

Urban Doers Community

Maribor Cycling Network

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Abstract

This article examines the transformative impact of the Maribor Cycling Network (MKM) on urban mobility and community engagement in Maribor, Slovenia. Over the past decade, MKM has strategically focused its efforts on four main pillars: community programs, advocacy, cycling services, and education. These initiatives have collectively fostered a more sustainable, cyclist-friendly city and serve as a model for other urban environments.

A cornerstone of MKM's success is the comprehensive design of a cycling network consisting of 11 primary corridors. This network connects key city points, linking districts and surrounding neighbourhoods. The planning process was thorough, involving detailed traffic, safety, and cyclist need analyses, and was coordinated with municipal services to integrate into the city's urban plan. This holistic approach ensures smooth and safe cycling through the city, providing a foundation for ongoing improvements and setting a benchmark for other cities.

Community engagement has been pivotal in MKM's approach. Through diverse events such as art-focused cycling tours, historical explorations and themed bike parades, MKM has shown that cycling can bridge various societal sectors. Initiatives like the Bajk Kuhna (Bike Kitchen), a weekly workshop focused on bike recycling and repair, have boosted volunteer participation and educated diverse groups, including children, the elderly, and the socially disadvantaged. Such programmes highlight the importance of regular community events and volunteerism in promoting cycling culture.

The establishment of the Maribor Mobility Center marks another significant achievement. Serving as a comprehensive hub for cyclists, the centr offers bike rentals, repairs, secure storage, and extensive information and support services. This centr exemplifies a successful, integrated approach to supporting sustainable mobility, providing a model that other cities can replicate to enhance their cycling infrastructure.

Proactive advocacy has been a cornerstone of MKM's strategy, leading to significant improvements in local and national cycling policies. By consistently engaging with municipal authorities and national organisations, MKM has ensured that the needs of cyclists are considered in urban planning and policy-making, resulting in practical improvements and the adoption of innovative cycling solutions.

Finally, MKM's contributions have led to concrete urban improvements, such as the renovation of historical streets and riverbanks into promenades and the successful implementation of the Mbajk bike-sharing system. These projects have significantly enhanced urban mobility and demonstrated the long-term impact of dedicated advocacy and community engagement.

In summary, MKM's integrated approach to developing cycling infrastructure, engaging the community, and influencing policy provides valuable insights for cities aiming to promote sustainable urban mobility. This case study of Maribor highlights the potential for local initiatives to drive substantial, positive changes in urban environments.

Key lessons:

1. Comprehensive Design of the Cycling Network

Our work in designing a cycling network with 11 primary corridors, based on thorough traffic and safety analysis, not only improved Maribor's cycling conditions but also set a model for other cities. The success was achieved through close collaboration with municipal services, ensuring that our network became a crucial part of the city's urban planning and catered to cyclists' needs across various intersections and access points.

2. Active Community Building and Engagement

MKM's consistent efforts in community building, through events like cycling tours and workshops, fostered a strong local cycling culture. The Bike Kitchen program, in particular, has been pivotal in increasing volunteer participation and educating diverse groups, illustrating how engaging the community can significantly enhance urban cycling culture and sustainability.

3. Establishment of the Maribor Mobility Center

The Maribor Mobility Center, the first of its kind in Slovenia, became a central hub for cyclists, offering services from bike rentals to repairs and education. By providing a comprehensive support environment for sustainable mobility, the center serves as a model for other cities aiming to promote cycling through a one-stop-shop approach.

4. Proactive Advocacy and Policy Influence

MKM's proactive advocacy has led to significant improvements in cycling infrastructure and policy both locally and nationally. Through collaboration with various organisations and authorities, we ensured that cyclists' needs are integrated into urban planning, demonstrating how sustained advocacy can influence long-term policy changes.

5. Contribution to Concrete Urban Improvements

Our long-term efforts have led to significant urban transformations in Maribor, such as the renovation of key streets and the creation of the long-distance Drava Cycling Route. These improvements, coupled with the successful Mbajk bike-sharing system, highlight how focused initiatives can lead to lasting urban change and prepare cities for future mobility challenges.

How does the Maribor Cycling Network Do It ?

In 2024, the Maribor Cycling Network (MKM) marks its 30th year, reflecting on a journey that began in 1994 when a group of cyclists united to advocate for their rights on Maribor's streets. This movement has left an indelible mark on Slovenia's second-largest city, shaping it through progressive visions, strategies, and policies. The significance of this initiative is rooted in Maribor's unique context as a city on the periphery of both Slovenia and Europe, far from the power centres that shape future policies.

