

part b

solutions - reclaim your street!

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Like a frog being cooked in a pot, [the] surrender of the street has been a long and gradual process. The loss of our streets for community-building activities started with a mental attitude: feeling intimidated and retreating. Winning our streets back starts by changing our mental attitude to our street: refusing to be intimidated and highly valuing our street for social and cultural activity.

”

*-David Engwicht,
www.playforchange.com*

There are many ways to address the concerns about overuse of automobiles and erosion of neighbourhoods raised in the previous section. The focus of the rest of this guidebook is on one of those ways – to show how you can use “street reclaiming” as a strategy to address these issues in your own neighbourhood.

street reclaiming – a homegrown solution!

Street Reclaiming is a fun, creative, community-building strategy that helps people become active participants in addressing neighbourhood traffic problems and making the street a safer place for families and neighbours to socialize and strengthen their community.

Through Street Reclaiming activities and design, residents can change the psychological feel of their street, so it is an ‘outdoor living room’ rather than a thoroughfare overrun by traffic. Examples include celebrations in the street, art, gardens, community-designed streetscapes, reading on the sidewalk, and other everyday activities that fill the streets with people.

Street Reclaiming can be a spontaneous act done by one person, or a neighbourhood-wide project that brings a community together.

street reclaiming is...

a solution that everyone takes part in!

- Psychologically or physically reclaiming streets as public space for playing, socializing, and building community
- Reclaiming community by making the street an extension of your front yard, your front porch, your living room!
- Reclaiming safety for pedestrians, children, elderly, pets, adults...
- Reminding drivers to slow down and act as a guest when driving in residential neighbourhoods
- Driving less – combining trips & using alternative modes
- Having FUN!

a way to gain the City's attention

For those who are trying to get the attention of City Councillors or staff to address a particular traffic problem, street reclaiming activities can help you be the "squeaky wheel that gets the grease".

Inviting City staff or Councillors to a block party, or sending them updates about your street reclaiming activities certainly can help you get the attention of those who are responsible for the transportation planning in your area. It will show that you are concerned, organized, and determined to find a solution. Media attention can also help keep your issue on your municipal Council's agenda, and raise public awareness about your concern.

a way to build relationships and organize your neighbours

Street Reclaiming can also raise awareness among your neighbours about the municipal transportation planning processes that affect your neighbourhood, and get them involved and on board when the time comes to vote on important local transportation issues. You may find that a street hockey game or block party is a fantastic opportunity to put out a display or hand out leaflets about a local traffic issue, and even gather names of neighbours interested in getting involved! It's a heck of a lot more fun than holding a meeting!

Creative activities can also re-fuel a neighbourhood group that's put in a lot of hours organizing or talking to City staff to have a problem addressed. Everyone needs a good time every once in a while. And the more fun you and your neighbours have together organizing events, celebrating, or creating street art, the more opportunities you have to discuss common concerns, and the more likely you are to reach consensus about local transportation planning and other decisions that affect your neighbourhood.

two ways to reclaim your street ¹

As Street Reclaiming advocate and mentor David Engwicht describes, there are two general types of street reclaiming: **activity** and **design**.

Reclaiming your street through activity and design both increase the presence of people in the street, and change the psychological feeling to one where car drivers feel like guests in a space that is used by people - not one that is dominated by cars.

Organizing fun events and activities and celebrating with your neighbours builds relationships and strengthens the "social capital" in your community

reclaiming through activity

...getting people out into the streets

Street reclaiming through activity is about using the street or sidewalk for every day activities such as sitting on a chair, reading, playing hopscotch, fixing a bicycle tire, holding a meeting in a car parking space, or having a party. By bringing every day activities back into the streets, we are reversing the historical “retreat” of such activities from the street. This can bring back a sense of community, slow traffic, and make it more enjoyable and safe for people to walk, cycle, skate, and use other alternative modes of getting places.

Does increased activity in the street actually slow traffic down? Why not see for yourself? You’ll probably find that the unexpectedness and intrigue caused by your activities causes drivers to slow down to take a look. This is why it’s important to be friendly to drivers (even if you’d rather yell at them to slow down) so that they are intrigued rather than angered. A curious motorist is likely to slow down, while an angry one is likely to speed up.



Suggested guidelines

- Do not close the street to traffic
- Try to avoid using official signage or traffic cones to warn motorists of the reclaiming event
- Treat motorists with respect and as a guest

reclaiming through design

...decorating your street

Street reclaiming through design is about creating a unique environment in your street using features such as banners, sculptures, gardens, hanging baskets, and murals. It is about re-creating the feel of the street so that it is more of a people-centred environment.

