

Barcelona's weekend open streets: success factors, challenges and transferability

Samuel Nello-Deakin, Autonomous University of Barcelona (samuel.nello@uab.cat)

This practice article reviews the evolution and key features of Barcelona's weekend open streets programme (*Obrim Carrers*), introduced in early 2020 along two major commercial high streets. Drawing upon ongoing public debates and a survey of users and local business owners commissioned by the Municipality of Barcelona, I identify key success factors of the scheme, together with pending challenges and future prospects. This overview holds practical lessons regarding the transferability of Barcelona's open streets initiative to other urban contexts, particularly for comparatively dense European cities.

Keywords: open streets; Barcelona; traffic closure; temporary uses; pedestrianisation

1. Introduction

Open street initiatives can be broadly defined as temporary traffic closures along one or more streets to encourage walking, cycling, and outdoor recreation, usually during weekends or public holidays. While such initiatives are popular in Latin America (Velázquez-Cortés et al. 2023; Hipp et al. 2017), they have received comparatively less attention in European cities, where pedestrianisation and street experiment initiatives have tended to focus on longer-term interventions (VanHoose et al. 2022).

The origins of open street initiatives are typically traced back to Bogotá's *Ciclovía*, which was first implemented in 1974 and has since become a paradigmatic example that has spurred similar programmes in many other Latin American cities (Velázquez-Cortés et al. 2023). In North America, prominent examples of open street initiatives include Los Angeles's *CicLAvia* (Cohen et al. 2016), and San Francisco's *Sunday Streets* (Zieff et al. 2022). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as the catalyst of a new wave of similar programmes (Glaser and Krizek 2021), with New York's *Open Streets* perhaps providing the most prominent example.

Existing academic research on open streets has primarily focused on assessing their benefits for physical and mental health, and social cohesion (Velázquez-Cortés et al. 2023, Cohen et al. 2016; Zieff et al. 2018). Open streets are also generally considered to have a positive economic impact, both by improving local business sales (Chaudhuri and

Zieff 2015) and through their broader health benefits, while requiring relatively low implementation costs. Some studies also discuss barriers to increasing their frequency or coverage (Hipp et al. 2017), but there appears to be relatively little research in this area.

Compared to both South and North America, open street initiatives remain surprisingly rare in European cities. Besides Barcelona's *Obrim Carrers* programme, perhaps the closest examples of short-term temporary traffic closures correspond to London's *School Streets* (Thomas 2025) and Paris's *Rue'Golotte* play streets (Alexander 2026), but both are aimed specifically children rather than the general population.

Addressing this lack of attention to open street initiatives in a European context, in this practice article I briefly summarise the main characteristics of Barcelona's *Obrim Carrers* programme, reviewing its key success factors, challenges, and future prospects. In doing so, my intention is to provide a useful overview for academics and practitioners alike, particularly regarding the transferability of Barcelona's programme to other contexts.

2. Barcelona's *Obrim Carrers* programme

Barcelona's *Obrim Carrers* programme entails the weekend closure of Gran de Gràcia and Sants-Creu Coberta streets (**Figs. 1 and 2**) to motorised traffic from 9 am to 8 pm from October to April, and from 10 am to 9 pm from May to September (except during July and August). Exceptions are made for residents accessing private parking garages, emergency and municipal services, and authorised freight deliveries.

