



Want Safer Streets? Take Design Cues From the Snow

It's never too late for #sneckdown season.

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#Sneckdown (before & after): The Last Sneckdown Streetfilm

from STREETFILMS

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Skinnier lanes, longer curbs, and speed humps slow down drivers. But building safer streets usually requires persistent demands from safety-minded citizens, and fistfuls of hard-won tax dollars from authorities. "[Traffic calming](#)" strategies rarely happen overnight... unless it's winter.

Enter the “sneckdown”: When a snowstorm fills up wasted street space with the white stuff, everyone gets a lesson in how to dramatically reduce car speeds. It’s like nature blanketing the city with curb extensions overnight.

The [Muppet-esque](#) portmanteau mashes up “snow” and “neckdown,” an engineering term for a sidewalk extension or street island designed to damper drivers. Snowbanks accumulate on the paved space where people don’t drive or park, revealing “streets we have overbuilt so a car driver can go faster and more recklessly,” according to Clarence Eckerson, the director of video production at STREETFILMS. Imagine if street engineers took a nod from Mother Nature, and repurposed even half of that whited-out space with room for walkers and cyclists—you’d have [slower, less dangerous, roads](#). Sneckdowns are “a very visual way to make the argument,” Eckerson says.

Eckerson’s [latest video](#) reveals New York City’s epic sneckdowns after snowstorm Stella, helpfully compared to shots of the same streets before the storm. Some of the iceberg-like sidewalk extensions clock in at 11 feet from the curb. Eckerson shows how they force drivers to navigate with greater care as they move through intersections and crosswalks.

Learning street design from snow patterns isn’t a new concept, as the former [CityLab correspondent Sarah Goodyear](#) has explored. But the sneckdown phrase has [caught on in recent years](#), partly thanks to Eckerson’s extensive documentary work (this is his third sneckdown installment!) and the good humor of like-minded street-safety advocates. Twitter accounts have popped up to chronicle and hashtag the phenomenon in Calgary, Pittsburgh, Halifax, Toronto, New York, and even sunny [Los Angeles](#) (there, the focus seems to be on two rarer species, #leafdowns and #palmfrondeckdowns).

Sneckdown documentation is about nudging cities to think differently about road design, but it also raises [a counterintuitive possibility](#): Are urban streets actually safer to drive on with giant snowbanks slowing down traffic? Walking and cycling on blocked and icy pathways clearly poses risks, but at least as far as crash fatalities are concerned, the research is not conclusive.



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A 2005 study in the [American Journal of Public Health](#) noted that, while nonfatal crashes increase in snowy conditions, deadly collisions actually decline, which suggests that drivers adjust their behavior “enough to reduce the severity of outcomes when collisions occur” —say, by driving more slowly. This didn’t account for changes in traffic volumes on blizzard days, though, or for geography. A 2016 article in [Environmental Health](#) found that rain accounts for a much higher share of weather-related traffic fatalities than ice or snow, and found that rural roads see a higher share of precipitation-driven deaths than urban streets ([rural roads also see more traffic deaths overall](#)). There remains “a dearth of assessments associating adverse weather conditions to fatal crashes in the United States,” that paper stated.

Sneckdowns: reminders that the safest roads aren’t the widest ones, and possibly not the warmest ones, either.

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