



## Why we need more pedestrian scrambles

*Crosswalks don't need to be such a Hail Mary moment.*



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The Shibuya pedestrian scramble in Tokyo is the busiest such crossing in the world. (Photo: Sean Pavone/Shutterstock)

The intersection of 5th and Spring streets in Atlanta is a busy one. It's home to the Georgia Tech Hotel and Conference Center, a Barnes and Noble that doubles as a campus bookstore, the college's business school facility and a number of stores and restaurants, including a Waffle House. At this and similar intersections all over the world, everyone wants to get somewhere — and fast.

That's where the pedestrian scramble comes in. At this Atlanta crossroads, those on foot can cross the street in the usual ways but they can also cross diagonally.

"For 15 seconds, pedestrians cross diagonally at every corner at the intersection. And then after that time frame has elapsed, we'll let the traffic light cycle," Tech police officer William Rackley [told WSB Radio in March](#) during the intersection's test period.

### A history of crossings

The scramble at 5th and Spring isn't unique — the city has at least four other such intersections — nor is it a novel solution to keeping pedestrians and drivers safe. Also known as a exclusive pedestrian interval or a Barnes Dance (more on that name in a moment), pedestrian scrambles date back to the late 1940s when they first appeared in Kansas City and Vancouver.

They gained popularity thanks to Henry Barnes, a public official who worked as a street commissioner in a number of American cities during the mid-20th century. Barnes championed the intersections starting in Denver, where they picked up the nickname Barnes Dances [after a city hall reporter wrote](#), "Barnes has made the people so happy they're dancing in the streets."

Dancing in the street may not be the best idea, even in a pedestrian scramble, but pedestrian safety was certainly a public safety priority for Barnes. In his autobiography, he wrote:

As things stood now, a downtown shopper needed a four-leaf clover, a voodoo charm, and a St. Christopher's medal to make it in one piece from one curbstone to the other. As far as I was concerned — a traffic engineer with Methodist leanings — I didn't think that the Almighty should be bothered with problems which we, ourselves, were capable of solving. Therefore, I was going to aid and abet prayers and benedictions with a practical scheme: Henceforth, the pedestrian — as far as Denver was concerned — was going to be blessed with a complete interval in the traffic signal cycle all his own. First of all, there would be the usual red and green signals for vehicular traffic. Let the cars have their way, moving straight through or making right turns. Then a red light for all vehicles while the pedestrians were given their own signal. In this interim, the street crossers could move directly or diagonally to their objectives, having free access to all four corners while all cars waited for a change of lights.

Barnes carried this mission of pedestrian safety with him to New York City in 1962. He immediately sought out sites for scrambles in the Big Apple, and installed a number of them, starting at Vanderbilt Avenue and East 42nd Street, near Grand Central Station, [according to CityLab](#).

Not surprisingly, pedestrians loved them as scrambles allowed them to cross the street without having to worry about what motorists were doing and allowed them to cross diagonally instead of standing through two different traffic cycles to get to a destination. Drivers and other traffic engineers, however, saw the scrambles as time-wasters and congestion-enhancers. A full traffic cycle devoted to pedestrians meant no turns to keep traffic flowing, which led to more congested traffic lanes.

Given that streets are often treated more as drivers' domain, and traffic engineers are more concerned with moving cars through an area rather than pedestrians, scrambles steadily fell out of fashion in the U.S. Even [Denver removed them in 2011](#).

### Bringing crossings back



A diagonal crossing helps pedestrians at rush hour in Santiago, Chile (Photo: Luciano Mortula - LGM/Shutterstock)

Pedestrian scrambles still exist, however.

Japan, for instance, has more than 300 pedestrian scrambles around the country, with perhaps the world's busiest and most iconic in Tokyo. The Shibuya crossing allows 3,000 people to cross during a traffic cycle before surrendering the road in this very busy commercial district back to motorists. The video below gives you a sense of it. This and other traffic and city planning efforts have helped achieve Tokyo's incredibly low traffic fatality rate. Deaths occur at only a rate of 1.3 per 100,000 people in 2015, [according to World Resources Institute](#).

### The famous Shibuya crossing - 90 seconds



England rolled out multiple scrambles starting 2005, including [one in Oxford Circus in 2009](#). That crossing was inspired by the Shibuya crossing, and the opening of the crossing played up the Japanese connections. Then-mayor of London Boris Johnson opened the scramble by hitting a gong while Japanese taiko drums were played.

Even U.S. cities are experimenting with them again. Atlanta is one such example, and [Washington, D.C.](#), Portland, Oregon, and, yes, [New York](#), have started using them as well, albeit only on certain streets.

Los Angeles set up a pedestrian scramble at the one of its most dangerous intersections, Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue, and saw its [pedestrian crashes drop from an average of 13 a year between 2009 and 2013 to one](#) during the crossing's first six months in operation between November 2015 and May 2016.

### Hollywood & Highland Crosswalk



Scrambles aren't the solution for every intersection, of course. They work best at intersections where pedestrian traffic is the heaviest, especially in areas where walkers outnumber motorists. And they require that everyone to know how they work. Many pedestrians are still used to crossing with the flow of traffic, and that thinking can make scrambles less safe. Pedestrian scrambles can't be too large since drivers are already prone to hogging crosswalks anyway, and an entire traffic cycle for pedestrians may be too much for some drivers to bear.

Regardless, as we work toward creating more pedestrian-friendly cities, innovation is an important tool, though attaining the goal won't be easy — something Barnes anticipated.

"The one thing that a traffic engineer learns early in life," he wrote, "is that, no matter how many statistics or how many studies he makes, he never can come up with an answer that will completely satisfy everyone."

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