

## IASS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

## Lessons for participatory urban planning

In early 2020, a section of Berlin's Friedrichstrasse was opened up to pedestrian and bicycle traffic by prohibiting motor vehicles. In October 2022, an administrative court ruled that vehicle access must be restored on the approximately 500 metre stretch of Friedrichstrasse as there was no legal basis for the closure. The complaint was filed by a coalition of local businesses.

The ruling has reignited a long simmering debate over the importance – or irrelevance, as may be the case – of private vehicle access for retailers on Friedrichstrasse. The Berlin-Brandenburg Trade Association and other critics of the closure welcomed the decision to restore vehicle access along the entire length of Friedrichstrasse. In their view, the difficulties faced by businesses on Friedrichstraße and the surrounding area are largely a consequence of the experimental mixed-use zone.

This dispute has accompanied the project from the outset.

The charge that the closure led to a downturn in business comes as a surprise for mobility and planning experts. There is a lot of evidence in the international literature that retailers tend to benefit from pedestrian zones, bus lanes, and bike lanes - even in cases where car lanes or parking spaces are repurposed to create them. This has been well documented in research conducted in North America (for example, here and here). Similar examples can be found in cities in the United Kingdom, including London and Bristol. Spanish cities have also seen an increase in revenues in the retail sector following the creation of pedestrian zones.

The picture in Germany is no different, as studies conducted by urban geographer Professor Rolf Monheim at the University of Bayreuth show (today and also 1977). Another study published in 2019 also shows that customers who travel by car to shop at inner-city stores account for the smallest share of sales. And, surprisingly, no more than 13 percent of senior citizens and people with mobility impairments use a car to shop in the inner city. A study by IASS researchers shows that the vast majority of customers in Berlin go shopping by foot, by bike, or by transit. Moreover, the final report on the experiment on Friedrichstrasse states that even during the trial, car parking spaces were never anywhere near capacity, and that just 11 percent of shoppers used a private vehicle to reach their destination on Friedrichstrasse – in line a broader trend across Berlin.

It is true, however, that many businesses in and around Friedrichstrasse are struggling, which the plaintiffs attribute, among other things, to the fact that private vehicles were barred from entering the 500-meter-long “promenade”, as the mixed-use zone was termed. But the situation is rather more complex: the experiment was launched in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was still in its

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early stages. Some data suggest that Friedrichstrasse did not and is not doing badly in the pandemic – all things considered. The number of people visiting the area has grown throughout the pandemic and they are staying longer, one study revealed.

However, according to media reports, 19 stores have been forced to close on Friedrichstrasse since the experiment began. Critics claim that these losses are due to the impacts of the experiment. But this ignores the fact that the challenges facing retailers and other businesses on Friedrichstrasse are longstanding: As early as 1996, the German daily newspaper *TAZ* ran a story headlined: "Berlin's famous high street has become a sideshow". According to the article, Friedrichstrasse was unable to compete with other famous shopping precincts in Berlin like Kurfürstendamm. The result was a hollow high street, with 40 percent of the commercial property standing empty in areas near the site of the future mixed-zone zone. In 2009, Berlin newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* announced: "Rising rents force retailers on Friedrichstrasse out of business". At the time, rents were already too expensive for many business owners and much of the available property – especially multi-level properties – was unsuitable for retail use. In 2019, well before the experiment was launched on Friedrichstrasse, another article in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was headlined "Vacancies instead of luxuries". With cars still ruling the road, there were complaints that "more and more store-owners were shutting up shop." The article cites a survey by a real estate service provider, which found that the vacancy rate in Friedrichstrasse had reached almost 25 percent – more than double the average in Germany. The opening of the Mall of Berlin just 500 metres away in 2014 – with space for 300 stores and cheaper rents – is unlikely to have improved the situation.

Clearly, the challenges facing traders on Friedrichstrasse existed long before the experiment was launched in 2020. The debate about what could be done to revitalize Friedrichstrasse also predates the experiment. As early as 2016, the ADAC suggested that a pedestrian zone should be established on Friedrichstrasse, for example.

This long-running debate and the recent legal battle show that the situation on Friedrichstrasse is far from optimal. Seizing the opportunity to experiment with an alternative was, in principle, the right thing to do: Developing a concept, trialling it in the real world, learning lessons, adjusting the concept, and then implementing a final design is exactly the kind of process we need to create good urban spaces. The fact is: we have a hard time imagining alternative urban spaces and tend to reject any proposed change as a consequence. Participation formats that draw on real-world experiences like this experiment can achieve far more in urban development than abstract arguments over models and sketches. But these kinds of co-creative urban development processes need genuine openness on all sides and a willingness to reconsider one's position. This was lacking on both sides of the debate in Berlin. Most of the players who were initially against the change are still against it, while the supporters are still in favour. One lesson that we can draw from this is that politically explosive and emotionally charged issues like the situation on Friedrichstrasse are poorly suited to this kind of approach.

The good thing about the experiment on Friedrichstrasse is that the vast majority – both critics and supporters – have recognized that they don't want to go back to the status quo of 2019.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what the court ruling dictates, but in the long run, it is clear that the traffic situation on Friedrichstrasse will be different than it is today and different to how it was before the experiment. Whatever it looks like, it will not be the traffic design alone that saves or dooms businesses on Friedrichstrasse. At most, it will be one among many factors.

Nevertheless, transforming Friedrichstrasse – and this will hold true for many streets – into a place where people want to spend their time can only benefit retailers. Where people are safe and happy, they stay longer and spend more money. And the whole city could also benefit: A reduction in car



traffic and the addition of multi-purpose buildings (Friedrichstrasse could easily host several retirement homes or student hostels, for example) as well as trees and unsealed surfaces that trap less heat and allow infiltration would help to make Berlin a more sustainable and resilient city.