

BELOW

The concept behind traffic gardens, which are imported from Copenhagen, is to reproduce urban conditions to teach kids bike and pedestrian safety.

Traffic Gardens Are Growing

On a trip to Copenhagen more than a decade ago, Steve Durrant, FASLA, saw children riding bikes through a miniature urban cityscape. “Real roads and real crosswalks and real traffic signals, even,” recalls Durrant, who was with Alta Planning + Design’s Pacific Northwest, Midwest, and Canadian group until 2021.

Inspired, Durrant teamed up with Washington state’s Cascade Bicycle Club to design something similar for its bike safety course, which teaches children the rules of the road. Prior to that, they were placing halved tennis balls in empty parking lots and telling kids, “Hey, imagine this is a street,” Durrant says. “And the kids are saying, ‘This isn’t a street, this is a parking lot with a bunch of broken tennis balls.’”

Ten years later, the White Center Bike Playground in Seattle is still held up as *the* example of how landscape architects can become involved in the creation of traffic gardens, says the engineer and traffic garden planner Fionnuala Quinn, who runs Discover Traffic Gardens, a design and build consultancy. ▶

► STREETS

Traffic gardens—sometimes referred to as bike parks, bike playgrounds, or safety cities—are miniature streetscapes for learning and practicing road rules protected from the danger of passing cars. They often feature painted pedestrian crosswalks, rail crossings, and roundabouts arranged so kids can easily navigate the space. The theory is that if children learn to follow traffic patterns in a fun environment, they'll have the tools to handle the roads when they walk to school or bike around the neighborhood.

The need is critical: According to U.S. Department of Transportation statistics, pedestrian fatalities have been increasing since 2009. Studies show that young children are particularly vulnerable because of their limited understanding of traffic rules and risks.

Traffic gardens can be as simple as a surface painted to mimic neighborhood streets, like the Seven Oaks Traffic Garden in Odenton, Maryland, that Kathleen Hayes, a landscape architect in Baltimore, helped design with Discover Traffic Gardens. Or they can be a little more elaborate, like the one Durrant created, with road signs, two-way streets, and large dots of color so a teacher could direct a student to ride “around the blue dot, over to the yellow, and come back to the purple,” he explains.

School districts have especially embraced the idea in recent years. Since 2019, the District of Columbia Public Schools has established 12 traffic gardens on school grounds. Milwaukee Public Schools recently announced its intent to have a traffic garden at every school property. Hayes says that similar to how landscape architects have elevated green infrastructure, once more landscape architects hear about the traffic garden movement, they'll run with it “and make it even better.”

—CARI SHANE

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First Forty Feet led the design of this miniature streetscape on a former mall parking lot in Vancouver, Washington.



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