

# SHARED STREETS AS A TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE "CITY OF SHORT DISTANCES"<sup>1</sup>

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*Mobility design is an essential element in the creation of the "city of short distances." The "shared street" model, in its many operational forms, is one of the design tools for transitioning mobility towards a more equitable model, both from social and environmental points of view. After discussing the theoretical premises, the paper presents the experience gained in this field by the City of Bologna, in particular through the project Bologna a scuola si muove sostenibile (Bologna moves sustainably at school).*

## Introduction

This contribution focuses on mobility design as an essential element in the creation of the "city of short distances" at the center of contemporary urban planning debate. In particular, it analyses the "shared street" concept as a tool for transitioning mobility towards a more equitable model, both from social and environmental points of view.

From a cultural point of view, the reference scenario for this work consists, on the one hand, of the perspective of "urban regeneration" intended as a socio-spatial change addressing urban development [Orioli & Massari, 2023; Ostanel, 2017] and, on the other, of the need to consider transport equity and mobility justice as objectives that contribute substantially to the achievement of a just transition in contemporary cities and territories [Cidell, 2024].

From a methodological point of view, this contribution analyses a series of design tools, drawing on available literature and case studies. Among these, the experience of the city of Bologna emerges as a constant reference point, where the author held the position of Deputy Mayor in charge of Urban Planning and Environment (2016–2021) and Mobility (2021–2024).

## The City of Short Distances in the Perspective of Urban Regeneration

The city of short distances, which emerges in the current debate as an innova-

tion to improve the livability of cities, originated as a functionalist urban planning device.

The underlying idea is linked to the organization of urban development through the aggregation of simple elements ("cells"), which is as old as the discipline of urban planning itself, from urban expansion organized by blocks, considered as collective units, which emerged from Ildefonso Cerdà's plan for Barcelona [Cerdà, 1867], to the organization of growth by "neighborhood units" theorized by Clarence A. Perry in the New York Regional Plan of 1921–29 [Perry, 1929]. Both theories express the intention to provide for the elements that constitute the physical city, while also taking into account the cohesion between the individuals who inhabit it. In particular, the neighborhood unit, theorized by Perry but reprised by many authors and in various implementations, "groups around a specific core of collective services a population large enough to require the installation of those services and to saturate the facilities connected to them" [Rigotti, 1952, p. 350]. This explanation, taken from one of the most influential Italian urban planning manuals of the 1950s, shows how the idea had spread and been adopted as the basis for urban design during the post-war period.

In the perspective of designing the city as a repetition of urban cells defined by a core of basic services and the population dependent on them, the mobility network plays an essential role. Rigotti himself writes: "given that normal collective life for a population group must deve-

lop within the cell (...), it is not necessary for heavy traffic to penetrate the boundaries of the cell, and indeed this would cause considerable disruption. (...) Traffic within the cell is localized; it is fairly slow and is limited to the movement of vehicles and pedestrians directly involved in the activities carried out within the perimeter" [Rigotti, 1952, pp. 352–53]. This separation of networks dedicated to crossing traffic and internal slow mobility results in the limitation of road space within the "neighborhood unit" and the liberation of public spaces around buildings, which can thus be dedicated to social life. The cell's size itself depends on the walking distance to the basic services it offers.

This theoretical framework is very similar and consistent with the "15-minute city" concept launched by Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo during her second election campaign in 2020, based on the work of Carlos Moreno [Moreno, 2024].

The main innovation in the theoretical approach consists in applying urban interpretation and design by "cells" to the regeneration of the existing city, which has significant implications from an operational point of view.

Discussing them in detail is not the purpose of this article; it should be simply noted that:

- The 15-minute distance is an optimal distance to cover on foot or by bicycle to reach services, but it cannot be considered absolute, as it also depends on the size and on the character of the city where the regeneration project is taking place.

<sup>1</sup> Český překlad článku je uveřejněn na webových stránkách časopisu.

- Intervention in the existing city requires careful, site-specific analysis, which will result in a baseline concerning population and existing services that will certainly differ from the optimal design ex nihilo of a self-sufficient urban cell.
- Work on public space and mobility networks also starts from the existing situation, which in all cities is generally biased in favor of private cars even for short-distance travel.

All these considerations suggest that it is necessary to keep in mind the rational reference model from which the city of short distances is reborn today, in the awareness that in urban regeneration contexts it is necessary to implement an adaptive and site-specific approach to urban design issues.

