

VOX VIDEO - Superblocks: How Barcelona is taking city streets back from cars

NARRATOR: If you imagine a typical American city street and you take away the space that is dedicated to cars, you aren't left with very much. There are some **narrow** walkways on the side and some bridges in between them, but not much else. Cars dominate cities; spend some time walking around in those cities and you'll find yourself pushed walking near **sidewalks** waiting for cross-walk lights, you'll find cyclists navigating really narrow **strips** (= lanes => **faixas**) of space.

David Roberts (Climate and Energy Reporter): Americans are used to cars, the way Americans are used to water. And that's so **ubiquitous** (= **present everywhere - omnipresent**) in the US that I think that most people, it just never occurs to them that it could be **otherwise** (= **the opposite, different**).

NARRATOR: But what if there were a way to change that, to give space back to pedestrians and bicyclists and to make cities more friendly to life outside of a car? It **turns out** (= as it happens) that Barcelona might have a solution.

In 2014, the city was faced with serious air pollution problems. Barcelona and its 35 surrounding municipalities **consistently failed to meet the EU's air quality target** (= **meet the target = failed to satisfy the air quality requirements imposed by the European Union**).

Studies were showing that pollution in the region was causing 3,500 premature deaths every year. Traffic in the city also causes severe noise pollution, and so the city developed an extensive urban mobility plan, with the hope of reducing traffic by 21%. **The coolest part of the plan were these things: they call them SUPER ILLES - that translates to superblocks:** it's this urban design concept intended to minimize the presence cars in city centres. The word superblock has been used before to describe huge city blocks without any passageway for cars, but that's not what's happening here. So here's how Barcelona's plan works:

You take 9 square city blocks, and you close off the inside to **through traffic**. So, buses and big free trucks or any vehicles that are trying to get from one part of town to the next have to drive around the perimeter. Inside the superblock, the speed limit is kept at 10 km/h - that translates to just over 6 m/h. And **kerbside parking (parking next to the sidewalk)** is replaced by underground parking, and that means you **wind up (= you find yourself in an unexpected situation = you end up with)** with street space for markets, and outdoor games and events.

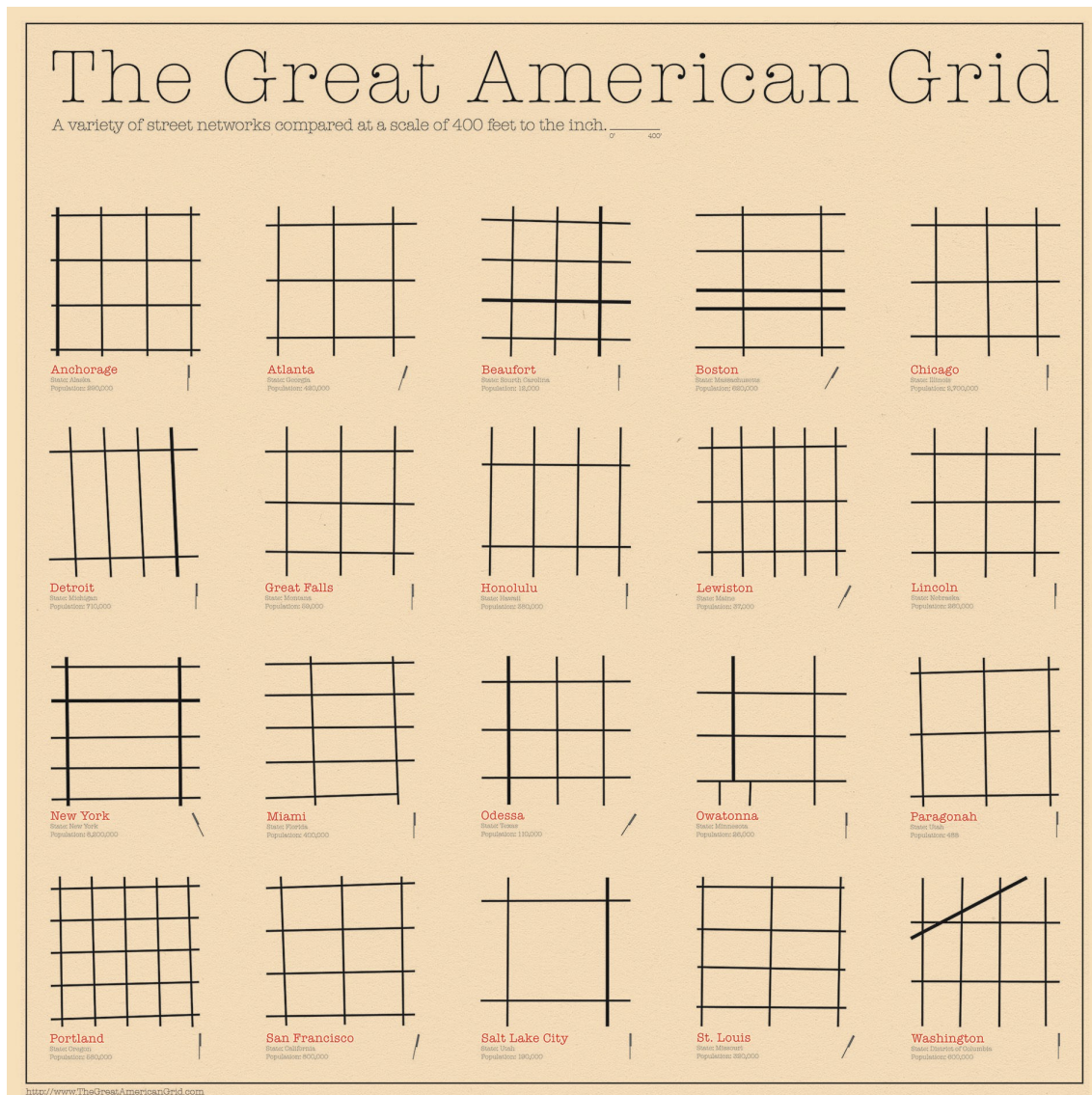
David Roberts: Within this 9 block perimeter, you're gonna have kind of a pleasant street escape where people can walk around and **mingle** (= get together, interact), and do things without this kind of constant fear of cars around.

