

# Cities worldwide took space for cars and gave it to people during the pandemic. Will it stick?

June 8 2021, by James Irwin, Joan Tupponce

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Parklet outside Scoop in the Fan. The seating area expands room for people to dine outdoors by repurposing a curbside parking space. Credit: Tom Kojcsich, University Marketing

The one constant during the pandemic is change, especially as it relates to how we use space. Since early 2020, a flurry of physical changes have taken place in our everyday lives, reshaping everything from how and where we gather to the way we shop for groceries, affecting public streets and spaces as well as the business sector. Localities and companies alike are facing challenges as they strive to meet changing demands for the way people live, move about and enjoy communal time together.

Some of the biggest changes have taken place in the public realm—on streets and sidewalks and in parks, plazas and other open spaces that collectively make up the outdoor living room of our communities. Over the past year, in cities around the world, streets typically reserved for vehicles have been converted into pedestrian-and-bike-friendly boulevards, pocket-sized urban parks have been created by repurposing unused curbside parking spaces, and restaurants have moved seating onto the sidewalk.

These quick retrofits of public (and sometimes private) space are pandemic-shaped examples of tactical urbanism: low-cost—and often temporary—changes to the built environment intended to improve neighborhoods and gathering places; a way to test ideas that change space without making a full commitment.

"If something is not working, you can make changes quickly. If it becomes attractive, it becomes permanent," said James Smither, an assistant professor in the Urban and Regional Studies and Planning program at the Virginia Commonwealth University L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs.

As we inch closer to the end of the pandemic, what, if any, of these changes will become permanent? The next two stories in this series will examine that question.

## Tactical urbanism around the globe and at home

Around the world, short-term projects that prioritize pedestrians and have been adapted permanently demonstrate powerful transformations of public space.

In Paris, longtime efforts to expand pedestrian zones and reduce car use—including pedestrianizing the Seine quayside—have accelerated during the pandemic. Mayor Anne Hidalgo has championed the idea of a [15-minute city](#) and is aiming to [significantly reduce car use in the city center](#). The latter will not only help to lower pollution but also allow for cycle lanes and pedestrian areas. Halfway around the world in the United States, many cities temporarily closed streets to through traffic during the pandemic to allow pedestrians more room to walk, jog or bike. (In various cities, debates are continuing over whether to make these changes permanent.)

Meanwhile, in Richmond last summer the conversion of the grassy area beneath the Robert E. Lee monument into a public gathering space reflects a progressive, community-generated form of tactical urbanism. After the murder of George Floyd, and before the city installed fencing for the future removal of the Lee statue, people came to the circle to reflect on issues related to social injustice. But while they were there, they also protested, installed small memorials and played basketball. The official use of the space remains in limbo. Gov. Ralph Northam ordered the statue's removal, but two lawsuits against that action that were struck down by a Richmond judge are now to be heard in the Virginia Supreme Court, possibly as early as this month.

Elsewhere in Richmond, a pilot program between the city and Venture Richmond is repurposing unused parallel parking spaces into tiny parks. Called "parklets," these small public areas are often in front of restaurants where people can sit and eat take-out meals. They typically

repurpose parking spaces or a lane that was previously devoted to cars. Parklets originated in San Francisco more than 10 years ago but more recently have been adopted by a growing list of cities including Los Angeles, Seattle and New York.

"San Francisco was an early adopter of this to engage the public at the street level," said Jason Alley, provisional policy adviser for Richmond. "The parklets are usually in denser areas that don't have parks already."

Richmond started its parklet project with five locations: Joe's Inn (205 N. Shields Ave.), Nile Ethiopian restaurant (306 N. 29th St.), Stir Crazy Cafe (4015 MacArthur Ave.), Hot for Pizza (1301 W. Leigh St.), and Scoop (403 Strawberry St.).

"We are trying to position them around businesses that have carry out," Alley said.

The city purchased these parklets using federal CARES Act money. A few custom-designed parklets that will be located elsewhere in Richmond are in the process of getting approval through the city's permitting process.

## **Trends already in place**

As in Europe (though to a lesser extent) converting streets from vehicle-only into pedestrian- and bike-friendly corridors has been an ongoing trend in cities around the United States, including Richmond.

In 2014, the city created a [Complete Streets policy](#) to become a bike- and pedestrian-friendly city. Then in 2018 it adopted the Better Streets manual. The concept includes streets designed and operated to be safe, comfortable and convenient for all users regardless of age, ability or mode of travel.

As part of this approach—and to make the city friendlier for people who walk and bike—the Department of Public Works has implemented several "quick build" techniques to accelerate creation of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. The department has added 421 high-visibility crosswalks in the past four years. The city now has over 53 miles of bike lanes—30 of those miles have been added since 2017, including buffered and protected lanes on Franklin Street, Brook Road and Patterson Avenue. In May, the Department of Public Works began engaging the public on six new corridors that present opportunities for enhanced bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure to be completed as part of the city's paving and resurfacing program over the next 12 months.

