

Sharing The City:

Learning from
the New York City
Public Space
Movement 1990–2015

Perspective of Brooklyn Bridge
Photo Credit: Nightnurse Images



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Learning from the New York City Public Space Movement 1990–2015

A project of Andrea Woodner and Claire Weisz, 2015–2017

5	Why This Inquiry?
11	Summary of Findings
19	Preface to the Two Workshops
20	August 9, 2016 Workshop
36	August 17, 2016 Workshop
83	Appendix: Workshop Briefing Book

**Let's mark a line
in the sand, and
let's have a look
and see where
we're at.**

**Where are we in
2016, versus 1996?**

— Mary Rowe, August 9

WHY THIS INQUIRY?

This inquiry is, at heart, an invitation to question.

We begin with the premise that in the little over 20 years that have elapsed since we founded the Design Trust, something of a “public space movement” has taken hold. The value of New York City’s public built environment to urban life has become almost universally acknowledged across sectors and disciplines: design, public service, social and urban planning, real estate development, and more.

It certainly was not always so. Twenty years ago, “public” was not a word that one associated with either space or design. Then, as now, New York’s public sector was full of talented designers, planners and policy makers who were drawn to the great possibilities of designing the city’s libraries, esplanades and parks. But the agenda was not supported. The Design Trust was founded to effectively provide that support, and has helped to spur a movement that has unlocked the potential embedded in public sector space design, and elicit a reframing of design thinking that has made New York a proving ground in the creation of great urban space.

Today we tend to take for granted ambitious public achievements like Brooklyn Bridge Park, Governors Island, bike lanes and bike sharing, the Department of Design and Construction’s Office of Sustainability, and one million newly planted trees, along with countless smaller wonders like the New York Restoration Project’s community garden rescue, elegant sheds and recycling plants, well designed park benches and fountains, and *Poetry in Motion*. As one interviewee for this project put it: *“If you had told someone in the ‘70s that you were going to put a fancy chair in the middle of Fifth Avenue and 23rd street—and no one would steal it—they would have said, ‘you’re crazy!’”*

That this public space renaissance over this time frame has occurred in spite of New York’s appreciating land values that maximize density and “highest and best use” is nothing short of amazing. It has been aided and abetted by visionary leadership across all sectors, by New York’s growing economy and enlightened public and private investment, by crime reduction and safer public spaces, and notably by increasingly sophisticated landscape architecture and urban design approaches, with these professionals now designing public spaces and infrastructure that achieve design excellence while embracing community character and sustainable and resilient solutions.

Having founded the Design Trust for Public Space in 1995, we began to reflect on this public space “coming of age” as the Design Trust itself came of age; celebrating a milestone anniversary in 2015 and, having

Imagine you're
Superman, flying
over Gotham
City, and you can
change anything
with respect to
the public built
environment.

What would it be?

— Andrea Woodner, August 9

become fully professionalized, moving on to new leadership. We began to sense that the public space movement had grown to the extent that it was not only creating internal competition for resources, but moreover it had codified a new language and common parlance so widespread that at times it runs the risk of cliché.

Our question is, “Where do we go from here?” But in order to answer that question, to determine new directions and new possibilities, and even begin to think about the possibility of adopting a shared agenda among public space advocates, we needed to ground these questions in a little research.

We interviewed twenty leaders within the ‘public space movement’ from multiple sectors, in order to ascertain, on an anecdotal basis, what drove this shift, and what are the real contours of these changes. Interviewees identified significant shifts in New York’s public space governance, as well as major milestones in the development of the City’s public realm. We also heard about what new City governance dynamics are at play today, about missed opportunities, and about challenges that persist or have come about as the unintended consequence of established improvements. Those conversations grounded two workshops conducted in the summer of 2016 with leaders from government, design, and civic activism. The conversations that ensued were a wellspring of inquiry and insight: thoughts were shared about what largely has been responsible for significant gains, and on what is needed now, to proceed more effectively, to search out deeper challenges, to further enrich our common ground.

We are deeply grateful for the generosity, candor and wisdom of all who contributed to some inspiring conversations. It is a great start.

Andrea Woodner and Claire Weisz,
Co-Founders, Design Trust for Public Space

View from Jamaica Bay
Photo credit: Albert Vecerka, Esto Photographics







SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

BRIEF: ASSESSING THE PUBLIC SPACE MOVEMENT

New Yorkers need a well-conceived and designed “public commons”... places outside of our own homes broaden our perspectives and allow us to mingle, gather and pursue non-commercial interests and activities together.

Over the past twenty years, this argument has essentially been won by the dedicated efforts of public space advocates, an evolving design community, and enlightened individuals within the public sector and the development profession. A modern “public space movement” has ushered in some brilliant and successful new public spaces. Bryant Park, the Times Square pedestrian zone, the High Line, Brooklyn Bridge Park, the Battery Park redevelopment, and 911 Memorial park have joined New York’s historically significant, iconic public places such as the New York Public Library, Central and Prospect Parks, and the Grand Concourse. Moreover, as the environmental movement has come into its own, we are reevaluating our role as custodians of and partners with Nature, even in dense urban environments.

Two veterans of this modern day public space movement, architect Claire Weisz and developer Andrea Woodner, decided that it was time to assess. What progress have we made in New York City in creating publicly accessible places that strengthen our neighborhoods? Where have we failed? What steps should we take together over the next decades to create the kinds of public spaces needed by a city as diverse and demanding as ours?

Over the course of the summer and early fall of 2016, Weisz and Woodner invited a number of leaders largely responsible for the recent evolution of NY public space to engage in a research process. In addition to private interviews, two group discussions were convened with a dozen practitioners at each.

These are their findings, followed by a concept for next steps.

PRESENT CHALLENGES

Despite the international acclaim many of New York City's 21st century public spaces have received, we must confront the fact that they represent largely a "Manhattan bubble," and that the benefits of these successes have not yet accrued across the city. In fact, social inequities are strikingly manifested in the varying degree of public and private investment in public space innovations across the boroughs.

We need a coordinated strategy of government planning, design, investment, and advocacy to build up our public realm, across all five boroughs over time, in order to bridge class, and race and every kind of difference that exists in this city. And we need to think beyond the terms of elected officials and their varying mandates, and beyond economic cycles.

GOVERNMENTAL CHALLENGES

The Bloomberg legacy was shaped by commissioners committed to the power of design and the importance of the built environment. They ushered in transformative building and public space initiatives. In contrast, the de Blasio administration, prioritizing issues of equity, is committed to achieving measurable outcomes by significantly increasing public access to pre-K facilities; decreasing pedestrian accidents and fatalities; and increasing the number of affordable and transitional housing units.

Similar to Bloomberg's *grands projets* and de Blasio's commitment to housing and early education for all, we want to initiate a lasting mission of "Sharing the City" through the creation of viable, sustainable public spaces that support and connect all communities. How do we embed the conviction, at all levels of government, that universal access to well-conceived and designed public space is what actually makes our city a *city*?

Throughout mayoral administrations, the not-for-profit sector has risen to meet the shortages in funding and expertise left by gaps in government support. As a result, and thanks to the new appreciation of urban space, the public space advocacy sector has become hyper-developed to the point where there exists significant redundancy among the missions and programs of various like-minded groups, as these organizations struggle to compete for resources and brand identity. It is time to create some rationality and synergy amongst these organizations, to map their identities, goals and programs, and look at ways to share information, improve efficiency and possibly coalesce around commonly identified goals.

INVESTMENT

Not every borough has access to the type of private investment or surtax assessments that enabled most of Manhattan's signal public building successes. How do we change the funding dynamic for capital projects and maintenance so that more communities can benefit? Moreover, in terms of taxpayer-supported projects, in less advantaged communities, public funding of open space amenities often vies with other social needs. The criticism that New York is great at creating one-offs, but doesn't have an overall strategy is well-founded. So is the critique that neighborhood improvements often fail to realize maximum benefit because of the constraints of ill-considered or arbitrary boundaries. How do we create a public space investment strategy that takes diverse neighborhoods equally into account, that improves neighborhoods in every borough, and that actually connects neighborhoods?

We live in a shared city. Public space is our connective tissue. We need to build to that.

PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES

The following areas are where engaged planning is essential.

