



Public Space

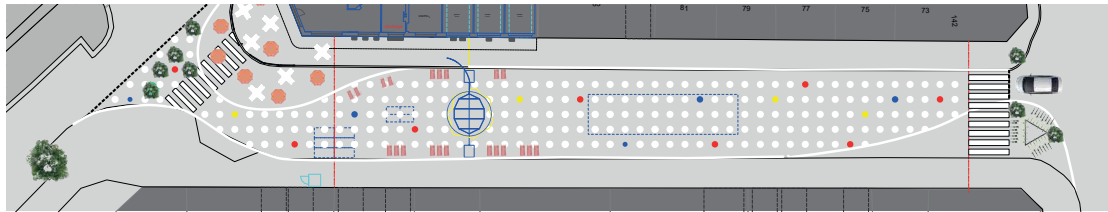
**Only open
streets
will save
the city**

An alarming study on air quality in school environments came as a bombshell to parents with children at Maria Boodschap primary school in Brussels. The outraged parents, including architect Annekatrien Verdickt, decided to cordon off the street every Friday until the competent authorities took action. The citizen movement Filter Café Filtré was born. This was in 2018, the year Greta Thunberg organized her 'Skolstrejk för klimatet'. These actions sowed the seeds for OpenStreets, a unique experiment where streets come under temporary self-management.

Gideon Boie – Photos Ivan Put

The audacity of blocking a street captures the collective imagination. Mediagenic images of school-gate actions get picked up eagerly by newspapers and TV news, causing the action to spread like wildfire to other primary schools. In the end, actions were held at no fewer than 173 schools in Brussels and elsewhere. The success of civil disobedience is mainly political; the issue sets the political agenda in no time. The Covid pandemic a few years later gave the citizen movement an extra boost.

During the Covid lockdowns, the need for public space was greater than ever. The idea of the school streets soon turned into 'summer streets', closed to car traffic, open to pedestrians. The location was Picardstraat, on Annekatrien Verdickt's doorstep. The architect's hand is visible in the staging and programme. Reclining chairs, work tables and plants furnish the street as if it were an extension of the living room. Painted circles on a 1.5 m pattern brighten up the asphalt. The vacant pharmacy was renamed 'Barmacie'. →



Picardstraat laid the foundations for OpenStreets in the second Covid summer. It was a case of instant urbanism. The ambition was to stimulate cultural exchanges and collective dreamworks. Art institutions such as KANAL, KVS, Kaaitheater and Ultima Vez turned the street into a stage. Cultureghem let people taste each other's cuisine. The day centre for people with mental disabilities also moved its activities outdoors. Imagination workshops let people design the street together.

OpenStreets is also a particularly tactical form of urbanism. When the local government was anything but interested in opening up Picardstraat, its status as a regional road came in handy to get permission through the regional government. Later, the reluctant agreement to temporarily open the streets for only one or two weeks became the trigger for a sprawling multi-year programme with each time other open streets. The rhizomatic approach offered the advantage of letting other residents and organizations enjoy the positive effects of open streets.

Activism to open up the streets did meet resistance. Protests against open streets peaked in the summer of 2023, after car-loving groups demolished test sites of the regional mobility plan GoodMove. OpenStreets also took a few blows but didn't give up, optimism being the moral imperative of activism. The open streets are the laboratories where a healthy, social and just city can be worked out. Intimidation of initiators, local residents and politicians is unfortunately a part of it.

In the 2023 edition, the temporary self-management of the streets led to micro-interventions, such as an extension of the street corner at the Barmacie with some green plants and a swing. The intervention was a way of leaving a trace of the street's short-lived utopian use during the summer. OpenStreets has long since ceased to be just about clean air in school environments. At stake are also road safety, social cohesion, cultural exchange, mental self-development and so much more. ▲■●



'A joyful exploration of what can be achieved through collective action. This project is an inspiration in terms of how activism and public organizing can help to both achieve healthier cities and reclaim public space for all.'

Meriem Chabani, jury member



Architect
Filter Café Filtré Atelier
Website
www.fcfatelier.be
Project name
OpenStreets
Location
Brussels

Programme
Activation of public space, i.e. the street, through experiment, play, cooking, workshops and tactical urbanism
Procedure
Call Brussel op vakantie - Bruxelles en vacances (Brussel Mobiliteit - Bruxelles Mobilité)

Client
Society
Landscape architect
Jan Minne
Structural engineering
Jan Terwecoren (micro-interventions)
Sustainability
Vito

Lead contractor
Tournevie, Hamaco
Completion
Recurring project
Total floor area
7,000 m²
Budget
Not available