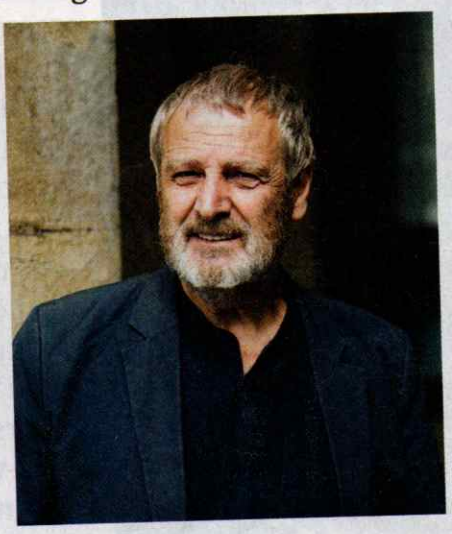
The Walking City

By Wes Enzinna

▲ *A sign in Vitoria-Gasteiz alerts drivers to the pedestrian paradise ahead*

On weekends, Calle de Postas in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, feels like a never-ending block party. Cyclists share the magnolia-shaded street with off-leash dogs and teetering toddlers. There are bustling cafe tables and families on benches eating ice cream. That's life in this city of 200,000 in the Basque Country, where nearly half the streets have been converted into car-free zones over the past decade.

"This city is my test case," says Salvador Rueda, a Spanish urban planner known for overseeing large-scale pedestrian conversions in Barcelona and Buenos Aires, among other places. Vitoria-Gasteiz, he says, is his "laboratory," a city whose history as a center of auto manufacturing—it's home to factories for Mercedes and Michelin—makes it an unlikely showcase. "If we can do something here, others can see it and replicate our results."



▲ *Rueda*

Rueda, 66, is known as the world's leading proponent of "superblocks"—in which groups of commercial or residential streets are barred to through traffic, crisscrossed by pedestrian walkways, and carpeted with grassy malls. Thanks to his work, Vitoria-Gasteiz has 63 of them, with plans for 48 more. "It's a revolution," Rueda says as we ride bikes down Calle de Postas. "A cheap revolution, where you don't have to demolish a single building."

The idea of large vehicle-free blocks, which has been around since the 1920s, has been applied, often with underwhelming results, to the design of corporate campuses and public housing. But nobody has used superblocks as extensively or as successfully as Rueda. In parts of downtown Vitoria-Gasteiz, he and his team have reduced the number of cars on the road by 27%, leading to a 42% reduction in the city's carbon dioxide emissions. A full 50% of residents walk as their primary mode of transportation, and 15% bike. In September the United Nations named Vitoria-Gasteiz the global Green City of the Year, citing its commitment "not just to sustainability but to citizen equality, security, happiness, and health." Cities in the U.S. and Latin America are considering adopting its model.

To make a superblock, Rueda and his team typically start with nine square blocks totaling about 40 acres. Then they extend the sidewalks, plant trees, add bike lanes, and install benches. Cars aren't entirely forbidden—in Rueda's Spanish projects, residents and delivery vehicles must abide by a speed limit of 10 kilometers (6 miles) per hour, the equivalent of a jog—but through traffic isn't allowed. Cameras clock cars' speeds and routes, and rule breakers are fined €200 ($223) for each violation. "Everyone here follows the rules," Rueda says, dismounting from his bike and pointing slyly to a closed-circuit camera on a building. "But just in case they don't, we keep an eye on them."

The average conversion for a single superblock costs about €5 million, and the total cost of superblock projects in Vitoria-Gasteiz from 2008 through 2016 was €56.6 million. On Calle de Postas, which is part of a superblock called Sancho el Sabio, the biggest expenses came from creating cycling and pedestrian lanes and public bicycle storage and rerouting bus lines around the perimeter. Building underground garages for stowing parked cars was another big cost, as was explaining the whole thing to the public. Funds were provided by the Basque regional government as well as by Madrid and the European Union. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIVER HUANO FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

"It's a revolution. A cheap revolution, where you don't have to demolish a single building"