“SHARING” AS A PLANNING PRINCIPLE

Private developers have learned that attractive public places (marketplaces, outdoor food courts and atria) are selling points with investors and community review boards, and marketing signatures of their projects. Meanwhile the new economy is successfully innovating models for sharing workplaces, transportation on demand, short term and apartment living, and industry. The appeal and acceptance of sharing and co-mingling is increasing, particularly in dense urban environments where start-ups flourish and their success can depend upon the efficient use of resources. These innovations enrich how we live in urban spaces; we should use them to inspire how we innovate for shared public space. (Examples include: liberating parking space for other uses, “complete streets,” rooftop farming, and street closings.)

DEFINE AND PLAN INFRASTRUCTURE

If, as expected over the next decade, federal and state governments allocate funding toward infrastructure investment, it would allow New York City to finally begin to upgrade its aging and inadequate infrastructure. At the same time, the private, manually driven gas

powered car may soon lose the hegemony it enjoyed in the 20th century. The hope is that with new infrastructure spending, the Tri-State Region's bridges, tunnels and roadways may soon be weighted toward public transportation, allowing city streets to be partially repurposed for non-vehicular transportation and other public uses. If we can add "public space" along with bridges, tunnels and highways to the definition of "Infrastructure", we could tap into these federal and state funds for public space capital funds, and build on trends that de-emphasize the private car.

CREATE AND CONNECT NEIGHBORHOODS

There is strong consensus that mixing uses within buildings, streets, and neighborhoods is socially enriching and economically beneficial. If it's not hybrid, it's not a neighborhood. Times Square added pedestrians, NYCHA added community centers and participatory budgeting. Subway stations are adding retail.

Housing projects with insufficient public realm investment and economic opportunity quickly become community deserts creating failing housing units without much else that communities need to thrive. In high-density low-income housing shared spaces have simply become "off limits" when maintenance and safety problems arise due to abuse and neglect. We need to establish community-governed "Neighborhood Improvement Districts" to restore public spaces and services necessary to the health and safety of residents.

Parks as green space are not always the answer to what public space should be. (Even Olmsted believed that the sidewalks outside the rusticated walls of his Central Park were as much parkland as the acreage within.) We need to continue to imagine and invite new uses and forms for our civic commons.

Problems can arise when neighborhood boundaries become barriers. When conceived as connective tissue, public space can breach neighborhood boundaries, help to ameliorate inequality, and build social cohesion locally while solving urban issues on a larger scale. This approach can tap into different budgets.

Public spaces can be platforms for a variety of exchanges, whether they are economic, social, or political. Protest is essential to preserving democracy, and it is critical that urban space and governance accommodate it.

NEXT STEPS

We need a campaign led by champions to drive the next decade of change for the public space movement. The above-mentioned principles that grew out of this assessment (“*Sharing as a Planning Principle*”, “*Define and Plan Infrastructure*” and “*Create and Connect Neighborhoods*”) could serve as an agenda. Our goal is that this agenda, and a commitment to support the role of planning and design to this end, becomes embedded not only in the public consciousness, but also in every municipal agency, supported by the private sector and endorsed by the tax payer.

DEFINE LEADERSHIP

Clearly, recruiting leadership is our first challenge. We need expertise, influence and passionate commitment to drive this cause. Who should take this on? Do we create a task force? Do we invite an existing organization to adopt this agenda? In terms of engaging today’s public space advocacy groups, our goal is to bring more and better resources to those who work every day to enable a dynamic, healthy and diverse city. We do not want to create an additional burden or more redundancy. Quite the opposite: we would like to test models for greater efficiency.

WE NEED A THOUSAND POINTS OF LIGHT

Whoever drives this effort, ultimately we will need to mobilize a broad and diverse set of stakeholders from every sector, and from every borough of New York City, to come together to call for a shared city. How does this action expand to incorporate and include all key players?

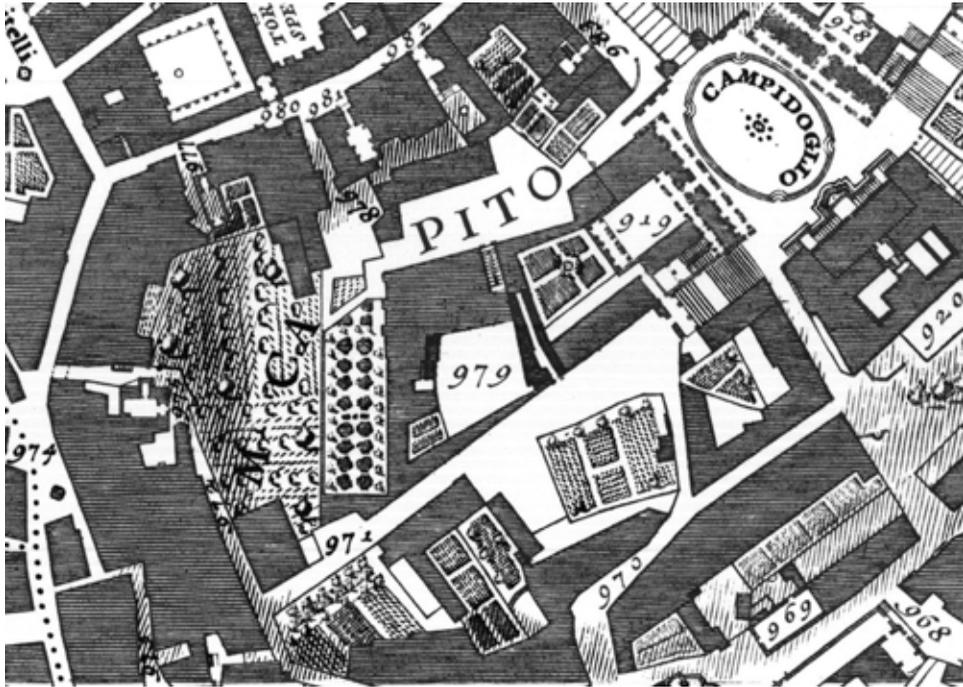
COMMUNICATE TO ILLUMINATE

A communications campaign that illustrates all the instances where the public realm is being strengthened, and develops a clear and compelling narrative that combines data and storytelling, will inform and motivate us to grow a movement. We want this movement to compel New York City to address systemic barriers, embrace planning and innovation, and make a fully realized *shared city*.

Bryant Park, Summer 2012
Photo Credit: Kevin Chu and Jessica Paul Photography







PREFACE TO THE TWO WORKSHOPS

Each of the two invited group interviews turned out to be focused and spontaneous discussions where platitudes were dispensed with and deep reflections jumped out. There was an urgency to both discussions; people were eager to exchange information, to reconnect, to talk to and learn from one another, with little or no need of a moderator. To preserve this sense of dialogue we decided to present the discussions more or less intact, keeping many of the points that were made in the order they were said and in people's own voices.

Participants' comments revealed their point of view and life experience, and while these groups were largely comprised of planners, policy makers and activists, we could have easily also convened groups including journalists, community organizers, developers and not-for-profit leaders. As these comments reveal, people wanted to make sure that the values that caused the public space movement in New York City were not lost.

Originally Andrea Woodner started calling this effort "the Nolli project." For readers outside of the design disciplines, the Nolli Map is a plan of Rome, created in the Renaissance, that uniformly depicts as figure/ground all public spaces both inside and outside buildings (the atria of palazzi, churches and cathedrals, as well as the open spaces of streets, piazzas and markets). In its time, this uniquely accurate drawing revealed the nature of public space and its mark on the city in a transformative new way. In a sense that is what these conversations also reveal, and what this initiative strives to do.

AUGUST 9, 2016 WORKSHOP



Amanda Burden
Principal, Urban
Planning, Bloomberg
Associates



Maxine Griffith
Government and
Community Affairs,
Columbia University



Robert Hammond
Co-founder and
Executive Director,
Friends of the High Line



Kitty Hawks
Interior Designer



Charles Laven
President,
Forsyth Street



Regina Myer
President, Downtown
Brooklyn Partnership



Milton Puryear
Co-Founder, Brooklyn
Greenway Initiative



Mitchell Silver
Commissioner, New
York City Department of
Parks & Recreation



Debra Simon
Director of Public Art,
Time Square Alliance



Elizabeth Streb
Founder, Streb Extreme
Action Company



Tim Tompkins
President, Times
Square Alliance



Paul Steely White
Executive Director,
Transportation
Alternative



Andrea Woodner
Artist, co-founder,
The Design Trust for
Public Space



Claire Weisz
Principal, WXY
architecture + urban
design; co-founder,
The Design Trust for
Public Space

KITTY HAWKS: Public space can connect us and enhance the effort to breach the prejudices that are growing by leaps and bounds, in our city and our country.