The goals of reclaiming through design are to:

- further encourage traffic to slow down by increasing the intrigue and uncertainty factor already in place because of neighbourhood activity in the street;

- encourage even higher levels of neighbourhood activity;
- send a clear message to motorists that the street is a shared space: a space for both movement and neighbourhood building activity.

suggested guidelines

- Focus on creating ambiguity and intrigue about what's going on in the street:
- Create rooms rather than corridors - create walls, floor designs, entryways, ceilings, furniture, and art. Highlight the fact that the street, like a room, is a place to "live", not just to "move" from one place to another. Designing street "rooms" can be done on any street, including major arterials, as it doesn't change the physical layout of the street.
- Reduce traffic-oriented devices - you want to make the driver curious, not angry about being told to slow down.
- Evolve a unique personality for each street
- Create ever-changing streetscapes
- Build ambiguity and legibility - blur the lines between public and private space, and build multiple functions into elements of the street to stir curiosity. This need not remove the "legibility" of the street - the ability to "read" the purpose of the space and the accepted rules of etiquette.
- Don't master design. Design after use - allow people to adapt design features to the way they'd like to use the street.

physical street reclaiming

Street Reclaiming through design can include physical changes to the street that reuses road space saved through reduced car use. This could include putting a carpet square in the middle of the street, putting potted plants at street corners to narrow the roadway, and painting old chairs and placing them in the centre of the road to create a community meeting place. Such measures change the psychological feel of the street, and they also physically reclaim

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Street reclaiming is built on finding a better balance between the movement function and the neighbourhood-building function of streets. These events are to demonstrate how cars and people can coexist more harmoniously in the same space. If you do close the street to traffic, do not call it a Street Reclaiming event.

”

*-David Engwicht,
www.playforchange.com*

space for people-centred use.

Physical street reclaiming measures are not the same as traffic calming devices that instruct or force motorists to slow down or re-route. They entice motorists to slow down by piquing their curiosity and making the street an unpredictable place.

This kind of reclaiming must be done in cooperation with municipal planning and engineering departments, and should only take place once you and your neighbours have effectively reduced the number of vehicle trips you make. This way, you've demonstrated that you are part of the solution.

For more ideas about physical reclaiming, see *Street Reclaiming: Creating Livable Streets and Vibrant Communities* by David Engwicht, New Society Publishers, 1999.

street reclaiming is different from traffic calming

Over the past decade, many municipal governments have begun to implement neighbourhood 'traffic calming' measures. These include a wide range of methods used to slow down or restrict traffic such as speed humps, curb bulges, traffic circles, and diverters. These measures have proven highly effective in reducing vehicle speeds and volumes. What's more, such steps often spur further improvements, including bikeways, greenways, and improved pedestrian facilities such as street furniture and textured sidewalks.

But because it works so well, demand for traffic calming is high. And since traffic calming is ultimately dependent on engineers and other city staff, these structural changes take time and money to implement. Often, resources for neighbourhood traffic calming measures are limited. Furthermore, it is often the case that a majority of residents in the affected area must approve all traffic calming measures before they can be made permanent. Successfully organizing your community to approve restrictive traffic calming measures can take a lot of time and effort. So, not every neighbourhood will be successful in gaining the City's attention and resources, and those that are often have to wait many years until a traffic calming solution is implemented.

Street Reclaiming is a complementary strategy to traffic calming measures implemented by municipalities. It relies on community-based solutions to traffic concerns that are "driven" by the passion, urgency, and proximity of local residents. Street Reclaiming need not wait for City engineers' work order schedules.

how street reclaiming differs from traffic calming ²

	Street Reclaiming	Traffic Calming
Major focus	Convert street space into a place for social and cultural activity.	Slow down traffic... as a means to an end of making the street work as a space for social and cultural activities
Primary technique	Change the <i>psychological</i> feel of the street	Change the geometry of the street
Approach	<i>Incentives</i> for motorists to drive slower, and for people to walk and cycle	<i>Disincentives</i> for motorists to speed
Initiative & control	Residents	City
Covert message	Residents must accept responsibility for their part in traffic problems.	Other people cause traffic problems and should be dealt with in a punitive fashion.

dealing with short-cutting ³

Many neighbourhoods are overwhelmed with commuters cutting through neighbourhood streets to get from one arterial route to another. The natural response is to get angry and tell these commuters to go away, stay on arterial routes, and stay out of our neighbourhood.

While raising awareness of commuters to your traffic woes may keep some people from short-cutting on neighbourhood streets, it might also make some of them angry and drive even more aggressively. Furthermore, if we push cars onto arterial routes, we are simply shifting the problem. People live on arterial routes too, and they will then bear the brunt of increased traffic, noise, and pollution.

