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THINGS THAT WORK

Could we transform dirty snowpiles into sidewalks and bike lanes?



UNIVERSITY CITY DISTRICT

Urban planners redesigned the intersection of Baltimore Avenue, Florence Avenue, and S. 48th Street in Philadelphia, creating new pedestrian space after snow patterns revealed areas that could be reclaimed. The unused areas, called “sneckdowns,” now feature planters and widened sidewalks.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 08, 2018

In the hours after a winter storm, when plows have carved out paths along city streets, most of us consider the dirty snow left behind on roadways as little more than an inconvenience.

But for urban planners and a number of local activists, those frozen remnants have much to teach us about designing our streets.

The snow piles highlight areas of pavement that aren't regularly used by drivers. But that wasted space could be reclaimed for something more valuable: wider sidewalks, bike lanes, green space, or maybe pedestrian islands — small sidewalk-like spaces in the middle of wide roads and intersections where pedestrians can wait safely if they aren't able to cross in time.

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“The patterns on the road provide really good ideas about how we can revamp our streets,” said Vineet Gupta, director of policy and planning at the City of Boston Transportation Department.

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The basic idea — monitoring how people actually use streets and sidewalks to see if there’s room for improvement — is not new to urban planners.

Recently, however, the concept of studying snowy patterns [has caught on](#) among city residents — most with no expertise in urban planning — allowing them to quickly recognize underused areas of pavement after a snowstorm, snap photos of those spots, and use that visual evidence to lobby public officials to

reimagine roads and intersections in ways that can improve safety and functionality.

The idea has spread to a number of cities, including Boston, thanks in part to [social media](#).

In a 2014 [tweet](#), Watertown native and then-visiting MIT fellow Aaron Naparstek dubbed these unused spaces “sneckdowns” — a combination “snowy” and “neckdowns.” (A neckdown is urban-planner speak for widened areas of sidewalk that narrow roadways and slow traffic to make it easier for pedestrians to cross.)

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In Philadelphia, the sneckdown concept has produced tangible results. City officials recently overhauled a pair of intersections after being shown photos — taken by residents and advocates — that highlighted unused areas of pavement.

In 2011, before sneckdowns even had a name, a worker at the neighborhood improvement nonprofit University City District in Philadelphia photographed the intersection of Baltimore Avenue, Florence Avenue, and South 48th Street, a spot where safety concerns had been raised.

When officials at the nonprofit saw the photograph — which was taken shortly after a winter storm and showed large swaths of unused, snow-covered pavement — they knew it could be a powerful tool to pressure the city for change.

Officials at the City of Philadelphia Streets Department were soon convinced.

The snowy patterns showed that making a few simple changes at the intersection “wouldn’t impact mobility for vehicles in the area, but it would enhance the neighborhood and improve safety,” said Richard Montanez, the department’s deputy commissioner.

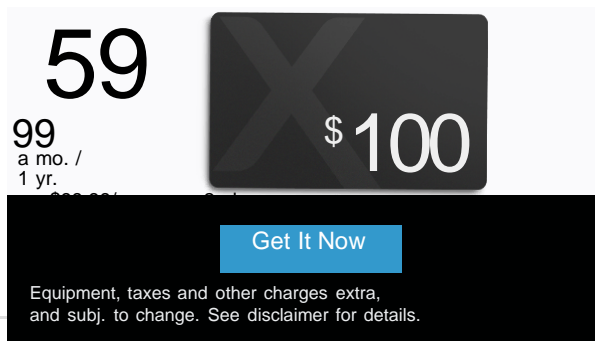
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From there, they took several low-cost steps in 2015. Large potted plants were placed on the pavement to form a barrier for vehicles in the same shape that was visible after the snowstorm. The area of pavement blocked off to cars was also painted the same tan color as the sidewalk to contrast the black pavement.

The measures remain in place and Montanez plans to make the changes permanent.

“The way we look at it is baby steps — a way for the community to get used to it in a way,” he said.

The other Philadelphia intersection overhauled was at South 12th Street, Morris Street, and East Passyunk Avenue. In 2014, Jon Geeting took post-snowfall photos of that junction and included them in a [blog post](#). A neighborhood improvement group, the Passyunk Avenue Revitalization Corporation, noticed and took up the issue with city officials.

The intersection was overhauled last year and now features wider sidewalks and islands for pedestrians similar to the shapes of the leftover snow that Geeting photographed.

Officials in other cities have also embraced sneckdowns and their growing popularity.

Transportation planners in Raleigh, N.C., [sent a tweet](#) before a snowstorm several years ago asking residents to send them “pictures of wasted space at intersections.”

Sneckdowns have “served as good illustrators to the public and to state officials about unused space at intersections, and the ability to repurpose that dead pavement to improve pedestrian safety,” said Eric J. Lamb, transportation planning manager for the City of Raleigh.

In Boston, city officials said they’re open to considering ideas inspired by sneckdowns, but changes would not happen without study and analysis.

Gupta, of the City of Boston Transportation Department, said he’s not aware of any road projects in the city as a result of sneckdowns yet. But the layout of pedestrian paths installed in Copley Square in the 1980s was based on footprints people made when walking across the square after a snowstorm.

In Cambridge, officials say the concept offers a rough starting point, but caution that some sneckdown-born ideas may not make sense.

“Not every area where snow accumulates can be eliminated, as these may be needed for properly removing snow from roads, sidewalks, and bike lanes to allow safe passage for all users,” said City of Cambridge spokeswoman Bridget Martin.

Still, she said, the concept, “can be useful for visualization purposes to find areas that can be

repurposed.”

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