## Mobility at the Core of Urban Design Experience

If the mobility project was one of the defining elements of neighborhood units, it would be even more crucial in today's city of short distances.

The transformation of the existing city necessarily faces many limitations. On the one hand, urban redevelopment projects in densely populated areas often cause disruption to the existing population and therefore require preliminary consultation and support, which is not always easy to implement. On the other hand, the high costs of urban renewal reduce the number of projects that can be effectively carried out.

In these circumstances a tendency emerges to develop projects with a significant component of co-design and social innovation and the use of gradual transformation tools (temporary uses and tactical urbanism), while urban regeneration is often approached starting from spaces already available to the public administration, that can be modified with "light" and low-cost interventions. Among those public urban spaces, the transformative potential of the re-design of roads within a new mobility system is clearly evident.

Initial experiments in this direction were conducted in many European cities during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing requirements led to the creation of more space for active mobility and outdoor life. It is precisely this renewed awareness of the importance of a healthy urban environment and the presence of local services in a "proximity dimension" that has led to the emergence of the model of the "city of short distances." And, in this perspective, attention is focused on the need to rethink the space of the street: *"the way in which local authorities around the world have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic has shattered a dogma that until then seemed unquestionable: there is no rule stating that cars must have free rein on every road and in all public spaces"* [Pinzuti, 2022].

## Shared Streets as a Tool for Urban Regeneration

Since the lockdown period, the need to redistribute road space has become increasingly important in many European cities. Public space, which has long been organized and designed solely for cars, to the point of achieving "automobility" [Shelley & Urry, 2000], can now be better distributed among different modes of transport. This redistributive approach, which responds to principles of spatial equity or "street democracy" [Francis, 1987], finds its operational expression in a broad concept of "shared street."

There is a wide variety of experiences and theories surrounding the democratization of the street and its use as a shared space. They are characterized by certain common denominators, such as the reference to the "right to the city" [Lefebvre, 1967] and to "publicness" as a fundamental dimension: *"while the concept of privacy has been well developed and legally protected in modern society, publicness is a relatively new concept that recognizes one's right to free and unlimited access to public places. Publicness is the foundation of street democracy, providing the framework in which a true public culture can develop and flourish"* [Francis, 1987, p. 28].

Related to these concepts, accessibility, understood in both a physical and social sense, emerges as a central dimension to address urban design [Ascher & Apel-Muller, 2007].

In Europe, pioneering experiences in this field have been carried out in the Netherlands since the late 1960s, with the introduction of the "woonerf" and "naked streets." Conceived by engineer Joost Vahl and recognized in 1976 by the Dutch government as a model for residential streets, the woonerf, or "living street", is a response to the dominant presence of cars in residential areas. It consists of designing the street as a shared social space rather than a restricted vehicle-use lane. This approach reverses priorities by lowering vehicle speeds, which is achieved by changing the geometry of the road section from straight to meandering.

The idea of removing all road signs designed to orient the flow of traffic, tested a few years later by Hans Monderman, represents a further radical step towards sharing a "naked" space, in which drivers are encouraged to slow down and pay attention due to the absence of references.

Alongside complex and radical experiences such as these, various approaches have been developed that achieve the democratization of road space in a more basic way, simply by identifying a reserved space for each type of user, pedestrian, cyclist, or motorist. This measure, which is part of a traditional approach to road space, makes the presence of the most vulnerable users visible and, as it generally involves reducing the section of the car lanes, also has the effect of lowering vehicle speed. The creation of shared streets, with different methods that transform the physical space to varying degrees, has gained significant boost in many European cities in the post-pandemic period.

In Italy, with the first distribution of funds from the European Recovery Plan (the REACT EU fund), several cities have begun to experiment with the redesign of road space on a large scale. Actions have focused mainly on implementing

and completing cycle networks by marking cycle lanes on roads and expanding and improving the safety of pedestrian areas and crossings.

