

Reclaiming the Road: How Agendas for American Car-free Cities are Advancing in the COVID  
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## **Reclaiming the Road: How Agendas for American Car-free Cities are Advancing in the COVID Era**

The 2020 pandemic has disrupted urban transport worldwide. Stay-at-home orders and avoidance of buses and other transit modes have given car-free advocacy groups in the United States a unique opportunity to show the residents of cities what a car-free future might look like – and decide for themselves which version of the city they prefer. The pandemic is an opportunity to change “habits, behavior, and thinking paradigms, and to accept new, automated, healthier, and improved means of urban mobility” (Ceder, 2020). Car-free cities would mean fewer collisions, as seen in California, where fatal collisions have fallen by half since the pandemic began, saving the public \$40 million a day (Shilling, 2020). It would mean the transformation of parking spaces, which make up 14% of Los Angeles (Chester et al, 2015), and 21.9% of Silver Spring, Maryland (with an additional 16% of land area used for roadways), into livable, productive space (Johnson, 2010). Meanwhile, driver advocacy groups argue that opening up roads and reducing lanes only serves a tiny minority of commuters and reduces overall quality of life. Along with them, urban planners, urbanist activists, advocates of alternate transportation methods, and city leadership will all have their say whether or not car-free cities will be the future after America returns to normalcy.

### **Review of Research**

#### *1979 Oil Crisis*

The 1979 oil crisis could have altered America’s urban environment. Iran’s oil revenue greatly increased after the 1973 oil crisis. The shah spent extravagantly, which, coupled with inflation and decreasing oil earnings in 1978, led to the 1979 Iranian revolution. The instability in the region doubled oil prices across the world (Painter, 2012). At the time, many believed that soaring gas prices would lead to a reckoning of the American lifestyle, starting with the rapid

recentralization of cities and increases in density (Kain, 2001). Popular opinion theorized high gasoline prices would reduce consumer accessibility, forcing urban structure to condense and rely more on mass transit. However, Kain contended in 1979 that while accessibility is indeed linked to urban structure, the primary driver behind shifts in urban structure was per capita income. Increasing automobile ownership was also responsible for the largest increases in accessibility. Seeing as both automobile ownership and per capita incomes were predicted to rise in the decades following 1979, Kain hypothesized that no dramatic change in American city development would occur. Indeed, despite early support from Jimmy Carter in 1979, a public transit funding bill to make transit infrastructure more accessible and expansive in order to provide an alternative to automotive transportation died in 1981 by Senate filibuster under the new Reagan administration (Smerk, 1981). Gas prices were offset by increased car efficiency, and while Americans did shift from large gas-guzzlers to more energy efficient and compact vehicles, the urban revolution some envisioned never came to fruition as American values moved on towards other issues. It will be important for car-free city advocates to take advantage of the spotlight presented by COVID-19 and pass meaningful legislation.

### *Pedestrian Malls in the Past*

Results from previous attempts to pedestrianize important city centers have been a mixed bag. Dozens of cities attempted to close off their central business districts to automobile traffic in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in an attempt to revitalize them (Hudson, 2021). The Kalamazoo Mall in Michigan was the first of over 200 pedestrian malls created in the United States two decades after it opened in 1959 (Cheyne, 2010). 40 years later, the town enthusiastically welcomed back motor vehicles once again. These pedestrian malls attempted to graft European urban designs, where cities had high density and had vibrant city centers, to the American downtown, where the

wealthy were increasingly attracted to decentralized suburbs with lower crime and more space. Planners primarily focused on the aesthetic standing of downtown, attempting to “beat suburbia at its own game” by pursuing tactics such as gentrification, pollution reduction, fountain construction, and artful landscaping. However, even with a 30% increase in pedestrian traffic four years after opening, there was no way this surface level change could fully encompass complex problems: “deindustrialization, urban disinvestment, and suburbanization.” Despite fierce resistance from locals defending the mall’s “ambience” from the vehicular “intruders,” the Kalamazoo Pedestrian Mall (which had since devolved into a lunchtime picnic spot lined with empty storefronts) opened up to automobile traffic again in 1996. Ironically, the council in Kalamazoo and other cities across America approached reinstating cars in downtown malls with the same vigor as they had when removing them 40 years ago – buying into the idea that changing the aesthetic appearance of downtown could somehow be the magic bullet they were looking for.

