

Open Streets for Whom?

Toward a Just Livability Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities for cities to close streets to automobile traffic in the name of public health. Although these interventions promise numerous benefits, neighborhood activists and scholars of color suggest they can perpetuate structurally racist inequities. In this Viewpoint, we implore planners and other city builders to think critically about the impact of these interventions by employing an environmental justice framework. Applying this framework in the open streets context exposes several potential paradoxes that arise. We conclude with a set of best practices that can help city builders transcend these paradoxes and extend this livability revolution to all.

Keywords: active transportation, anti-racist planning, environmental justice, open streets, policing

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal; a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020, para. 49)

Among a world on pause, Arundhati Roy invited the public to take stock of the structures that govern our shared reality. In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic forced cities to fundamentally reimagine the role of the street. As of January 2021, around 600 cities worldwide had closed or limited rights-of-way to vehicular traffic, turning them over to pedestrians and bicyclists (Combs et al., 2020). In many cases, these interventions—once considered temporary—are now becoming permanent (Newton, 2021). Most of these “open streets,” “safe streets,” or “slow streets” projects have received positive coverage, with some even claiming that the pandemic represents “the dawn of a new utopia,” opening a portal to a livability revolution (Walker, 2020, para. 1; Glaser & Krizek, 2020; Haag, 2020; Lindsey, 2020). Here, we use *open streets* as an inclusive term to define any initiative that reallocated road space to pedestrians, cyclists, and other nonmotorized modes of transportation.

During that same summer, another portal opened in the wake of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Black Lives Matter protests took place across the United States on an unprecedented scale (Buchanan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the pandemic exposed deep racial and ethnic disparities both directly

through exposure and mortality rates and indirectly through the ensuing housing and financial crisis (Krieger, 2020).

In this Viewpoint, we connect these struggles and implore city builders¹ working on open streets projects to center justice-oriented practice. Although the pandemic has opened a window of opportunity for innovative solutions untethered by the usual constraints, it should not become “the fuel for urbanist fantasies” or “a permission slip for nonsense” (Descant, 2020, para. 11; Walker, 2020). Our analysis of potential paradoxes emerging from open street implementation illuminates the unintended consequences of seemingly apolitical actions.²

In the following sections, we present a four-component environmental justice framework and explain the relevance of these components for open streets projects. Then, we discuss six potential paradoxes that city builders should consider when engaging in open streets planning in a more just and critical way. We conclude the Viewpoint by suggesting policies (e.g., anti-displacement strategies), programs (e.g., Black- and Latinx-led cycling events), and partnerships (e.g., collaborations with environmental justice groups) that city builders can use to start addressing these paradoxes in a justice-minded way.

Building a Theory of Open Streets Justice

Environmental justice scholarship and practice found its footing in the 1970s through grassroots activism against disproportionate rates of locally unwanted land uses in majority-Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)

neighborhoods (Bullard, 1994). Activists also pointed to low rates of access to environmental amenities in BIPOC communities (Agyeman et al., 2016). A fuller conception of justice, however, goes beyond the distribution of burdens and amenities to encompass inclusion, representation, decision making, and power (Boone et al., 2009; Hollander & Németh, 2011; Wolch et al., 2005).

In this Viewpoint, we delineate a holistic definition of environmental justice that includes four components describing the observable outcomes of distributional and interactional justice as well as the underlying structures of procedural and recognitional justice (Fraser, 1995; Low, 2013; Schlosberg, 2004). These four components help develop a holistic picture of environmental justice in open streets projects, including several potential paradoxes, and build toward an anti-racist planning practice, one that considers opposition to oppression as ongoing, addressing the systemic barriers facing equity planners of all backgrounds (Deggans, 2020).

Environmental justice research and practice has primarily dealt with race and ethnicity in the United States (Boone et al., 2009). We recognize that BIPOC communities are not homogenous groups and that vast diversity of individual experiences and views exists even within specific intersections of identity (for example, among Black transwomen). In this piece we mainly focus on marginalization based on race and ethnicity without fully exploring the ways in which open streets might affect BIPOC women, LGBTQ people, undocumented communities, and disabled BIPOC individuals (Surcio, 2021). We urge others to further this discourse concerning intersectionality in mobility justice research and practice.