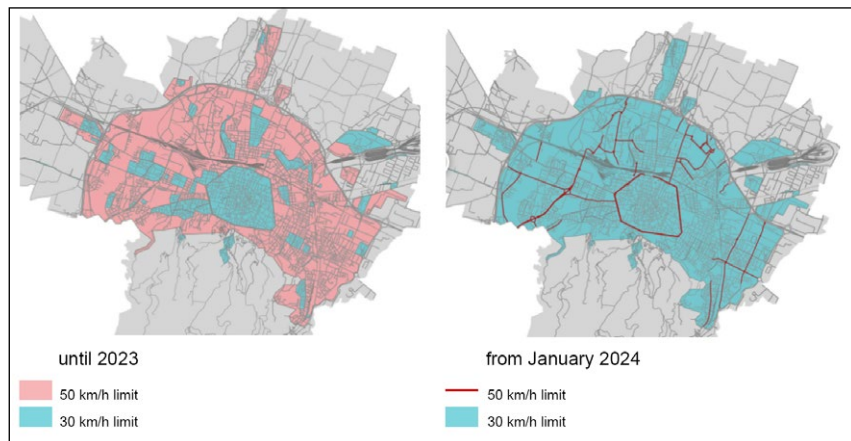
In addition to applying to car lanes, the redistribution of available public spaces has in many cases involved parking areas and zones excluded from traffic, even leading to the creation of new squares and social spaces for neighborhood life. In this way, 52 squares have been created in Milan since 2018 through tactical urbanism interventions, covering a total area of over 56 000 square meters, which are now pedestrian and livable thanks to the installation of new street furniture [Comune di Milano, 2021]. The program to transform public spaces continues today, with new calls for applications to identify other areas to be reclaimed from cars (“open squares” and school squares), but also with the first projects to transform the layout from “tactical” to “permanent.”

## The Bologna Experience

In Bologna, too, the first measures to share road space were taken during the pandemic. In the early stages, these measures consisted of simple signage and temporary barriers to increase the space available for pedestrians and cyclists. Specific attention was paid to school areas, where measures were taken to increase the space available for waiting outside. These measures were accompanied by the first trials of cycle lanes traced with road markings.

To emphasize the importance of “proximity” and the presence of public spaces throughout the city, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all these measures were collected in the emergency mobility plan *Spazio a Bologna. Muoversi e vivere nella città che riparte* [Comune di Bologna & Fondazione IU, 2020].

Following the approval of the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan in 2019 [Città metropolitana di Bologna, 2019], the pandemic period has encouraged a concrete rethinking of the urban mobility model, focusing on people and their need to move in a variety of ways in the city’s public spaces. After the pan-



Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU

Fig. 1: The transformation of Bologna in a 30 km/h city: before and after

dem, this trend continues, based on several insights that had been acquired:

- the characterization of individual mobility as the sum of short and very short journeys, made using a combination of different modes of transport [Ciuffini et al., 2023];
- the growing demand for road safety in the neighborhoods from their inhabitants;
- the demand for improved accessibility, not only for people with disabilities, and the need for greater environmental comfort, in a city where the urban heat island is a very relevant phenomenon.

All these and many other needs can be met by designing a new mobility, conceived as an urban planning project that involves a comprehensive vision of the city’s transformation.

The concept of shared streets was taken as the basis for this project, which started from a number of fundamental considerations: the first is that, in this vision, a starting point must be the protection of the most vulnerable users, namely pedestrians, cyclists, children, the elderly, and people with reduced mobility.

The second assumption is the consideration that cars, whether moving or parked, take up a lot of space. And the city just doesn’t have that much space available, both because of its historical layout and because there are many other uses and needs that affect urban public space. Putting people first does not mean declaring war on cars. But it does mean ensuring that credible alternatives to cars are available, so that

more people are able to choose different modes of transport. It is not about making cities “car-free,” but about placing ourselves in a “post-car perspective” [Coppola et al., 2022].

Under all these premises, a very radical change has been implemented in Bologna’s entire urban mobility system. This change is represented by the vision of the city as a “30 km/h city.” The realization of Bologna Città 30 program involves interventions in four major areas: regulation (definition of the map of new speed limits and change of signage), road controls, information and education, and transformation of street space (Fig. 1).

Announced in the 2019 SUMP and launched in November 2022, the plan to transform Bologna into a 30 km/h city was presented in June 2023. The road signs were modified in the following months, and the new traffic regime came into force on January 16, 2024.

Road transformation work continued through the first phase of the Bologna Città 30 project and continues to this day. Alongside major projects linked to the construction of the city’s first two tramway lines [Orioli & Sgubbi, 2025], the creation of shared streets continued, with the goal of improving safety and encouraging bicycling and with a focus on school areas [Orioli et al., 2023] (Fig. 2).