### *Barcelona Case Study*

Extensive research has been conducted into the case study of the modern urbanism of Barcelona and their successful implementation of “superblocks,” or large neighborhoods closed off to through-traffic. Currently, Barcelona has six of these car-free zones, but over 500 are planned to be constructed. Roberts (2019) posits that Barcelona suffers from the same problems which plague most other cities across the world today – a dense population with many cars and little green space, leading to the heat island effect (where the city is several degrees warmer than the surrounding area due to heat trapped by concrete and asphalt) and high air and noise pollution, leading to over 3,000 premature deaths each year. De Balanzó and Rodríguez-Planas (2018) say the 1992 Barcelona Olympics turned the city into a tourist town, leading to

widespread gentrification and housing price increases. Car ownership also grew as the metropolitan area fell victim to unchecked urban sprawl, bringing in congestion from surrounding areas as workers and tourists made their way into city proper. These problems (along with many others) turned out to be too much to live with, and Barcelonans occupied several plazas across the city in protest in 2011 as part of the 15M movement. Most importantly to superblock, the 15M movement connected leaders from several disparate organizations striving for social “good,” such as the “Squatters Social Centers” and the “Housing movement.” Following the success of the 15M movement, a new municipal administration was elected in 2015. This new government hired the “former leaders, members, and synthesizers of the neighborhood associations,” incorporating their urbanist ideals into city government, laying the groundwork for the pursuit of Barcelona’s ambitious superblock plan. This example of how Barcelona adapted to its problems may be useful in examining how the agenda for car-free cities in America can help municipalities adapt their policies after the Covid-19 pandemic has laid our problems with the status-quo out bare.

### **Complete Streets**

Reduced activity to city businesses has been a major driving force in the adoption of car-free, reduced speed, and flexible road areas. Oakland, CA, opened up “Flex Lanes” in June 2020, giving businesses free reign to utilize sidewalks, parking lanes, and a portion of the street for business needs with a permit (Maher & Hamilton, 2020). Oakland mayor Libby Schaaf noted that “Oakland’s beloved business community has suffered a significant economic hit under the COVID-19 pandemic, and the City is rallying to support it with streamlined access to use the public spaces to aid their recover.” As of February 2021, approximately 103 permits have been approved so far (Rodas, 2021). Ju Hong, manager at Daol Tofu, a Korean restaurant in Oakland,

said “It’s slowly helping our business and we are grateful to be serving customers again,” after reopening outdoor dining early February. Shifra de Benedictis-Kessner, a leader at the Temescal Telegraph Business Improvement District who has been helping businesses apply for permits all year, said that despite a slow ramp up due to poor communication between them and small businesses, that the Flex Streets in Oakland would “become a permanent program and that the amazing engineers and planners who worked on this will prioritize responsiveness and communication.”

America’s largest city, New York City, has also been experimenting with pedestrian streets during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, mayor Bill DeBlasio was elected in part in 2013 due to his progressive support of the Swedish program Vision Zero (Surico, 2021). Vision Zero was simple: cut down traffic fatalities to zero. Much of the change to New York’s streets towards pedestrianization during DeBlasio’s two terms, however, have happened in response to pandemic in 2020. Open Streets was announced in April 2020, partially or fully closing streets so New Yorkers could socially distance outdoors. 40 miles of streets were closed off to vehicular traffic in the first week of the program, with DeBlasio opening up 60 more over the summer, providing a lifeline to struggling businesses.