DEBRA SIMON: We have this massively missed opportunity, where we are going to be a city of arts presenters not creators.

ELIZABETH STREB: We artists develop content and invent new forms, new language, new syntaxes, but then have no responsibility for the distribution of those events.

MITCHELL SILVER: Cities are now magnets for both millennials and those who are aging that want to stay in the City. Streets are safer, the population is growing, and so public space means something different today than it did 20 or 30 years ago. We are now starting to see a reinvention of the use of that public space. New York gets 130 million visits to our parks annually. That is showing you the value of our public space to this city.

We have to start looking at the streets as a place and not just as a way of moving people and start looking at the semi-public spaces that are there that we own, that we don't have to acquire, and that we just have to reprogram for the public benefit. That is my hope going forward.

REGINA MYER: When we start thinking about equity we need to think about a few different levels. The high-level design that we've been putting in legacy parks, that needs to be employed in a lot of different places with pride.

We need to have those higher standards in every public place. What Mitchell Silver has done in parks without borders has started to address matters of access and quality. I'm so used to public spaces with fences. When we start breaking them down we also need to put quality into them.

MILTON PURYEAR: If you are in the urban environment, if you are surrounded by concrete and hard surfaces, sound effective surfaces, and thousands and thousands of people all the time your humanity stresses. Providing places with absorbent natural environment for people to de-stress, to decompress and not have sound is important. To not have the stimuli that the city and thousands of people put into your nervous system for a moment.

CHARLES "CHUCK" LAVEN: The biggest source of potential parks for New York in 2035 is its streets. Sixth Avenue is about a 10-acre park. If we refer to parks as infrastructure, and we have a multi zillion dollar infrastructure bill next spring, we'd better be sure that we never talk about parks as anything other than infrastructure because, a few percentage points at the bottom of that bill will be massive to the city of New York and to the country.

TIM TOMPKINS: What's the role of the civic sector? On the one hand being a source of innovation and creativity, and raising the standards in terms of design, and helping us imagine something slightly different. In every case the civic sector and the public-private partnerships have done that, but then

The high level design that we've been putting in legacy parks, that needs to be employed in a lot of different places with pride. We need to have those higher standards in every public place. — Regina Meyer, August 9

it bumps up against the equity issue. I see, not just in New York but across the country, there are all these different creative and good things that happen, from a kind of entrepreneurial civic sector. Whether it's with Business Improvement Districts, or parks conservancies, there isn't a real coherent philosophy about how they nurture those, as opposed to just tolerate.

MITCHELL: [One European country] has a Chief of Public Realm and that struck me—streets and sidewalks and parks represent 40 percent of the City's land area. We didn't advocate for a Public Realm Chief but we are putting together a public realm team: Parks, Department of Transportation, Department of Environmental Protection and City Planning, this now will come together and parks and borders is now becoming that experiment to see how we can have a seamless public realm. For instance: you have the pedestrian plazas in the street at Madison Square then you have the park right across the street. Now we are experimenting in doing a study of how those work together. That's what I meant by re-envisioning real estate that we own, and not just spending a lot of money acquiring new parks.

JONATHAN ROSE (via email): The quality of public realm needs mayoral and departmental leadership as much as affordable housing, health, education, and transportation do. It's a commissioner level position. This needs to be a key question in mayoral campaigns. What would the city look like and feel under this type of leadership?

PAUL STEELY WHITE: Defining this as a movement, recognizing the gains we've made, and trying to consolidate that and move forward is the most important question asked.

What's the public populist message or brand that will connect with average New Yorkers? How do we position ourselves going into the next election? Is it something about a public realm chief? Is it a funding ask? What are the one or two critical reforms that we think we want to get from the City Council, from our next mayor, from the same mayor? Is there a strategic project that we can collaborate on that will communicate the necessities that we are talking about? For example: How can you reimagine 14th Street?

MAXINE GRIFFITH: I want to speak up for planning. We do zoning very well but we don't look at the City as a whole. What makes a good neighborhood, putting it all together, working with the community, with our officials, etc. This focus on open space is very important but it's hard to see it without context. Planning should provide context.

We were extraordinarily luckily to have Amanda Burden in the Department of City Planning for so long. We are really lucky to have Mitch as a planner doing public space, but we were lucky—it didn't happen because of a government structure. I like having a philosophy and a message, but looking around the table, the feeling about this group, in addition to impressive credentials, is that we all understand the political. I would urge a parallel political strategy that doesn't just look out for a mayor's next term.

How can we help support the good angels on all levels of government? I'm

The Bloomberg administration didn't change government, they used government.

— Claire Weisz, August 9

hoping for a narrative that is put forth, in parts, in terms of philosophy and approach, but also that deals with the political. You can't get money without politics.

ROBERT HAMMOND: Private is not the answer. In certain cases, I think it works but really it's the public responsibility. For that we need a lobby. New Yorkers for Parks can be reinvented! Find creative back-end ways of getting federal funding. The High Line got it through transportation and housing rezoning but we shouldn't have to go through back doors. Why can't we, with this hopefully next administration really put that forward?

AMANDA BURDEN: Taking the measure of a good public space should be part of our job. A successful public space is a space that's used, it's a space that's part of community life; it's a bike lane that's used; it's benches that you can spend time on, benches with backs. What's the point of a whole park where the benches don't have backs, and you can't fit three people on a bench? All of these things aren't about fussing with details; they are about including features that make people want to spend time in the space. If these public spaces are going to provide a relief from urban pressure and stress, they have to measure up.

REGINA: Successful places integrate neighborhoods and draw people from one neighborhood into another; they begin to exchange activities and experiences.

MITCHELL: We are now focusing on the experience of the place, paying attention to local demographics... we are now designing as experienced builders not just park planners. It's not one size fits all. At the Department of Parks and Recreation we are not just saying "parks": it's parks and public space, because parks are public space.

REGINA: There's a way to win public and private partnership in corridors of commerce (like Sixth Avenue), where there's very little access to nature. The everyday worker during a 9:00 to 5:00 job needs a little of that too, a little mental and spiritual time out if you will.

MITCHELL: Public space needs to be seamless. Frederick Law Olmsted said, "The sidewalk adjacent to the park is the outer park." The City Charter says, "Parks will maintain the sidewalks." We are redesigning the sidewalk as the outer park: when you are on Fifth Avenue, that is the outer park, when you are on Myrtle Avenue beside Fort Greene Park, that is the outer park.

CHUCK: In order to do a great design, you have to have a great client and the client has to ask for it and want to do it. The genius in some of the parks that we've created in the last 12 years took arm wrestling across all of those silos and bringing them together.

CLAIRE: There's a question about the civic commons, the market, commercial activity, and nature parks. Are we giving up on commerce in public space?

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It's a philosophy
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— Tim Tompkins, August 9

FINAL COMMENTS

TIM: What's the language that helps people see it? It's generally public grounds; we know what it is. But what is the thing that cuts across all these different elements and constituents? The parks, people, the environmental folks, and the transportation folks all create a constituency. We need a language that pulls it together and articulates the vision of a certain level of quality; certainly equity because it's the equity of funding that is at issue. It's not binary: public or private. It's a philosophy about how the public sector intersects and nurtures these many constituencies.

CHUCK: We have close to 2,000 parks. In any given year another 13 will lack investment for 20 years. We just have to keep pace.

ELIZABETH: I'm curious about the role of the arts innovator in all of these public investments. We are the experience providers but we're also the pre-identifiers. We are the world's eye view looking at these types of entities. We artists go in and by sheer necessity and not planning, discover these places that will become critical to real estate. It's not that I want to go to Jed Walentas, who has the Domino Sugar Factory and say, "I want to be here. What would it take for you to give it over to me?" I say this: "Fall on your knees and beg for SLAM (Streb Lab for Action Mechanics) to be a part of your development! What would that take? That's my question. As it is, we are the beggars and you are the makers and the builders. How could the collaboration occur for you not to grant a favor after hearing our plaintive cries?"