Maribor's history over the past century has been marked by profound social, economic, and political transformations that have significantly influenced its urban development. From its days as a city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to its later role as a major industrial centre on Yugoslavia's northern border, Maribor has constantly redefined itself. The city saw significant demographic changes in the latter half of the 20th century, with an influx of residents from the countryside and other Yugoslav republics, further shaping its identity and infrastructure. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and Slovenia's independence in 1991 brought another pivotal shift for Maribor. The city, once a thriving industrial hub, faced economic collapse and mass unemployment.

Despite these challenges, the period also sparked vibrant social and cultural activity, with the rise of various activist and civil society initiatives, along with new political movements, including green politics, which gained traction during the early democratic era of the newly established state.

The Challenge of Urban Congestions with Cars

Following Slovenia's independence, Maribor, like many other cities in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe, experienced a rapid increase in car ownership, which led to significant urban congestion. The streets became overcrowded with vehicles, making the city increasingly inhospitable for cyclists and pedestrians. Public transportation, once a staple of urban mobility, was largely abandoned in favor of cars, which were seen as symbols of freedom and progress. This shift resulted in a cityscape dominated by cars, with minimal options for alternative modes of transport.

The lack of cycling infrastructure and the dominance of cars made safe navigation challenging for cyclists. In response, the MKM was founded in 1994 by a group of committed cyclists who saw the urgent need to advocate for better cycling conditions. They recognised the negative impact of car-centric urban planning on Maribor's quality of life and aimed to promote cycling as a viable and sustainable alternative. MKM's early efforts focused on raising awareness about the benefits of cycling and the need for better infrastructure. They organised direct actions, such

as group bike rides through the city, to demonstrate the presence and rights of cyclists. These efforts were critical in bringing attention to the issues caused by urban congestion and the lack of safe cycling options.

Over time, MKM's advocacy began to yield results, as local authorities and the broader community started to acknowledge the problems associated with excessive car use. The network's persistent efforts helped to shift the conversation towards more sustainable urban planning, where cycling and other forms of active transportation were given greater priority. This change in mindset laid the groundwork for future improvements in cycling infrastructure and urban mobility in Maribor, gradually transforming the city into a more balanced and accessible environment for all its residents.

From Simple Vision to Long-term Strategy

MKM shaped a very straightforward vision for Maribor: to make cycling as integral to the city's daily life as it is in Amsterdam or Copenhagen. This vision was not just about promoting cycling as a mode of transportation but about reimagining the entire urban landscape to prioritise sustainable and active mobility. MKM's early goals included increasing the number of cyclists, improving cycling infrastructure, and reducing the dominance of car traffic in the city. The organisation visualized a future where safe and accessible bike lanes crisscrossed the city, children could cycle to school without worry, and urban spaces were freed from the overwhelming presence of cars.

Turning this vision into a long-term strategy required more than just enthusiasm and idealism; it demanded a structured approach and strategic planning. MKM realized the need to professionalise its operations, transitioning from a volunteer-based group to a more formalised organisation capable of sustaining its efforts over the long term. This transition allowed MKM to secure funding through grants and public support, enabling them to execute more ambitious projects. The creation of a comprehensive Cycling Strategy for Maribor, which outlined clear goals and actionable steps for the city's development as a cycling-friendly environment, was a critical part of this evolution.

Key to the success of MKM's long-term strategy was the ability to engage with local government and the broader community. By fostering partnerships with municipal authorities, urban planners, and other stakeholders, MKM ensured that cycling was integrated into the city's broader urban planning and development strategies. This collaborative approach not only helped to align MKM's vision with the city's official policies but also provided a framework for ongoing advocacy and action. Over the years, this strategy has led to tangible improvements in Maribor's cycling infrastructure, setting the stage for the city to evolve into a model of sustainable urban mobility.

Key Moments in MKM's History

One of the pivotal moments in the history of the MKM was the decision to professionalise the organisation. Initially driven by volunteers passionate about cycling, MKM recognised that to have a lasting impact, it needed a more structured and sustainable approach. This led to the transformation of MKM from a volunteer-based group into a formal non-governmental organisation (NGO) with at least one paid staff member. This shift not only provided stability but also allowed MKM to participate in larger projects, secure funding, and engage more effectively with public and private stakeholders.

Another significant milestone was the establishment of the Mobility Center in Maribor. Moving into this dedicated space marked a new phase for MKM, providing

a physical hub where the organisation could interact directly with the community, offer cycling services, and run public programmes. The center became a focal point for promoting sustainable mobility in the city, offering services such as bike rentals, repairs, and educational workshops. This move greatly expanded MKM's reach and influence, enabling it to run larger and more impactful projects.