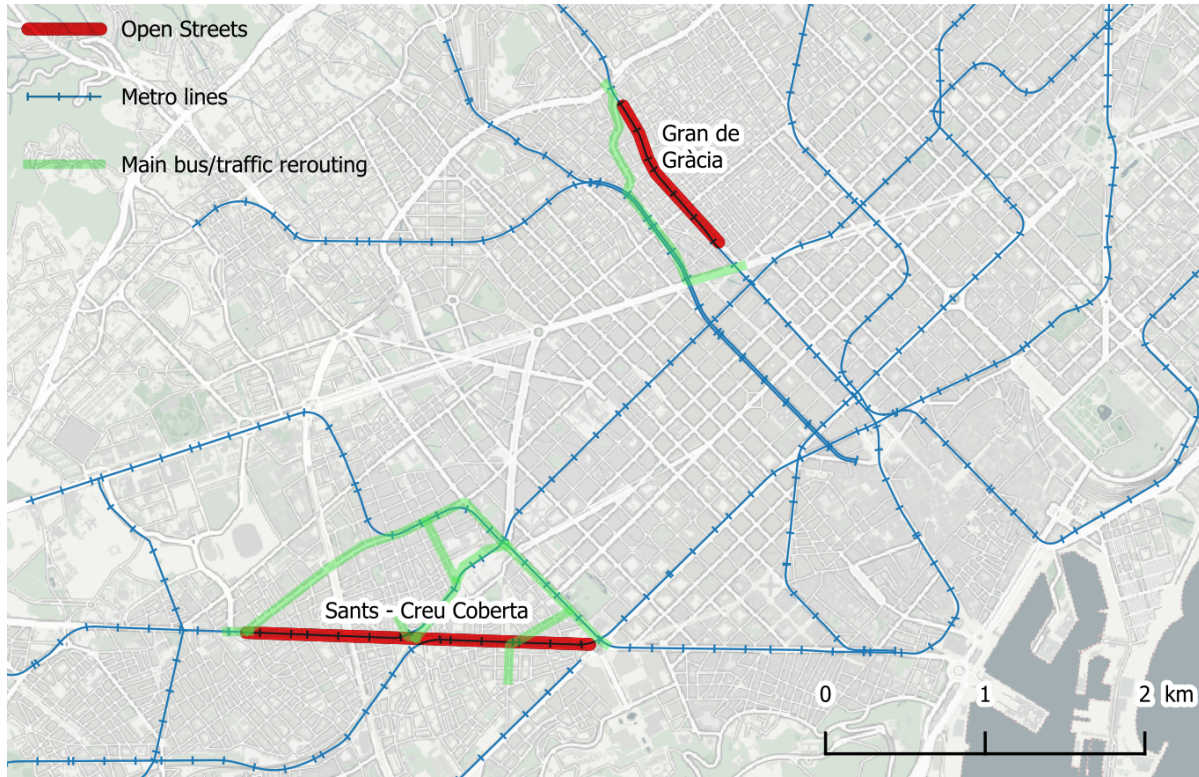


Figure 1: Open streets included in Barcelona's *Obrim Carrers* programme (base map: Positron by CARTO, © OpenStreetMap contributors, © CARTO).



Figure 2: Sants-Creu Coberta open street (photos: author, Sept. 2026). The lower photo shows how traffic closures are enforced through physical barriers and on-site stewards.

The programme was initially launched in February 2020 with the experimental traffic closure of two streets (Gran de Gràcia and Via Laietana) during part of weekend, to which two additional streets were added in March 2020 (Sants-Creu Coberta and Aragó). In its initial version the programme only ran during the first weekend of the month, and included organised public space activities (e.g. music, sport, circus), envisaging the potential for further gradual roll-out to additional streets.

However, the unexpected arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown completely upturned existing plans, while paradoxically leading to the roll-out of emergency public space and mobility measures (e.g. sidewalk widening, emergency bike lane construction) which echoed some of the aspirations of the *Obrim Carrers* programme. As in many other cities, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for drastic experimentation with street space reallocation, enlarging the Overton window regarding the public acceptability of street interventions restricting motorised traffic (Nello-Deakin et al. 2024). Once the lockdown was over, the programme was accordingly reintroduced with a weekly frequency, albeit only in the two streets where it was perceived as most successful (Gran de Gràcia and Sants-Creu Coberta), and without organised public space activities. Initially, the programme received some contestation over its potential impacts on local businesses and traffic, which briefly resurfaced after the change of municipal government in 2023. However, it has remained essentially unaltered since late 2020, becoming a consolidated scheme with high levels of public support and usage.

To assess the impacts of the scheme, the Municipality of Barcelona commissioned a preliminary survey of street users and local business owners in December 2020. This was followed by the publication of much more complete evaluation report in December 2023, which included pedestrian and cycling counts along both open streets in Sants and Gràcia, and a more extensive two-wave intercept survey (December 2021-January 2023) of open street users (n= 945) and business owners (n= 530). While this evaluation report is only publicly available in Catalan¹, in the rest of the article I draw upon some of its key results. Among other findings, this two-wave survey found that most open street users are from the local neighbourhood and arrive by foot (40 to 60%, depending on the survey wave and location), with “strolling” being the most common purpose (30 to 40% of respondents, depending on the survey wave and location) for using the open street. Perceptions of the scheme were generally highly positive among survey respondents, with approximately 40% of users giving it the highest possible rating.

¹ Both the 2021 survey and the 2023 full evaluation report are publicly available (in Catalan) at the website of the Municipality of Barcelona:
<https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/collections/04fe757d-67e2-4ada-8043-b82f33a93551>

3. Success factors

Latent demand for pedestrian space

Perhaps above all, the simplest explanation for the success of Barcelona's open streets is that they were implemented in streets where there is a strong latent demand for additional pedestrian space. Both Gran de Gràcia and Sants-Creu Coberta are the main historical high streets in their respective neighbourhoods, functioning as their preponderant commercial, pedestrian, and motorised traffic axis. In turn, both streets run through some of Barcelona's highest density neighbourhoods, with a population density of 375 inh./ha in Gràcia and 386-593 inh./ha in Sants². As a result, both streets have relatively narrow sidewalks compared to pedestrian volumes, with limited opportunity to expand sidewalks or introduce cycle lanes – at least without a radical reduction in traffic levels – despite long-term demands for increased traffic calming. In contrast to other neighbourhoods, both Sants and Gràcia also lack a pedestrian boulevard or “rambla” to accommodate leisurely strolling, a deeply ingrained practice in a Mediterranean city like Barcelona.