The projects are an important part of the city's commitment to Vision Zero, which began in 2017, and support a multimodal approach by implementing safety improvements such as high-visibility crosswalks for people who walk, accessible curb ramps for people who roll and dedicated space for people who bike or scoot.

"The city of Richmond is one of the more progressive cities that incorporate quick-build tactical urbanism techniques directly into its maintenance-related transportation programs," said city transportation engineer Michael Sawyer.

These steps to redefine space and mobility also connect to efforts related to climate change, sustainability and long-term regional planning, from the city's [Richmond 300 master plan](#) to its climate action and resilience planning initiative, RVAgreen 2050. More locally, VCU's 2018 master plan devotes entire sections to a vision for a walkable, accessible and safe environment that offers opportunities to improve bus, bicycle and pedestrian circulation on and between the Monroe Park and MCV campuses. The university is exploring dedicated bike lanes and improving streetscapes and intersections to improve mobility and safety. It isn't a new concept: This past winter, VCU was the only university in

Virginia to earn gold status as a [Bicycle Friendly University](#) from the League of American Bicyclists. And the university's most recognizable location, The Compass, is the site of a pedestrianized street intersection.

"Shafer Street was pedestrianized. It is only pedestrian from Franklin Street to Main Street," said Smither, the urban planning professor. "The Compass is a very active place for students and faculty."

## **Will these urbanism practices stick post-pandemic?**

Sera Erickson, bicycle program and alternative transportation coordinator for VCU Parking and Transportation, believes trends promoting walkability that predate the pandemic are likely to continue. She sees car-free streets as a trend in the future.

"One of the goals of RVAgreen 2050 is that every person in Richmond be located within a short walk of a green space. I know the mayor has also promised more parks," Erickson said. "A lot of the ways people are solving this problem is by doing this kind of urbanism, taking parking spaces and turning them into parklets, reclaiming parking lots to be green spaces, etc."

Erickson supports the concept of more car-free streets.

"Car-free streets encourage walking and other outdoor activity, as well as economic growth in those areas," she said. "For instance, once the streets in the 17th Street Farmers Market area in Richmond became car free, more outdoor seating sprang up and ultimately allowed those businesses to function during COVID-19 and even increase some of their business."

[There is evidence](#) that her thoughts on the economic benefits of walkable places are valid. But whether practices employed during the pandemic—including a rapid expansion of car-free streets and extended

outdoor dining—will continue in the future remains unknown. For answers, we'll likely need time, but consumer trends provides some clues.

"A typical adoption-rate curve suggests that consumers' adoption (using a product or service more than once) of new business marketing offerings can start slowly, increase and eventually level off and start declining," said Jodie Ferguson, Ph.D., an associate professor of marketing at the VCU School of Business.

The pandemic forced a more "sharply increasing adoption rate of services," Ferguson said. And consumers are likely to continue using services implemented during the pandemic "now that they are familiar," she added.

One of the wild cards is the [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#), which was signed into law on March 11. While the timing, use and amount of funds going to states and cities is yet to be determined, it is likely that Richmond will receive millions of dollars in federal funds. The plan includes \$30.5 billion to support a variety of public health and economic issues related to COVID-19 as well as funding to support public transportation systems.

In the meantime, debate continues over whether to make some of these short-term changes permanent. That conversation likely will look different depending on the country, though demand for increasing access to public space is relatively universal—and not a new concept. The idea of converting streets with vehicular traffic into pedestrian- and bike-friendly spaces has been practiced in Europe with success. Copenhagen, Denmark, pedestrianized the city's main street, Strøget, in 1962, and the [city](#)'s pioneering effort resulted in increases in pedestrian volume and cafe seating along the street. Other European cities that have followed suit include Vienna, London and Paris.

Though Smither doesn't believe there will be a major shift in the U.S. adopting this type of concept in the next decade—"in the U.S. there is more emphasis on cars than on train, transit and bicycle infrastructure," he said—American cities that have permanently returned a [street](#) or section of an area to pedestrians and cyclists include New York, Miami Beach, Tampa and Los Angeles.

"One of the best local examples in Virginia is the Downtown Mall in Charlottesville," Smither said. "That changed in the 1990s. It was their Main Street. It allowed some traffic to cross Main Street perpendicular. That allowed people to see the mall and navigate around."

Smither sees all these changes—permanent and temporary—as a gain for tactical urbanism in general.

"People are more aware that these can be options they can explore," he said. "Tactical urbanism is do-it-yourself planning. I think there will be more of a demand for that."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

Citation: Cities worldwide took space for cars and gave it to people during the pandemic. Will it stick? (2021, June 8) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-06-cities-worldwide-space-cars-gave.html>

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