

Shared Ambitions

Shyam Khandekar describes how, through an evolutionary process of sharing cars, streets in cities could become more citizen-friendly if an experiment that has started in The Hague catches on in other cities

Go to any city, almost in any part of the world, and private cars line the streets. The magnitude of space used by the parked car is often 25% to 40% of the built-up area of the housing along the street. This is not only the case in cities of the developed economies but also in many cities of the emerging economies.

As an urban designer I know that very often the creation of compact urban neighbourhoods is difficult to achieve simply because the number of cars that need to be parked in the streets/public open spaces according to the norms of the local authority cannot be met.

While the car being driven creates a problem of its own in terms of environmental pollution (air and noise) and health hazards (accidents), the car which is parked in public spaces, such as along the streets, reduces the space available for landscaping the area not only for the use of the young and the old but, in fact, all citizens.

The parked cars, many of them just used once or twice a week and simply parked for more than 75% of the time, are not only a

waste of money for the owners of the cars, but unnecessarily clutter public spaces.

The ideal solution lies in more households sharing the same car. In The Hague in the Netherlands, this idea has started taking shape. Three main parties are involved in thinking this through, nurturing the idea and putting it into practice. These three are:

- The Citizens who are willing to share their car
- The Local Authority which incentivises the concept of sharing
- The Facilitator/Consultant who provides the service to get the act together
- Additionally, a service provider and a bank are necessary to get the project going.

Each of these three need the other two for this idea to work. The interest of the Citizens is to have less cars in the public spaces so that the free space can be used for other more social purposes such as kids play area or social gatherings or landscaped spaces.

The interest of the Local Authority is to increase the liveability of their streets and cities,

The car which is parked in public spaces reduces the space available for landscaping the area for the use of all citizens



and the removal of hard-paved areas from parking spaces to landscaped spaces helps in reducing the heat-stress and water runoff problems associated with climate change in cities.

The interest of the Facilitator/Consultant is to help the act of getting shared cars together and thus fulfil this mission.

The Case Copernicusstraat, The Hague

The Copernicusstraat is a typical residential street built in the early part of the last century. It is part of a neighbourhood of six parallel streets extending from Regentesselaan on the east to Valkenboschlaan on the west and is nearly 500 meters long.

Containing a variety of housing types, some with gardens, it houses a variety of households from young to old, with and without children. There is a strong sense of neighbourhood in this area and the 'straatcommissie' (the association of those living on this street) looks after the issues of liveability. It was here in 2017 that the group of citizens living in Copernicusstraat concerned about the growing number of cars on the street (and the excessive number of cycles on the pavements because the cars took up the streets) deliberated about possible options for improving their living conditions.

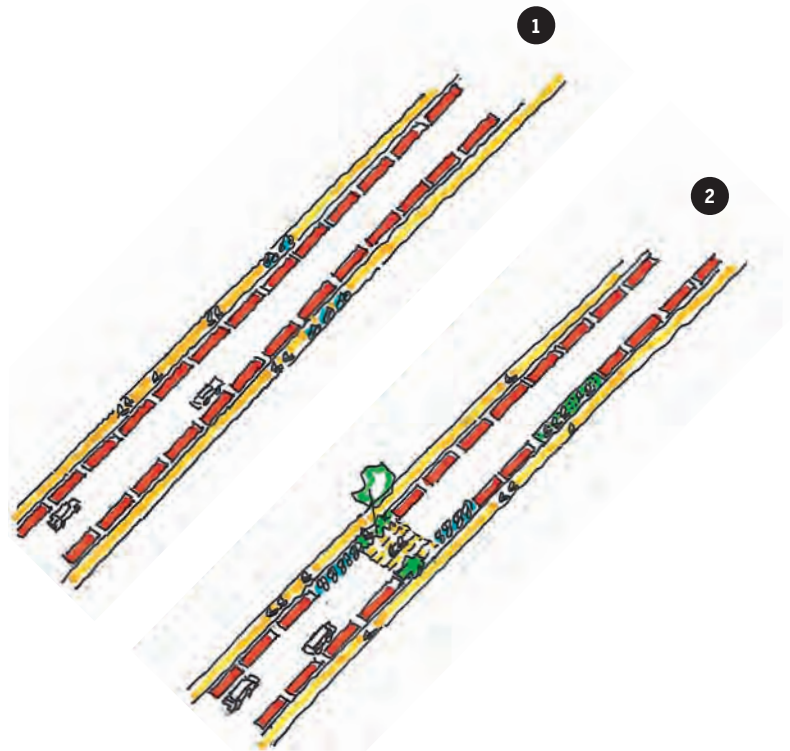
The Local Authority – the municipal corporation – was willing to invest time and money in helping solve the problem if the citizens were willing to reduce the number of cars by sharing some.

Around this time, Walter Dresscher (www.wijzijndeel.nl), a designer with a mission to improve the liveability of neighbourhoods was exploring the possibility of sharing cars through a citizens' co-operative. He had been discussing this concept with the local authorities, who shared his goal of reducing the number of cars parked in public spaces.

A presentation of this concept of a co-operative venture piqued the Copernicusstraat 'straatcommissie's' interest. Six families were willing to do away with their private cars and start sharing a single car. The local authority helped by providing a fixed parking place exclusively for the shared car. In order to achieve larger aims of sustainability, the shared car is an electric one and the local authority also provided an electric-charging point at the reserved parking place.

Cooperative Effort

As the idea gained ground and more households showed interest, other incentives too were provided by the local authority to households who considered joining the shared-car project. For example, for those households who wanted to try the concept before finally giving up their private



car, the local authority provided a free parking space in a parking garage elsewhere in the city.

For those using the shared car, a digital app allows the participants to make reservations for using the car, access and use it and make the payments from time to time, based on the amount of time the car is used and the number of kilometres driven. Starting with one shared car in 2019 for eight households, by mid-2024 the number of shared cars has increased to 11 used by 83 households (and 120 drivers). This means that more than 72 cars (83 minus 11) have been effectively taken off the roads in this neighbourhood.

While the idea of sharing a car is not totally new since car-rental agencies do allow you to share a car, what makes the idea propagated in The Hague more exciting is the fact that the households sharing the cars did that through a cooperative agency, which they created.

While the idea of sharing cars via cooperative effort is growing in other cities, the numbers of shared cars actually in use is still limited. Yet this idea and this initiative has a premise that can be used in all cities around the world. The possibility of application of this idea is universal.

What Walter Dresscher started in The Hague is the proverbial 'first step' of a long journey. As Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." ●

The two illustrations show schematically the potential transformation of a street like Copernicusstraat

- The first sketch shows a segment with 26 cars parked equally along the length of the street. Consequently the cycles clutter the narrow pavements

- The second sketch shows the situation in which six families have shared a car and so the number of cars is reduced from 26 to 21.

The space for the reduced 5 parked cars is utilised to park cycles and create green spaces. With the cycles off the pavements, pedestrian movement is much easier

NOTE: These sketches show the theoretical possibilities of the idea of sharing cars. In order to achieve these results, the local authority needs to quickly refurbish the street in this way so that empty car spaces created due to shared cars do not lead to cars from the neighbouring streets being parked here