

# Triple-Duty Streets: Expanding the Definition of What Our Streets Can Offer

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Proposed future of 14th Avenue NW Park Boulevard in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. The Park Boulevard concept supports multimodal travel, community gathering, and ecological function. Rendering: Mithun

It's no secret. The veil of rainy weather doesn't hide the fact that the Pacific Northwest is a great place to live. For the same reasons you and I love living here—the temperate climate, easy access to mountains and water, big-city life—people are moving to the Northwest at a rapid pace. [As reported by Jon Talton](#) for *The Seattle Times*, according to a US Metro Economies report created by Global Insight for The United States Conference of Mayors, the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area is expected to grow more than 39 percent in the next 30 years. How can we grow and, at the same time, keep our cities not just livable but also lovable?

The answer lies in streets. Typically representing about 30 percent of a city's open space, streets have huge potential for uses other than just moving traffic: streets should perform the triple duties of multimodal transportation, placemaking and ecological function.



## Beyond Complete Streets

In the early 2000s, the National Complete Streets Coalition spearheaded the Complete Streets movement, which advocates mobility for all travel modes (see [smartgrowthamerica.org](http://smartgrowthamerica.org)). Thanks to this movement, cities are retrofitting roads to serve more than just automobiles. According to a press release for the [Commute Seattle 2012 Mode Split Survey](#), since 2010 in Seattle, walking increased by 7 percent, bicycling by 18 percent and commuting by rail by 21 percent. These trends challenge the design community to create the next generation of streets that support environmentally friendly travel while also serving as places to inhabit rather than just drive through.

## It's a Street, It's a Park

A new breed of streets is emerging that embraces the spirit of parks. For example, Seattle's seminal Bell Street Park in Belltown reallocates the public right-of-way to create a place for people and plants while accommodating slow-moving vehicles. Its first phase (four blocks) is just the beginning of a bold vision for a green corridor that connects the Elliott Bay waterfront and Denny Park. Reclaiming Bell Street for public life is an innovative solution to a common problem: many urban neighborhoods that lack community space are also experiencing rising land-values that make acquiring area for parks cost prohibitive.



Curb-less by design, Seattle's Bell Street Park easily and frequently converts into a festival street. Photo: Nate Cormier, SvR Design Company

Bell Street Park elevates the street so it is flush with the sidewalk, allowing for a continuous walking surface. When the street is closed for festivals, the area becomes a public plaza. This street-park hybrid has inherited the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department's

disposition to program open spaces. With a perpetual festival permit in place, the street becomes a venue for community events such as salsa dancing, a wine crush or a pop-up playground. This is what makes a city lovable: smart and flexible placemaking.



Bell Street Park. Photo: Nate Cormier, SvR Design Company

## **Park Boulevard**

Building on the momentum of Bell Street Park, 14th Avenue NW Park Boulevard in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood advances the triple-duties concept for street design. Once an old trolley line, the existing boulevard currently has a graveled central median used for parking.



The old trolley line that used to run down the center of 14th Avenue NW in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. Photo: Seattle Municipal Archives

The community's idea is to create a one-mile-long linear park that stretches from the Ship Canal to Ballard High School by converting the parking spaces to park places, thus fulfilling a critical need for community gathering areas. It will also encourage walking and biking and establish an awareness of the relationship between the natural and built environments.

Plans are under way to start with a two-block section of the ultimate vision. To create the linear park, the design eliminates parking and slides over traffic lanes. Borrowing from the Bell Street Park strategy, a raised intersection will allow people to seamlessly flow from one park area to another. Intertwining the natural and built environments, a bioswale will serve multiple functions: creating a buffer between children playing in the park and the street, providing urban wildlife habitat and—when the entire project is realized—filtering the equivalent of seven Olympic-size swimming pools of rainwater annually.

### **What's Next?**

Lately, I've been taking cues about how we should redesign our streets from my six-year-old son as we walk to school. While I stroll along the sidewalk, my son scrambles to the top of a rock wall and tests his skills, leaping from one boulder to the next. I stop to talk to a neighbor; my son tips over a rock and examines a secret world of scattering bugs. These are activities that we would have missed if I had driven my son to school. Without planning to, we are blending transportation, community building and environmental literacy.

Bit by bit, cities are dismantling an auto-centric landscape in exchange for an enriching network of public spaces. We are learning that transportation and recreation don't have to take place separately. Fitness becomes a positive side effect of a fun and active commute, and environmental health results from designing with nature. Our cities can grow while increasing our quality of life when we expand our definition of what our streets can offer.