



Crossing the street could be a lot safer in US cities. *Photographer: Robert Alexander/Archive Photos*

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This Cheap Street Fix Saves Lives. Why Don't More Cities Do It?

“Daylighting” intersections to improve visibility for drivers is an effective way to make crosswalks safer for pedestrians. Here’s why it works so well.

By [John Surico](#)

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After a string of tragic traffic fatalities, a community board in Queens, New York, endorsed a call in June for city officials to make all intersections more visible to road users, particularly the most vulnerable. Then, in October, a board’s transportation committee in Brooklyn did the same. In the weeks since, full boards in Brooklyn and Queens joined the pack. Several boards in Manhattan are considering it as well.

The non-binding resolution is noticeably rare for community boards. Historically, the citizen-led bodies – which play an advisory role but are often looked to as local gauges of support – have been slow to support safety-minded street redesigns, favoring car parking over measures like bike lanes or road diets. But recently, things have changed, said Paul Kelterborn, an author of the resolution in Brooklyn’s Community Board 1, which represents Greenpoint and Williamsburg.

“We get emails about close calls all the time, and there are regular crashes here,” said Kelterborn, who has served on the board for three years. “But we’re so slow to even acknowledge what’s happening. We’re designing streets for the past, not for what we’re currently seeing or trends that we can anticipate. This just seemed like such a common sense, sensible action the city could take.”

That action is called daylighting, a process that pays close attention to the schematics of the street where most crashes occur: the corners of crossings. The idea is that if intersections are clear of obstructions like parked cars – or “brighter,” to follow the expression – then drivers, pedestrians and cyclists would all be able to see one another better. Better sightlines, less likelihood of crashes, the formula goes.

Daylighting can take many forms. Curb extensions, painted or built out with concrete, and sometimes with rain-absorbing plantings, are often cited. Curbside cycling amenities, like bikeshare docks or racks for micromobility vehicles like e-scooters, are increasingly common. Outdoor dining sheds can help with daylighting, too. Others use granite blocks or giant concrete balls. Even affixing a “no parking past this point” notice to a stop sign can help.



Restaurant sheds like this one in Manhattan can function as daylighting elements for intersections. *Photo: Barry Williams/NY Daily News via Getty Images*

Proponents often point to daylighting's effectiveness when it comes to preventing the most common kinds of car-on-pedestrian crashes. In San Francisco, 80 intersections in the Tenderloin, a high-crash area, saw an 14% decrease in reported collisions with daylighting. Elsewhere, pedestrians reported a high spike in comfortability, too. Yet today, the relatively cheap measure is still not universal. And as the US contends with an ongoing surge in pedestrian deaths that's reversing years' worth of traffic safety progress, it seems like the time to ask: Why not?

The easiest answer – as it often is – is parking. It's illegal in many states to park up to a certain distance of the crosswalk – California is the latest to sign that into law – but in many cities, like Philadelphia and Portland, traffic rules often go unenforced to accommodate drivers. New York's state law calls for 20 feet (6 meters), but New York City exempts itself, allowing cars to park up close, if not beyond it. Sufficient daylighting requires 25 feet of visibility, which may require removing a parking spot or two in cities where it was flouted. If the rule was observed on all four corners, drivers could lose up to eight parking spots on a single block, much to their chagrin.

But curbs are not as clear cut. Angie Schmitt, a writer and pedestrian safety consultant based in Cleveland, Ohio, said that while parking is a factor, she more often confronts an awareness gap when pitching cities on the subtle power of daylighting. “There’s sort of a lack of attention towards it,” said Schmitt (who is also an occasional contributor to Bloomberg CityLab). “Maybe it’s resources, or it doesn’t fit nicely into a funding program. [Cities] are just not in the habit of doing it, and a lot of places haven’t gone back and done that kind of safety work.”



Plastic flexposts keep vehicles away from an intersection in Hoboken. *Photo: Bloomberg News*

Some cities, too, expect implementation to be costly. At a recent presentation in Florida, Schmitt cited Hoboken, New Jersey, a city with rising star power in safe-streets circles for its consecutive years without a traffic death. The city saw a 30% drop in pedestrian injuries after daylighting; its overall success is largely attributed to the practice. “I wanted to use it as an example of how it didn’t have to be expensive,” she said.

Most corners in Hoboken have flexible bollards, bike racks or prohibitive paint stripes – a basic but transformative tweak. Going forward, street redesigns will incorporate “bulb-outs which involve more permanent curb reconfigurations, as standard practice. Schmitt said she’s noticing the same trend in newer developments nationwide, perhaps in response to residential demand. (Although, she pointed out, the 20-foot threshold might no longer work in an era of ever-larger vehicles.)



Paved curb extensions in Jersey City have been installed as part of that city's traffic safety makeover. *Photos: John Surico/Bloomberg CityLab*

For planners, the Urban Street Design Guide from the National Association of City Transportation Officials reads as a gospel of daylighting. It includes design guidelines and best practices based on street geometry. But renderings are still just pictures, said Alex Engel, NACTO's senior manager of communications. Cities have to take it upon themselves to show people what benefits daylighting can provide.

“Part of the challenge is what to do in resource-constrained environments so that we’re getting these messages out to pave the way for more projects,” Engel said. “One of the ways to do that is really just to do projects. When residents see it in their neighborhood, they might be more inclined to support it somewhere else.”

To that end, subjects suggested direct outreach to residents and businesses nearby. In addition, cities can use the sites to tell the public what exactly they’re seeing – and why.



A pavement sticker accompanies a newly installed curb extension in DC. Photo: John Surico/Bloomberg CityLab

In Washington, DC, for example, new curb extensions and medians sometimes come with a pavement sticker that reads: “This area helps save lives.” It then goes on to briefly explain that the design interventions “slow traffic, make it easier for drivers to see you, and shorten your crossing distance.”

Context matters, Engel says. What works in Boston may not work in San Francisco: Some cities require more enforcement than others, for example, while certain intersections are more dense or wide, requiring a different set of strategies. Local politics differ of course, too. Engel’s team notes that daylighting doesn’t entirely address the issue of excessive speed, the leading cause of traffic fatalities, either. While visually narrowing the street is still a major safety improvement, daylighting instead bakes safety into the built environment of everyday encounters.

In April, New York City passed a bill requiring the city’s Department of Transportation to daylight 100 intersections a year, starting in 2025. “Daylighting is a proven safety measure that expands sightlines at intersections, where traffic violence often takes place,” the bill’s author said. The mandate comes atop a renewed commitment from City Hall to make 1,000 intersections safer each year.

But for Kelterborn, that pace isn’t fast enough – there are 50,000 intersections in the city, according to NYC DOT, and one tool mapped crashes in 16,000 of them in recent years. At the current rate, it would take centuries to daylight the five boroughs. Hence the growing number of community board resolutions – even if they’re just gestures, Kelterborn added, their accumulation means something.

“Since our resolution passed, we’ve connected with a couple of [community] boards. We’re talking to each other, which I think is pretty exciting, and that’s the way it should be,” Kelterborn said. “We have the lived experience. We should all be taking lessons from each other, and figuring out the best ways to solve these problems.”

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