

**Reimagining Local Government Conference
Chapman University**

**Streetfilms as a Public Resource On Public Space
By Clarence Eckerson**

As a livable streets filmmaker for the past twenty years, it's been both my primary responsibility and passion to document cities around the world, and much of that has revolved around public spaces and the what goes on in them.

The bulk of my work has been done via the website Streetfilms, a non-profit resource promoting "*transportation best practices*" through short films, where I've been the Director for over ten years. In that time, I've produced, shot or edited over 700 shorts on the topics of transportation, walking, biking, public plazas, street interventions and open streets public events - where our roads become open to people and activity. All of our videos are free for the public to use in screenings, for communities to show to elected leaders and for journalists & advocates to embed in written stories on related transportation topics. We are nearing the 11 million views mark since 2006, and are consistently cited as an inspiration by experts and leaders across the world.

As mentioned previously, a healthy percentage of Streetfilms' work has been devoted to advocating for more public space by showing great projects and their evolution. As is the case, many stories involve a myriad of city agencies, small non-profits and the community, but sometimes involve big business, mega developers and citywide advocacy groups as well. What happens at the intersection of these players can be benign or

contentious and what public uses are permitted or negotiated is crucial to if a space feels free, open and safe.

I've been very fortunate to be in dozens of countries throughout the world to see public space in action. Before I film in a location I'm unfamiliar with, I often make advance contact with many well-respected advocates to collect valuable history and their personal thoughts. Then typically on my first day on the ground I usually just walk. Walk and observe. To see how a space "feels": Do I feel good there? Do people seem happy? Is there spontaneity? Too much commercialism? Is there a large presence of security that hovers over it making the space feel like it comes with constraints?

The best public spaces are ones that foster a happy environment for people to sit, mingle, date and relax. You can tell right away if people are gathering freely and you might even see the occasional protest or citizens concerned for human rights collecting signatures and such.

In 2010, I produced the wonderful Streetfilm "**Copenhagen's Car-Free Streets & Open Spaces**" (link: vimeo.com/13826541). Happiness and energy abounds throughout it. And it contains one of my favorite filmed moments: at the 1:40 mark watch as Gil Penalosa, Executive Director of *8-80 Cities*, is speaking about car-free environments when a spontaneous school celebration breaks out behind him. In "**Stockholm: The Walkable City**", (link: vimeo.com/122821176) people roam the car-free streets and plazas of the old city without a care in the world, some even swim while basking on simple wood

platforms along the water. In Austin, Texas, the city closes its famous music nexus “**6th Street Car-free Nights**” a few times per week to let music lovers roam freely (link: vimeo.com/144129249). And while visiting **Buenos Aires** (link: vimeo.com/100368046) people took over the streets surrounding the famous Obelisco monument following a 2014 World Cup Semifinal Victory. Wherever you go, it’s *obvious* that letting people have space is a democratic right that we need to do even more of.

One place I absolutely adore for public space is Montreal. Every summer for a few months, large sections of the city are given back to the people. One which is a huge success is “**Montreal’s Car-free Rue St. Catherine**” (link: vimeo.com/73115761) an over mile long, 24-hour corridor which bustles with people, food, art and nightlife.

But there’s plenty in Montreal for families as well. Every year in April they bring out “**Montreal’s 21 Swings (21 Balançoires)**” (link: vimeo.com/97090808), where people of all ages ride swings and thus knowingly participate in musical masterpieces with strangers. And even in just the *sidewalk realm*, Montreal can soar as here in “**A Montreal Neighborhood Intersection Morphs into a Wonderful Public Space**” (link: vimeo.com/73285141) where ample sidewalks, traffic calming and colorful benches draw people to eat, chat, and relax.

When it comes to creating public plazas in the United States, New York City has prospered. Under the leadership of N.Y.C. D.O.T. Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan (2007 to 2013) the Bloomberg Mayoral Administration enacted more projects to better

accommodate the majority of users on streets by questioning the amount we've cater to private vehicles. Dozens of plaza and streets projects followed.

Although many have forever linked Mrs. Sadik-Khan's name with the grand car-free plazas of Times Square, many folks will probably be stunned to see the initial project that got it started. In 2007, the neighborhood of D.U.M.B.O., Brooklyn became the inaugural plaza of her tenure, "**Paint a Parking Lot, Put Up a Paradise**" (link: vimeo.com/12499682). It showed how a dead triangle for parking cars could be revived as a public place with relatively inexpensive materials, art installations, paint and movable chairs.

From there the projects got more ambitious, adding "**The Transformation of NYC'S Madison Square**" in 2008 (link: vimeo.com/12499469) before finally tackling the *Crossroads of the World* the following year "**In Appreciation of the New Times Square**" (link: vimeo.com/12796518). Both squares are highly thriving people-centers today.

But the administration was determined to not let just Manhattan-ites and tourists benefit from the plaza plan. Thus once it was a proven concept new ones went up in places like "**Queens' Corona Plaza: A Community Place Rises**" (link: vimeo.com/48493960) which one could argue has more community life, diversity and vivacity than other plazas in the city. It's currently slated to be made permanent under a multi-million dollar plan in 2017.

I'll add, that due to the attention of all these changes, the most watched Streetfilm of all-time (that's nearly 500K plays) is "**NYC Metamorphosis**" (link: vimeo.com/83173191) which details over a dozen livable streets "before & afters" that spans my time being employed at Streetfilms.

Yes, an extremely good, high-quality public space can be created by government. But they can also be temporarily created by "the people" with interventions. And once proven many can go on to become permanent when a city sees a committed groundswell of support. On Streetfilms we have covered ample journeys.

Perhaps there is no group that better does this than Jason Roberts' affiliation *The Better Block* which got started in Oak Cliff, Texas. You can see their style of people engagement on display here "**The Better Block Celebrates Four Years of Re-imagining Streets**" (link: vimeo.com/95573182) where the community not only fosters a fun, lively environment but creates temporary businesses and events in vacant storefronts over many days to draw visitors.

One of our first major hits came from covering The Village Building Convergence's "**Intersection Repair**" (link: vimeo.com/12500072) in Portland, Oregon in 2007, a project where hundreds of city residents take back their streets and neighborhoods by creating calmed intersections with art and paint which then serve as a logical village commons.

I'd like to add another video "**A Car-free Street Grows in Queens**" (link: vimeo.com/15514741) as well, where a large group of residents in Jackson Heights wanted more parkland and areas to recreate for kids. They formed a group and made it their mission to take back an entire street (78th) devoted to parking vehicles and liberate it. Today it is permanently mapped as parkland.

There are so many more Streetfilms and topics we could explore, but it is far better to visit the site and sift and browse our 700 film collection. However, I will close with one final thought, which is the amazing display of humanity anytime a city conducts ciclovias or open streets, giving the streets back to its residents for a given time period. It is the ultimate form of democracy, allowing people to do whatever they want (bike, run, walk, picnic, dance) with neighbors and friends. Back in 2007, we published a remarkable Streetfilm on Bogota, Colombia's "**Ciclovía**" (link: vimeo.com/15514741) that proved to be a game-changer for cities across the U.S. and the world.

As people circulated it and got excited, pods of citizens in cities used it to convince their elected officials that they needed to do this wonderful thing too! As a result, in 2008 copious cities hosted their first events including Portland, NYC, San Francisco, and Chicago. And in 2014, Streetfilms assembled "**The Rise of Open Streets**" (link: vimeo.com/78886448) as a sort of a tribute to the myriad places that have been regularly closing their roads for people and to inspire those that still haven't to do so.

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