Episode Book

EPISODE #6400

Where Pedestrian Zones End and Car-Free Cities Begin

PUBLISHED	1 November 2026 at 17:34 UTC
DURATION	23:28
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/pedestrian-zones-car-free-cities-34562/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Vex, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	anthropic/claude-sonnet-5.5
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.26
SOURCES	22 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	2 November 2026 at 06:29 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Pedestrian zones usually end at dangerous traffic seams, but moving beyond isolated car-free pockets requires rethinking urban mobility. From the pre-automobile networks of Venice and Fes to retrofits in Brussels, Ghent, and Freiburg, most pedestrian initiatives struggle to scale past half a square kilometer. The episode examines how Pontevedra transformed over three hundred hectares by eliminating through traffic, and how district experiments like Freiburg's Vauban show the boundary between pedestrian enclaves and true car-free networks.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

This one is dedicated to Klára Schneiderová, the thirty-year-old Czech diplomat who ran her embassy's branch office in Jerusalem. On Thursday a minibus mounted the pavement on Agrippas Street, beside Mahane Yehuda market, and killed her. We share in her family's grief, and her colleagues' too.



Herman

She had been here about a month. The embassy called her a smart, warm and friendly person, and an outstanding diplomat. The driver was detained and police have opened an investigation. There's no finding on the cause beyond reports that he lost control, so we're not going to guess at fault.



Corn

Daniel's prompt starts from that pavement. Jerusalem lags well behind cities of its size on pedestrianization, and expecting a dense recreational area to sit next to motor traffic and stay safe is, in his words, crazy. His actual question is narrower. Has anyone gone beyond the pedestrian enclave? Where is the biggest pedestrianized area by square mileage, and has anyone built the thing he pictures, a place where you can go miles without meeting a car and everybody rides public transport?



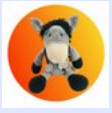
Herman

We'll answer the literal question, and then go to the experiments that look like his picture.



Corn

Start with the number, then.



Herman

The number is stranger than you'd think. But first, vocabulary. A pedestrian zone is a hole cut in a car city. A car-free city is a different animal. Daniel is asking about the second, and the world has mostly built the first.



Corn

I covered the urbanist toolkit once, the Jane Jacobs starter pack. Even there, nobody had a good answer for what happens at the edge of the hole.



Herman

The edge is the point. Klára wasn't jaywalking through the market. She was on the pavement of Agrippas, the seam between a pedestrianized market and a working road. The interior of a pedestrian zone is usually fine. The boundary is where the planning either works or kills somebody.



Corn

So the thesis is that you can't put dense leisure space next to through traffic and hope.



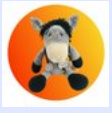
Herman

Yes, and the seam is where that gets tested. The market is a few hundred metres of people who've stopped watching their feet. They're reading prices, tasting olives, steering around a trolley of crates. Then there's a kerb, a strip of pavement, and a vehicle that weighs more than the whole stall.



Corn

A kerb is a suggestion to a minibus.



Herman

To a minibus that has lost control, yes. A kerb is designed to stop a rolling wheel at low speed. It was never meant to stop a vehicle that's actually going somewhere. Road engineers have a separate category for that, crash-rated barriers, bollards tested against a given weight at a given speed. They're what you see outside embassies and stadiums, and almost never outside a fruit stall.



Corn

Why not? If the bollard exists, why isn't it everywhere people gather?



Herman

Cost, mostly, and clutter. A rated bollard line is expensive, it fixes the street layout for decades, and it has to leave gaps for deliveries and ambulances. So cities protect the famous targets and leave the ordinary places to a kerb. That's a choice, even if nobody ever announces it.



Corn

And the gaps are the weak point, presumably. A line of bollards with a hole in it is a line with a hole in it.



Herman

Right, and the hole is where the delivery truck goes, so the hole is also where the crowd tends to be. Designers try to solve that with retractable bollards or timed access windows, but those cost more again, and someone has to operate them. It's the same lesson as the seam. The protection is only as good as its opening.



Corn

Fine. Biggest pedestrian zone on earth. Where?



Herman

If you want the biggest, you have to go to a city that never let the cars in to begin with. Venice. The historic centre is about eight square kilometres, and only three spots allow motor vehicles. Tronchetto, the port at Santa Chiara, and the bus station at Piazzale Roma. Together that's about seven tenths of a square kilometre.



Corn

So most of it is pedestrian.



