Review of *inspiring case studies* Play Streets and School Streets

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELDS

Montréal Urban Ecology Centre

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The promotion of two innovative models to encourage free play

SHARED STREETS WHERE CHILDREN CAN PLAY

In recent years, Quebec has witnessed increased municipal interest in strategies promoting free play in public spaces. Following the project "In my street, we play," launched by the city of Beloeil in 2015, several dozen cities have authorized free play on selected residential streets, allowing young (and not so young people) to utilize public space to have fun, interact, play and move around in a safe, creative and friendly way.

"LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELDS" TO INTRODUCE TWO NEW MODELS OF STREET SHARING

Internationally, other arrangements for free play and independent mobility for children exist. With the project "Levelling the playing fields," the Montréal Urban Ecology Centre (MUEC) and the School of Public Health of the University of Montreal (ESPUM) are introducing two new models of street transformations which give children back the right to the city: the school street and the play street.

This research-intervention project led by multidisciplinary researchers and practitioners aims to deploy free-play pilot interventions in five Canadian communities, in order to observe and collect data on these two innovative models of re-allocating urban space in favour of young children.

This document defines the characteristics of school and play streets, then offers inspirational case studies to inspire Canadian practices.

Play Street: definition and benefits

DEFINITION

A Play Street is a residential street temporarily closed to car traffic to encourage free play and independent travel for children, but also for adolescents and local residents. The goal is to create safe and welcoming spaces near places of residence in order to give citizens back the right to use the public domain, while also contributing to better health, the power to act, and community cohesion. A play street creates a space that people of all ages and abilities can use creatively and as needed.

The creation of a play street is often based on a participatory process, with the residents of the neighbourhood, especially the parents, being particularly involved in the implementation and management of the system.

BENEFITS

As a light and inexpensive intervention which does not involve closing the streets to car traffic permanently, a play street improves the quality of life within the community where it is established. Play streets have a positive impact on the well-being of children and the whole community by:

- Offering a safe and friendly local public space, thanks to calmed motor vehicle traffic in residential areas;
- Encouraging more time spent outdoors and more physical activity for all residents;
- Allowing young people to play independently, freely and spontaneously in public spaces;
- Fostering social ties, including intergenerational, between members of the neighbourhood;
- Giving citizens back their right to the city, especially the most vulnerable populations; and
- Opening the decision-making process to residents of the area, including children.

Inspirational Case Studies

Ghent and Brussels, Belgium:
The Speelstraat or "streets reserved for games"

Project characteristics

These are residential streets temporarily closed to traffic during school vacation periods (Easter, Summer and September), between 2pm and 8pm. Only residents, emergency vehicles and cyclists have access to the street, at low speed and with priority given to children playing, pedestrians and cyclists. It is also recommended that residents do not park on the street during the play period, in order to provide more space for children.

Objectives

1. Provide children with a safe area to play and cycle on the street.
2. Give adults the opportunity to get to know their neighbours.

Mobilization of stakeholders and project implementation

A resident or a group of residents applies for a permit, which is granted by the city for two years under the following conditions:

- That the target street is predominantly residential, with minimal through traffic or regular public transit service;
- That at least two-thirds of the residents of the targeted street support its use as a Speelstraat.

Closing procedure

Designated sponsors manage the street closure, deploying the following **fixed barriers** during periods of free play:

- A C3 sign (red and white circular sign indicating that access is prohibited, in both directions, to any driver);
- An additional sign "street reserved for playing," which specifies the hours and/or days during which the street is closed.

Designate street sponsors

Residents become the resource persons for the City of Ghent and the neighbourhood. Their role is to:

- Survey residents before filing the application;
- Monitor and make appointments with the city;
- Manage road barriers (installation and removal);
- Supervise children (but they are not responsible for their safety);
- Act as the point person for questions from the city or from residents; and
- Evaluate the proper functioning of the projects.

Photos: City of Ghent

Seattle, "Play Street" Program

Project characteristics

Launched in May 2014, Seattle's program has grown rapidly, with more than 250 residents having applied for "Play Streets." The concept designates a street closure, which can be a single event or occur at regular times throughout the year (maximum of three periods per week). These periods are limited to six hours a day and must end by 10pm or before sunset.

Objectives

1. Encourage the use of local streets for free play, in an active and safe manner.
2. Promote social ties between neighbours of all ages.
3. Provide access to additional public spaces in areas where private parks and gardens are scarce.
4. Allow local traffic.