Support from local business and residents' associations

Both in Sants and Gràcia, the existence of a supportive local business association for the specific street was critical in enabling its political viability and implementation, as well as providing the municipality with a clear interlocutor for monitoring and evaluation. Particularly in Sants, the Creu Coberta local business association has also played an important role in fostering synergies between the open streets programme and other recurring street events (e.g. open-air markets, community organisations fair). Indeed, prior experience with traffic closures during this type of event provided an important precedent and learning experience for the open streets programme, among other aspects by proving that their impacts on motorised traffic were manageable. Nevertheless, an important nuance in the case of Sants is that there exist two different business organisations along different sections of the street (Creu Coberta vs. Carrer de Sants). While the Creu Coberta business association has been strongly supportive of the scheme from the start, the Carrer de Sants business association (*Sants Establiments Units*) has been more critical, arguing that the scheme has proved detrimental to many of its affiliated businesses.

Residents' associations in Sants and Gràcia have also been strong proponents of the scheme, but their support has perhaps been less critical than that of local business associations. On this point, the case of Via Laietana – where the scheme was also trialled in early 2020 but discontinued after the COVID-19 lockdown – provides an interesting counterexample. Although Via Laietana shares many characteristics (e.g. busy high street with narrow sidewalks) which make it a good target for the open streets programme, and despite support from the local residents' association, the local business association was strongly opposed to the scheme, arguing that accessibility losses for motorised traffic

² Unlike in Gràcia, the open street in Sants crosses three different administrative neighbourhoods with varying residential densities.

would harm business. While evidence both from Barcelona (Yoshimura et al. 2022) and elsewhere (Chaudhuri and Zieff 2015) suggests the contrary is more likely to be true, the Via Laietana scheme was eventually discontinued largely because of this opposition.

Combining results from Sants and Gràcia, the municipal survey carried out in 2021-23 shows that approximately 60% of surveyed business owners considered the scheme had had a positive impact on their business, with less than 20% considering that the impact had been negative. Pedestrian counts also show higher pedestrian volumes on Saturday than Sunday (when almost all shops are closed), suggesting that shopping provides an important incentive for open street use.

Viable public transport alternatives

Both in Sants and Gràcia, an underground metro line runs directly along the route of the open street (see **Fig. 1**), thereby guaranteeing public transport accessibility during traffic closures. Nevertheless, both streets are also important bus corridors, with open streets entailing the rerouting of two bus lines in Sants and five lines in Gràcia. Paradoxically, the existence of a clear traffic diversion route in Gràcia (Avinguda Riera de Cassoles) route makes bus rerouting easier (see **Fig. 1**), but also means that the negative traffic externalities of the Open Streets programme are highly localised along a specific street. By contrast, the lack of a clear parallel route to the Sants open street closure results in greater bus detours, but also spreads potential traffic externalities throughout a wider area.

4. Challenges and future prospects

Despite the overall success of Barcelona's open streets initiative, the scheme faces multiple ongoing challenges which condition its prospects and limit its potential upscaling. Below, I briefly review these main challenges and their implications.

Traffic rerouting

As noted above, both street closures involve significant traffic and bus rerouting. In the case of Sants, the evaluation report by the Municipality of Barcelona found an average increase of 2% in traffic volumes for nearby traffic counting stations (compared to a weekend without open streets). In the case of Gràcia, the average increase was 6%, but the concentration of rerouted traffic along Avinguda Riera de Cassoles resulted in increases of above 50% for certain time periods for this specific street. In 2021-2022, protests from residents of this street affected by traffic rerouting led the municipality to consider cancelling the Gràcia open street, but it was finally considered that its neighbourhood-wide benefits outweighed its negative traffic externalities.

Door-to-door accessibility

While mitigated by the existence of metro lines, the open streets programme undeniably somewhat reduces public transport accessibility, particularly for population subgroups with reduced mobility which may be more reliant on bus services (e.g. elderly). In the case

of Sants, this problem is magnified by the lack of wheelchair accessibility of the *Plaça de Sants* metro station, an important interchange which remains one of Barcelona's few metro stations without lift access³. Private vehicles or taxis carrying people with reduced mobility are allowed to access the open streets, but understandably not everyone may have access to these services.