DEBRA: I would like to have a "Department of the Livable City," which could take on public spaces, infrastructure, arts and public art planning, and transportation, and look at it not only from the point of view of infrastructural content but also from an equity position.

ROBERT: Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses were really both trying to do the same thing: they were both trying to save the city. But cities are winning, and cities are going to continue to win. More and more cities are going to have the problems that we now have so we are going to have to have a whole new approach. When the High Line started, the neighborhood was dying for economic development. On 9/11 people were worried that the city was going to die again. I look at all these other projects around, these industrial rezoning projects, and I think they're all going to be economic successes. The question is, *are they going to be social successes?*

We made a mistake when we asked housing projects next to the High Line to respond to design questions: do you want stainless steel, or concrete here? We never asked until we were open: what can we as an organization do for you? To me that's the change that we have to start making. I'd love this to come out with some concrete things that we can do.

KITTY: As you start to think about parks, how do you condition or prepare or engage the neighborhoods of those parks to have a sense of ownership? The

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recreational
thing.** — Claire Weisz, August 17

safety of New York City parks, with the exception of Central Park, is pretty hair-raising at the moment. How do you keep the fear out? Why are there walls? Why are there fences? You don't want to lock up a park—it's a public place.

REGINA: When you think of how far New York City has come in the past 50 years it's a pretty amazing effort of re-imagining what New York City is. We need to keep that authentic New York as a city of people continuing to invest, continuing to imagine. That kind of enrichment and that level of partnership is what has made the Brooklyn Bridge Park a success. Now I think the next challenge is, how can that happen someplace else?

MAXINE: We should advocate for the Planning Commission and the wonderful professionals in Parks to actually plan. That is an organization that is supposed to go across silos. It already has a governance process that embraces community. Someone once told me: "In Tokyo they have planning without zoning; in New York we have zoning without planning." Indeed we are so dependent on Amanda or Mitch that when they're not there the structure falls apart and we feel we have to re-advocate for it—there should really be a structure that at least informs above and beyond which we can't fail. Then get great people to fill those jobs.

MILTON: Since the streets have most of the real estate we've put green infrastructure and green plants on the surface. But actually it's a small fraction of the total area because all the other stuff is under the ground. I've always wondered why we let utilities come in willy-nilly underground. They should be vertically organized so that the water's at the bottom, electricity at the top and gasoline between. This will create a utility infrastructure for streets that make the rest of the 26 percent usable for something else.

I'm really emphatic about the means to immerse oneself in nature, as opposed to just recreation, the ability to escape from the city. There are studies that show abnormally high levels of hypertension and high blood pressure in black communities in particular.

TIM: I'd love to see a coherent public space philosophy that advocates both within and outside government and includes a set of specific ideas that nurtures quality design, management, increased money for operations, and creative programming. We also need a coherent philosophy about the respective role of government and civic nonprofit groups. Advocates develop several ideas and then what does government do with federal savings to develop and to implement those ideas? This philosophy will have to be versatile. Right now the city is prosperous; right now the city is safe.

MITCHELL: Our goal should be to create a public realm team to plan and facilitate a seamless and equitable open space approach that unlocks the potential of public and semi public space for present and future generations.

AMANDA: I think that this group can't disappear—very important things have been said here and it just can't stop at one conversation.

**Providing places
for people to
de-stress, to
decompress and
not have sound
. . . to have an
absorbent natural
environment . . .
for a moment
to not have the
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city and thousands
of people put into
your nervous
system.** — Milton Puryear, August 9

Of course, the dream is that every neighborhood in the City has a park that is inviting to its neighbors and is tailored to its special demographics and also has maintenance to take care of it. In order to there we need a focused ‘public realm team’ with a coherent public space philosophy; a continuous advocacy that not only educates and governs but also understands the critical roles of maintenance and funding. And this ‘team’ needs to transcend administrations. Typically one administration has great leadership and then there is a void. And I am not sure that public space is always popular. It’s really crucial to have a well-informed advocacy because park space is very complicated.

CLAIRE: The Bloomberg administration didn’t change government, it used government. It did its best with the tools it had, but it’s about time to change these tools. Maybe our Public Health Department has to morph with City Planning into a new kind of department where we fund and we make philosophies based on the public health outcomes we require, not only our health as human beings but our environmental health. That also links to transportation. I do think health could be the reason we do things in the future. If we could make that change maybe the Parks Department would actually be running the City of New York.

CHUCK: I want the city to adopt congestion pricing, hopefully statutory in nature, and I would eliminate privately owned single-passenger cars. This would free up the streets in ways that you can’t imagine and allow us to creatively think about the streets, the sidewalks connected to open space. You can’t do that open space network unless we get a third of the cars off the street. We came surprisingly close in the Bloomberg administration. I think everyone was shocked at how close we got.

Every time the *New York Times* has an article about infrastructure it talks about roads, bridges, and tunnels. I’d love that phrase to be “roads, bridges, tunnels, urban infrastructure, and open space.” We need to advocate for the creation of the public realm and public park partnerships with developers, transportation planners, and others who tend to view this as an afterthought. We’ve got to change the conversation so that the infrastructure of the urban area is not just a road, a bridge, or a tunnel.

ANDREA: We need to change people’s minds about what matters most. When we prioritize how much money we make, how powerful our position is, we de-prioritize the creative side of our own life experience and de-prioritize all forms of creativity. I believe fundamentally that the parks and open space which belong to all of us really express the city’s creative side. They are the city’s “extracurricular.”

Recalibrating priorities matters because people pay taxes and donate to not-for-profits accordingly. Politicians will never be able to justify putting parks into their budgets unless people who are paying the taxes agree this is a fundamentally important thing to support. People support arts organizations when they appreciate that making art, and making art available, matters. My big hope for the next 20 years is that people wake up to the fact that it’s not just about making money. It’s about making your life meaningful and joyful.

The Battery
Photo Credit: Amy Barkow





**I would want
to speak up for
planning. . . . In
Tokyo they have
planning without
zoning; in New
York we have
zoning without
planning!** — Maxine Griffith, August 9

PAUL: Extend people's ideas of what a park is and what that park experience can be. Can you experience it on the city streets? On the school playground? If we can talk about this to the candidates and to the reporters, and repeating that in the next two or three years, I think it will be doing a good job.

ANDREA: We haven't yet started to talk to the not-for-profit advocacy groups for public space. They're notably absent from the room. We wanted to get a broader sense before we get into the specific agenda of those not-for-profits. Obviously we're going to need to include them in this conversation. There are other people in government that we're going to need to hear from.

The field is ginormous and I think part of our challenge is going to be how to really structure these conversations so that we engage the right people in the right way. We're figuring that out step-by-step as we go along. I think this was an incredible first step.

REGINA: Show the public what's possible—give a film to community boards or get PBS to show it. Once you start thinking in terms of showing this is what's possible and this is why it's important, the communities get involved.

ANDREA: Are you saying that you think one of the ways to get people to understand this coherent philosophy is by commissioning or really looking at creating some sort of ... I'll call it creative content that lets people understand some of these issues?

ROBERT: Don't make a movie. We're going to premiere [Citizen Jane] at the film festival.

MITCHELL: NYC Parks has 130 million visits a year. Think of where else on the planet that many people visit something. And that doesn't include Times Square and other public places. We have a built-in constituency. Our market is screaming: We love our public spaces! How do you tap that 130 million visits (if that were visitors) it would be almost half the population of the United States that visits New York's public parks every single year? That is the challenge, how do we tap that?

ANDREA: That said, I have one more request from this group: we need a T-shirt. We couldn't figure out even what to call this project that Claire and I are working on. We've gone through a lot of ridiculous ideas like The Movable Bench because of the success that meant to Bryant Park to have that have chairs that were not locked down. Be creative, come up with something that will really help us.

REGINA: We can call this session Saving the City. I have to say that some people said that the city is already saved but really.

TIM: Sharing the City.

ANDREA: Sharing the City. That's it!