Mobilization of stakeholders and project implementation

Citizens (local residents or community groups) submit requests, after informing residents of the process (through pamphlets, a meeting, etc.), with explicit community support required. After the request is evaluated, the city grants a permit for a maximum of six months, following which the request must be renewed.

Photo: Paul Kiefer

Closing procedure

The City of Seattle provides standardized and mandatory signage, which must be installed at each end of the section closed to traffic:

- A "Play Street" sign, which also displays the contacts at the city to obtain more information on the process.
- A "no through traffic" sign notifying drivers of the street closure, except for local residents.

The purchase and installation of an adequate device to close the street is the responsibility of the residents (see green box below).

Photo: City of Seattle

Use a "tactical" and "homemade" street closure system

To manage street closures, two options are available:

1. Use garbage cans or private garden furniture.
2. Rent barriers from a local firm, for a relatively low cost.

Whichever option is preferred, the elements acting as barriers must be:

- Spaced no more than 5 feet apart
- Minimum 3 feet high
- Interconnected (by a rope, banners, etc.)
- Installed at the two extremities of the play street

The Playing Out Program in the UK

Project characteristics

Launched informally in June 2009 by two Bristol parents, this resident-led play street model has spread to hundreds of local streets within the UK, including the cities of Bristol and London, and to other countries such as Australia. These are temporary but consistent street closures, allowing children to play and move around freely. The program rests on several important pillars: each project is managed by the citizens, at a modest cost, using the existing space; the projects are sustainable and consistent over time; and they must be legal and inclusive.

Objectives

1. Encourage communities to regularly close their local street in order to foster free play for children.
2. Improve the health and well-being of children.
3. Increase community cohesion.
4. Help citizens to become actively involved and to rethink issues of the right to the city.
5. Accelerate changes in the use of the public domain, through light and inexpensive actions.

Mobilization of stakeholders and project implementation

The process takes approximately two to three months, from the citizens' request to the city to the implementation of the street closure.

Project leaders must consult local residents, then assign the following roles:

- **Organizer:** the project leader, who coordinates the periods of free play on the street, must be enthusiastic and fully committed to the process.
- **Stewards:** they are responsible for street security. Two reliable people are positioned at each vehicle entry point during each free play period.
- **Supporters:** people providing support are necessary for all tasks related to the project: helping to publicize it, preparing pamphlets, disseminating information, setting up suitable signage, documenting the project by taking photographs, etc.

Photos: Playing Out

Closing procedure

The rules may vary depending on the local city council. In general, it is advisable to:

-   Close the ends of the street with barriers, cones or garbage cans;
-   Install signs or place the "Playing Out" logo to publicize the project.

Positioned at the entrances to the street, the stewards have a major role in the proper functioning of the play street. With this in mind, they must:

-   Wear a fluorescent vest to be visible to everyone and easily identifiable;
-   Manage the safe passage of vehicles by talking to drivers to warn them, then whistling or shouting a clearly identifiable message to people playing on the street;
-   Warn children and adults of the end of the free play period, ten minutes before the street reopens.

Important lessons[1]

For residents, the biggest enabling factors are:

- Support from the neighbourhood and their peers;
- A simple and accessible municipal framework;
- Clear guidance;
- A basic kit for the management of lane closures.

It is also important to strengthen support in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods by offering concrete assistance to deploy the project, or covering certain costs (printing posters, etc.).

For municipalities, the obstacles identified are mainly linked to:

- A lack of clarity as to the legal base from which to deploy the project (because it is part of a national program, to be implemented with local regulations which may differ);
- Administrative costs;
- Concerns about potential risks to children and possible disputes between neighbours.

