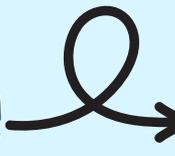


SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

GLIMPSESING A DIFFERENT KIND OF STREETScape



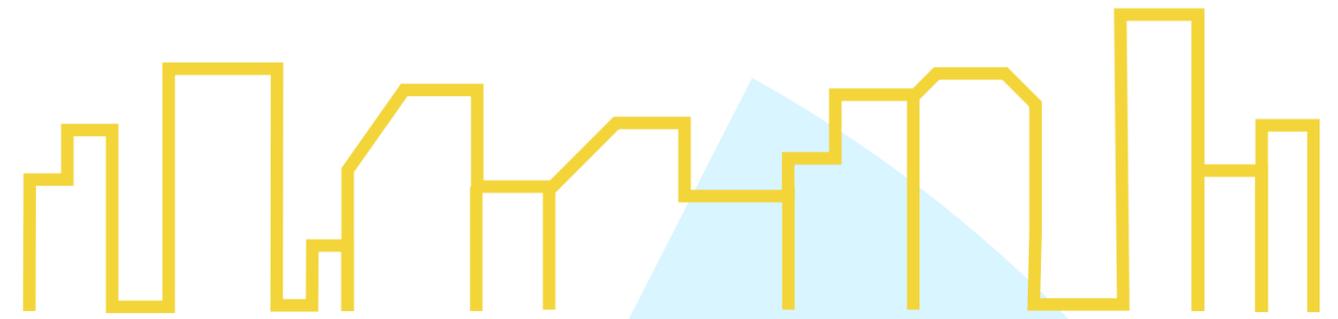
Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

GLIMPSEING A DIFFERENT KIND OF STREETScape



How claiming back urban space for people from cars makes healthy spaces



Throughout the lockdowns, streets around people's homes and town centres were rapidly transformed and repurposed. The most obvious change was the drop in traffic. In the United Kingdom, traffic dropped by **as much as 73%**,¹ reaching levels previously seen as long ago as 1955. With fewer cars clogging up the roads, the air became clearer. For the first time in ages, people could hear birdsong again and felt safe cycling on the roads. The low-grade and damaging hum of engines subsided.

And out on the streets, spaces and places began to alter in the face of a new reality. As physical retail was put temporarily on hold, the high streets' role as an enabler of consumption was challenged. In its place, came community – the high streets began to bubble up with spaces for children's play, community exchange and people getting together to help each other in a flowering of so-called 'mutual aid' groups. Life returned to high streets, but not as we had known it.

The shifts taking place on the streets were planned in some cases, organic in others. The flurry of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) introduced in the midst of the pandemic sought to galvanise active travel – walking and cycling and push cars out of cities. The results were significant, with **traffic accidents halving in areas with LTNs**.² Considering that **65% of cities' public realm is given up to cars**³ – and cars are static 80% of the time – claiming back space for people and communities was quietly revolutionary.



More organically, parents and children decided to turn streets into their own playgrounds where their imaginations could run wild. In Germany, the district office of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg – one of Europe’s most densely populated areas – **opened up 30 streets**⁴ on Sundays as temporary playgrounds. Play was hugely disrupted during lockdown, with potentially dire consequences for childrens’ mental health and social development. As research shows though, play is far more than just about learning for children, **it is a feeling**⁵ – a way of doing things, figuring them out for yourself, and living. And adults got involved too, shaking off society’s expectations and getting stuck into hop-skotch.

Creating space for children to play is vital to building a fairer, more cohesive society. In the UK, **1.5 million million people live in overcrowded accommodation**,⁶ with **one in eight households having no access**⁷ to a garden. These trends disproportionately effect ethnic minorities in urban areas all around the world, **who are less likely to have access to well-maintained green spaces**.⁸ A major US **nation-wide study**⁹ covering over 900,000 people showed that children who grew up with the lowest levels of green space had up to 55% higher risk of developing a psychiatric disorder independent of other known risk factors. Opening up spaces meant people could gather, learn and play together, **while also tackling the inequality of access to green spaces and clean air**.¹⁰ In terms of building community resilience in the face of the climate emergency, play could be the great enabler, leveler and connector.

And as children and parents poured out to play on the streets, they were aided by the innumerable amount of street art and murals that blossomed all around the world such as the **Artscape**¹¹ initiative in Sweden and **roller shutter graffiti**¹² in Italy. While the world logged onto Zoom, art filled the streets. Many of these murals provided a visual commentary on the unfolding COVID-19 crisis, from the **USA**¹³ to **Brazil**,¹⁴ while other pieces of street art honoured **the superheroes keeping us safe**.¹⁵ Street art played a vital role in pushing social boundaries, helping to recast the crisis people were living through and helping to illustrate the many mistakes made at the hands of the political class. Street art challenged power and playfully suggested that a different world could emerge from the pandemic; one that we were free to create.



Communities leaned towards self-reliance, using the disruption caused by the pandemic to build on their new found agency. The residents in **Bernal Heights, San Francisco**,¹⁶ started a local newspaper to keep everyone informed during lockdown and set up food and supply banks, pop-up bakeries and open spaces to celebrate the arts, with musicians, poets and opera singers all engaging new audiences. Streets became a place for communities to gather.

As streetscapes around the world transformed and diversified, people began to feel differently about those surrounding them, **with surveys noting an uptick in feelings of solidarity towards others**.¹⁷ The humble street, once obscured and ignored by stationary cars and rushing commuters, became a social space: people spent more time on the street, uninhibited by work or social commitments, and acknowledged and engaged with those around them. Social distancing became something merely physical.

Now that the world is emerging once more from COVID-19 restrictions, our ability to rapidly transform streetscapes, and the power of doing so, must be retained and developed further. The memories of traffic subsiding, the air clearing and people coming together as communities, bedded to a place and a people, can inspire new transitions. With the climate crisis posing profound challenges to society, fostering resilient communities where people share both necessities and luxuries cannot be underestimated. The streetscape provides a blank canvas on which any community can create.



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