Hurtling along a “cycle highway” by the River Scheldt in Antwerp recently, Charlemagne only noticed the electric scooter when it was too late. Spinning tyre met stationary scooter, British journalist separated from Belgian bike and Anglo-Saxon words were uttered. How irritating and obnoxious these twiggy little devices can seem with their silly names (“Lime”, “Poppy”, “Zero”) and their sudden invasion of the pavements of every large European city. Everywhere they seem to be in the way, abandoned precisely at those points where prams, pedestrians or speeding journalists need to pass.

And yet your columnist refuses to hold a grudge, because the rise of the electric scooter is part of a broader and welcome phenomenon: the gradual retreat of the car from the European city. Across the continent, apps and satellite-tracking have spawned bike- and scooter-rental schemes that allow city-dwellers to beat the traffic. Networks of cycle paths are growing and creeping outwards; that of Paris will by next year have grown by 50% in five years. Municipal governments are lowering speed limits, introducing car bans and car-free days, pedestrianising streets and replacing car parks with bike parks.

There are downsides. Electric scooters can be a nuisance. A campaign group called Apacauvi has sprung up in Paris to combat their “urban anarchy” and mayors, including Anne Hidalgo in the French capital, are starting to impose regulations on their use and storage. Some politicians have criticised heavy-handed municipal measures. Angela Merkel has called legislation expelling some diesel cars from German cities “disproportionate” and the new conservative mayor of Madrid wants to loosen a recent ban on polluting cars. For some it is a class issue, a case of urban eco-yuppies imposing their bike and scooter fads on suburbanites and country folk who rely on their cars. Others consider it technologically anachronistic. Electric and self-driving cars would be cleaner, quieter, more efficient users of road space. Why get in their way?

Antwerp is a good antidote to such objections. Like many European cities such as Cologne, Birmingham and Milan, it fell victim to post-war planners enamoured with car-centric American cities. Highways and overpasses were draped around and through it, old streets widened and squares turned into car parks. This gave Antwerp some of the worst congestion in western Europe. But in the past couple of decades the city has
changed tack, built a dense network of cycle lanes, widened pavements, pedestrianised streets and squares and imposed traffic restrictions.

The result is impressive. It is possible to cycle or scoot from one side of Antwerp’s city centre to the other without encountering a private car. Even in the suburbs bikes rule the road and are not subject to the one-way and no-turn rules binding drivers. Cafés spill out onto pavements. Trees and shrubs sprout from filled-in parking spaces on residential streets like Lamorinierestraat. The cycle highways—broad enough for bikes or scooters to overtake in either direction, governed by their own traffic lights and entirely separated from cars—run out into the suburbs, through the city’s port district and along metro and tram lines. On the Mechelsesteenweg a woman teaches a girl of about six, equipped with bike and helmet, how to use the lights. Everywhere there are bike racks, rental bike stands and scooters.

The post-automotive jewel in Antwerp’s crown is the Groen Kwartier, an entirely carless neighbourhood built around the site of a former hospital. In the streets of this inner-city district can be heard only the sounds of children playing and chatter across balconies. Far from being a preserve of privileged hipsters, it is home to a mix of people with white Belgian, Arab, west African and Orthodox Jewish backgrounds. Barcelona is attempting something like the Groen Kwartier by creating “superblocks”, or clusters of city blocks around which traffic is allowed but within which it is highly restricted.

Even the electric scooters have their benefits. For all that they clutter up pavements, they take up vastly less road space overall than cars. In the quiet streets of central Antwerp the scooter craze feels like a fair price to pay. Moreover, the scooters and bike schemes in fact make carless cities less elitist. University towns and trendy central districts have long been bike-friendly. Today’s shifts extend those trends to suburban areas and more typical citizens by making non-car travel accessible to those unable to buy one, offering cheap rental vehicles that can cover the “final mile” between bus or train stations and suburban homes or offices, providing cycle highways linking outlying places with city-centre networks and even, as in Germany, pioneering bike “autobahns” linking close-together towns. Electric scooters and bikes make such routes accessible to those not up to cycling, and boast seats, baskets or cargo boxes for those with shopping or children to transport. The old or infirm will doubtless want to keep their cars.

Two wheels good, four wheels bad
So ever fewer citizens in and around European cities need to put up with the cost and hassle of driving to go about their daily business. And ever more are enjoying the experience—once the preserve of a metropolitan elite—of calm streets, squares and parks. Madrid’s bid to roll back car restrictions, the most notable exception to this trend, was tellingly reversed in July following protests.

All of which seems like a revolution in the European cityscape. But in many ways it is a reversion. Places like Antwerp existed for centuries before the car. Their centres are warrens built around foot traffic, that had to be trimmed, straightened and trained like rose bushes as car ownership grew. They are denser than American cities, even in their suburbs, and tend to lack the big open spaces needed for cars to move smoothly. In such cities cars never made much sense. But they found their way in and became part of the urban furniture. And now that is changing.