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1   Based on the analysis of Alice Ferguson (2019), Playing Out: a grassroots street play revolution, *Cities & Health*, 3: 1-2, 20-28.
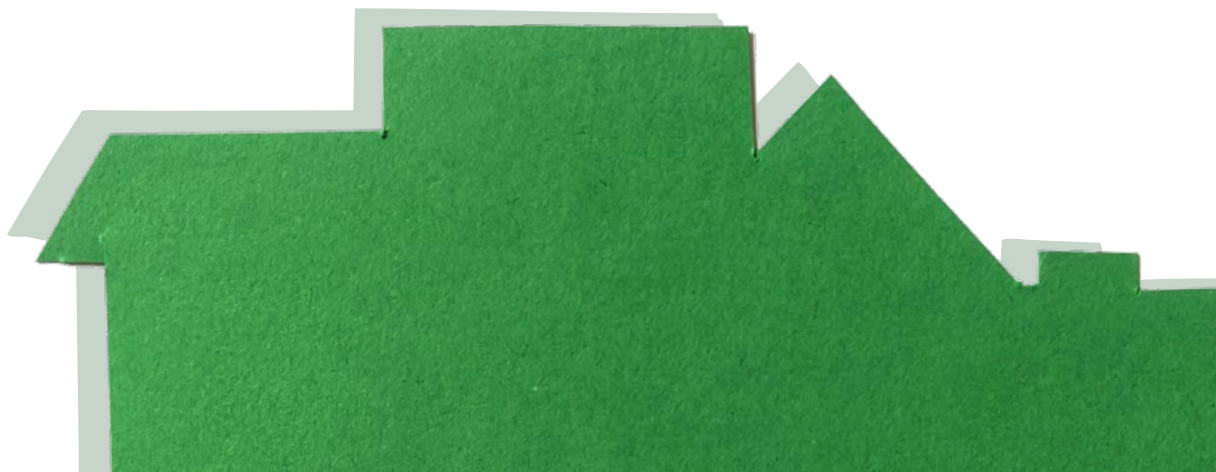
The "Rues aux enfants rues pour tous" program in France

Project characteristics

The program was launched in 2015, with the aim of creating free play spaces for children and adolescents near their homes, especially in vulnerable neighbourhoods where access to private gardens and green spaces is scarce. It is about making children want to play freely, but also allowing them to discover their environment, the street and the city and encouraging them to confront reality, to assert themselves, and to grow.

The project involves closing a street temporarily to motorized traffic for targeted periods, on a regular or event basis. Between 2016 and 2019, more than 80 "streets for children, streets for all" projects were implemented, including nearly 40 in disadvantaged areas.

Objectives

1. Reclaim public space for all.
2. Promote active modes of travel (walking, cycling, rollerblading...).
3. Encourage interaction through free play and encourage intergenerational ties.
4. Encourage citizens to want to pay attention to the built environment and rethink amenities (urban furniture, planting, etc.).
5. Involve children and adolescents in the fabric of the city by involving them in the organization of each "streets for children" (events, design, etc.).

Mobilization of stakeholders and project implementation

Establishing the street generally starts as a citizen initiative and is then based on a collaboration between local actors: parents, associations, neighbourhoods, etc. It sometimes happens that the municipality initiates the movement and deploys the means necessary for projects, especially in neighbourhoods with more precarious populations.

Closing procedure

The closed area is clearly demarcated, and access is managed by volunteers. Specific signage is put in place, with "Street reserved for play" signs. Play elements, mobile or not, ephemeral or not, can be installed, and events can be organized.

Photo: Rue de l'avenir

Accelerate changes in practice

The program encourages free play and active mobility but also offers organized activities with the aim of attracting children and adolescents, thereby promoting practical use and the progressive appropriation of public spaces.

Depending on the context of each project, the profiles of the children in the neighbourhood and the possible partnerships with local actors, the activities can vary greatly: toy library, active modes of travel (bicycle, scooter, roller skates, etc.), artistic or sporting activities, live shows, awareness-raising activities on road safety, the environment, architecture or sustainable development, DIY workshops, bicycle mechanics, street greening, etc.

Network project leaders

The collective that initiated the program is responsible for the review of existing projects, with the aim of disseminating best practices, creating support platforms, and encouraging the development of other "streets for children" in the French territory.

School Street: definition and benefits

DEFINITION

The concept[2] involves designating a street adjacent to a school to be closed to automobile traffic for a period of 15 to 90 minutes, during children's arrival and departure times. The goal is to create a friendly and safe environment around schools in order to encourage independent and active mobility for children. Its implementation is generally based on a participatory process involving the municipality, school staff, children, parents and community stakeholders.

BENEFITS

Like Play Streets, from which it borrows its typology, the establishment of a school street has a positive impact on the district and on its local residents. This includes the children, who benefit directly, but also their families, neighbours, teachers, etc.

In fact, the creation of a school street contributes to increasing the quality of the living environment in the area where the school street is implemented by:

- Improving safety and accessibility around the school for users coming on foot, by bicycle, by scooter, etc.;
- Promoting the independent mobility of children in their daily journeys;
- Easing car traffic during rush hour;
- Creating a play area or meeting point for children and families around the school;
- Reducing air pollution in the area during peak hours.

School streets also benefit the mental and physical health of children by encouraging active travel and creating calmer neighbourhoods (less noise, less conflicts between modes of transportation, etc.), and by promoting social interaction between individuals of the same age and between generations.

