

SUSTAINABILITY LIVING GUIDE:

51. RECLAIM YOUR STREETS: HOW TO CREATE SAFE AND SOCIAL PEDSTRIAN PLAZAS¹

Erika Kosina[©]

The next time you find yourself waiting forever for a light to change at a busy intersection, practice this visualization: Imagine the streets around you completely devoid of cars. Replace the painted lane lines with lush, green, flowering plants. Zap that smog-spewing SUV and manifest a café table in its place, complete with a shady umbrella and chairs. Vanish the ugly traffic light and see instead a whimsical statue.

Think it's all just a wishful fantasy? It's actually happening, and in some unexpected places. From an artists' collective in San Francisco's funky Mission district to New York City's Times Square, people are working to reclaim streets as public spaces, partnering with residents and local businesses to create a renewed sense of community while they're at it.

Here's how to make it happen in your own city:

1 Start small and temporary.

Even something as small and car-centric as a parking spot can be transformed into a space for pedestrians to enjoy. In 2005, REBAR, an artists' collective based in San Francisco, wanted to demonstrate the need for more urban green space in San Francisco. They put some quarters in a parking meter, brought in some benches and sod, and used the parking space for a rather unconventional purpose: a park instead of a car. They called it PARK(ing) Day. Park(ing) Day is now "an annual, worldwide event that inspires city dwellers everywhere to transform metered parking spots into temporary parks for the public good," according to REBAR's website. The website also offers a downloadable instruction manual (\$6.99) with step-by-step instructions on how to transform a parking spot into a park, including ideas about creative uses for the space and advice on how to make your park safe and inviting. Once you've successfully reclaimed 200 square feet, you're ready to take on a whole street, or even a park.

2 Request a one-day street closure in an area that pedestrians and bicyclists already frequent, like a park or esplanade.

"Ciclovias" started in Columbia in the 1980s, when several of the country's major cities declared main streets closed to cars on Sundays and holidays from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. A staggering 2 million people (30 percent of Colombian citizens) now participate in these weekly events, where stages are set up for aerobics instructors, yoga instructors, and musicians to encourage people to move their bodies without the assistance of an automobile.

The cities of Portland, Ore., Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and even Cleveland, Ohio, sponsor "Sunday Parkways"—events where park streets are closed to car traffic. On a recent Sunday in the streets of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, those enjoying the break from cars included families teaching kids how to ride bikes, joggers and runners of all shapes and sizes,

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and even old-school boom-box-toting roller skaters disco dancing their way across the pavement.

After you see how much fun a Ciclovía can be, you'll want to move on to a semi-permanent project. This type of project uses a temporary installation to test a street closure, with the goal of eventually closing the street permanently. For this one, you'll need help.

3 To make a park permanent, recruit partners who will benefit from the experience, like community organizations and local businesses.

San Francisco's Pavement to Parks project reclaims wasted space on overly wide streets and turns the space into temporary public parks and plazas, complete with benches and movable landscaping. City and community organizations help make sure the parks stay clean and coordinate community uses such as farmer's markets, chess clubs, and concessions. In one "parklet," Pavement to Parks partnered with REBAR and three restaurants to turn parking spots in front of the restaurants into additional seating and bike parking.

Perhaps the most well-known example of a successful temporary street closure that is now on its way to becoming a permanent pedestrian area is in New York City's Times Square, where, in May of 2009, Broadway was closed to traffic between 47th and 42nd Streets. The goal of the project, named "Green Light for Midtown," was to improve mobility and safety in Manhattan's Midtown area, and to make it a better place to live, work, and visit. Because this project would affect a large and diverse group of residents and businesses, New York City's Department of Transportation held numerous public and private meetings with stakeholders before they started the project—with Business Improvement Districts, local community boards, elected officials, local media, the theater community, government agencies, and representatives from the taxi, hotel, real estate, and tourism industries.

This closure yielded some startling results. According to the Department of Transportation's 2010 evaluation report, pedestrian injuries in the area dropped by 35 percent. In addition, the area has become a much more inviting place, encouraging people to linger and spend time there, which promotes social interaction and benefits local businesses. Again, according to the Department of Transportation (DOT) report:

- 84 percent more people are staying (e.g. reading, eating, taking photographs) in Times Square and in another similar temporary pedestrian area (in Herald Square) than before the projects.
- 42 percent of NYC residents surveyed in Times Square say they shop in the neighborhood more often since the changes.
- 26 percent of Times Square employees report leaving their offices for lunch more frequently.
- 74 percent of New Yorkers surveyed by the Times Square Alliance agree that Times Square has improved dramatically as a result of this project.

The DOT currently is upgrading and reviving the plaza with a temporary mural, and is designing a permanent pedestrian plaza for the space that will be constructed in 2012. Like the song says, "if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere." Here are some more tips to ensure that *your* new temporary pedestrian plaza will get built, be used, and turn into a permanent pedestrian oasis.

4 Make the space beautiful and inviting with plants, seating areas, and art.

Using reclaimed materials whenever possible is the inexpensive and environmentally responsible way to go. Pavement to Parks blocked off one street using reclaimed logs that were hollowed out and used as planters. In another plaza, they sanitized, painted, lined, and filled donated dumpsters and unused terracotta sewer pipes with trees and plants. For easy maintenance, make sure your plants are drought-tolerant.

5 Warn users of the space in advance of the closure with fliers, signs, handouts, and digital announcements.

Because the Green Light in Midtown project would potentially disrupt one of the most congested traffic areas in the United States, the DOT made a tremendous effort to involve the community and form collaborative partnerships long before the first orange cone was placed. In addition to meeting with key stakeholders, project leaders distributed thousands of fliers to inform the public about the proposed closure and invite them to participate in open house discussions. The DOT also welcomed feedback about the proposal on its website.

6 Make it fun! Have a party in your new park!

It's easier than you think to turn a parking spot or even a street into a beautiful, safe place for people to relax and socialize, even in the middle of a big city. Look around, visualize, and then start talking to people in your community about it. Happy parking!