Completing Our Streets: Lessons for Los Angeles from Peer Agencies Creating Safer, Multimodal Streets

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Research Topic

For most of the past century, the goal of street design in the United States was to move vehicular traffic as quickly as possible. However, as the multitude of negative externalities that stem from car-centric culture became obvious, street design shifted toward a new norm: providing safe, efficient access to every user. Recent street design documents for the City of Los Angeles, like the "Complete Streets Design Guide," advocate for safer, multimodal streets. However, these recommendations are misaligned with many existing car-oriented regulations, and they are not consistently applied. Today, the Los Angeles has begun reviewing and refreshing its currently mismatched street design guidance.

This report analyzes 10 peer cities with the goal of providing best practices and lessons learned for Los Angeles' update of its street design guidance. Specifically, the report examines each city's development and implementation of its street design guideline reviews through semi-structured interviews and review of six priority complete streets design treatments. This research provides insights on how peer cities attempted to address misaligned policy, prioritized complete streets goals, and created guides specific enough for today's use and flexible enough to address changing transportation and mobility needs of their populations.

Main Findings

The researcher found three main influences on street design guidance development:

- Level of support from leadership: The majority of cities interviewed had developed or updated their guidelines after direction from city leadership, whether from the mayor's executive order or city council resolution. This endorsement and guidance from local leadership made it easier to establish staff buy-in, as well as procure funding.

- Existing street design policies: Existing design guidance could be a resource or an obstacle to efforts to update documentation with a focus on complete streets.

- Interdepartmental coordination: Multiple city departments manage and/or operate in the public right of way, so development of street design guidelines necessitated interdepartmental collaboration. Most cities mentioned the challenge of dealing with departmental silos — the primary challenge was ensuring that every department knew about all existing policies and procedures, as well as when and how to work together.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Successful development of street design guidelines depends on city leadership buy-in, supportive existing policies, and the ability of staff to work across departments.

- Successful guideline implementation depends on the document's level of enforceability, a balance of prescriptive and flexible parameters for deploying design treatments, and adequate guidance for context-specific decision making.

- In its street design guidance update, Los Angeles should prioritize regulations over recommendations, choose flexibility over specificity, and create unified documentation.

City Scores by Treatment	
Corner Radii	**Top 3 Scores:** Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington DC **Bottom 3 Scores:** Toronto, London, Mumbai
Curb Extensions	**Top 3 Scores:** Philadelphia, San Francisco, Atlanta **Bottom 3 Scores:** London, Mumbai, San Diego
Pedestrian Refuge Islands	**Top 3 Scores:** Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas **Bottom 3 Scores:** Mumbai, Washington DC, Toronto
Raised Crosswalks	**Top 3 Scores:** Philadelphia, Mumbai, San Diego **Bottom 3 Scores:** San Jose, London, Dallas
Roundabouts	**Top 3 Scores:** Philadelphia, Washington DC, San Francisco **Bottom 3 Scores:** Mumbai, Toronto, San Diego
Transit Platforms	**Top 3 Scores:** Washington DC, Atlanta, Mumbai **Bottom 3 Scores:** San Diego, Toronto, Dallas

Figure: Highest and Lowest Scoring Cities by Design Treatment

Study

The researcher examined 10 peer agencies' approaches to complete street design guidance. Cities eligible for analysis met the following requirements: they must have developed or updated their street design guidelines within the last decade, have built-out urban cores, and currently sustain populations of approximately 1 million or more.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with staff from 10 cities: Atlanta, Dallas, Philadelphia, San Francisco, San Diego, San Jose, Washington, D.C., along with London, Mumbai, and Toronto. Interviewees included transportation planners, engineers, urban designers, as well as consultants. All were staff that dealt either with the creation of and/or the implementation of existing street design guidelines.

The author also reviewed each agency's street design document(s) for six design treatments: corner radii, curb extensions, pedestrian refuge islands, raised crosswalks, roundabouts, and transit platforms. These treatments have either misaligned or missing guidance in current Los Angeles street design documentation.

Conclusions/Recommendations

- *Prioritize Regulations over Recommendations*
  Cities may find it easier to develop recommendations than to integrate design guidelines into city regulation. However, recommendations lack the enforcement power necessary to implement complete streets. Los Angeles already has a recommendations document in its Complete Streets Design Guidance, and needs more enforcement capability.

- *Choose Flexibility over Specificity*
  All interviewees mentioned the difficulties of navigating the sweet spot between too much specificity and too much flexibility. While it may be desirable, it is impossible to create specific guidelines for every street context. Los Angeles should aim for measured flexibility — providing a range of standards based on different street typologies, and acknowledging the potential for modification based on context.

- *Create Unified Documentation*
  While robust documentation is commendable, it can also be overwhelming. When a project manager is forced to read through multiple technical manuals, the likelihood that the new development will contain a mistake increases. If Los Angeles wants to facilitate adherence to design policies, the city should have all necessary information in one place.

For More Information

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