NARRATOR: The concept is gonna be tested out in 5 neighbourhoods but the city has identified a 120 possible intersections throughout the region where it could be implemented. So how do we know what the results of this kind of plan would look like? **Well, northwest of Barcelona is a city called Vitoria-Gasteiz, which has implemented superblocks designs since 2008. In the main superblock in the city centre, pedestrian increased from 45% of the total area to 74 %, and there was so much less noise traffic that noise levels dropped, from 66.5 decibels, to 61 decibels. Most impressive of all, there was a 42 % reduction in the nitrogen oxide emissions, and a 38% reduction in particle pollution in the area. And on top of that, business is up.**

VOICE: What you consistently see when people change their street escapes to prioritise human beings over cars, is you don't see any decline in economic activity, you see the opposite: you got more people walking and cycling around, more slowly, stopping more often, **patronising businesses more (= going regularly to restaurants, cafes, shops),** in that centre of social activity will **tend to build on itself (= to use this advantage to improve its quality).**

NARRATOR: So here's the question: could something like this work in an American city?

VOICE: Barcelona has some unique advantages getting started on this plan, in that a lot of it was built before cars, and a lot of it was built on a simple grid.



NARRATOR: The district of Eixample, which is where the superblock plan is based was designed in 1859, in this repetitive grid structure, by this guy, Ildefons Cerdà. **He basically invented the word for and the study of urbanization, when he laid out (= designed) this grid plan** for Barcelona, that evenly distributed resources like schools and hospitals. But superblock designers insist that cities don't need a simple grid structure to implement this kind of plan; it can work anywhere. Now, cities in the US have attempted some car minimising projects like this - the problem is they're usually done in wealthier areas, with

lots of existing businesses. Zoning policies usually require separation of residential areas and commercial areas, but an ideal walkable area would be a mix of the two. On top of that, zoning minimums on parking ability availability encourage the presence of cars, and parking lots, and minimums on street width make for (= produce, create)really wide, un-walkable streets. And because of that, walkable districts are basically isolated luxury items in the US. What makes the Barcelona plan different is that they're not setting aside one fancy neighbourhood or town square to make pedestrian friendly; instead, by proposing superblocks throughout the entire city, they've declared car-free spaces a right for everybody, no matter what part of town they're in.

VOICE: Maybe, this might be overoptimistic but I think it's sunk in (= people understood => caiu a ficha) in the US, that the model whereby every city resident comes with a car, and drives a car everywhere is just inherently limited. It limits the growth of your city, it limits the health of your city, and the growth of your city. So one way or another, we have to find ways of having a lot of people live close to one another, without all of them having cars. And being able to get around, and work and play and live and have enjoyable lives, without cars.