

A Different Kind of City



In September, my partner and I were lucky enough to spend a week in Barcelona, and on our first evening, jet lagged and weary but anxious to see the sites, we left the hotel and walked a few blocks to the city's most famous street, the Rambla.

What I expected to see was a car-crowded avenue filled with high end shops and restaurants, with pedestrians squashed - as they are in most major North American cities - into two narrow sidewalks along a four lane thoroughfare.

What I saw was the antithesis of that. On the Rambla, it's the cars and delivery trucks, not the people that are squashed into single lanes running down either side of what can only be described as a broad pedestrian corridor in the center – a plaza crowded with trees, planters and people on foot, on benches and in outdoor cafes.

I was dumbstruck. How, I wondered, could a city of 1.6 million people give over a major traffic artery to people instead of cars? Had it always been that way or was this something new?

So I started digging and quickly realized that the redesigned Rambla was just one part of an inspiring plan to put people and climate resiliency at the top of the city's agenda.

Just take something as small as Barcelona's commitment to making water freely accessible to pedestrians. Dotted through the city and on major arteries like the Rambla and the Diagonal, are some of the most beautifully designed public water taps imaginable.

Those 1700 public taps aren't just beautiful, they're functional both for over-heated tourists and locals, and especially for the homeless. And they've been installed because Barcelona's leaders understand that access to water is critical in a city that's facing increasingly hot, dry summers due to climate change.

But Barcelona's climate resiliency ambitions go far beyond water taps. In addition to creating climate shelters throughout the city - air conditioned schools and other buildings where people can take refuge during heatwaves - the city has several other projects underway to climate proof their city and reduce emissions.

Central to that strategy is a master plan to expand the city's greenspaces by an extra one square meter per city resident. And with a population double the size of Winnipeg *that* is a lot of greenery.

At the heart of that effort is "Trees for Life," Barcelona's tree master plan, overseen in a close collaboration between forestry and other key departments like city planning and public works. The long term aim of that and the city's Nature Plan is to increase canopy cover, improve the connectivity between green areas and increase greenery in the more dense zones of the city.

In order to do that, Barcelona has also committed to reclaiming more than half the space now allocated to cars for what they call "super blocks."

Yup, you read that right – more than 50% of Barcelona's roads will eventually be closed and the reclaimed space will be turned over to people and transformed into parks, playgrounds and gathering spaces.

The goal is to create more than 500 superblocks over the next few decades, which will ultimately mean that no Barcelonan is more than 200 meters from a green space.

Despite initial resistance, once in place, the vast majority of residents and business owners quickly come to see the advantages. Noise and air pollution drops, neighbours mingle more, there's more incentive to shop locally and, with fewer cars to dodge, kids have loads of safe space to explore and play in.

And while resident cars have access on designated roads, through-traffic is excluded.

The cherry on the top? – by gaining public space and reducing traffic, Barcelonans are also reducing carbon emissions.

Admittedly, superblock success depends heavily on an efficient public transit system and city officials who understand that community input is critical to success.

Also essential are measures to counter gentrification – lower income locals being squeezed out by wealthier residents keen to upgrade housing in an area that's greener, cleaner and, more or less, car free. To combat that, Barcelona has imposed, among other things, regulations that ensure 30% of all new builds and renovations are low cost housing.

So, might a car-addicted town like Winnipeg adopt something similar?

Well, there are a few glimmers of hope, like the city's plan to close Fort Street to traffic and the as yet unapproved urban forestry and greenspace strategies. But a superblock initiative? That seems like a distant dream in a city that has two major road expansion projects on the books and doesn't even have the courage to open Portage and Main to foot traffic.

But still...it's nice to dream, isn't it?

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