2   The school street concept is inspired by the Schoolstraat initiative.

Inspirational case studies

"School streets" pilot project, Edinburgh (UK)

Project characteristics

Launched in 2015, the pilot project was implemented over eight months around 11 targeted schools. A section of street adjacent to each school was closed to road traffic during children's arrival and departure times, i.e. every morning and evening from Monday to Friday for 30 to 60 minutes.

Mobilization of stakeholders

1. City Council and Transport and Environment Committee: The initiative was primarily municipal, with the selection of 11 schools for the first wave of pilot projects, according to the criteria of the School Streets pilot project evaluation.

2. School management and staff, students and parents: The mobilization and implementation of pilot projects were then carried out through a collaboration between local actors.

Project stages and regulatory aspects

1. Phasing of the pilot project: In collaboration with the principals of the identified schools, the municipality decided to carry out six projects in the first phase (2015) and three projects in the second phase (2016).

2. Impact studies and awareness by the municipality: Updating the School Travel Plan to encourage active transportation, dissemination of information, study of mobility dynamics, etc.

3. Regulations and implementation: Adoption of an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) and implementation of signage warning motorists of the closure of the street during the beginning and ending of the school day for the eight-month study period.

4. Evaluation of the pilot projects: The idea is to continue the project on a permanent basis, based on the results of the impact study, which examined the following elements:

- Changes in the use of cars for transporting children to and from school
- Increased walking as a means of transportation to school
- Moving drop-off points further from the school for children who continue to be driven by their parents
- Speed and volume of traffic
- Air quality in the targeted sector
- Acceptability of the project by the local community (parents, children, residents, etc.)

Closing procedure

- Signs prohibiting the passage of motorized vehicles (except for emergency vehicles and residents)
- Police presence to enforce the closure of the street

Related program to support active mobility:

Walk Once a Week (WOW) Program: Supported by Living Streets, the WOW campaign encourages young people to walk to school by granting badges if the student walks to school at least once a week for a month.

Photos: North Edinburgh News

"School streets" pilot project, Camden, London (UK)

Project characteristics

This is the first school street pilot project in the city of London, initiated in 2017, around four schools in the district.

Mobilization of stakeholders

Led by the Camden Borough public health team, the program aimed to carry out the initiative in collaboration with schools. A call for projects addressed to school administrators and the public was issued in order to identify the participating schools in the temporary school street pilot project. Other city actions related to planning, consultation and evaluation activities were organized to promote walking and cycling.

Actors mobilized: **School principals, parents, members of the local and school community**

Objectives

1. Reduce road traffic around the school.
2. Make the streets near the school safer when children arrive and depart.
3. Reduce car transport to school.
4. Improve air quality in the area.

Related approaches helping to promote active mobility in children:

Transport for London (TfL), Sustainable Travel: Active, Responsible, Safe (STARS) program: This certification system rewards schools that organize:

- Awareness and education activities for active transportation
- Concrete initiatives to increase the number of children walking and cycling to school

Walking School Bus initiatives are also helping to increase active trips to school by offering children collective walking trips supervised by parents or volunteers.

Photo: Healthy School Street

Project implementation stages and regulatory aspects

1. Selection of participating schools according to the following criteria:

- The anticipated benefits for the area of implementation
- The rate of collisions over the past three years
- The surrounding pedestrian and cycling networks
- The involvement of schools in planning how their students travel

2. Formal agreement between the municipality and the school principals.

3. Regulations: In the UK, the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 (s1 and s6-9) gives municipalities the right to restrict or regulate road traffic, with the aim of promoting user safety. The adoption of an Experimental Traffic Order (ETO) allows temporary measures to be carried out.

4. Implementation of facilities and evaluation: Implementation, impact study and consultations with the various stakeholders, with the aim of guiding decision-making.

5. Making permanent improvements based on the results of the evaluation.

Closing procedure

- Retractable bollards set up by school staff
- Temporary or permanent one-way signs
- Signage prohibiting car traffic during certain periods or permanently in the case of the establishment of a one-way street
- Photo radar to fine vehicles on school corridors during prohibited periods

Photo: Beth A. Birmingham

Four-day school street experiment, Mountview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario

Project characteristics

Initiated by the organization 8 80 Cities and supported by the city of Toronto, a school street pilot project was tested for a four-day period at the end of October 2019. A section of Mountview Avenue in front of the school was closed to road traffic for one hour during children's arrival and departure times, i.e. between 8am and 9am and then between 3pm and 4pm. The school bus stop was moved to an adjacent street, and the children walked the remaining 50 metres to the school across the closed street.

