sense of pride in public transport.

Originally contested by the public transport company and experts who feared significant losses in ticket revenue and argued that ridership depended more on convenience than price, the €365 annual ticket broke expectations and records. Within three years, the original gap in sales revenue was refinanced through additional ticket sales, particularly in the suburban and sub-rural parts of the metropolitan area.



Vienna's €365 annual public transport pass complemented wider reforms in parking management and street redesign, helping create conditions for more sustainable everyday travel.
Image: Jorge Láscar / Wikimedia Commons

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The fare remained in place for 14 years, until it was raised in January 2026. Dramatic increases in ridership also led to an ambitious but costly infrastructure development plan, including extensions and a new metro line.

3. **Parking Management Reform**

The most unpopular of all measures in Vienna's mobility strategy was undoubtedly the parking space management reform. Although it had been in place in downtown Vienna since the 1990s, proposals to extend operating hours, raise prices slightly and expand regulated parking to the outer districts drew strong opposition from residents, the chamber of commerce and opposition parties.

By 2010, daily congestion along major transport corridors, combined with overparked streets particularly in the outer districts—much of it caused by commuter cars from neighbouring countries—made additional steering measures unavoidable. After congestion pricing was rejected in a city-wide referendum, Vienna turned to an established and tested alternative: parking space management.

Implemented in 2011, the reforms had an immediate effect. They freed the streets from commuter parking, making space available for placemaking and traffic-calming projects, and reduced congestion along major corridors. Public opinion subsequently shifted after implementation, and calls to expand further into unmanaged areas resulted in positive local referenda several years later. As revenue from parking space management is legally required to be spent on mobility-related measures, it also indirectly cross-subsidised the €365 annual public transport pass.

Takeaways from Vienna's Mobility Reforms

One swallow does not make a summer. Lasting transformation requires an entire portfolio of interconnected actions that reinforce one another and deliver visible progress. All three projects served the same purpose: making limited street space available for quality-of-life improvements by boosting walking and public transport, while reducing private car use and parking.

The interaction between the €365 pass and parking management reforms illustrates this approach. Parking regulation both discouraged private car use and generated revenue that could support lower public transport fares. More broadly, Vienna's experience suggests that steering measures which both reduce car dependence and generate revenue can reinforce the wider sustainable mobility strategy.

Takeaway 1: Listening, Responding and Designing Around Tangible Needs

Throughout the planning and design of Mariahilfer Strasse, opponents claimed that the project would create a barrier and draw traffic congestion into adjoining residential areas. In response, traffic management plans were developed to ensure wide-scale traffic-calming across surrounding neighbourhoods, and relevant information was shared regularly with the public.

The design focused on identifying and maintaining all user groups, uses and functions the street already served, while adding new possibilities and attractions. A Functional Social Spatial Analysis (FSSA) combined intensive on-site observation, interviews with different user groups, data collection and the mapping of uses,



Through the Grätzl-Oase programme, residents can reclaim parking spaces for neighbourhood uses, such as seating, play and social activities.
Image: © MA 18/ Christian Fürthner

conflicts and opportunities to inform the planning process. Citizen engagement conducted on site over several weeks informed the design competition brief, while a representative citizens' jury helped select the final scheme. The resulting design introduced seating, daybeds, play facilities and water tables, giving the reclaimed space tangible new uses.

Takeaway 2: Focusing on Alliances
Stakeholder management around Mariahilfer Strasse originally focused on handling active opposition, which consumed resources without meaningfully reducing controversy. Refocusing efforts towards forging alliances and actively engaging supporters—most notably major retailers, real estate interests and young resident families—initiated a significant shift in public opinion.

The efforts were collaborative: visibly designed, but also communicated, promoted and defended together. Engagement with the real estate sector became the starting point for a long-term collaboration that resulted in numerous jointly planned and co-financed shared-space projects in downtown Vienna.

Takeaway 3: Convincing by Experiencing
Allowing local communities to experience the benefits of change requires the willingness to withstand initial opposition, but it can lead to a later shift in public opinion. Using available space as soon as possible after measures free streets from parked cars is essential: empty urban space is not in itself experienced as a benefit. Benefits arise from placemaking, children's play, outdoor seating, greening and other uses that foster a different sense of public space ownership.

Mariahilfer Strasse Neu became a recognisable brand and reference project, demonstrating the benefits of well-designed street transformation. Over the following decade, transformation spread to adjoining streets and inspired projects throughout the city, increasingly as bottom-up requests from local communities rather than top-down decisions by the administration.

Takeaway 4: Supporting Community-Driven Action
Controversial public discourse also prompted local communities to initiate small-scale transformation projects, which at times encountered legal barriers or administrative resistance. Recognising locally active groups as agents of change, the city introduced mechanisms to enable and support community-driven action.

This led to the development of a prototype contract for the use of public space, enabling initiatives such as parklets in parking spaces, as well as a small community grants scheme. Since 2015, Grätzl-Oase has supported more than 1,000 community-driven projects across Vienna's neighbourhoods—

helping to shape a lasting "1,000 needles" strategy, inspiring the heat mitigation Cool Streets programme, and other municipal initiatives. Crucial to its success was the scheme's institutionalisation: the scheme is managed by the non-government organisation, Local Agenda 21, with regular submission periods, transparent rules and a jury for project selection.

Takeaway 5: Designing Fare Reform for the Long Term
Prices matter, but Vienna's experience with the €365 annual pass shows that fare reductions work best where public transport is already well developed, dense and convenient. Low fares alone are unlikely to deliver the expected results where service intervals exceed a maximum of around 15 minutes.

Cities must also account for the real costs which may include not only the direct costs of reducing fares, but also the additional infrastructure investment required to accommodate higher ridership and the difference between actual revenue and what would have been generated had fares been regularly indexed. Transparent accounting can support the measure's long-term viability and help prevent financial backlash.

Creating and branding an iconic fare also requires planning for the exit: how long fares will remain stable, when and why prices may eventually be raised, and how that change will be communicated. Otherwise, abandoning a highly popular brand may prove almost impossible.

Behind the Scenes: Institutionalising and Scaling Change

Several overarching principles have proved essential in the institutionalisation, acceleration and upscaling of successful projects and measures.

Policy Meets Tactics and Operations. Creating street typologies based on the suitability of different traffic-calming, walkability or placemaking interventions, and categorising Viennese streets to produce ready-to-use guidelines, allowed most maintenance projects to become opportunities for transformation.

Cross-Disciplinary Governance Structures. Cross-disciplinary teams within the administration, Urban Renewal Offices operating as city-funded non-profit organisations, and Local Agenda 21's support for community-driven action created the institutional foundation needed to sustain and scale change.

Sharing Visibility and Success. Sharing visibility and success with city staff, local stakeholders and community representatives reinforced shared ownership of successful projects and encouraged support for future projects.

Successful transitions from private car use to walking, cycling and public transport are ultimately about durability and acceleration from pilots to scale.

Nothing is more powerful or "contagious" than community-driven action. No argument on behalf of an administration will prove more convincing than what is discussed and agreed within local communities. Contested measures become the accepted urban baseline when they are visibly planned, communicated and, at times, defended together.

Lasting change extends beyond the administrations and individuals that set it in motion. It results from engaging the entire ecosystem and organising efforts that build shared commitment, which leads to perhaps the most important transition: from individual to collective leadership.