Distributional Justice

Distributional justice is concerned primarily with exposure to environmental hazards and access to amenities and resources (Bullard, 1990; Commission for Racial Justice, 1987; Fraser, 1995; Rawls, 1971). Instances of environmental injustices include both the concentration of environmental amenities in Whiter communities and the concentration of environmental hazards in BIPOC communities. In the context of open streets, distributional justice primarily concerns the allocation of open streets as well as potential gentrification and displacement risk (Graff, 2021; Hake, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Rigolon & Németh, 2020; Torres, 2020).

Interactional Justice

Interactional justice refers to the quality of, and power relations embedded within, interpersonal interactions in a particular space and time (Low, 2013). Interactional injustices can have potent impacts on comfort, safety,

and pleasure on open streets. BIPOC respondents often note increased fear of neighborhood crime, over-policing, harassment, surveillance, and general heightened anxiety in majority-White pedestrian and cycling spaces, all contributing to interactional injustices (Brown, n.d.; Lubitow, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019).

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice requires a commitment to systemic institutional transformation, emphasizing the policy environment and planning processes that tend to produce and perpetuate unjust conditions (Low, 2013). Procedural injustices occur when less-powerful groups are absent from the decision-making process or through tokenistic engagement strategies (Arnstein, 1969). Further, without some form of reciprocity, extensive community engagement may become a form of unpaid labor for marginalized residents (Butler & Moore, 2021). Proponents of open streets projects celebrate that the range of normally acceptable outcomes has been widened in a pandemic-driven “state of exception,” but others argue that this comes at the expense of a commitment to community-led process (Agamben, 2005; Astor, 2019; King & Krizek, 2020).

Recognitional Justice

Centuries of structural racism have shaped experiences of oppression as well as resilience for BIPOC communities, leaving behind “thick injustices” as well as an embodied set of expertise in navigating those conditions (Swanstrom, 2011, p. 4; see also Haines, 2019). Acknowledging and accounting for these histories lies at the core of recognitional justice (Schlosberg, 2004). Recognition is a cross-cutting notion that also applies to procedural justice insofar as city builders should engage with marginalized communities, but the notion of recognitional justice also implies that open streets planners understand the cultural context of BIPOC communities and the historical roots of injustices that shape the politics of active transportation and public space (AICP, 2016; Fraser, 1995).

Identifying Complexity and Moving Toward Justice

These four components of our environmental justice framework highlight a range of issues that sometimes conflict and contradict, revealing the complex role of structural racism in open streets planning. Examining literature on open streets efforts and wider active transportation justice issues through these components, we identified six potential paradoxes that exist both within and across them (Figure 1). Engaging with these

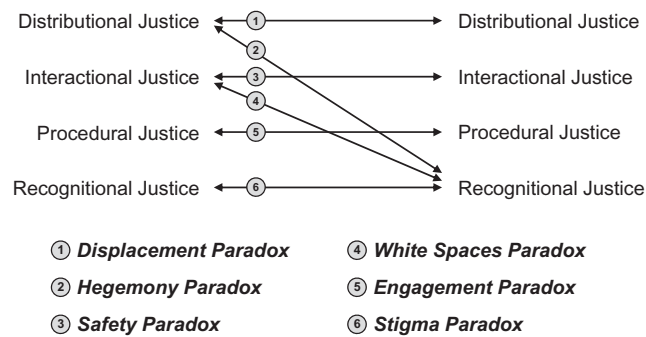


Figure 1. Six potential paradoxes of environmental justice in open streets projects.

paradoxes can help city builders identify barriers and opportunities to plan open streets programs. Although many of these conundrums suggest that different components of justice may be mutually exclusive, we argue that identifying these potential paradoxes can illuminate new strategies for city builders working in partnership with BIPOC communities.

The Displacement Paradox

For low-income BIPOC residents, new infrastructure such as open streets projects can represent a welcome investment that promotes health and wellbeing (Jelks et al., 2021). From a distributional justice standpoint, these projects might be particularly important in urban BIPOC communities with few parks that tend to become overcrowded and poorly maintained (Boone et al., 2009; Rigolon, 2016). Yet new infrastructure can also stoke fears of environmental gentrification, or patterns of residential change that occur when investments in green infrastructure result in rent and property value increases that can displace the very residents the projects were intended to benefit (Dooling, 2009; Rigolon & Németh, 2020).