Herman

Roughly ninety-one percent, about seven point three square kilometres. One travel round-up says six and a half, so I'd say the honest band is six and a half to seven and a third.



Corn

That's a wide band for a city that's been measured since the Doges.



Herman

Nobody measures car-free space the same way. Do you count canals? Do you count the lagoon islands? And it gets worse, because the crown is contested. Guinness certified Fes el Bali in Morocco in October two thousand nine as the largest car-free urban area by population. A hundred and fifty-six thousand residents inside a walled medina.



Corn

That's more people than Venice's historic centre has had in decades.



Herman

Far more. Roughly nine thousand four hundred named lanes, something like eleven thousand historic buildings. J.H. Crawford of carfree dot com calls it the largest contiguous car-free area by population, and then concedes that Venice may be slightly larger by land. So the area crown goes to Venice, the population crown goes to Fes, and the question "what's the biggest" has no single answer.



Corn

I'd have guessed Venice for both. I'd have lost.



Herman

Most people would. Here's the deflation, though. Neither of those is an experiment. Both are pre-automobile fabrics. Nobody banned cars in Venice, there was just never a road. Venice's motor traffic stops at the car park at the head of the viaduct from the mainland. Zermatt is the same story, mostly reached by cog railway.



Corn

How does a place like that actually work day to day, though? Somebody still has to move a fridge.



Herman

By hand and by boat in Venice, and in Fes by donkey and handcart, which is still how a lot of goods move through the narrow lanes. Which shows that logistics don't vanish. They get slower and more physical, and the city has priced that in over centuries.



Corn

Priced in how? Does a fridge cost more in Venice?



Herman

Everything that has to be carried costs more, and that's absorbed into rents, wages and what a coffee costs. Residents there have long said that moving house is a small expedition. People accept it because what they get back is a city where a child can run ahead of you around a corner. Fes works the same way, except the handcart is the delivery fleet.



Corn

So it's an accident of history that looks like a planning triumph from far away.



Herman

And that's why you can't copy it. You can't un-build a century of roads. The fairer comparison is the retrofits, cities that had cars and took them out. Brussels is the big one. Le Piétonnier opened on the twenty-ninth of June two thousand fifteen, and it grew from twenty-eight hectares to fifty. Grand-Place, Place de Brouckère, Boulevard Anspach, the Bourse, all inside the Small Ring.



Corn

Fifty hectares. Convert that for me, I only think in napping distances.



Herman

Half a square kilometre. The mobility alderwoman, Els Ampe, called it Europe's second biggest pedestrian area in a large city, after Venice. And Ghent pushed its zone in two thousand seventeen from thirty-five hectares to more than fifty. Freiburg's centre is six hundred and ten metres by seven hundred and twenty, about point four four of a square kilometre, pedestrianized bit by bit since nineteen seventy-one, with trams doing the access.



Corn

So the champions of retrofitting top out around half a square kilometre.



Herman

Right. And Daniel's picture, miles without a car, is an order of magnitude bigger than anything a large city has retrofitted. Brussels, a capital, with a government that wanted this, got fifty hectares. It was also not painless. Shopkeepers on Boulevard Anspach protested before it opened, and the fight over the plan ran for months.



Corn

What were they afraid of, exactly? A pedestrian street sounds like more customers.



Herman

Fewer customers who arrive by car, and more uncertainty about deliveries. A shopkeeper doesn't run on averages, he runs on whether next Tuesday's stock gets through the door. They were betting their rent on a plan drawn by someone else.



Corn

What's Jerusalem's number? He says we're way behind.



Herman

I haven't seen a clean figure for Jerusalem's pedestrianized area, and I don't want to invent one. But put the Mahane Yehuda pedestrian streets next to Brussels and Ghent at fifty hectares each, and Freiburg at forty-four, and I'd say the comparison is not flattering. The market is well loved and well used. It's just small, and it ends at a road.



Corn

Herman, you do the shopping there. Do you cross at the pedestrian bit or the other bit?



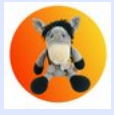
Herman

Both, which is the problem. The market doesn't end so much as dissolve into traffic. You walk out of a crowd and into a lane of buses in about four steps.



Corn

I walk out of a crowd and into a nap, but that's me. Fair point.



Herman

So the enclave model has a ceiling. What happens when a city decides to blow past it?



Corn

Let me guess. Spain.



Herman

Pontevedra. Galicia, about eighty-three thousand people, and it's the closest thing in Europe to Daniel's picture at city scale. Since nineteen ninety-nine, under Mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores, the city kept private motor traffic out of the historic centre first, then out of most of the urban core.