Almost immediately, Open Streets found widespread support. “Open Streets helps us safely navigate and enjoy the City as we continue adjusting to unprecedented times,” said Gregg Bishop, Commissioner of the NYC Department of Small Business Services only a week after the initial launch late April (New York City, 2020). Along with Open Streets came Open Restaurants over the summer, allowing the use of streets and parking lots for outdoor dining spaces. Victor Sanchez, the owner of a Dominican restaurant in North Manhattan, is selling more meals now with the help of expanded outdoor seating than before the pandemic (Hu & Schweber, 2020). 14

schools in Brooklyn submitted proposals to open nearby streets for academic and recreational use during the day - Open Streets: Schools - to local councilman Brad Lander (Kuntzman & Zimmer, 2020). Lander wrote in a letter to the New York Department of Transportation, “The open streets and restaurants program opened a window into the possibilities when we think creatively about our public space, and their success should be taken as a mandate to do more (Lander, 2020).” Mitch Schwartz, a spokesman for Mayor Bill de Blasio, said “We’ve used this crisis to make sweeping and popular changes to the urban landscape.”

DeBlasio’s March 2021 press release promised to expand the programs and hinted at making them permanent, a sentiment supported by many in the community. Queens Borough President Donovan Richards Jr. also weighed in during the press release, saying “Open Streets became salvations for restaurants and changed the way we dine here in New York City. Open Streets have truly revitalized boulevards, avenues and more across Queens, and I look forward to seeing our streets enjoyed again this year.”

Making Open Streets permanent is a major ticket item on New York mayoral elections in June 2021. Several candidates committed to turning 25% of New York into car-free zones by 2025, a challenge set forth by non-profit Transportation Alternatives who advocates for better “walking, biking and public transit” (Transportation Alternatives, 2021). Candidate Andrew Wang remarked “we should provide public funding and make Open Streets permanent” on Twitter after touring Open Streets in Park Slope. Kathryn Garcia, New York’s former sanitation commissioner and another candidate, wants “create Complete Streets in all five boroughs that prioritize pedestrians, bicyclists and public transit riders (Garcia, 2021).” Scott Stringer, New York’s comptroller and mayoral candidate, released a 40-page white paper on transportation, with points including to “permanently open up street space to support local communities and

businesses,” “scale back our highway infrastructure and build out community green spaces,” and more (Stringer, 2021). Many candidates also called for the creation of a new “office of public space” to “coordinate street work and investments,” solidifying the role of urban transformation in local government.

Members of more rural communities are also looking at pedestrianization of Main Street as a way to increase economic opportunity. Lowell et al. (Nov 2020), a group of scientists analyzing clean transportation in Maine, Virginia, Vermont, and Maryland, said that by investing in complete street initiatives that make biking and walking more appealing, visitors would “potentially spend more time in rural centers.” Noah Strike, a student at the University of Virginia (UVA), argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a “sudden shift towards expanded outdoor spaces — often occupying roads and parking spaces” and that the Corner, a business district a five-minute walk away from the UVA campus, would attract more tourists and be more useful to local businesses if it was closed to automobile traffic. “Wider sidewalks, public seating, exercise space, bike or bus lanes, art installations, community events and festivals would all entice students and residents alike to spend their time — and money — on the Corner,” Strike writes, noting that one of the last remaining pedestrian malls in the United States, the Charlottesville Downtown Mall, is a success vibrant story which can be replicated.

### **Biking and Public Transit**

Advocates of biking transportation used America’s increased bicycling during the pandemic to garner support for biking infrastructure improvements and transportation bills. The League of American Bicyclists worked with “transportation stakeholders in the private and public sector to continue to include funding for transit and bikeshare” in emergency relief packages early on in the pandemic (Whitaker, 2020). In May 2020, the League of American



Bicyclists and other transportation groups sent a letter to the federal government asking to fast-track transit and active transportation projects. Head of Micromobility Policy at Lyft Caroline Samponaro specifically asked for “investments in transit, bicycle, bikeshare, and pedestrian infrastructure.” On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, the House of Representatives passed INVEST, a new five-year transportation bill with many provisions providing safety, equality, and economic measures for bikers. While the bill did not pass the Senate, the League of American Bicyclists were confident their lobbying put transit and biking as top priorities for the new administration.

