

Reclaiming the Streets

Showing What Streets Can Be Without Traffic

The Return of Car-Free Sundays on the Grand Concourse

ON OCTOBER 16, IN PARTNERSHIP with the Bronx Borough President's Office and more than 50 leading health and quality-of-life advocates, Transportation Alternatives won the return of Car-Free Sundays on the Grand Concourse. On that day, between 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. on a mile-long section of the Grand Concourse between 161st and 167th streets, hundreds of Bronxites took advantage of the opportunity to walk, bike and socialize free from the fear of traffic. What is more, the event put to rest concerns about negative traffic impacts and demonstrated the civic pride and human activity that results when people—not cars or trucks—are given the exclusive right-of-way.

Car-free Days of Yesteryear

The banning of traffic on Fifth Avenue for four successive Saturdays proved so delightful to pedestrians and so generally harmless to merchants that Saturday closings have now been tried out twice on Lexington Avenue and on Eighth Street in the Village, with one-day experiments scheduled for thoroughfares in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

—THE NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL,
AUGUST 18, 1970

In the early 1970's, the City of New York undertook experimental street closures on Manhattan's Eighth Street, Lexington, Madison and Fifth Avenues. Unlike the city's myriad street fairs during which streets are clogged with an influx of vendors, these popular events were about transforming streets from traffic choked corridors into expansive public spaces where New Yorkers were free to walk, bike and celebrate the vitality of unbridled public space.

While successful in many respects, the events were discontinued for fear that they would increase traffic congestion and prevent



The first car-free Sunday on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx in over 9 years brought out hundreds of residents to enjoy active street life.

SAM CHADWICK

shoppers from patronizing local businesses. In 1996, after years of established success, the Giuliani administration ended the last of the city's great traffic-free events, Car-Free Sundays on the Bronx's Grand Concourse.

Prior to its cessation, summer Sundays on the Grand Concourse were a time for Bronx residents to escape urban noise and pollution. Families and Bronx residents young and old strolled, bicycled and played along the four mile car-free stretch, from Joyce Kilmer Park at 161 Street to 198th Street, while problems with safety, traffic and travel proved non-existent.

... And Today

In just the past five years, much has changed. Motor vehicle ownership is on the decline and walking rates are up. We now know that only a tiny fraction of shoppers in many of the city's most bustling business districts arrive by car. And we have an increasing number of inspiring examples from other world class cities that are banning traffic from major streets to create vibrant public spaces.

TakeAction!

Write to the Mayor and voice your support for consecutive Car-Free Sundays on the Grand Concourse during the summer of 2006.

Paris now closes the Georges Pompidou expressway to create the "Paris Plage" every summer, Chicago is now closing Lake Shore Drive more frequently to spur more biking and walking, and cities throughout Europe and Latin America are closing large swaths of their street network for citywide "Car Free Days." Most significantly, there are now several score city health groups who are now advocating for more traffic-free space to get more New Yorkers to walk more often. And more than encouraging New Yorkers to use streets as they would a park, car-free days, insofar as they demonstrate the feasibility of giving streets over to pedestrians and bicyclists, can serve as catalysts for more permanent, pro-pedestrian street changes.

The return of Car-Free Sundays on the Grand Concourse is a significant milestone not just in terms of encouraging additional such events in the South Bronx, but for encouraging neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs to undertake their own car-free events.

To ensure the success of future car-free days, the city should move beyond one-time street closures. Instead, the City should endeavor to schedule consecutive events to get everyone in the habit of participating in them, and if driving, avoid the area. □