AUGUST 17, 2016 WORKSHOP



David Burney
Associate Professor,
Graduate Center of
Planning, Pratt
Institute



Vin Cipolla
Executive Director,
David Geffen Hall Cam-
paign, Lincoln Center
for the Performing Arts



Joshua David
President and Chief
Executive Officer,
World Monuments Fund



Abby Hamlin
President,
Hamlin Ventures



Eloise Hirsch
Administrator,
Freshkills Park



**Naomi
Hersson-Ringskog**
formerly No-Longer
Empty



Katie Hollander
Executive Director,
Creative Time



Justin Garrett Moore
Executive Director,
New York City Public
Design Commission



Yeohlee Teng
Fashion Designer



Andrea Woodner
Artist, co-founder,
The Design Trust
for Public Space



Claire Weisz
Principal, WXY
architecture + urban
design; co-founder,
The Design Trust for
Public Space



Mary Rowe
Senior Fellow,
Project for Public
Spaces

CLAIRE: Many of you have either stepped into new roles in other organizations or stepped away from other passion projects. I think the reinvention around this table is staggering.

VIN CIPOLLA: It's a New York thing too. If you brought folks together in a smaller city, 15 years later, we'd all be in the same places.

MARY ROWE: This discussion is, politically fairly neutral. Regardless of who the mayor is, or who the governor is, let's mark a line in the sand, and let's have a look and see where we're at. From your perspective, where are we in 2016, versus 1996?

DAVID BURNEY: In terms of inequality in the city, I think about the inequalities in the public space map along with all of the others: health outcomes, incomes. If you talk to Laura Hansen (Neighborhood Plaza Partnership), it's a real struggle. There is an absence of significant funding to help those less well-endowed communities. There was a whole discussion about tithing the Central Park conservancy, taking 10 percent of its money and distributing it, and that didn't go down too well.

JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE: There are now national discussions of questions of safety and security in cities, and how that relates to different demographic groups, whether it's Black Lives Matter or immigrants. Still there is very little awareness or understanding of the complexity of some of those issues. People in the design professions aren't equipped or confident in talking about these issues. Negative responses have a tremendous impact on public space in cities. The design community needs to connect to academia, to research and policy to really try to understand these issues better. Big blind spot.

ABBY HAMLIN: The entire city's use of public space has changed over 20 years, but it has not changed equally across the board. With Roseanne Haggerty's work in Brownsville, there is almost too much un-programmed open space.

For 25 years my office overlooked Bryant Park and I watched its evolution. I dealt with Dan Biederman. I dealt with the whole creation of Bryant Park. The company I worked with was responsible for this building (the Grace Building), and we were part of the thinking of the evolution of Bryant Park.

We can talk about the way we've evolved in a very positive direction, and we should, but at the same time, we need to acknowledge that hasn't been an across-the-board change in our public space in all of New York City. It's only in parts of New York City.

YEOHLEE TENG: One way to look at making a fairer distribution of the quality of public space is to look at our subway stations. Improving the quality of these would improve the lives of everybody in every borough. I think that it's something that really needs attention today. The stations are public space, but they are very neglected. They are the great equalizer. You do another park, but that benefits one community. You do all the stations, it benefits everybody.

**New Yorkers have
always been very
creative about
nabbing a little
space here, a little
space there.**

— Mary Rowe, August 17

MARY: We did a year-long inquiry into redefining public space as a civic commons. These spaces don't have to actually have to be owned by or funded by government. They can provide a civic function, and can be funded differently and managed differently.

Historically, faith institutions of various kinds, legion halls and the like, were part of the civic space. Lobbies, Penn Station. This is where we should be trying to push a little bit. If we define public space too narrowly to be a park or plaza, then we lose all these other things. New Yorkers have always been very creative about nabbing a little space here, and a little space there. The Design Trust's "Roads Forward" even acknowledged the New York taxicab as public space!

JOSHUA DAVID: Many of the transformative public spaces that we think about in Manhattan have been very robustly funded through highly celebrated, and highly touted public-private partnerships. These don't necessarily work in all communities. Because of the model's extreme success it creates a false sense that this can happen everywhere. Maybe there is some way to make it happen everywhere, it's not happening everywhere organically. How can we get creative about transforming funding mechanisms the same way that we have in design and programming, and in conceptual thinking about programming?

CLAIRE: Chuck Laven said at the last session, If you look at how infrastructure funding may work, after this election there's no doubt that the metrics on public space are our infrastructure. So his theory was that we should make sure that we are politically getting that one percent out of the federal budget.

ANDREA: We have really redefined what public space is as much more inclusive. We have some tremendous success in models like Bryant Park and the High Line. That said, we have some sense that inequality is a persistent issue, and safety and security remain essential to this. We need to start getting a little bit more creative, and a little bit more astute, to try to push forward on those issues, building on the successes that now demonstrate that public space really does make a difference, and building on the fact that now we are incorporating more things into our understanding of what public space is. We're appropriating other spaces and utilizing them much more efficiently.

How do we push forward now on the challenges that remain? We haven't really come to grips with some of these things that we know should happen.

MARY: So it's the Manhattan bubble here? Bryant Park, yes, but the majority of New Yorkers are not moving to Bryant Park. Many communities that are dominated by other land uses than public space. Claire is talking about roads as public space... Isn't that really our argument?

CLAIRE: If that's the argument, get rid of the cars, and appropriate that for people.

NAOMI HERSSON-RINGSKOG: It's not about the space, it's that members of the public are becoming more aware of the different tool kits. Whether it's private or public space, I feel that we are going to take the opportunity to

Are we giving up on commerce in public space?

— Claire Weisz, August 9

congregate, or do whatever action needs doing, to hang out or protest. We as people are becoming a little bit more creative and have more of a yearning to mobilize and use our spaces.

ANDREA: What if we took this thinking about security and safety, and neighborhood policing as becoming the solution to Black Lives Matter? Take neighborhood policing, and made *neighborhood* the real, dominant driving force, and policing supports that. What if we took the subways idea as *neighborhood*, and then the transportation is a kind of tag line to it? How can we turn the intentionality around by calling it “neighborhood?” There’s probably a better word, but let’s use one that means a localized gathering. What if this becomes the driver, and then the other functions support that whether it’s policing, or transit, or retail, or housing and we put the emphasis on “neighborhood?”

MARY: One question that came up is, is the city livable enough? Some of these initiatives that were game-changers had a certain quality level that made the relationship show.

VIN: We go from livable, to resilient, to sustainable, back to livable.

CLAIRE: Does design quality matter?

VIN: Reconciling this needs to take place on a national level. If you’re in Austin, you are thinking about the incredible increase in traffic, and you want to focus on better public transportation. You’re not really thinking about parks. Depending upon where you are, it’s really a different set of issues, which is why I think that the conversation about infrastructure investment in public space, or thinking about space at an infrastructure project, is a very rich place. It’s a new framework that could better seep into policy thinking and making.

YEOHLEE: It’s giving public space associations with other than parks and leisure functions. You associate public space with how we live, how we get to work.

NAOMI: Isn’t the city really about things “shared?” Isn’t that why we have a city? I’d love to dump the term “public space” because I think it’s limiting and misleading.

It’s why we tried to hijack it last year and call it the “civic commons.” If you’re going to be developing cities, you’re building shared space period.

ELOISE HIRSH: This reinforces our alliance with governance. I’m trying to set up a conservancy in the western section of Staten Island. I have arguments with people daily about why the design conversation really should matter. If we can design; if we can shift the definition, that could broaden it—the civic conversation matters.

KATIE HOLLANDER: We agree that infrastructure needs to become a new priority... I couldn’t agree with this more. In Brooklyn, thinking of the examples

Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses were really both trying to do the same thing: they were both trying to save the city. But cities are winning, and cities are going to continue to win.

I look at all these industrial rezoning projects, I think they're all going to be economic successes. The question is, are they going to be social successes? — Robert Hammond, August 9

of Brooklyn Bridge Park, and Williamsburg, there's clearly great wealth, and that's why those spaces have been developed. If you look at other areas in the borough, they haven't changed at all.

Infrastructure and transportation, at least from the point of view of the boroughs, in getting from Brooklyn to Manhattan but what about all of the thoroughfares within the borough whether they're in Brooklyn, Queens, or the Bronx. I think of Eastern Parkway, for instance it cuts through so many communities, and is such an un-utilized public space. It's just cars whizzing by and a few people on the streets, but it's incredibly rich.

