

From Streets for Traffic to Streets for People: Reimagining Broad Street in Monrovia

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Streets are more than mere conduits for vehicles—they are vital social spaces where community life unfolds. Yet in many African cities, streets have been narrowly engineered for traffic flow, sidelining their potential as spaces for public life. Monrovia, Liberia’s capital, is a case in point: it is dominated by motorised transport, has congested roads and unsafe conditions for pedestrians, and has limited recreational spaces.

In the post-COVID era, cities around the world began experimenting with their streets, making them safer, healthier, and more inclusive. These interventions are defined as intentional, temporary changes of the street use, regulation and/or form, aimed at exploring systemic change in urban mobility, away from “streets for traffic” and towards “streets for people”. As noted by Bertolini (2020), they range from re-marking of streets, re-purposing of car parking, re-purposing of sections of streets, and re-purposing of entire streets. Cities like Bogotá, New York, Addis Ababa, and San Francisco have successfully applied these interventions, demonstrating improvements in liveability, health, and community engagement. However, could street experiments work in a city like Monrovia, Liberia?

Rethinking the Role of Streets in African Cities

Urban theorist Luca Bertolini (2020) argues that streets are not merely spaces for movement but platforms for multiple urban functions such as commerce, play, politics, and social interactions. In Monrovia, there are promising signs that public space is regaining importance. Developments like the Invincible Sports Park and the PHP Unification Park, both launched by former President George Weah, have become centres for weekend recreation, offering spaces for sports, leisure activities, and family gatherings.

Opportunities for Street Experiments in Monrovia

Street experiments do not require massive infrastructure overhauls. As shown in the work of Bertolini (2020) and VanHoose et al. (2022), even modest, temporary interventions such as parklets or the weekend pedestrianization of streets can catalyse long-term transformation. These experiments have the potential to trigger behavioural, institutional, material, and organizational change in the urban mobility system.

However, the lack of knowledge of the potential benefits of such intervention is a major bottleneck in a city like Monrovia. For instance, Road Safety Action International (RSAI), a non-profit organization, has been

at the forefront of advocating for a paradigm shift in the function of streets in Monrovia. In 2024, RSAI conducted a study titled *“Navigating Cultural Barriers to Car-Free Urban Planning: A Case Study of Monrovia’s CBD”*. The study found that 87.2% of city planners and infrastructure experts support the idea of a Car-Free Zone on Broad Street. Additionally, there is strong interest in using active modes of transport, with 87.2% supporting walking and 67.6% supporting cycling as realistic options.

In fact, RSAI is currently advocating for a pilot project to repurpose Broad Street into a pedestrian zone during weekends, similar to Ciclovías in Latin America or Sunday Streets in San Francisco.



Current view of Broad Street in Monrovia

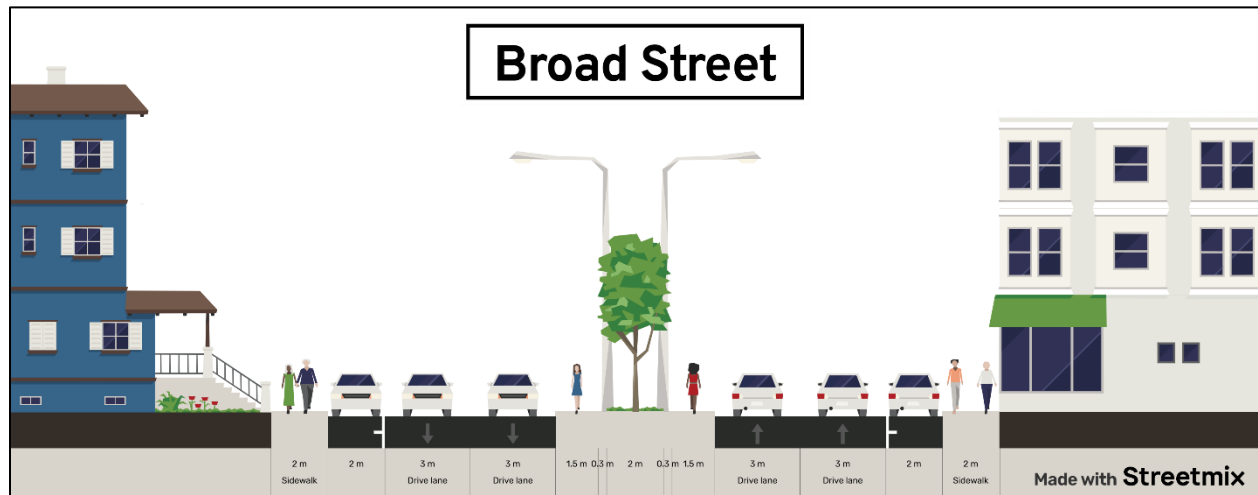
Reimagining Broad Street Using Streetmix

As part of RSAI’s advocacy to experiment by repurposing the entire Broad Street, we have developed a visual representation of how we envision Broad Street by using Streetmix, a digital tool that allows users to redesign street cross-sections. This visual representation compares the current vehicle-dominated street with a proposed layout that prioritizes pedestrians, cyclists, and shared public space.