Although empirical evidence on the impact of open streets on gentrification is still lacking, advocates in Houston (TX), New York City (NY), Oakland (CA), and Washington (DC) have raised concerns that open streets could accelerate ongoing gentrification, especially in the context of hot housing markets (Kramer, 2020; Nzinga, 2020; Olin, 2021; Richling, 2021). These concerns led a predominantly Black neighborhood in DC to scratch plans to establish open streets in the community (Kramer, 2020). Fears of gentrification might increase as several cities are making these projects permanent, resulting in “greenway-like” public spaces that have been linked to gentrification in other studies (Rigolon & Németh, 2020). In sum, even if open streets were equitably distributed, advocates are concerned that they may present new distributional injustices by accelerating gentrification and displacement in BIPOC communities.

The Hegemony Paradox

The second paradox arises from examination of open streets through both distributional and recognitional justice. One of the key intended benefits of open streets projects is to extend open space benefits such as improved health across the city (Akpınar, 2016; Wood et al., 2017). Given persistent racial and ethnic inequities in children’s park access, open street initiatives that include play areas, like New York City’s, can fill this gap, helping BIPOC children find respite during the pandemic (City of New York, 2020).

Yet many BIPOC adults were not working from home during the pandemic but instead were on the pandemic’s frontline in physically engaged jobs (Krieger, 2020). Open streets aimed at increasing physical activity tend to center a Whiter, wealthier pandemic experience (Bliss, 2021; Cobb, 2020). A nationwide analysis of physical activity showed that working-class BIPOC communities have elevated rates of occupational physical activity but lower rates of recreational physical activity (Saffer et al., 2013); working-class BIPOC adults may not need or want open streets for physical activity. Furthermore, open streets may frustrate BIPOC commuters. Programs such as Oakland’s Slow Streets: Essential Places, which helps to improve safety on pedestrian routes to grocery stores, COVID-19 testing sites, and food distribution centers, is one attempt by planners to respond to this paradox (Rani, 2020).

The Safety Paradox

BIPOC communities often cite high crime rates within their neighborhood as a primary reason they avoid walking and biking (Adkins et al., 2017; Brown, n.d.; García Zambrana & Khan, n.d.; Sulaiman, 2018). To address this issue, many cities might increase police presence in such neighborhoods. Unfortunately, police routinely use traffic and pedestrian rules, including jaywalking, to target, surveil, harass, and even kill BIPOC cyclists and pedestrians, presenting another interactional injustice issue (Aevaz, 2020; Barajas, 2020; Roe, 2020; Sanders et al., 2017; Wisniewski, 2020).

Open streets, if engaged with the goal of increasing neighborhood solidarity and social capital, can address safety concerns without inviting further injustice at the hands of police (Cain et al., 2018; Collins & Guidry, 2018). Similar to parks, open streets could be venues to promote solidarity and social capital, increasing the eyes on the street that might make open streets safer (Jacobs, 1961; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019). Further, such connections can facilitate community problem solving, which may reduce reliance on policing (Dixon & Piepza-Samarasinha, 2020; Kaba, 2013). Nevertheless, the visibility engendered by open streets can increase the risk of police persecution and prosecution experienced so regularly by BIPOC youth and adults (Katz, 2021). Or as Jay Pitter (2021) recently argued: “Streets are the biggest placemaking paradox, at once sites of immeasurable joy and delight and unspeakable violation” (para. 11).

The White Spaces Paradox

When BIPOC pedestrians and cyclists only find open streets in majority-White neighborhoods, they are likely to encounter interactional injustices. In San Francisco (CA), open streets were initially located based on resident enthusiasm, and almost all of that enthusiasm came from Whiter and wealthier neighborhoods (Hake, 2020). Although majority-BIPOC neighborhoods may not have welcomed open streets programs to the same degree, without an even distribution of open streets across the city’s neighborhoods, BIPOC individuals who did want to use open streets facilities were left to use streets that tend to function as “White spaces,” or places that feel both “off-limits” to Black individuals yet remain necessary to navigate as a “condition of their survival” (Anderson, 2015, p. 10). Interviews and focus groups with Black and Latinx cyclists consistently reveal feelings of hypervisibility, unwelcomeness, and subjection to racial microaggressions from White drivers, residents, and cyclists (Adkins et al., 2017; Anderson, 2015; Brown & Blickstein, n.d.; Lubitow, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019).