Also, getting from and to areas in farther Brooklyn, whether it's Weeksville, a community that I think is struggling completely to keep that space owned and operated. If there is a way to more easily get there from Prospect Heights, or Bed-Stuy or Crown Heights, and to have an experience that you want to participate in, it brings those communities closer together. I think that part is really important. Because right now, sometimes it feels like it's kind of designed for the areas.

MARY: We talk about these commons pieces as connective tissue. Just back to Manhattan for a moment, and connecting spaces there, one time Claire did an important little drawing that said, "There's Times Square, there's Bryant Park, there's Grand Central, there's Penn Station and there's nothing connecting them."

DAVID: I totally agree about the street. I think the street is the one common connector and we don't spend enough time on the design of the street. Street design makes a huge difference. As a city, you think of what we did on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn for example, as a negative example. You can destroy a street with bad planning. On the other hand, you can create, through design, a successful street. Then you don't have to invent new parks and plazas, it's right there.

NAOMI: One of the things that's really been on my mind before today has been our waterways. This could be where we ought to be gathering. Just like the way we put the emphasis and the investment into Bryant Park, whether it be starting with the ferry lines and getting people on the water.

ANDREA: This sounds so much like 20 years ago. We're talking about design, and design really is experience. Design informs how you experience things. Looking now at people's priorities, whether it's getting to daycare, getting to work, getting to school. If each of those can be designed so that the experience contains an element of shared commons.

I just want to convey a little anecdote about the program that Claire and I just started, providing artist studios for recent graduates trying to get started in New York, and making them affordable. We didn't just build a number of private studios, we also built in a gathering space within the facility, like a gallery or a common area, and that turned out to be the secret sauce of the program. Of course the studio's the primary thing: it's where they do their work, but what really makes this a program is that they have a place to come together, and

If it's not hybrid,
it's not a
neighborhood.

— Claire Weisz

they're talking to each other, and they're hanging their work, looking at their own and each other's work. I argue this can happen anywhere. It can happen in daycare, it can happen on the way to daycare, it can happen in the subways.

This is why it seems like this is 20 year *deja vu*, it all boils down to design, so that you design in that experience that provides more than a privatized experience. If we want to get out of the bubble, we have to start pushing that. We have to start pushing the idea that any time you design anything college campus, research center, shopping street you really want to try to create that sense of community, commonality and connection, make it an experience that gives you something more than just the getting from A to B.

ABBY: Over the years I've been known as a design-driven developer. I've focused a lot on what design really can do. One of the areas that has been particularly challenging has been affordable housing. Does shared space really matter when somebody really needs to live somewhere, and there's only x dollars to allow them to live there?

MARY: What would the intervention point be? Because maybe we say, well if the markets are going to do this, fine—projects such as The High Line are going to happen. Private sector partnerships are going to happen in affluent neighborhoods. Co-working spaces for hipsters are going to happen. Have we decided that the key intervention points that should happen from civic leadership in targeted areas? There are four possible intervention points: governance, equity, re-imagined spaces and design. And as Vin said, in lots of places in the US this is not on the radar at all. Cities are not actually cultivating civic spaces as effectively as they could. New York should be continuing to lead on this.

Design has a dark side. Lots of folks are saying "Stop telling us what we want and what's good for us."

DAVID: You're talking to the wrong designers!

CLAIRE: Abby, is housing, or affordable housing, a point of intervention? Historically in architecture that's where a lot of the public space was being reinvented. If we create commons and buildings, people will be better equipped to go out and want more out of streets.

ABBY: I would make affordable housing a priority, absolutely. We can do better. It's an argument I have all the time. If you have only a little bit of money, and you spend a little extra money, allow for a certain amount of public space, that means you lose a unit. Or you think about how the ground floor space is going to be used in a way that creates more of a commons, if you will. Or shared opportunity. So there's a trade off.

ANDREA: Design Trust is doing design guidelines for ground floor and sidewalk design in mixed-use affordable rental projects.

DAVID: It's a tough sell, because they're trying to squeeze the maximum out of every inch.

Times Square
Photo Credit: Derek Goodwin





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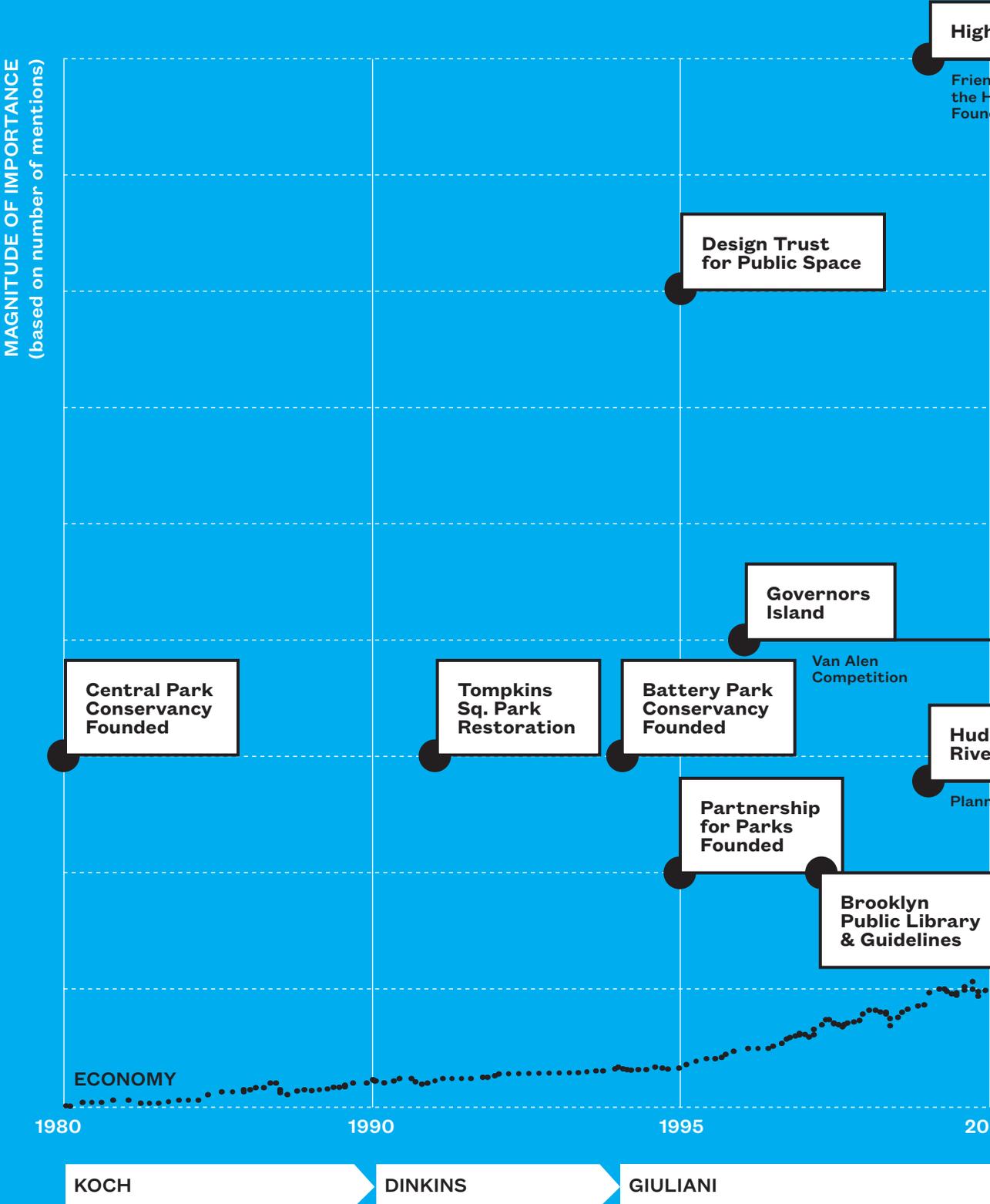
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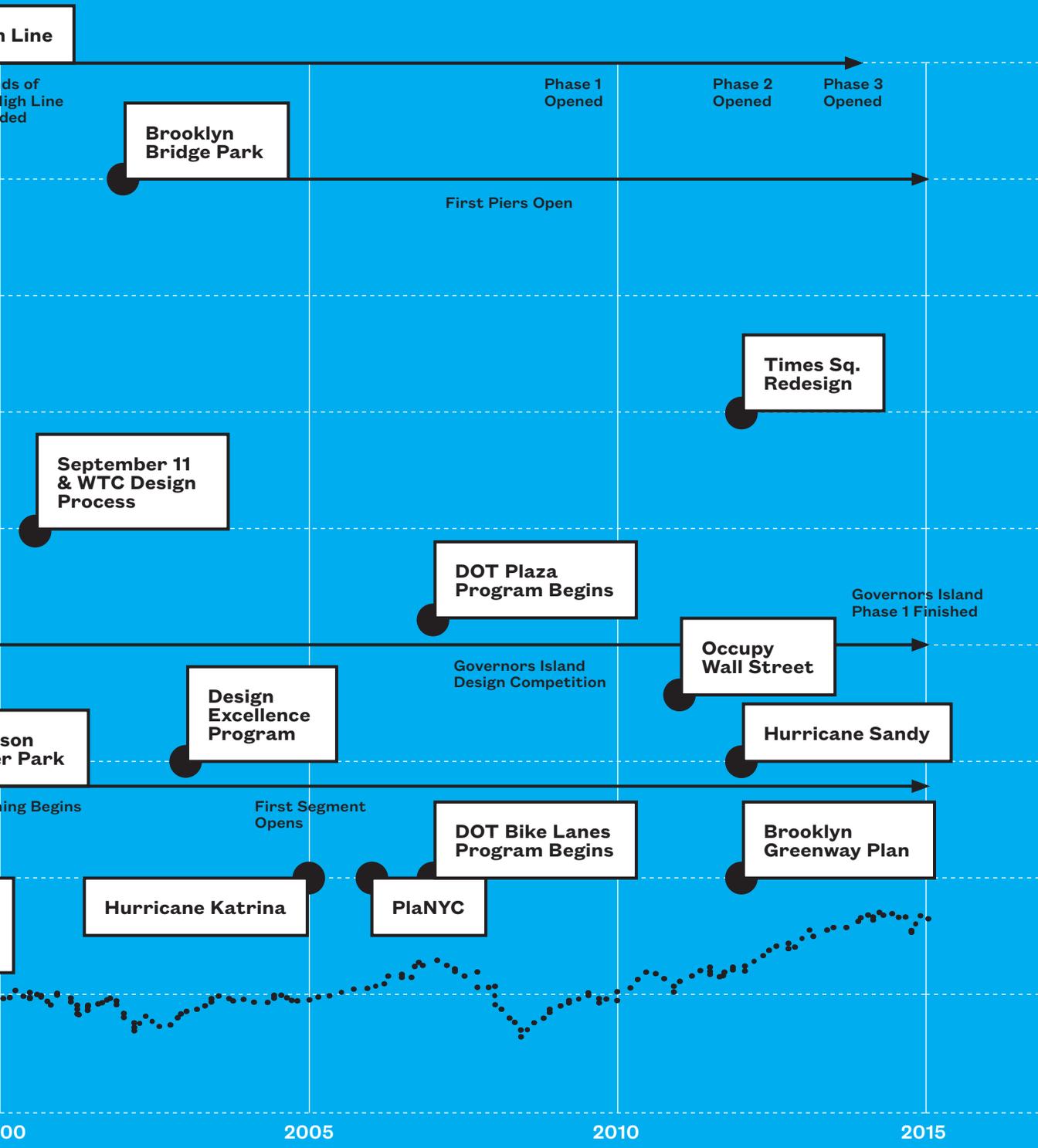
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MAJOR MILESTONES IN NYC PLACEMAKING MID '80S TO PRESENT





