Should urban areas convert more raods into car-free zones, prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists?

Across the world, cities are being suffocated by car traffic — clogged streets, polluted air, and a growing sense that urban spaces are built more for machines than for people. As populations grow and the climate crisis intensifies, urban areas must take action. One of the most effective solutions is to convert more roads into car-free zones. These pedestrian-prioritised areas lead to cleaner air, safer streets, stronger local economies, and a better quality of life. Keeping cities car-centred is no longer sustainable — not for the environment, not for our health, and not for the communities trying to thrive within them.

Car-free zones immediately create safer streets. Without speeding vehicles and constant traffic, pedestrians and cyclists can move freely and confidently. Parents don’t have to grip their children’s hands so tightly, and cyclists don’t have to fear for their lives every time they share the road. In car-free areas, public space becomes just that — public. Instead of endless parking spaces, we get parks, benches, markets, and room to breathe. When cities are designed around people, rather than vehicles, everything changes for the better.

These changes also dramatically improve public health. Vehicle emissions are one of the biggest contributors to air pollution in cities, and long-term exposure leads to asthma, heart disease, and other serious health conditions. When cars are removed from streets, air quality improves almost immediately. Less noise, less stress, and more opportunities to walk and cycle all contribute to healthier and happier citizens. Clean air and safe movement should be basic standards in every modern city — not luxuries.

Many worry that businesses will suffer if streets are closed to cars, but time and again, the opposite proves true. Car-free streets often become some of the busiest and most vibrant in a city. Without traffic cutting through, people stop, shop, and spend more time in the area. Foot traffic is far more valuable than vehicle traffic, especially for small local businesses. When the environment is pleasant and accessible, people naturally want to stay longer — and that means stronger economic activity.

A perfect example of this is right here in Melbourne. Bourke Street Mall has long been a pedestrian-priority zone, and it shows exactly what’s possible when a city puts people first. Without cars dominating the space, Bourke Street has become one of the CBD’s most iconic and lively destinations. Trams glide through calmly, buskers fill the space with music, and people move freely from shop to shop. Businesses thrive not because of car access, but because the street is designed to invite people in. The success of Bourke Street should not be treated as a one-off — it should be a model. Other major streets in Melbourne, like Elizabeth Street or parts of Flinders Lane, could be transformed just as successfully with the same approach.

In fact, Melbourne — often ranked as one of the world’s most liveable cities — should lead the way. It already has the public transport, cycling potential, and strong local culture to make car-free zones work brilliantly. Expanding this model would make the city greener, safer, and more enjoyable for everyone who lives, works, or visits here.

In conclusion, converting more roads into car-free zones is not just a brilliant idea — it’s a necessary step for the future of urban life. The benefits are clear: improved safety, cleaner air, stronger communities, and thriving local businesses. Bourke Street proves it can be done. Now it's time for cities to take bold action and reclaim their streets for people, not cars.