The Engagement Paradox

Given the historical exclusion of BIPOC communities from planning processes, residents of majority-BIPOC neighborhoods should have substantial control over open streets planning and implementation. Nevertheless, planners should limit the administrative burdens of such programs on overengaged and overburdened BIPOC neighborhoods (Young, 2011), as done for pedestrian safety in Portland’s (OR) Cully neighborhood (Wilson, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many city builders implemented open streets under what Agamben (2005) called a “state of exception,” a moment that allowed open streets programs to be

created swiftly in response to rapidly emerging community needs. Many BIPOC community leaders criticized open streets planners for taking advantage of this state of exception and bypassing the traditional planning process, perpetuating procedural injustices and threatening community adoption of these interventions over the long term (Badger, 2020; Butler & Moore, 2021; Descant, 2020; Thomas, 2020). Conversely, the engagement paradox also involves cases in which many cities chose not to implement open streets despite public advocacy for them, which potentially constitutes a procedural injustice.

The Stigma Paradox

Cycling and walking are commonly used but might be seen as undesirable forms of mobility in many Black and Latinx communities, where cycling by choice can be perceived as a White cultural phenomenon (Barajas, 2019; Brown & Blickstein, n.d.; Lubitow, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019). This is not to say that BIPOC individuals do not want to bike and walk but that experiences of doing so are often undesirable due to unsafe infrastructure, aggressive policing practices, social stigma, fear of violent crime, and a historical lack of engagement in active transportation organizations and planning activities in BIPOC communities (Brown, n.d.; Brown & Blickstein, n.d.; Lubitow, 2017; Multicultural Communities for Mobility, n.d.; Roberts et al., 2019).

Open streets can be supportive infrastructure for low-income BIPOC individuals who bike and walk as modes of necessity, especially because they tend to experience higher rates of bike/pedestrian injury and death than White people (Barajas, 2018; League of American Bicyclists & Sierra Club, n.d.). Yet fear of peer judgment based on the dual stigmas of “acting White” and being too poor to afford a vehicle are routinely named as a barrier to broader adoption of cycling in qualitative research with Black and Latinx individuals across the United States (Brown & Blickstein, n.d.; Lubitow, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019). Open streets can foster recognitional justice addressing the social stigmas that may surround the use of open streets and pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure broadly.

Navigating the Paradoxes: Where Should City Builders Begin?

Our examination of open streets programs through four components of justice reveals much complexity and contradiction. Although there are no easy answers, we offer some strategies as places to begin an iterative journey toward more just open streets planning (see Table 1). These strategies should be understood as sustained work and part of broader justice-oriented planning

Table 1. Potential paradoxes of environmental justice in open streets programs.

	Displacement paradox	Hegemony paradox	Safety paradox	White spaces paradox	Engagement paradox	Stigma paradox
Policies Introduce anti-displacement policies and strategies Create policy to site open streets near schools/ community centers		•	•			
Programs Explore and enact community-based alternatives to policing Provide technical assistance to BIPOC businesses to adapt strategy	•		•	•		•
Partnerships Build partnerships within environmental justice community Understand and leverage community power Develop shared understandings of race, privilege, power Build anti-racist planning culture from within Encourage agenda setting for open streets by BIPOC residents	•	•	•		•	

efforts: Environmental injustices have been consciously built over centuries, and their dismantling requires a proportionately persistent effort that moves beyond routine engagement as currently practiced (Arnstein, 1969; Botchwey et al., 2019; Karner et al., 2019).

Policies

Policy and planning responses can begin to address some of these paradoxes. Including anti-displacement strategies in open streets policy and programming can help city builders and residents navigate both the threat of displacement and the perception that open streets programs are for White, affluent gentrifiers. Several anti-displacement strategies—from affordable housing investments to tenant protections—could be tied to all open streets programs, but especially those in areas struggling to retain affordable housing (Hauswald & Reyes, 2020; Palmer, 2019; Rigolon & Christensen, 2019).