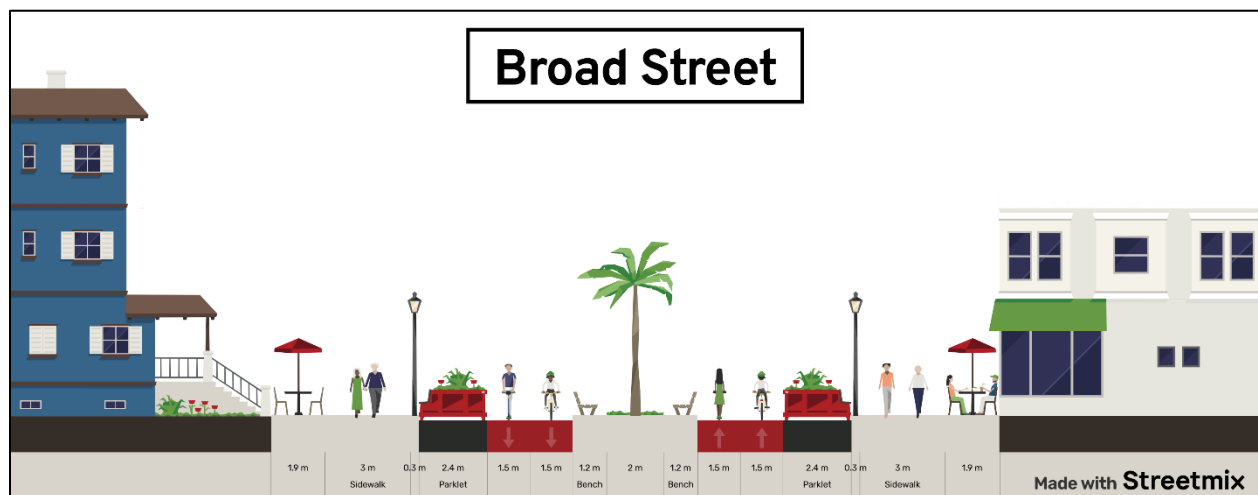
While conceptual, this design aligns with the prefigurative and communicative goals of street experiments. Bertolini (2020) emphasizes that street experiments offer a glimpse of radically different arrangements of the urban mobility system that transcend mobility itself.

Tools like Streetmix serve this function by enabling stakeholders to visualize the trade-offs and co-create alternative configurations of urban space. By generating a clear, accessible cross-section of the proposed

Broad Street, this visualization stimulates public imagination and opens up dialogue on how streets in Monrovia can better serve the people. The figures below illustrate a typical repurposing of Broad Street using Streetmix.



Current layout, dominated by vehicles.



Proposed layout, prioritizing pedestrians, cyclists, and shared space.

Benefits of Street Experiments

Street experiments have demonstrated significant benefits in cities around the world. They can promote physical activity, particularly among children and youth, by creating safe, car-free spaces for play and recreation (D'Haese et al., 2015; Zieff, Chaudhuri & Musselman, 2016). These interventions also enhance social cohesion, as residents engage more with one another in reimagined public spaces (Semenza, 2003; Zieff et al., 2016).

Beyond health and social interaction, participants report increased feelings of safety and well-being in pedestrianized environments (Meyer et al., 2019). Economically, these interventions can boost local commerce, with businesses often benefiting from higher foot traffic and improved street appeal (Littke, 2016).

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite the opportunities, the road to street experimentation in Monrovia is still a long way off, as the city still faces key challenges. According to RSAI (2024), four key policy barriers need to be addressed:

1. Urban Planning: Need for guidelines that blend modern urban design with local cultural values.
2. Stakeholder Engagement: Early and meaningful involvement of communities, businesses, and policymakers.
3. Infrastructure Investment: Investment in non-motorized transport infrastructure (e.g., cycling lanes, pedestrian pathways, etc.).
4. Long-term Vision: Aligning Monrovia's urban development with the global sustainability goals.

Addressing these gaps requires policy reform, political will, and creative urban experimentation. Cities like Monrovia must embrace street experiments not as one-off events but as part of a systemic shift towards more inclusive, equitable and vibrant urban futures.

References

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