Corn

Nineteen ninety-nine. That's a long time to hold a policy in a democracy.



Herman

He's been re-elected for decades, which is half the story. Numbers, with their disagreement flagged. The city's mobility plan calls the whole urban centre, three hundred and twenty-four hectares, a reduced-traffic zone. One European article says about four hundred and ninety. Wikipedia says almost half the city is pedestrianized. Same city, three definitions.



Corn

Which one do I believe?



Herman

Take three hundred and twenty-four as the official figure and treat the others as a sign the edges are fuzzy. Even at three hundred and twenty-four, that's more than six times Brussels. And the outcomes are striking. About seventy percent of trips on foot or by bike. Eighty-one percent of children walk to school. And ninety-one percent of vehicles never enter the centre.



Corn

Ninety-one percent. So the cars didn't vanish, they just stopped being invited.



Herman

Here's what makes the case, for me. In the late nineties about twenty-six thousand cars a day crossed one central square, many of them just passing through on the way to the beaches. They weren't going anywhere in town. The city was a shortcut.



Corn

That sounds familiar. Agrippas is somebody's shortcut.



Herman

Quite possibly. And now the best part. The mayor refuses the label. His line is: "We are not a car-free city. We are a city with vehicles that are essential to the functioning of the city."



Corn

That's a clever refusal. He's selling a car-free city to people who own cars, so he says it isn't one.



Herman

It's also accurate. Delivery vans, residents, emergency vehicles, buses, they all still move. What's gone is the car that's just crossing town. And it's the right frame for Daniel's picture, miles of pedestrian priority with essential vehicles and transit. It's also far easier to sell in Jerusalem than "ban the cars." Nobody in a city council wants to be the person who banned the cars.



Corn

Nobody wants to be the person who told the minibuses where to go either.



Herman

Which, in Jerusalem, is its own department. Anyway, Vauban is the other prototype. District scale rather than city scale. It's in Freiburg again, thirty-eight hectares of former French barracks that the city bought in nineteen ninety-four. Building started in ninety-eight, first residents in two thousand one, around two thousand homes for about five thousand people.



Corn

And the streets?



Herman

Car-free except the main thoroughfare, which carries the tram downtown. Parking only in two garages at the edge, and a space there reportedly cost about forty thousand dollars. Seventy percent of families don't own a car, and fifty-seven percent sold theirs to move in.



Corn

Forty thousand dollars for a parking space. That's the policy right there. Nobody banned anything, they just sent the bill.



Herman

A bill for the space, yes. One discrepancy to flag. One source calls Vauban a two hundred and fifty-five hectare town, but the planning paper says thirty-eight. Thirty-eight is the development site, so I'd use that.



Corn

Do you think forty thousand dollars would work on the market stalls? Charge the cars to park on Agrippas?



Herman

I'm not sure, honestly. Vauban works partly because everyone chose it. The people who moved in already wanted that life. That's not the same as imposing it on an existing street full of people who didn't choose it.



Corn

Which is a better argument for the retrofit being harder than the new build.



Herman

Much harder. A new district has no incumbents. A retrofit has a baker who has received deliveries at that door for thirty years, a clinic, a taxi rank, and every one of them has a vote or a cousin on the council.



Corn

And the baker is not wrong to ask where the van goes.



Herman

No, he isn't. That's the honest part. Now, what about speed? The Covid years showed the envelope can move fast. New York closed up to a hundred miles of streets to cars in two thousand twenty. Madrid pedestrianized nineteen kilometres of streets, two hundred and thirty-five thousand square metres. And Barcelona had a manifesto, signed by a hundred and sixty academics and three hundred architects, calling for pedestrianizing the whole city.



Corn

A manifesto. That's what you write when you can't get a bollard.



Herman

Ha. But the counter-evidence is the part critics will hammer, and it's relevant to Agrippas. In the United States, most of the downtown pedestrian malls from the fifties and sixties failed. About ninety percent were converted back to cars.



Corn

Ninety. That's not a failure rate, that's a verdict.



Herman

The usual diagnosis is that those malls were islands. Shops closed, nobody lived nearby, and after five o'clock the street was empty. A pedestrian street with no reason to be there at night isn't safer, it's just quiet. Compare that with a market, which has a reason to exist.



Corn

So Mahane Yehuda has the opposite problem. Too many reasons.