Another approach – and a principle underlying street reclaiming - is to convince motorists that they are guests on the street, and should behave accordingly. As David Engwicht says, “if you can get them to feel like a guest, they may think twice about wearing out their welcome by coming too often or acting inappropriately.”

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I do not believe that any neighborhood has the right to reclaim its streets while contributing to the destruction of someone else's. There is therefore a moral obligation on those wishing to reclaim their street that they first ensure that they have reduced their own car use to a minimum and that when driving, they act like guests in someone else's living room.

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*-David Engwicht, 1999.
p. 93*

Some suggestions using this approach are:

- Create entryways or a series of entryways to motorists feel like they're entering somebody's room
- Find fun ways to interact with motorists that are friendly – play music, offer cookies, put up welcome signs
- Keep motorists engaged – change decorations around, put up interesting facts about your neighbourhood, or poems for them to read along the way

street reclaiming includes reducing your own car use

Part of Street Reclaiming is understanding that residents must accept responsibility for their own driving habits, and the contribution this makes to neighbourhood traffic problems. Even along streets that are used as shortcuts for commuters passing through the neighbourhood, residents attempting to make their streets safer cannot ask others to modify their behaviour if they don't also modify their own.

That means you, your family, and your neighbours, taking responsibility for making your community a better place. Surveys can identify local traffic concerns. Adopting the 'Five Rs' of traffic reduction can help you reduce your household's car use. Simple community activities – a local car-sharing schedule, walking school-buses, or home made garden planters or signs – can help reduce vehicle use and its impacts.

lessons learned by street reclaimers

Between 2000 and 2003, BEST and three selected neighbourhood groups in Greater Vancouver partnered in carrying out a Street Reclaiming Pilot Project. Here are some benefits, challenges, and tips that BEST and neighbourhood groups learned during these projects.

benefits of street reclaiming

safer neighbourhoods

Through Street Reclaiming activities, residents can reduce and slow down traffic on their streets. This results in safer streets and reduced noise and pollution from vehicle traffic. Through the increased presence of people in the street and increased interactions among neighbours, people also feel safer in their community. And Street Reclaiming can create a more interesting streetscape, resulting in a pleasant environment for walking and cycling.

building community and involvement

One of the most obvious and inspirational benefits of street reclaiming is that it builds community. Block parties, street art, and other activities in the street are exciting, creative, wonderful community-building experiences that increase interactions among neighbours. People feel connected to one another, safer in their community, and motivated by others who share a belief in active citizenship. Neighbourhood involvement can build a sense of place and ownership. There is a real sense of pride and community among neighbours who participate in neighbourhood activities in the street.

creative solutions

Art and events in the street create a friendly atmosphere where neighbours can meet and socialize...with a surprise around every corner for the perceptive visitor. Street Reclaiming is a way for neighbours to come up with solutions that are unique to their neighbourhood, that reflect their values and creativity, and that they themselves can implement to address their concerns.

increased participation

Fun, informal neighbourhood activities make participation in group activities more accessible, and can attract people who usually can't or don't attend formal meetings. They give residents an opportunity to voice their concerns while being part of a solution. Street Reclaiming is a great way to empower people to take part in their community and make a difference in the quality of life in their neighbourhood.

“

The reclaiming activities brought me together with other neighbours where we got to know each other, create community and then talk about our concerns about traffic from there. It created a space for us to organize and feel hope in taking back our streets.

”

*-Karen Hawbolt,
Neighbourhood Traffic
Group*

community organizing strategies

Street Reclaiming activities have been a successful organizing tool that help neighbourhood groups to:

- gain profile and support in the neighbourhood;
- educate their neighbours about traffic problems and possible solutions;
- attract more residents to get involved in the group; and,
- focus on having fun and building community – ensures that people will continue to have energy to sustain these activities over time.



Kim Hendess

complements the “city process”

Neighbourhoods that are enthusiastic about carrying out a street reclaiming project are often already engaged with the City’s planning process and are seeking an additional strategy to address their problems. Street Reclaiming activities can be quite beneficial & complementary to this work. Increased awareness, dialogue, and community-building organized around transportation issues within the neighbourhood serve to increase pressure on the City to put resources into that neighbourhood, and to increase community support for traffic calming measures proposed by the City. Through fun street reclaiming activities, groups can also foster a more unified neighbourhood voice in communications with City staff & Council.

using a variety of strategies

The combination of “city process” oriented strategies with street reclaiming strategies that is being used by all three of our pilot neighbourhoods provides a model for how neighbourhood groups can work towards their goals from various angles, and achieve success through various means.

fun!

challenges

... a few bumps along the road

getting & keeping people involved

Language barriers, busy schedules, burn-out, and lack of community involvement can be difficult challenges to overcome. Renters or new neighbours often feel less connected to the community, or less invited to be involved.

lack of time & resources

When people are asked to commit time and resources, it helps if it's for fun action, rather than just meeting and planning. Planning is important in community organizing, but this must be balanced with fun action so people see the benefits of committing their time and energy.

burn-out

Too many meetings and not enough action, or too much responsibility being taken on by too few people can lead to group members feeling burnt out and losing steam.

morale

Hostile car drivers and persisting high volumes of speeding, aggressive traffic can be disheartening (and in worst case scenarios, unsafe).

communications

Cross-cultural outreach, overcoming language barriers, and finding volunteers to help with communications was a challenge.