Coexistence with cyclists and e-scooters

While Barcelona's open streets primarily have pedestrians in mind, they also aim provide a space for leisurely cycling and (e-)scooter use, which in theory should adhere to a speed limit of 10 km/h and always give priority to pedestrians. In practice, coexistence between pedestrians and cyclists/e-scooters can occasionally become a source of conflict, particularly for vehicles with electric assistance. While regulating or restricting cycling/e-scooter use emerged as a common suggestion in the intercept survey commissioned by the municipality in 2021-2023, most surveyed users also considered open streets to have a beneficial overall impact on traffic safety. Prohibiting these modes would also contradict the purported aims of the scheme and significantly affect cycling route connectivity. Since cycling and e-scooter volumes along both open streets remain relatively low compared to pedestrian flows (on average, approx. 100 bicycles and 75 e-scooters/hour compared to 2,000 pedestrians/hour), self-regulation generally works well enough for the specific mobility context of Barcelona. However, this strategy might not be effective in contexts with a higher cycling modal share, where it might become necessary to create separate spaces for pedestrians and cyclists.

Resource-intensiveness

The enforcement of traffic closures along the open streets relies on a mix of concrete jersey blocks and movable traffic fences (see **Fig. 2**), which need to be installed and removed by truck on days of open street operation. During open street hours, traffic management and emergency vehicle access is managed by subcontracted traffic safety wardens at key junctions, with little dedicated police presence. While this low-tech system has the benefit of simplicity, it is also relatively resource-intensive and inflexible. Presumably in part because of staffing requirements, the scheme does not operate on public holidays outside weekends, or during the entire months of July and August. This interruption during the summer seems like a missed opportunity to implement open streets during the period when they arguably might be most needed and popular, following the examples of "summer streets" initiative in other cities.

Long-term political commitment

Since its initial launch in 2020, the Open Streets programme has become a consolidated initiative which currently enjoys a widespread social acceptance. However, the periodic

³ At the time of writing (summer 2026), construction works are underway to finally add a lift to the *Plaça de Sants* metro station.

recurrence of episodes in which the continuity of the scheme has been cast into doubt are a reminder of the fragility of temporal “street experiments” (Büttner et al. 2026) which do not entail a physical transformation or reallocation of street space; on this point, Barcelona’s permanent superblock transformations provide a useful contrast. Indeed, the overall future of the scheme was momentarily uncertain after the change of municipal government in 2023, which effectively interrupted the roll-out of further car restriction and active mobility policies.

More recently, the length of the open street in Sants is scheduled to be significantly shortened from September 2026, to accommodate roadworks associated to the redesign of Plaça de Sants square and metro station. While this shortening will supposedly have a temporary duration of two years, there exist concerns that the change may become permanent, with its necessity currently being subject to ongoing local political debate. As these examples show, the continuity of the scheme is critically dependent on long-term political commitment, with neighbourhood associations playing a key role in defending open streets against potential political changes.

5. Lessons and transferability

Overall, Barcelona’s *Carrers Oberts* programme presents high levels of usage and social acceptance, providing a good example of the consolidation of municipal-led open street initiatives. In contrast to schemes which place more emphasis on cycling or physical exercise, Barcelona’s open streets are strongly dominated by pedestrians, presenting strong synergies with neighbourhood activities and local commerce in particular. Given these characteristics, Barcelona’s programme may offer a useful model for implementing similar pedestrian-focused open streets in dense urban settings, particularly within a European context.

As suggested earlier, key success factors for Barcelona’s open streets include 1) *Strong latent demand for pedestrian space*; 2) *Support from local business and residents’ associations*; and 3) *Viable public transport alternatives*. Admittedly, additional relevant factors could be added to this list, including among others political leadership, consistency with broader municipal policy goals, and clear messaging strategy at the time of implementation. For cities considering introducing similar open street schemes, however, this paper suggests that the three factors listed above provide a useful heuristic for determining the minimum necessary (albeit not sufficient) conditions for their potential viability, and helping identify potential candidate streets.

Despite its overall success, Barcelona’s open streets programme also presents some clear limitations in its current form. While positive at a local level, its restriction to two specific neighbourhoods raises questions of spatial equity, and points to a missed opportunity to upscale the scheme to more neighbourhoods. Besides the critical issue of political will (or lack thereof), the resource-intensiveness of staffing and intersection monitoring also supposes an important barrier to upscaling, echoing findings from other contexts (Hipp et al. 2017). Both in Barcelona and other cities, future upscaling efforts

could perhaps be assisted by experimentation with other monitoring approaches, including both intelligent transport systems (e.g. automated traffic barriers, dynamic road markings; see Valena et al. 2021), and self-organisation by local community organisations.

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