Herman

Too many people for the room it has. And then displacement. The phrase that gets used is that motor traffic in surrounding areas increases because it's displaced rather than replaced. Close Agrippas and the minibuses may simply turn up on the next street.



Corn

So you've moved the seam, not removed it.



Herman

And you may have moved it somewhere with a worse pavement. Which is why I think the honest answer to Daniel is that we have built pedestrian enclaves, not car free cities, and the seam between them is where the danger lives.

Vex

THAT DRIPPING TAP outside the market is the key, people! I have timed it, the drip interval matches the pedestrian crossing signal at Agrippas to the millisecond, and those signals are not traffic control, they are a metronome, a metronome counting out how many walkers each car lane is allowed to swallow before the next green. That is why the pedestrian zone stops exactly where it does!

Vex

I have the receipts, I have a notebook with every drip logged since two thousand and nineteen, and it spells out the whole master plan of car free enclaves stitched together by through roads! Look into the taps, all of them, before another pavement becomes a seam!



Corn

That's the tap caller again. I'd love to know how he gets through screening.



Herman

The signal timings at Agrippas come from the municipal traffic department's controllers, and a leaking tap has no connection to them at all.



Corn

Back to the seam, then. Here's what bothers me about Pontevedra. It's eighty-three thousand people. Jerusalem is nearly a million. Does it scale?



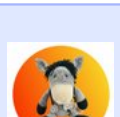
Herman

That's the right worry. Nothing I've seen describes a city of a million or more removing cars from a multi-square-kilometre district and replacing them with transit. Not one. The largest contiguous car-free areas are Venice and Fes, both pre-automobile. The largest retrofits in big cities top out around fifty hectares.



Corn

So Daniel's picture exists, but only small.



Herman

Five thousand people in Vauban, eighty-three thousand in Pontevedra. Real, working, measured. Just not at metropolis scale. Let me ask you something, Corn. If you were Jerusalem's mayor and could close exactly one street, which would you pick?



Corn

The one that leads to the most shade. I'd close it and plant it.



Herman

That's not a traffic answer.



Corn

It's the only answer I'd walk to. But seriously, probably the one beside the market. Same street, because that's where the people are already standing.



Herman

Then you'd be exporting the minibuses to the next street, and we're back to displacement.



Corn

Unless the minibuses go somewhere with a bus lane and a proper stop. I don't think you close a street, I think you give the cars somewhere to be that isn't beside people.



Herman

That's actually closer to Pontevedra than you'd guess. They didn't just close streets. They built car parks at the edge and made the centre slow. Cars as guests.



Corn

Guests who park outside. My kind of guests.



Herman

One more thought and then I'll stop, because I can feel myself running long. The reason nobody has done it at scale may be less about engineering than about the seam. Every car-free district has a boundary, and the boundary is where the cars go.



Corn

You always feel yourself running long about a minute after you've started.



Herman

About a minute before I stop, actually. There's a difference.



Hilbert

Bosch GLM forty, three hundred and eighty-nine shekels, Azulay's on Jaffa Road. It reads to the nearest millimetre and it reads wrong on a wet pavement, because the red dot disappears into the water. I took it back. Azulay said the dot was my problem. I have the receipt and the manual and a letter from the importer saying the dot is within tolerance.



Herman

Wet stone does scatter a laser. That's a real optical issue, Hilbert. It's the same reason your phone's rangefinder sulks in the rain.



Hilbert

So I'm going Tuesday with a cloth tape. Fibreglass, thirty metres, borrowed from a man on Hillel Street. Agrippas, both sides, from the market entrance to the spot. I've paced it already. Two hundred and eleven of my steps. The market side is wider. Near the wall it narrows to a bit under two metres.



Corn

That's narrow for a street with stalls on one side and buses on the other.



Hilbert

Corn, you said a kerb is a suggestion to a minibus. Wet or dry, a suggestion. The widths I have are in a notebook, dated, with the weather. Wet days people walk closer to the wall. They need more of the pavement and they get less.



Herman

Then the width isn't a fixed number at all. It depends on what the stone is doing.



Hilbert

That's why I write down the weather. Herman, you gave three areas for Pontevedra and never said which street. Nobody says which street. I'll have the widths for this one.



Corn

You'll need a second tape measure to check the first.



Hilbert

I have one. In the other pocket.



Herman

What you'd get from that, Hilbert, is a map of where the pavement is thinnest. Which is arguably where the edge matters most, because the narrow pavement is the one a vehicle reaches first.



Corn

Is there a standard for it? A minimum width a pavement is supposed to have?



