

# Urban Play Streets: Creating and Operating Part-Time Traffic-Free Zones

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On weekdays during the summer, most inner-city residential streets are crowded with youngsters playing and dodging cars. Their parents are working and the kids on some blocks are using the local playground—the street.

Knoblauch (1) indicated that it is this same group of urban youngsters that is most represented in the pedestrian accident statistics. Blackman (2) indicated that the greatest danger to children comes from their undisciplined, incautious playful behavior near their homes. Backett (3) and Read (4) found that children who were victims of pedestrian accidents came from families with more maternal sickness, less maternal supervision, overcrowded homes, and areas with fewer play facilities than children in a similar group not involved in accidents.

Play streets carefully selected and approved by the residents can be very useful to the traffic engineer as one of a number of safety techniques to be considered for spot reductions of urban pedestrian accidents.

Gold (5), in his book *Urban Recreation Planning*, indicated that the basic need today is to make the planning process more responsive to the need for outdoor recreation in the inner-city neighborhood. Studies by the National League of Cities and a task force sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that there was little communication between the inner-city resident and the urban recreation planner. These studies recommended that facilities should be geared to meet the needs of the specific neighborhood and community rather than the entire city.

Considerable time (usually years) elapses between the discovery of people's recreational desires and the opening of a new facility. Playgrounds and parks require land and are expensive to construct. The cost of urban land is normally staggering. For example, a plot of 930 m<sup>2</sup> (10 000 ft<sup>2</sup>) can cost a million dollars or more, and the typical play street in New York provides more than 1580 m<sup>2</sup> (17 000 ft<sup>2</sup>) of recreation area.

The residents of densely populated low-income areas (especially the young and the elderly) have few recreational opportunities since their travel is limited and they do not go to areas having more abundant facilities and opportunities. The play street seems to fill a gap in offering urban recreational opportunities. Each play street can be developed to meet the unique needs of the street population and to suit the local topography.

## WHAT IS A PLAY STREET?

The play street is a residential street that is closed to vehicular traffic during specified hours to permit a supervised program of recreational activities to take place (Figure 1). A well-run play street is usually characterized by the presence of large numbers of youngsters and smaller numbers of adults engaged in such diverse activities as games, crafts, dancing, talking, sitting, watching, and so on. The play street is the meeting place and activity center for the neighborhood.

Play streets are generally located in densely populated lower income urban areas. The streets are normally one-way and there are few, if any, commercial establishments except on the street corners. The streets are barricaded with wooden sawhorses. Signs on stanchions or on the barricades are used to indicate the prohibition of through traffic and parking, as well as the hours and days when the restrictions are in effect (Figures 2 and 3). Equipment is normally provided for group street games (volleyball, basketball) and curb or sidewalk games played by one or two youngsters (board hockey). The surface of the typical play street is marked to facilitate many of these games (Figure 4).

Recreation departments in several cities use play streets as sites to temporarily locate mobile recreation vans. The play streets are usually sponsored by block associations and community organizations and provide the physical location for recreational programs for local residents of all ages.

It should be pointed out, however, that simply closing a street to traffic does not create a successful play street. The selection of a play street should include (a) developing recreational programs that have trained leaders, scheduled activities, and recreational

Figure 1. Philadelphia youngsters play in water from a fire hydrant.



Figure 2. Street barricade signs in New York City.



Figure 3. Roll-out sign used in New York City.



equipment; (b) ensuring that the adjacent streets will be able to replace the traffic capacity lost by closing the street; and (c) ensuring that closing the street will not create parking and delivery problems to the extent that most of the residents will object to the existence of the play street.

The main lesson that has been learned from previous programs is to be sure that the majority of the residents and merchants on the proposed play street are aware that parking problems will exist, are in favor of the play street, are willing to form a community organization to

Figure 4. Youngsters play baseball or learn to play basketball.



sponsor the play street, and are willing to provide their time for supervision, coordination with the local agencies, and storage of equipment. Successful play-street programs are characterized by community support and a continuation of community activities at times when the roadway is not closed to vehicular traffic (6, 7).

Very little information has been published concerning play streets. The information on play streets provided here was primarily derived from field surveys of the streets and interviews with the play streets' users, residents, and merchants and with the staff supervising the conduct of the play streets. These surveys were augmented by interviews with city officials in New York and Philadelphia.

First we observed play streets in New York City and Philadelphia. Structured surveys were then developed, two pilot tests were conducted, and 20 New York City play streets were randomly selected for surveys. Interviews with 200 children and 200 residents on 20 New York play streets were conducted. Some 500 observations were made of the number of people using the streets, the number of vehicles driving through the streets, and the number of parked cars. There were typically 272 family dwelling units on a play street and the street was used by 112 people. Among the findings were the following:

Item	Percent
Users who live on the street	67
Users who live within three blocks of the play street	95
Users who play on the play street every day	83
Users who stay home (playing, watching television) when not on the play street	52
Adults who were glad the street is a play street	92
Adults who thought the play street reduces the number of children hit by cars	97
Adults who were not in favor of opening the street to through traffic, even at low speeds	93
Adults who did not own cars	65
Adults who engaged in play-street activities	35
Ages of users:	
Under 15	55
15 to 19	25
Over 19	20
Benefits, as viewed by the staff supervising the play street:	
Social	54
Educational	25
Safety	12
Supervision	9

A detailed description of the survey and the survey results can be found in Reiss and Shinder (8, 9).

## SUMMARY

Today's cities house a high concentration of people who do not have access to recreation areas or facilities. These people generally are not mobile and they have a minimum amount of discretionary money. At the same time, local governments have limited money or land available for development and operation of recreational areas. The needs of communities change seasonally as well as from year to year. Local programs should be flexible in order to keep pace with the dynamic situation.

The potential for using "traffic-free zones" to solve these problems is significant. The streets are present in these high-need areas. The use of vehicles in these high-density residential areas is often minimal. The conversion costs are extremely small, since only enough funds to close the street are required.

People who understand traffic operations can play a major role in solving some of the problems. Traffic engineering departments must work together with the departments of social services, law enforcement, planning, and recreation and with the city manager, community organizations, and the residents in order to identify what the community wants and needs and how to meet these requirements in a safe, efficient, economical manner.

Resistance to tax increases, together with a desire for increased services, has played a role in creating urban monetary crises. The use of traffic-free zones merits consideration as a workable solution to some of the social, recreational, educational, and safety problems that exist in cities today.

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