City builders can also create policy that prioritizes open streets alongside public or nonprofit community centers that provide neighborhood services and can generate funding for those centers to provide services (e.g., internet access). That was the case in Alexandria (VA), where BIPOC children could use WiFi for online

schooling on the open street adjacent to a community center (National Association of City Transportation Officials [NACTO], 2020). Similarly, some cities have located open streets near parks and schools that are already well used by the community, because open street space can serve as outdoor classrooms and play spaces for child care facilities, such as in Detroit’s (MI) Streets for People initiative (City of Detroit, 2020).

These policy changes can help address both the hegemony paradox by creating open streets that help meet basic needs in BIPOC communities and, to some extent, the safety paradox by promoting more eyes on the street from community members.

Programs

Cities implementing open streets projects can invest in community-based alternatives to policing, which help navigate the safety, White space, and stigma paradoxes. Rather than increasing police presence on open streets, such as in New York (NBC New York, 2020), enforcement funds can be directed to BIPOC-led cycling groups like Los Ryderz in Los Angeles (CA) or Black Girls do Bike in Atlanta (GA) and to programs that expand access to bikes for those who cannot afford one

(Brown & Blickstein, n.d.; Jacobs, 1961; Sulaiman, 2018; Welch, 2020). Such programs enable new forms of interactional justice, because group rides create safety in numbers through eyes on the street and a sense of collective ownership of public space (Jacobs, 1961; Sulaiman, 2018). Communities can also implement programs that provide materials and technical assistance for permitting to BIPOC-owned businesses to create outdoor dining areas as part of open streets initiatives, with examples in Denver (CO), Long Beach (CA), Philadelphia (PA), and Portland (OR; Denver Streets Partnership, 2021; NACTO, 2020).

Such actions could help address the displacement paradox for commercial tenants and owners and the safety paradox because they create additional eyes on the street and alternatives to police actions that disproportionately affect BIPOC individuals.

Partnerships

Understanding and leveraging institutional power undergirds successful navigation of several potential paradoxes. Examining power dynamics that shape community relationships and institutional culture can be effective starting places for systemic change, with impacts beyond open streets planning, including changes in funding mandates and training (Toole et al., 2020; Yasin, 2020). The City of Austin's (TX) equity tool, implemented as a result of grassroots organizing from Communities of Color United, is one such example (City of Austin, 2018; Communities of Color United, n.d.).

Another starting place is for planners to build reciprocal partnerships with racial and environmental justice organizations. This involves conducting meaningful engagement with BIPOC residents to ask fundamental questions at the agenda-setting stage for open streets and fund community-based organizations to lead this effort.³ Such strategies should involve centering the expertise of BIPOC individuals, as leaders of Durham's (NC) Calles Compartidas project have done (NACTO, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019; Routh, 2016). Rigolon and Christensen (2019) found that when community-based groups were at the table early in park planning processes, anti-displacement measures were more likely to be included in subsequent plans. Building relationships with such groups benefits many White and/or middle-class planners who may not have the lived experience to identify issues related to the hegemony paradox and can also build trust for effective community engagement.

Conclusion

In this Viewpoint, we provide guidance for how city builders—planners in particular—might work alongside working-class BIPOC communities, using streets projects

to generate a more just livability revolution. Some claim that more critically examining open streets projects through a justice lens risks “making equity the enemy of improving cities for people” (Cortright, 2020). On the contrary, we believe open streets initiatives can and should elicit critical conversations and bring about important change.

We present four components of an environmental justice framework through which city builders should examine open streets programs. Six potential paradoxes of justice in open streets projects emerge from examination of such components, and the paradoxes help generate progressive policies, programs, and processes. Because anti-racist planning addresses key structural barriers to justice, several of these strategies are more general in scope and applicable beyond open streets. In the end, these strategies open a portal for city builders to understand environmental justice issues for open streets and beyond.

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NOTES

1. We use the term *city builders* throughout instead of the rather restrictive term *planners*. A number of BIPOC scholars advocate this shift in language, which acknowledges that a variety of actors shape cities, including environmental justice activists, residents, artists, and other advocates outside of the formal profession of planning (Chan, 2018; Pitter & Lorinc, 2016).
2. Because there is little peer-reviewed literature on how these paradoxes play out in the open streets context, we use the term *potential paradoxes* throughout.
3. This is not to say that every working-class BIPOC community shares the same needs, context, or beliefs; planners must recognize the diversity within BIPOC communities and learn about specific local needs as well as intersectionality issues.

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