From February 2022 to December 2023, the urban cycle network grew from 212 km to 240 km, meaning that over 70% of the main cycle network has been completed. In September 2025,

Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU



Fig. 2: Examples of widespread interventions to redistribute and share road space safely

Source: Comune di Bologna

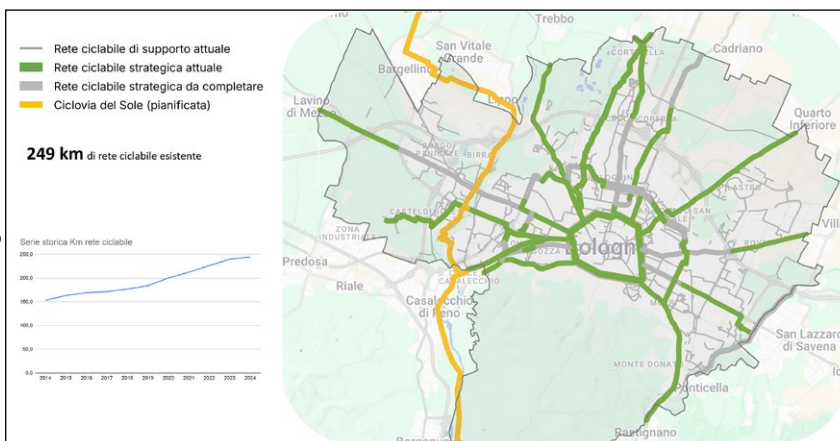


Fig. 3: Bologna's cycle network in September 2025 (in green the completed main network)

Source: Comune di Bologna

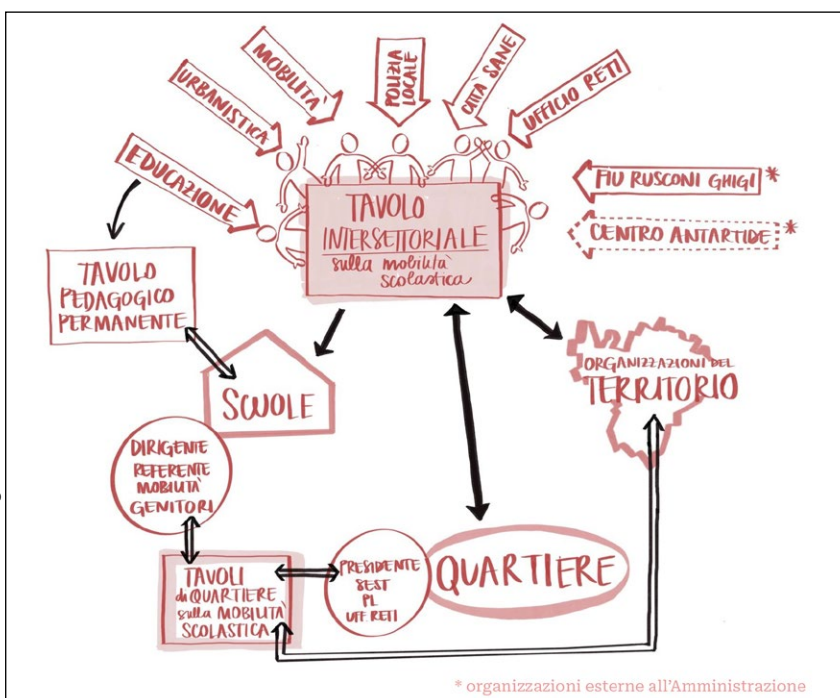


Fig. 4: Diagram of the Tavolo intersectoriale per la mobilità scolastica (Cross-Sectoral Table for School Mobility)

249 km of cycle network was completed. This has led to a steady increase in the number of bicycles in the city, amounting to around 10% each year (Fig. 3).

Various interventions have been implemented around schools: from traditional safety measures, such as installing new signage and transforming the road through traffic calming measures, to the actual creation of pedestrian or shared spaces through tactical urbanism permanent transformations.

One of the focuses of Bologna Città 30, both in terms of communication and education and about the transformation of physical space, is the Bologna a scuola si muove sostenibile project [Orioli et al., 2023]. Launched in 2019, the project resumed after the pandemic through the promotion of activities such as pedibus and mobility education, as well as the creation of school streets and squares. The shared space model was then tested both through its physical implementation and through interaction with school communities (Fig. 4).

The tactical interventions made it possible to experiment methods of directly involving schools in the implementation, but also to develop a system for monitoring the effects of pedestrianization, which is necessary to determine whether to make the changes permanent or modify them.

