

Lessons from Barcelona's Superblocks Model

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Many people in the United States, particularly communities of color and low-income residents, lack sufficient access to quality parks and green spaces, preventing them from enjoying the economic, health, social, and environmental benefits that parks provide. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the value of open public spaces for mental and physical health and has accelerated efforts to adapt and repurpose underutilized public space for community use. Some places in the US have begun to expand access to public park and green spaces by converting streets and sidewalks and curating vibrant experiences through programming, placemaking, and art. And US policymakers can learn from cities abroad that have pioneered large-scale efforts to reclaim streets and other public spaces for local residents; Barcelona's superblocks program is one notable example.

Policy Innovation

Superblocks were conceived as a way to meet demand for public space by reducing through-traffic and repurposing streets. In 2016, Barcelona began implementing the superblocks program as part of a broader mobility plan that improved equitable access to green space. Key elements of the program include intentional design to foster walkability; a clear governance structure with a strong mayoral champion; a comprehensive approach to several elements of environmental and social well-being; and collaborative and inclusive community engagement.

Key Takeaways for US Policymakers

1. Communities can **capitalize on the lessons from temporary urban space innovations** during the pandemic, making successful projects and strategies permanent.
2. Local governments can **align transportation, permitting, and land-use policies** to build a variety of citizen spaces that use different funding streams and expertise.
3. Greening practices can **foster more resilient communities** by activating civic infrastructure, mitigating noise and air pollution, and managing stormwater runoff.
4. By **prioritizing community participation** in pilot projects, policymakers can tailor design and implementation to local needs, garner sustained community support, advance a collaborative leadership and stewardship model, and strengthen community trust in local government.

Bottom Line

Superblocks offer one approach to reclaiming streets for people and producing popular community areas with tangible social and environmental benefits. Although the full superblock model may not work in some American cities, some elements, such as strong community engagement, design pilots, and alignment between transportation and land-use policies and programs, can be adapted to yield successful outcomes for communities.

This fact sheet draws from the Urban Institute Brief "From Streets to Citizen Spaces: Positioning Parks and Green Spaces in an Equitable COVID-19 Recovery," available at <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/streets-citizen-spaces>.