BLOOMBERG

DE BLASIO

Design has a dark side. Lots of folks are saying: “Stop telling us what we want and what’s good for us.” — Mary Rowe, August 17

You’re talking to the wrong designers. — David Burney, August 17

ABBY: I think zoning, of course. In New York, that's the major tool that is used. I know, as the city who goes through its re-zonings it's helping to broaden thinking to include infrastructure, trees, library. So, yes on housing, but currently everything is number of unit dollars, divided by number of units. We should somehow insert that in there, but I think it needs to be broadened.

JUSTIN: At City Planning, there were new neighborhood investments, which looked at infrastructure, parks, schools, etc. But still, the driving force was always units. So that's a public conversation that has to happen. There were people in government, and even from the development community advocating for public spaces.

MARY: Do we need a "units of public space" metric? In Vision 2020, there is a distance from a park, but it's only a park.

DAVID: The administration just seems to see number of built units as the end. Once we've built our units, we're done. When you go to those communities, they're pushing back. What about the benefits of density? What about the other services? What about support? Public space is cheap to build.

KATIE: It's also programming and maintenance.

MARY: We seem to only want to pay for hard costs. Maintenance funding came up in the last discussion, obviously, but also, in terms of programming and the arts, production of creative work is not supported at all. And that work is essentially public.

KATIE: Big concerts and film festivals, things like that, are probably supported in a way that visual arts are not. I think it's now just being thought of a lot more than it had been. Creative Time and the Public Art Fund—there's a lot more effort to activate spaces in a certain way. But there's never, or very rarely, any money attached to that. It's just a space.

MARY: Back to my question about, where are our intervention points? I'm curious. 20 years ago, when you dreamt this up, did you say to yourselves, "We're going to create something that's going to persuade city government to make this a higher priority?"

CLAIRE: No, it was very clear at that point. It was more proactive than persuasive. David remembers this—there was no mechanism to plan in New York City. Bloomberg really changed that paradigm. Before that, we, Andy and I, thought the approach should be, "Let's fund the planning so that the city can do something." Because the city can't pay for planning. So we provided a demonstration. Many of the people that supported the Design Trust were associated with city government, and they recognized the value: "Those guidelines. They gave us a way to do that. We could do this ourselves."

JOSHUA: I think a powerful, and well-funded coalition is what's needed now.

A successful public space is a space that's used, it's a space that's part of community life; it's a bike lane that's used; it's benches that you can spend time on, benches with backs.

If these public spaces are going to provide a relief from urban pressure and stress, they have to measure up. — Amanda Burden, August 9

I think there was a missed opportunity with the whole tithing debate. That hit me very hard. Those were my final years at the High Line when the city was proposing, first Dan Squadron, then the administration, taking 10 percent of the money that we were raising for the High Line to distribute to other parks. I think everybody on our board and staff, was completely unified in the desire to see parks across the city be improved, and brought into the same level of investment as the High Line. But our non-profit was just not set up to fund that. So what was cultivated was a very defensive position. We had to. It's very hard to raise the money to keep the High Line going. You can't take 10 percent out of it. Yet, there were a lot of people who came together, board members, and high-level staff members of all those conservancies... That's just a small part of the coalition of people that you could assemble behind an effort like this. I think you'd have to decide where the zones of commonality are. When we look at the biggest changes that have happened in public space in New York, they've been driven politically and financially. Money and power influences bureaucracy. Assembling some kind of well thought out coalition of people who have funding and influence that's the wedge. It's the way to begin to address the equity problem, which I think does get solved by the public sector, more than the private sector.

ANDREA: So it's really like a lobbying effort.

JOSHUA: It's a lobby, yes. Without it you'll never get public money.

ANDREA: And it sounds as though we think it should happen. I didn't hear any disagreement that the next challenge is getting out of the bubble.

MARY: Could we not say that the lack of equity is in fact fueling the tale of two cities, fueling the polarization of the city? I want to know how serious this is. Or is this just, you want it because it would be nice?

CLAIRE: Eloise, how serious do you think the issue is in Staten Island?

ELOISE: It's not as serious in Staten Island, but I think for the city, it is serious. You may disagree from where you're sitting, but I do not feel that there is an impotence in the administration caring about this. I think that they're so focused on their own terms of equity and racial justice, and that they don't see the connection between community, the space that community cohesion requires, and equity. They can't see it yet.

JUSTIN: It's a hierarchy of needs. The things that are very pressing, that's where all of the energy goes. The connectedness that requires you to go through the full pyramid isn't happening, because it takes an incredible amount of bandwidth. When you talk to a council member when there's a community group, no one is talking about it.