PeopleForBikes, another non-profit advocating for biking in the United States, provided two \$20,000 grants to Tucson, Arizona and Fort Collins, Colorado to improve walking and biking facilities in response to the pandemic (Herbert, 2021). PeopleForBikes hoped efforts responding to the pandemic would lead to permanent changes in local transportation networks (Herbert, 2021). Tucson has some of the highest traffic fatalities in the country. Gabriela Barillas, a livability planner for the DOT in Tucson, ultimately wanted to “reduce some single-occupancy vehicle trips and replace them with walking, biking or transit trips.” The city expanded its Slow Streets program using the grant, adding speed bumps and hiring “block leaders” who educate their neighbors about the program and provide feedback to the city to inform future improvements (City of Tucson, 2020). Barillas highlighted the necessity of advocacy groups pitching in to create real change, saying “the PeopleForBikes funding was critical when it came to community engagement and getting buy-in.” The city targeted neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic, ensuring resources would have the greatest impact.

There was already a robust bike network in Fort Collins, and leaned into this advantage to make biking more accessible and popular. The city used the grant to install 126 permanent wayfinding signs and temporary pavement wayfinding stencils. Fort Collins also promoted their

Shift Your Ride Campaign, a plan encouraging people to opt out of single-occupancy vehicle rides. Nick Heimann, an active modes specialist at Fort Collins, describes a new pledge introduced during the pandemic: “Community members can commit to going car free one extra trip per week than they were previously doing. Our goal is to have 1,500 community members sign the pledge by Earth Day 2021.” September was designated Shift Your Ride month to encourage participation, and as of February 1<sup>st</sup>, more than 500 people had committed to the pledge.

### **Right of the Road**

However, not everyone is happy seeing cities make rapid adjustments towards a car-free future during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mariya Frost, the director of the Center for Transportation at the Washington Policy Center, a right-wing think tank based in Seattle, contends that the public officials are taking advantage of the pandemic to pass permanent anti-car legislation without properly gauging public opinion or conducting appropriate studies of effectiveness. Frost claims that by making Stay Healthy Streets, Seattle’s take on Complete Streets, permanent after just a three week “pilot-project,” city officials rushed to “work around the public and solidify a law that may harm mobility and access during [Washington State’s] economic recovery.” “There is absolutely no reason to make COVID-specific policies permanent at this time, especially when we know so little about what our recovery will look like, how long it will take, and what working families will need in order to get back on their feet,” she writes. The National Motorists Association takes issue with pedestrianizing streets at all, relating Complete Streets initiatives and Vision Zero to an “Orwellian Era of Transportation Planning” (DiPrima, 2021). “It advocates ‘complete streets,’ then attempts to remove motorists—often the largest user group—from those streets. ‘INCOMPLETE IS COMPLETE,’” said Christopher

DiPrima, National Motorists Association board member, about Vision Zero. Others in the National Motorists Association point census data on transportation, citing that walkers and bikers only represented 3% of transport. According to the NMA newsletter, city programs that promote pedestrianization are like “the 3-percent tail trying to wag the 85-percent dog.”

## **Conclusion**

American urban planners have tried before to bring back pedestrianism in our cities. This present opportunity feels unique. The various Complete or Slow Streets programs in cities across the country were born out of a genuine need for more outdoor space to stay active, enjoy restaurants, and learn in-person while all staying socially distanced. Bike ridership increased as people explored their neighborhoods while working from home or skipped a ride on mass transit. And all across the country, many citizens have found that the opportunities provided by expanding pedestrian and cyclist access to the road are too good to pass up. Unlike the pedestrian mall construction spree in the 1960’s, urban planners are not taking a “one size fits all,” purely aesthetic approach. Tucson and Fort Collins created radically different programs to fit each city’s current environment, while both invested in outreach and marketing to get people to make changes to the way they commute. With a new liberal federal administration, pedestrian and biker advocacy groups are lobbying together to pass legislation making Complete Streets the new normal, a divergence from the failure to pass legislation after the 1979 oil crisis. While there is still debate on who the roads should cater to, especially as new leaders are elected with urbanism-favoring agendas, it seems like most American cities will be shifting the balance in favor of active transportation in the coming years.

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