Frank Zupan

“
...youth can always make
a significant contribution
to the development of
communities in which
they live.

“
-from *Building
Communities from the
Inside Out: A Path
Towards Finding and
Mobilizing a Community's
Assets*, John P. Kretzmann
& John L. McKnight

lessons learned – tips ⁴

getting people involved

Find lots of different ways for people to get involved, and share the work among a lot of people so nobody feels overburdened. Delegate work and form committees.

communicate with your neighbours & get noticed

Create an identity and put people in the streets. Inform your neighbours about your traffic problems and your street reclaiming strategies through leaflets, newsletters, posters, media, and through neighbourhood events. Be sure to provide translations into languages spoken by your neighbours, and establish an outreach or contact person who can translate and communicate with those who speak other languages. Word of mouth is key – most people attend events for the first time because a friend invited them.

build partnerships

Find out what resources the City or other community organizations can provide. Involve local businesses, community groups, community centres, artist, dance, or sports groups, schools, churches, etc. In a spread out community, collaborate with other community groups to attract more people.

don't accuse

You don't want to alienate those who rely heavily on driving an automobile, as these people are also part of the community, and are part of the solution to traffic problems. There is a delicate balance between accusing residents of automobile overuse, and urging residents to take responsibility for their car use, and to change negative patterns.

actively involve marginalized groups

Think of activities and communications strategies that will appeal to members of the community who don't often participate or feel invited. Think about children, youth, seniors, people from ethnic and linguistic minority

groups, single moms, and people with disabilities. The street is an ideal public place for people of all kinds to meet, mingle, and learn from one another.

focus your message on the ‘persuadables’

some people believe they have a right to drive wherever they want, whenever they want. Don’t spend too much time trying to convince these people otherwise; rather, focus on those who can be persuaded to learn from your message, change their driving habits, and get involved. Don’t be too disappointed if not everyone is on side with your goals – and stick to what you believe will benefit your community as a whole.



Kim Hendless

don’t polarize “us” and “them”

There are two schools of thought when it comes to street reclaiming. There are those who would like to reclaim the street by excluding cars completely, and there are those who believe the car has a rightful place on the street. We encourage you to consider the latter. Reclaiming streets means establishing, in David Engwicht’s words, a “new culture of respect for the dual role of streets for movement and social activity.”⁵

For example, if you are having a street party, consider keeping the street open so cars can get by – although slowly and one at a time. This way, car drivers will see that social activity and movement of cars can co-exist, and that they should drive cautiously and slowly at all times.

strategizing

integrate action into the planning stage

Focus on action. People want to see at least some of their ideas happen right away. This builds support, enthusiasm, and momentum among those residents involved in the process. Mix-up some annual well planned events with a few spontaneous actions.

be specific

Who is going to do what, when, and with whose help? What supplies are necessary? Who needs to be contacted?

have a rainy day plan

communicate & cooperate with City staff

Communicate early, communicate often, and communicate on a number of levels. A collaborative approach creates opportunities, while a confrontational approach can burn bridges. You'll likely find staff who support street reclaiming. While many street reclaiming activities contravene current city bylaws, it is possible to gain the support of City staff to enable smoother navigation through such rules and regulations. Street Reclaimers have found it very helpful to have a "champion" on Council or staff who jumps an idea through the formal hoops. It also can't hurt to ask the City to change the bylaws that prevent positive, community-building street reclaiming activities, and to support initiatives that enable communities to find creative solutions to local transportation problems.

be patient

Good things come to those who wait.

and be sure to have fun!



Kim Hendess

resources used in this section

1. This section is based on the ideas of David Engwicht, from *Street Reclaiming: Creating Livable Streets and Vibrant Communities* by David Engwicht, New Society Publishers, 1999; www.lesstraffic.com; and www.playforchange.com
2. Engwicht, 1999 p.122
3. This section is based on the ideas of David Engwicht, from www.playforchange.com. See the Street Reclaiming eBooklet.
4. Thanks to Susan Briggs for input on this section.