The third key moment in MKM's history was the creation of the Cyclists' and Pedestrians' List, a local political party formed by active members of the network. This initiative was a bold step towards ensuring that cycling and pedestrian issues were represented in local government. The party successfully won seats in the Maribor City Council, providing a direct channel to influence public policies and urban planning decisions. This political engagement allowed members of cycling community to advocate more effectively for cycling-friendly infrastructure and policies, ensuring that the needs of cyclists were considered in the city's long-term development plans.

Synergies Between Strategy and Practical Measures

MKM has consistently worked to align its strategic vision with practical measures to promote and improve cycling in the city. One of the key components of this effort was the development and implementation of the Maribor Cycling Strategy. This strategy provided a clear roadmap for increasing the number of cyclists, enhancing cycling infrastructure, and fostering a more cycling-friendly urban environment. By breaking down the strategy into specific goals and actionable steps, MKM was able to ensure that its broader vision was translated into concrete actions that directly benefited the community. A significant part of this approach involved close collaboration with local government and other stakeholders. MKM actively participated in the development of important municipal documents, such as the Integrated Transport Strategy and the Sustainable Urban Strategy, ensuring that cycling was an integral part of the city's overall mobility plan.

Through these efforts, MKM was able to secure dedicated funding for cycling-related projects and ensure that cycling infrastructure was considered in all urban planning decisions. This strategic integration of cycling into city policies not only advanced MKM's goals but also created a supportive environment for future cycling initiatives. In addition to policy advocacy, MKM focused on implementing practical measures that directly impacted the daily lives of Maribor's residents. For instance, the organisation worked on expanding and improving the city's cycling network by identifying critical points and proposing necessary upgrades. MKM's efforts also led to the establishment of more cycling-friendly streets, the creation of bike lanes in residential neighbourhoods, and the development of the long-distance Drava Cycling Route, which opened up new recreational and tourism opportunities.

These practical measures were essential in making cycling a safer and more attractive option for people of all ages. MKM's ongoing commitment to both strategy and practical implementation has had a lasting impact on Maribor's urban landscape. By continuously advocating for cycling within the framework of the city's broader development plans and by executing specific projects that improve the daily experience of cyclists, MKM has helped to transform Maribor into a more sustainable and resilient city. This synergy between strategic vision and practical action demonstrates the effectiveness of MKM's approach and serves as a model for other cities looking to enhance their own cycling infrastructure and culture.

Looking to the Future

As the MKM reflects on its 30-year journey, it remains committed to expanding and evolving its activities to further enhance cycling culture and sustainable urban mobility in Maribor. The organisation recognises that while significant progress has been made, there are still many areas in need of improvement, particularly in integrating cycling more comprehensively into the city's fabric. To this end, MKM is focused on reinforcing its core programmes, which include community engagement, advocacy, cycling services, and education. These efforts are aimed at not only increasing the number of cyclists but also ensuring that cycling becomes an integral part of daily life for a broader segment of the population.

One of MKM's primary goals for the future is to expand its community programmes, such as the Bike Kitchen, which has already played a crucial role in promoting cycling and recycling bikes. By increasing the number of volunteers and offering more workshops, MKM hopes to engage even more residents, particularly those who might not have previously considered cycling as an option. Additionally, MKM plans to enhance its online presence and communication strategies, ensuring that its initiatives reach a wider audience and encourage greater participation from the community. In the realm of advocacy, MKM is dedicated to updating the Maribor Cycling Strategy to reflect the latest trends and needs in urban mobility. This includes creating new partnerships with local and international organisations to explore innovative solutions for cycling infrastructure and policies. MKM also aims to establish a system for gathering feedback from cyclists, which will help guide future projects and ensure that the organisation's efforts are aligned with the community's needs. By continuing to influence local policy and advocate for cyclist-friendly urban planning, MKM hopes to secure even greater support from municipal authorities and other stakeholders.

Looking ahead, MKM envisions a future where cycling is not just a mode of transportation but a cornerstone of a healthier, more sustainable urban lifestyle. The organisation is committed to addressing new challenges, such as the increasing demand for electric bikes and the need for better cycling facilities in underdeveloped areas. MKM's long-term vision includes creating a city where everyone, regardless of age or ability, feels safe and encouraged to cycle. Through continued innovation, collaboration, and community engagement, MKM aims to make Maribor a model for other cities striving to build a more sustainable and resilient future.

In turbulent times, where crises and wars shape our everyday life, perhaps local initiatives such as MKM are an indicator of some direction, which indicate that the prerequisite for a resilient and long-lived society is a functioning community, functioning networks of individuals, which prove that democracy in practice much more than just politicians and elections. Such communities can save us from social disintegration in the future and make us more resistant to future crises, as they maintain hope and faith in humanity during difficult times.