An example of this approach is "Piazza Procaccini", a new pedestrian school

zone that was created by reducing and redesigning the road through tactical urbanism approach (Fig. 5). This square, designed and built with the direct contribution of students from the nearby high school, was monitored both directly and instrumentally. Direct monitoring was carried out through site visits and data collection before and after the intervention, following the method proposed by Jan Gehl [Gehl & Svarre, 2013]. Instrumental monitoring, carried out using cameras, allowed objective data to be collected, such as vehicle speed and the number of people present in the area at different times of the day (Fig. 6 and 7). The analysis shows how social life has changed after the transformation of the street, not only for the students, but with continuous attendance throughout the day. The instrumental analyses also made it possible to collect data to show that this type of intervention induces moderation of speeds and contributes to the safety of people [Fondazione IU, 2022; Transform Transport, 2022].

The permanent interventions, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to develop certain design elements that are considered invariable, such as the need to unseal portions of public space and installing new materials of different qualities, capable of having a positive impact on the urban microclimate. Each intervention involves the planting of trees and the installation of street furniture that configures the public space as “playable”, suitable for use by users of different ages.

At the Tambroni schools, the transformation of a street into a school square has allowed for the redevelopment of an area that also includes a small market, with the result of mixing two publics: children and their families, and market customers, who are mostly elderly residents. The retrofitting of the school building took place at the same time as the design of the new square. Integrated interventions of this type are expensive and complex to implement, but they can help raise public awareness about a new vision of the city, with benefits for many (Fig. 8).

In Piazza Perti, the definitive transformation of a road into a “naked street”,



Fig. 5: Piazza Procaccini before and after tactical urbanism intervention

Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU  
Photo © Margherita Caprilli

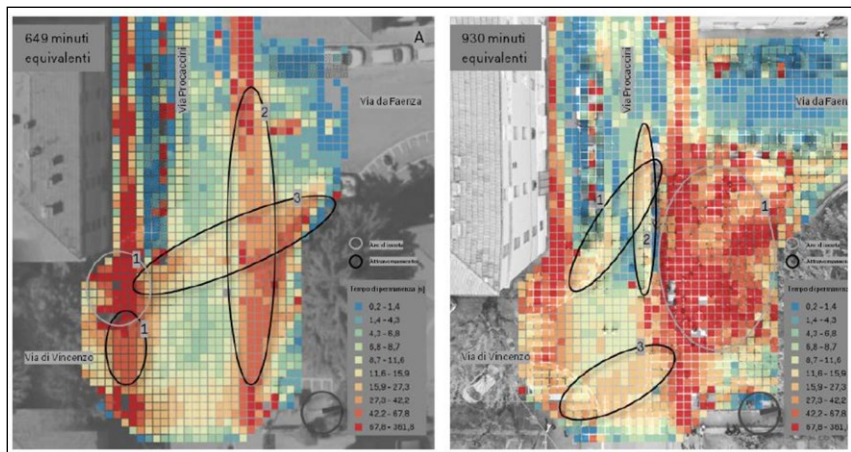


Fig. 6: Monitoring Piazza Procaccini before and after: time of stay

Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU, Systematica

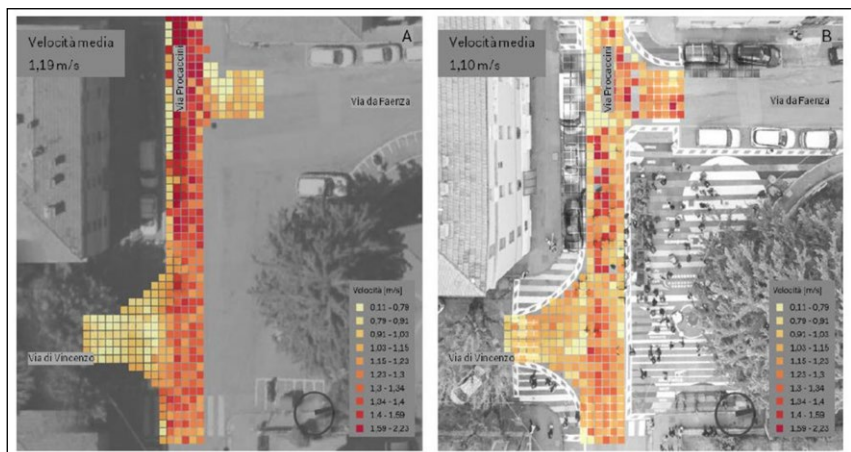


Fig. 7: Monitoring Piazza Procaccini before and after: average speed of vehicles

Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU, Systematica



Fig. 8: Piazza Tambroni before and after

Source: Google Maps; Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU  
Photo © Margherita Caprilli

Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU  
Photo © Margherita Caprilli



Fig. 9: Aerial view of the new Piazza Perti

Source: Comune di Bologna, Fondazione IU  
Photo © Margherita Caprilli



Fig. 10: The new special "signage" installed in the school areas after transformation

accessible to residents' cars but without signage, also provided an opportunity to rethink the accessibility of school buildings, through a large staircase-ramp that overcomes the existing differences in levels. The school square project thus also extends into the school courtyard, involving, in its design and execution, the integration of the work of several public service offices (Fig. 9).