Herman

Most planning guidance sets a clear walking width, often somewhere around one point five to two metres for a normal footway, and wider where crowds are expected. But that's the clear width, after you subtract signposts, stall awnings and crates. A pavement that's two metres on paper can be a metre in practice.



Hilbert

Then my tape is measuring the paper and my steps are measuring the crates. I'll do both.



Hilbert

What you said about the edge being where the cars go. I've been standing at the other end of the street since.



Corn

Cars end up wherever the pavement is thinnest, so maybe the numbers do belong in a planning argument.



Hilbert

I'm not making an argument. I'm taking a tape. Though I'll take the wall side first, Herman, since you say it's the one that gets reached.



Herman

A seam has a width, then. We spent twenty minutes on hectares and the thing that decides it might be one point nine metres.



Corn

Or two. Depending on the weather.



Corn

Klára Schneiderová was thirty, a month into her posting here. She had spent part of her childhood in Israel, when her father served as the Czech ambassador in the late nineties, so she was coming back to a place she already knew. A black flag was due to fly over the Czernin Palace in Prague, and she was to be flown home for burial. She should have had years of walking that market.



Herman

What the record shows is that car-free places can be built at five thousand people and at eighty-three thousand, and Pontevedra does it while refusing the label. What nobody has shown is a metropolis doing it, and Jerusalem isn't trying at anything like the scale of Brussels or Ghent. So the seam is the thing to watch. Every pedestrian zone has an edge, and the edge is where the cars are, and how wide the pavement is when they arrive.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping the show on the air. If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To; episode five oh four, How to Start Thinking Like an Urbanist; and episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you enjoy the show, leave us a review wherever you listen, it helps more people find us. See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

1. **Guinness World Records, record dated 2009-10-16 . [primary]**
https://guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/383310-largest-car-free-urban-area-by-population

2. **Pontevedra city presentation . [primary]**
https://www.meerdelen.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/More_City_Pontevedra.pdf

3. **Times of Israel, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.timesofisrael.com/czech-diplomat-30-killed-after-minibus-mounts-sidewalk-strikes-her-in-jerusalem/

4. **Ynet, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.ynetnews.com/article/6i0e1brjf

5. **Ynet (Itamar Eichner), 2026-10-30.**
https://www.ynetnews.com/article/h141bfmtmx

6. **JNS, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.jns.org/news/israel-news/czech-diplomat-dies-in-jerusalem-traffic-accident

7. **Jerusalem Post, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-913338

8. **i24NEWS, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy/artc-head-of-czech-embassy-s-jerusalem-office-killed-after-being-struck-by-minibus

9. **JFeed, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.jfeed.com/news-israel/tnprv2

10. **Haaretz, 2026-10-30.**
https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2026-10-30/ty-article/.premium/czech-embassy-diplomat-killed-in-jerusalem-traffic-accident/000001a1-8c47-dca2-a5e5-aeef22d80000

11. **Wikipedia, last edited 2026-05-22 [primary-ish reference list, cites municipal area data].**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_pedestrian_zones

12. **Wikipedia, last edited 2026-10-30.**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedestrian_zone

13. **Wikipedia.**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carfree_city

14. **VRT NWS, 2015-06-28.**
https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2015/06/28/brussels_boasts_secondbiggestpedestrianareaineuropeaftervenice-1-2378942/

15. **New York Times, 2024-09-25.**
https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/25/climate/pontevedra-pedestrians-cars.html

16. **Brave New Europe (Elena Ledda).**
https://braveneweurope.com/elena-ledda-pontevedra-the-city-that-is-made-for-people-not-cars

17. **Nós Diario, 2022-12-29.**
https://www.nosdiario.gal/social/pontevedra-baixas-emisions/20221229142739159241.html

18. **The Local Spain, 2022-10-18.**
https://www.thelocal.es/20221018/the-biggest-village-in-the-world-is-this-spains-most-liveable-city

19. **CSBE, Urban Crossroads #93.**
https://www.csbe.org/aspiring-for-the-car-free-city

20. **academic paper on Vauban (38 ha, 2,000 homes, 5,000 residents).**
https://www.irbnet.de/daten/iconda/CIB4417.pdf

21. **Rediff Getahead, 2025-07-16.**
https://www.rediff.com/getahead/slide-show/slide-show-1-7-wonderful-car-free-places-in-the-world/20250716.htm

22. **Carfree.com (J.H. Crawford), Fes field notes from January 2002.**
https://www.carfree.com/fes/