▲ *Bike lanes in Buenos Aires*

"We're very lucky here," says Gorka Urtaran, Vitoria-Gasteiz's mayor. In his city, he says, environmental politics aren't as polarized as they are in many other parts of the world and even other parts of Spain. The local branch of the center-right Partido Popular supports superblocks, as do the major car manufacturers, which employ 30% of the city's workforce. Alberto González Pizarro, business director of Irizar E-mobility, an automotive company that's been contracted to build electric buses, says carmakers see superblocks as a business opportunity. "What is emerging are other modes of transportation that we're well-equipped to build," he says. "We're ready for the future." The taxi drivers union has come around, too. "We make the same and sometimes more in fares now, and we're not destroying the environment to do it," says Izaskun López de Sosoaga, president of the Taxi Association of Alavesa, a drivers union in Vitoria-Gasteiz. "It's a win-win."

Things have been less smooth in Buenos Aires, where Rueda was hired in 2018 to create superblocks in five neighborhoods. Unlike cities in Spain, with their plazas and wending alleys that are ideally suited to pedestrians, Buenos Aires depends more on cars, with less reliable public transit. There have been some successes—the city claims that traffic in parts of its downtown "microcenter" has fallen 77%—but because vehicles are banned from the blocks during the day, shopkeepers complain of having to show up as early as 7 a.m. to receive deliveries. "People love to stroll across these streets," says Nancy Demellier, 56, who runs ABC Glass on Maipú Street. But "we as retailers are a little bit tired of this situation."

▲ *A network of cameras controls traffic in Vitoria-Gasteiz*

Janet Sanz Cid, the deputy mayor for energy and urban planning, acknowledges the inconveniences but says they're a modest cost for addressing a public-health crisis. Last year at least 351 people died as a result of exposure to air pollution from car emissions, according to the city's Public Health Agency. A study published this September by the Barcelona Institute for Global Health calculates that the city could prevent 667 premature deaths every year if it built all the proposed superblocks.

Another complaint in Vitoria-Gasteiz and Barcelona is that rents have risen in the apartments adjacent to the superblocks, which risks pushing residents out. It's the iron law of gentrification: Make something nice, and prices go up. To address this problem, Urtaran in Vitoria-Gasteiz and Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau support a national rent control bill. "The solution," Rueda says, "isn't to not build superblocks–it's to build them everywhere, so there isn't competition between different neighborhoods."

Rueda is keenly aware of the dangers cars pose. In 2004 he and his family were driving down a highway when a car in the oncoming lane passed over a manhole cover that had been left ajar. It sent the 50-pound steel disk flying into the air and through the windshield of his blue Volvo. Rueda's wife was hit in the face and killed instantly. He says he'll forever associate automobiles with "the hell inside the car that day" and points out that in the 20th century, motor vehicle collisions killed about 60 million drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. "Cars are an interesting artifact of a historical era," he says. "But maybe their moment as a useful technology has passed."

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▲ *The city's first superblock covered the main square*

Even so, Rueda insists today that he "doesn't hate cars." He says, "There are many ways to reduce Co_2 emissions in cities. Superblocks are just one little building block helping us think about what the future of cities might look like."

In a recent paper he offered an appropriately Spanish metaphor for his ideas, comparing the composition of cities to that of the national rice dish: "Paella is a system of proportions," Rueda wrote. "Even if you use the best ingredients, if you don't add salt, the paella will be bland, and if you add too much, it will be inedible." By allowing cars to totally dominate our cities, he argued, we've oversalted and ruined our dinner.

Back in Vitoria-Gasteiz, we've ridden our bikes for miles along a seemingly never-ending network of superblocks to the outskirts of town, where the streets and buildings disappear and give way to a greenbelt. It's a giant maze of forest and wetlands with bike paths and rivers flowing through it. At the far edge of the park, the real world reemerges in the form of a busy highway. On the other side are abandoned auto plants and some newer factories, too. Standing there astride my bicycle, with Vitoria-Gasteiz behind me, the scene strikes me as a symbol of Rueda's dream: On this side of the highway, we're living in an unimaginably pleasant future, and on the other side of the road is the past, the world still trapped in the 20th century. I ask Rueda if he thinks the two worlds can be bridged.

"I don't know," he says. He smiles and turns back toward the city and its superblocks. "Let's just keep pushing toward Vitoria-Gasteiz." Ⓑ