Finally, the projects also experiment with a special vertical "signage" that uses simple and direct language to convey the meaning of the spaces as places of opportunity for children and young people (Fig. 10).

All the projects have been strongly integrated with the themes of mobility and road safety, placing the intervention in the context of a comprehensive review of how children arrive at school, crossings, parking, etc. These measures have been

made possible by the integrated work involving many offices in municipality together with technicians from Fondazione IU Rusconi Ghigi (also known as Urban Innovation Foundation).

Dialogue with the local community takes place through the "Quartieri" (Districts), which act as intermediaries with schools and with citizens' requests and feedback. The six Districts are the decentralized offices of the municipality, and each one hosts a Lab where citizens can meet with the administration, receive information on ongoing projects, and collaborate on their development.

"Integration" and "collaboration" are the two terms that best define the working perspective within which these transformations can be achieved. The gradual nature of their realization and implementation in different parts of the city, as well as being an operational necessi-

ty, also seems to be an essential requirement for the assimilation of a new way of moving and living in the city.

Beyond civic collaboration, projects undertaken to give Bologna a new mobility have also proved controversial. In particular, the Bologna Città 30 project has met with much opposition on the political front, both locally and nationally. Opposition to the project manifested itself, among other things, in a dispute between the municipality on the one hand and a taxi driver and the Ministry of Infrastructure on the other, culminating in the recent ruling by the Regional Administrative Court that annulled the measure (January 2026).

In its ruling, the court did not question the results achieved in two years of Città 30, but stated that the implementation of the measure needed to be reviewed and corrected. The municipality was asked to determine the presence of sensitive targets and then to define the new speed regime street by street. The implementation of Città 30 has therefore entered a second phase, in which the regulations amending the maximum speed limits are being revised.

At the same time that the court overturned the measure, a report released by the municipality documented the effects of the first two years of Città 30 (January 2024 – January 2026), compared with the two-year period 2022–23.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the primary objective of increasing road safety, the Città 30 measure has so far made it possible to save 17 lives on the roads of Bologna (-43.6% of deaths); reduce injuries from 4 848 to 4 500, equal to -7.2%; prevent 709 road accidents, with less damage to property and/or people and also less disruption to traffic (from 5 653 to 4 944 in the two-year period, equal to -12.5%).

The analysis of the data also shows a significant change in mobility, with a decrease in urban traffic flows of approximately -9% on an annual basis and an increase in bicycle flows of 19% compared to the 2022–23 average.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.comune.bologna.it/novita/notizie/bologna-citta-30-report-2025>

From an environmental perspective, there continues to be a significant reduction in NO<sub>2</sub> (nitrogen dioxide) levels in the control unit that monitors air quality in Bologna's urban traffic, with a 24.4% decrease compared to the average of 41 µg/m<sup>3</sup> in the years 2022–2023. In absolute terms, this is the second lowest figure in the last 10 years, after that recorded in 2024, the first year of Città 30.

Despite the controversy, monitoring data show that the measure of generally reducing vehicle speeds in urban areas produces benefits in terms of safety, health, and the livability of urban public spaces, encouraging the pursuit of a transformation process that needs time to take root in people's culture and habits and fully unfold its effects.

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## ČESKÝ ABSTRAKT

### Sdílený uliční prostor jako nástroj pro zlepšení „města krátkých vzdáleností“, Valentina Orioli

Design mobility osob a vozidel je zásadním prvkem při vytváření „města krátkých vzdáleností“. Model sdíleného uličního prostoru ve svých různých praktických podobách představuje jeden z nástrojů pro transformaci mobility osob a vozidel směrem k vyváženějšímu modelu, a to jak ze sociálního, tak z environmentálního hlediska. Po představení teoretických východisek článek prezentuje zkušenosti města Bologny v této oblasti, zejména prostřednictvím projektu „Udržitelná mobilita do školy v Bologni“.