

STREETS

guest

- Wiki Home
- Pages and Files
- Members
- Recent Changes
- Manage Wiki

People

- Fare Hike Four
- Janette Sadik-Khan
- Jan Gehl
- Andrés Duany

Places

- Davis, California
- Toronto
- Potrero Hill, San Francisco
- Melbourne, Australia

Organizations

- America Walks
- Transportation for America
- League of American Bicyclists
- Congress for the New Urbanism
- National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO)

Street Designs

- Bikeway Design Solutions
- Bicycle Boulevard
- Sidewalks
- Pocket Parks
- Curb Extensions

All Articles

StreetsWiki Writer's Guidelines

Skinny Streets

Edit

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0

2

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Skinny Streets



Skinny Streets is the name of a movement aimed at reducing the dimensions of streets in municipal standards. Since the 1990's, many cities have revisited their overly wide street design standards and adopted narrower profiles. Reducing the width of streets provides a number of benefits. Skinny streets reduce: speeding, vehicle crashes, street construction costs, pedestrian crossing distances, impervious surfaces (and therefore stormwater drain capacity), street maintenance and resurfacing costs, and heat re-radiation which contributes to the urban heat island effect.

New urbanist traffic engineer James Charlier of Boulder, Colorado, notes that street dimensions from the last century grew increasingly wide to accommodate what are now obsolete requirements: providing room for a four-horse wagon team to make a U-turn, or providing sufficient width for military vehicles to respond to a national emergency. Fire departments, citing public safety concerns, deploy ever longer and wider vehicles and then insist on wider streets to accommodate turns and the passing of two such vehicles on a single street. These single-minded "safety" concerns overlook the increase in crashes, injuries, and fatalities that come with wider street dimensions. They also ignore the steady reduction in house fires that has occurred over the last several decades with the phasing in of better building materials, indoor sprinkler systems, and less frequent cooking.

Defining the Ideal Street

In the early 1990's, pedestrian and bicycle planner Dan Burden worked with a team of traffic engineers to define ideal street dimensions for street types ranging from residential to multi-lane boulevards. Burden and his team examined streets in older, traditional neighborhoods, specifically those that seemed to serve traffic effectively while encouraging low speeds and safety for other users. The results were compiled in a deceptively simple

guidebook entitled *Street Design Guidelines for Healthy Neighborhoods* [1]. The guidebook provides street dimensions for the entire right-of-way, from the outside edge of the sidewalk inward. The recommended street dimensions are narrower and far safer than conventional standards allow. For example, the recommended residential street is 26 feet wide with parking on both sides. By comparison, most city street standards require 36-40 foot widths.

Proliferation of Skinny Street Standards

Municipalities throughout the US, weary of multiple complaints of speeding on residential streets, have replaced their wide street standards with narrower standards. Under the auspices of the [Congress for the New Urbanism](#), architect Donald Cohen assembled a [list of example localities](#) . The state of Oregon has adopted skinny street standards as a recommendation for the entire state. It is important to note that state fire officials were involved in the creation of these standards.



Obstacles to Skinny Streets

A previous major obstacle to adopting narrow street standards -- or perhaps just an excuse -- has been the question of legal liability for municipal traffic engineers who are asked to approve narrow standards. This is because the narrower standards are thought to be in conflict with national recommended standards such as those of the American Association of Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) -- the so-called "Green Book". Courts tend to favor national guidelines over "deviations." However, the Green Book provides a great deal of flexibility, to the point of encouraging narrow widths (e.g., 26') on low-volume residential streets, and traffic engineers are learning that narrow street standards make a great deal of sense in most cases.

By contrast, fire departments present a more formidable obstacle to the adoption and use of skinny streets standards. As Ewing, et al. note, "[t]he main obstacle to skinny streets in the United States is no longer the city traffic engineer, but rather the local fire chief, who enforces the fire code with singular purpose." [2] This is quite unnecessary, since in most cases it can be shown that fire apparatus can usually navigate narrow streets. Where this is in doubt, driving tests can show where parking prohibitions, wider corner radii, or smaller fire equipment can be deployed as a solution. A useful guide for fire departments - or for those working to convince the local fire chief - is Dan Burden's manual on the topic [3].

ALSO ON THE LIVABLE STREETS NETWORK

- [Lane Width](#)
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REFERENCES

Each source is referred to by the same number every time it is cited. Please keep citation style consistent.

[1] Burden, Dan, with Michael Wallwork, Ken Sides, Ramon Trias, and Harrison Bright Rue. 1999. *Street Design Guidelines for Healthy Neighborhoods*, Local Government Commission Center for Livable Communities.

[2] Ewing, Reid, Ted Stevens, and Steven J. Brown. [Skinny Streets and Fire Trucks](#) (pdf). *Urban Land*, August 2007.

[3] Burden, Dan. 2001. *Emergency Response: Traffic Calming and Traditional Neighborhood Streets*, available as a free download from the [Local Government Commission](#) .

[4]

PICTURE REFERENCES

Pictures are cited in the order they appear above. Please keep citation style consistent.

[1] Kalamazoo, MI. Photo by Dan Burden via the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Library.

[2] Rt. 62, Hamburg, NY. Photo by Dan Burden

FURTHER READING

- Girling, Cynthia and Kellet, Ronald. 2006. *Skinny Streets and Green Neighborhoods*, Island Press.

- [Charlier and Associates](#) , a firm specializing in skinny street and new urban designs.
- [Sierra Club web page on narrow streets](#)
- American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. 1994. *A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets*.
- Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE). 1993. *Guidelines for Residential Subdivision Street Design*.
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KEYWORDS

movements, skinny streets, lane width, traffic engineers, emergency response, narrow streets, speeding, traffic calming, safety

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