The project, implemented with the help of school volunteers and students, aimed to set up a car-free environment and to encourage the independent, active and sustainable mobility of children in a safe context.

Project implementation stages and regulatory aspects

1. **Start-up (May):** Documentation of inspiring practices, support from a city councillor and choice of site.

2. **Mobilization of stakeholders and validation of the school (June):** 8 80 Cities, the EcoKids association, representatives of the councillor of the chosen school, and the sustainable development office of the local school board. The school principal agrees to the project.

3. **Regulations (July and August):** 8 80 Cities, the office of Councillor Gord Perks, and the transportation department of the City of Toronto work on the regulatory framework for the project. The option chosen is to request a street closure permit for an event, which is easier to obtain but which limits the intervention to a four-day period. Dialogue with the school to choose the dates and submit the permit to municipal authorities.

4. **Feasibility (mid-September to mid-October):** Collaboration between 8 80 Cities and the "Street Events" unit to clarify the scope of the permit and make field visits in anticipation of the school street pilot.

5. **Implementation of the project (October 28 to 31, 2019):** Launch of the project on the first day, with a press conference, a speech by the city councillor and school and festivities leaders. Street closure managed by volunteers.

Objectives

1. Reduce pollution around the school.
2. Reduce stress and chaos associated with children's arrival and departure times.
3. Promote physical activity in children.
4. Reduce automobile travel.

Closing procedure

- **Road signs** notifying the public of the street closure, provided by the city.
- **Six handcrafted wooden barriers**, inspired by a model of the open source platform "Wikiblock": low cost ($50 per unit), easy to build (assembled without screws or nails), and attractive (painted in bright colours to create an inviting atmosphere).

During the two closed periods, volunteers installed the barriers at both ends of the street, as well as in front of the entrance to an underground parking lot. During the day, the barriers were put aside but left on the street, and they were stored in the school at night. When the street was closed, at least four volunteers were present, identifiable by fluorescent jackets, to enforce the street closure, inform the public about the project, operate the office of the "engagement hub," and collect the impressions/sentiments of users.

Best practices for mobilizing children and parents:

- **Rely on an association which involves the students:** The school's "Eco Team," including a teacher and students, created and circulated posters in classes to publicize the project. The team also collected data before and after the project and provided equipment to play on the street. Their enthusiastic involvement helped to mobilize the school.

- **Organize a festive launch (here, with a red carpet!):** To publicize the initiative, unite the community and celebrate collective commitment.

- **Set up a kiosk on site:** To inform residents, generate dialogue around the project and encourage the mobilization of stakeholders.

One-day pilot project, Sir James Douglas Elementary School, Victoria, British Columbia

Project characteristics

This was the first street school pilot project in the city of Victoria, a one-day event to test the street closure system around a primary school. A small section of the street adjacent to Sir James Douglas Elementary School (located between the main access street and the school staff parking lot) was closed for two 45-minute periods at the start and end of the school day. Children and parents were encouraged to come to school on foot or by bicycle.

Despite the difficulties, especially regarding regulatory aspects, the project was appreciated by the majority of parents. A working group has been set up to extend and replicate this initiative around other schools in the city of Victoria.

Mobilization of stakeholders and implementation of the project

The process involved a large number of actors with the following responsibilities:

1. **Parents, members of the school's active transportation committee and school administration:** Mobilization of several stakeholders concerned about the safety of children around the school during the start and end of the school day.

2. **School administration and City of Victoria:** Validation of the parents' interest in the implementation of a school street pilot project, then implementing the temporary event for the day.

3. **City of Victoria, community players:**
   a. Establishment of a working group focused on the creation of other school street projects across the City, in particular by the addition of school streets in the City of Victoria's 2019-2022 strategic plan.
   b. Creation of a guide for the implementation of school streets in 2019.

Objectives

1. Make local streets safer.
2. Promote physical activity and independent mobility.
3. Improve air quality.
4. Create social ties in the neighbourhood.
5. Reduce car traffic.

Best Practices identified[3]

- **Propose related activities to involve the community:** workshops on active mobility, games, etc.
- **Involve teachers**, in addition to other stakeholders such as parents and school administration.
- **Redistributing traffic** is not always a big problem.

Photo: Katherine Brandt

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3   According to the 8 80 Cities *School Streets Guidebook*: https://www.880cities.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/school-streets-guidebook-2019.pdf