

Pontevedra, a Spanish City That Picked Pedestrians Over Cars

For over two decades the city's mayor has reclaimed public space for people and limited vehicles in the city center, which reduced traffic and improved air quality.

By Tanya Mohn Photographs by Matilde Viegas

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Pontevedra may be a smaller city in northwest Spain, but it has been a pioneer in favoring pedestrians over cars for more than 20 years. The city has played a large role in inspiring other municipalities and continues to be a model on how to successfully confront the challenges of climate change by reducing traffic and cutting emissions.

When Mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores was elected in 1999, Pontevedra embarked on a quest to transform itself into a city that supports clean air, walkability and safe streets. Since then, it has received international recognition and numerous awards for sustainability mobility, road safety and urban design.

Officials, architects and urban planners in dozens of cities in Europe, North and South America, and Asia, have made inquiries and traveled to Pontevedra — including a recent visit from a delegation from Suncheon, South Korea — to learn about its achievements.



Mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores of Pontevedra was elected in 1999. “We wanted a city for people, a compact city where all the basic services and shops would be within a five-minute walk, accessible to everyone,” he said.

In a video interview, the mayor spoke about the steps taken by the city and if they can be replicated elsewhere. The conversation, interpreted by Pontevedra’s general director of mobility, Jesús Gómez Viñas, and general director of security, Daniel Macenlle, has been edited and condensed.

You described Pontevedra as a “car warehouse” in 1999. Why?

The city center was overcrowded by private cars and congested. Noise, pollution and safety risk were high. The whole municipality is about 120 square kilometers [about 46 square miles], with just under 85,000 people, about 80 percent of them living in the historic center, where every day the number of vehicles trying to enter was three times more than Madrid and five times more than London.



By The New York Times

What inspired you to make changes?

I studied alternative models for cities during the 12 years before becoming mayor. I read many books, like “City of Children” by Francesco Tonucci, about the transformation of cities and what we had to do in order to make changes. And I looked at what other cities were doing, in Spain and around the world.

What were the goals in 1999?

The idea was to reclaim public space for pedestrians and limit cars in the city center. We wanted a city for people, a compact city where all the basic services and shops would be within a five-minute walk, accessible to everyone.



Mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores holds photos of what his city used to look like before he implemented his traffic plan.

What were the initial steps?

Measures were implemented little by little. The first stages, which took four to eight years, were designed to give the people more public space by reducing traffic and expelling most cars. We did this by eliminating vehicles passing through the city center as a shortcut and driving around looking for parking places. Roads were closed off, most on-street parking spots were removed, and free parking on the center's periphery and for service vehicles for a limited time was established. We allowed only necessary traffic to keep the city working, for things like loading and unloading goods, and picking up or dropping off people.

Eventually, streets were narrowed, sidewalks were widened, the speed limit was lowered, traffic-calming measures like raised pedestrian crosswalks and other physical barriers were installed, and more lighting, trees and green spaces were added.

How did residents react?

At the beginning, there were protests until they could see the results of the initial transformation. We listened to the public, but it's important for leaders to have the political courage to implement the project despite initial opposition.

When I became mayor, I had a very strong team with very clear ideas and focus. Within a month of pedestrianizing the historic center, there was approval from the citizens, local business owners and professional associations. After they saw the advantages, they asked for more, so changes expanded to the surrounding areas.



The downtown area of Pontevedra.

Have any cities successfully replicated what Pontevedra has done?

There are many cities in the world taking steps in this direction, recovering spaces and seeking environmental balance, but very slowly and not with the same determination as in Pontevedra. More places could do it, but aren't.

Most ideas about what to do to accomplish the transformation that we have done are widely known. Books on the topic date from 1928, but we aren't doing what we need to do to get it done. The knowledge has been there for many years. Many government leaders know what to do, but are afraid they will lose elections.

Can the principles that worked in Pontevedra be applied in any city or town?

The philosophy, values and principles implemented in Pontevedra: traffic reduction, recovering spaces from the cars for pedestrians, calming traffic measures — these can be applied anywhere.

There are three basic pillars needed for success: political will, skilled civil servants and citizen support. Politicians must have studied and read widely about mobility and the transformation of cities, and have a clear idea about what they want to implement. Police, engineers, architects and others who do the work must understand the goals of the project and work together to accomplish them. And the public must also understand and support the policies and the process and defend them through voting.



Mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores said air quality was good all year and travel inside the city center was mostly on foot,

Are the challenges different for large and small cities?

In big cities, the problem is not as serious because people have alternative ways to move, often a complex network of public transport, like subways and other transportation options that Pontevedra doesn't have. If you ban cars, people have to move mostly on foot. But despite smaller cities facing more challenges, Pontevedra's principles are globally applicable

What is Pontevedra like today?

The air quality is good 365 days a year. CO2 emissions dropped about 70 percent, and we have practically no noise in the city. Traffic decreased — by 97 percent in the historic center and by 77 percent and 53 percent in the peripheral areas.

The space devoted to people increased. Travel inside the city center — about 90 percent — is mostly on foot, 80 percent of children 6 to 12 years old walk to school and can play safely in plazas and streets, and there have been no traffic deaths since 2011.

People came back to the city center. The population of Pontevedra grew and is the youngest in Galicia, a region where it declined overall. Urban transformation — it's a process, and we are still working on it. But the quality of life is really high. You can see it.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section F, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: In Spain, a City Favors Pedestrians

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