

Street Reclaiming



Tripods block the road to traffic and open it for pedestrians. Streatham, UK

“CARS CANNOT DANCE: When they move they are violent and brutish, they lack sensitivity and rhythm. CARS CANNOT PLAY: When they diverge from the straight and narrow, they kill. CARS CANNOT SOCIALIZE: They privatise, separate, isolate, and alienate.”

– London Reclaim the Streets agitprop

Imagine a packed city street in London, shoppers mingling on the thin strip of pavement that separates the store-fronts from the busy road. Two cars careen into each other and block the road. The drivers get out and start to argue. One of them brandishes a hammer and starts to smash up the other's car. Passersby are astonished. Suddenly people begin to surge out of the anonymous shopping crowd and jump on top of the cars, others fling multicoloured paint everywhere. Before anyone

has time to catch their breath, 500 people emerge from the underground station and take over the street, reclaiming it from commerce and cars for people and pleasure. An enormous banner is unfurled over the two destroyed vehicles. “Reclaim the streets – free the city – kill the car,” it proclaims.

Thus began the first Reclaim the Streets party in Camden High Street, May 1995. All afternoon people danced to the sound of the mobile bicycle-powered Rinky Dink sound system. Free food was served at long tables stretching down the middle of the road while children played on a climbing frame placed in the middle of the now-liberated crossroad junction.

This was the birth of the street party as a tactic, and it spread rapidly across the world – sometimes involving tens of thousands of participants, other

times a few hundred. The magical collision of carnival and rebellion, play and politics is such a potent recipe and relatively easy to pull off, that anyone can do it. Even you...

How to sort a street party:

Step 1: Get together with some like-minded people. Possibly your friends. Work on a plan of action. Sort out different roles, jobs and time frames. Imagine. What's possible?

Step 2: Decide on a date. Give yourselves enough time. Not too much – a deadline is a great motivator – but enough to sort the practicals: materials, construction etc. You may need money.

Step 3: Choose the location. Your street, the town centre, an underground train, a shopping mall, a corporate lobby, a busy road or roundabout, a motorway! A separate meeting place is good: people like a mystery, bureaucrats don't.

Step 4: Publicize! Word of mouth, leaflets, posters, email, carrier pigeon. Make sure everyone knows where and when to meet. Posters and paste go well on walls, billboards, and phone boxes. Leaflet shops, clubs, pubs – everyone, even your mum.

Step 5: Sort out your sound system. A party needs music – live, some DJs, acoustic, samba drums, yodelling – go for diversity. Invite jugglers and clowns, poets, prophets, and performers of all kinds. Ask campaign groups to come along and set up a stall in the middle of the road.

Step 6: How will you transform the space? Huge banners with a message of your choice, colourful murals, a bouncy castle, a ton of sand and a paddling pool for the kids, carpets, armchairs. The materials and money from earlier may come in useful here. Print up an explanation

for this collective daydream to give to participants and passersby on the day.

Step 7: For opening the street – or rather stopping it being re-closed by the traffic – ribbons and scissors are not enough. A large scaffold tripod structure with a person suspended from the top is useful. Practice in your local park. Blocking the road with a car that can then be dismantled is nice. Even the traditional barricade will do.

Step 8: Rescue some young trees from the road of your local “development” and have them ready for planting. You may need a pneumatic drill and safety goggles for the last bit.

Step 9: Have a street party! Enjoy the clean air and colourful surroundings, the conversation and the community. Bring out the free food, dance, laugh, and set off the fire hydrants.

Some boys in blue may get

irate. Calm them down with clear instructions.

Step 10: At least a couple of the boys in blue will fail to get the point and nick people – six is generally the minimum to convince their paymasters it was worth all that overtime. Of course you found a solicitor who understands about street protests and distributed a bust card with their number, a phone number to collect details of arrestees, and basic advice. Make sure someone stays awake, alert and near that phone to take messages, gather names, and organize a defendants' meeting a week or two later.

Get together with even more like-minded friends and plan the next one. Organize in your community, workplace, school and street.

Resources:
from www.reclaimthestreets.net