ANDREA: It's kind of obvious, but not obvious ... that the shared, the community experience, the shared space, is what's going to make the healthier communities. If you want to spend money on police cars, that's one thing. But

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An emergency
medical station
in Brownsville
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of crime statistics
. . . the one in
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it can have glass,
it can be open.**

— Justin Garrett Moore, August 17

if you spend money on better streets, you won't waste the money you spent on the police cars.

MARY: Let's take Rosanne Haggerty's focus area ground. She actually has data to show that if you made public realm investments in Brownsville, there would be health improvements, a diminishment of crime, better property upkeep.

JUSTIN: Data is dangerous! Build an ambulance station in Williamsburg and one in Brownsville. The EMS in Brownsville gets designed as a bunker, because there's data that says that an EMS in Brownsville should be designed like a bunker. The one in Williamsburg, it can have glass, it can be open. Data causes that.

KATIE: All the things that we're talking about happens over time. The Central Park Conservancy was formed in the Koch administration. Maybe people around this table, but certainly not the general public, would connect the resuscitation of Central Park to his legacy.

So to your point about having a committee, or whatever it is, that can withstand the waves, and ebbs and flows of the administration, is helpful. Also having staff that stays.

MARY: What would happen if you combined our idea with the two de Blasio priorities, jobs, and housing? What about if we made a case that the "spatial means" are critical tools and strategies?

DAVID: If you can get outside of the bubble of City Hall, which is its own thing. That bubble is hermetically sealed. Agencies try to engage in city planning. Within Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ), they are looking at public space and public housing. So, at that kind of staff level, and with parks obviously, there's a lot of commonality. However, it's extremely difficult to get collaboration between agencies in administration, just for bureaucratic reasons. Moreover, they need support. They're not feeling empowered. Maybe people like us in the chattering classes need to get behind them and find some way to give them energy.

MARY: David, would you make that your focus? I'm trying to imagine the next steps for Claire and Andy when they leave. Do we say, "Put something together that's going to be convincing. That's going to allow city government to collaborate more effectively."?

DAVID: Yes. I think that's a win.

VIN: Twenty years ago, you guys created a mandate for public space and design. You said design matters, and public space matters. So 20 years later, and I'm going with something that you said Andy, that right now shared space is an afterthought, even a luxury. But maybe it should be the leading framework for all planning? Whether it's improving subways, or anything else, whatever the mandate is that we want to start with; we need to start with shared space. That's our civic commons. Get that right, and the other stuff is going to work within it.



TRENT



Every time
the New York
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article about
infrastructure it
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tunnels. I'd love
that phrase to be
“roads, bridges,
tunnels urban
infrastructure
and open space.”

— Charles Laven, August 9

That's the vacuum right now: that mandate, that framework doesn't exist. It's not in the conversation. It's at this table, but it's not in the conversation. And it needs to be.

YEOHLEE: This whole conversation centers around connections. If you take it underground, you connect the whole city, you improve the public space that connects the whole city.

CLAIRE: You're saying, pick a project.

YEOHLEE: I think the project should be about transportation. Public space, transportation. Connect the city. Connect it well.

ANDREA: So Yeohlee says, "Pick a project." I say, "Figure out how to make that ingredient, for everything."

CLAIRE: Okay, what about this as an outrageous idea? (I think there are lots of problems with it even before I utter it!) We do see in municipal administrations this adoption of Chief Something-or-Other; Chief Resilience Officer, Chief Stewardship Officer, Chief Service Officer, Chief Diligence Officer. What about a Chief Place-making Officer?

MARY: It would give you what Andy's looking for, which is somebody who threads through everything.

ANDREA: I'd rather that it was embedded in everybody's consciousness, so that there wasn't one person trying to drive it.

MARY: But somebody has to embed it.

ANDREA: How do you embed it?

VIN: In advocating for the public grounds.

DAVID: There's this town in England, which is a small center of pottery, that has just hired a Director of Public Space.

ANDREA: I probably know less about government than anybody at this table, but I do remember hearing about Mayor's Councils, where Mayors from different cities would come together and want to listen to one another. Maybe we could try to organize a Mayor's Council around these issues.

MARY: You're suggesting making shared space the starting point for planning. That's a big idea.

ANDREA: I think that is a big idea.

ELOISE: This might call for some kind of a model that would demonstrate it.

Public space
needs to be
seamless.
Frederick Law
Olmsted said,
“The sidewalk
adjacent to
the park is the
outer park.”
The Charter
says, “Parks will
maintain the
sidewalks.”

— Mitchell Silver, August 9

ANDREA: That's why we're having this conversation now, because over the past 20 years or so, everybody has been producing models. Models now exist. OK they are mostly within the wealth bubble, but we do have things to show. We have things to show on a less macro-scale too, about school and schoolyard design. The Design Trust is actually doing a project on designing ground floor retail in affordable housing for sites where the city is issuing RFP's for mixed use affordable rental housing. The Design Trust recognized that ground floor street frontage, sidewalks, storefronts and stores, mixing retail and civic use, bodegas with churches and pre-K, is where neighborhoods get that shared experience. So they are guidelines, yes, but on a more granular scale.

What we are all saying is it's not just the High Lines, the Bryant Parks, it's the granular scale. It could go anywhere and needs to go just about everywhere. It could go in the subways. We need to appropriate the streets. If we do congestion pricing, we'll have acres more street to utilize for this shared experience. So, big scale, small scale, but everybody has produced it now. We have things to point to.

MIA SCHARPIE: In the Workshop Briefing book, the milestones mentioned were things like the High Line. The High Line was important because it's such a visible example, but it also fundamentally changed the formula. It was both a system innovation, an actual project and a precedent. It was one of the things that changed the game, like the Central Park Conservancy, or the Design Excellence guidelines. But how do they actually change the larger system? This table's an opportunity to ask that question. We can ask the question about individual projects in our regular day jobs, but the question of, how does that stick in the system, that's going to take a brand new initiative.

JOSHUA: I think some of the most interesting changes in the bubble of Manhattan, have been the intersection of transportation and public space. I ride to work on my bike every day on bike lanes that the city has made, that weren't there before. It's an incredible reapportioning into the public space, but it's also transportation infrastructure. Then it merges into plazas, and those plazas merge into parks, and there's a subway station coming up in the plaza. When we talk about "shared spaces," or "civic commons," you're in a language of soft, extra, nice things. Whereas, when you talk about infrastructure, it's the heart of the city, it's what makes the city function, it's essential, it's not optional. Everybody says you can't neglect infrastructure, the bridges are falling down. We should be thinking about the neglect of our public realm in the same way. It's infrastructure neglect, it's not just "we took off our earrings." One of my things I was proudest of when I was at the High Line was getting \$18 million in federal transportation money by describing the High Line as inter-modal transportation.

MARY: We could argue that public housing is infrastructure. Libraries are infrastructure.

JOSHUA: Equate public space with the functionality of a successful, healthy, equitable city.

I ride to work on my bike every day on bike lanes that weren't there before. . . . It's an incredible reapportionment into the public space . . . then it merges into plazas, and those plazas merge into parks, and there's a subway station coming up in the plaza. — Joshua David, August 17

ANDREA: So, I'm really glad you brought up bicycles just now. Because in my view, what made bicycles really viable wasn't just the lanes, it was the shift to bike sharing as well. Bringing more cyclists into the bike lanes was the key. That's a real case example of, not just design, but how do you make it a vital component? It might necessitate a new business model. It might take changing a system that has nothing to do with the actual, physical space itself. How it's populated, how it's used. Who buys it. Who sells it.

ABBY: I don't love the heat, but I love that being on the subways we are all together, and we are somewhat socially engaged for better or worse. If you go to other places around the world you don't see that. Then we go to our separate neighborhoods, and we don't have those same moments of sharing and interacting.

I think for the continued next 20 years it's both absolutely the physical and the infrastructure. But I think the game-changing mode is going to have to incorporate Black Lives Matter, and all of the other community issues, all of the pieces of bringing the city together where the public is a part of that discussion.

JUSTIN: There has to be a conversation about who's programming public space, how that's really being defined and implemented.

MARY: So what I'm hearing is: integrate the language of infrastructure; forge a coalition to motivate collaboration in the city departments; try to get a broad understanding of and acceptance of the primary social value of shared space. The question remains: do we want a model or two? If so, a model of what? Do you want to tackle subway stations?

CLAIRE: Just to talk about your question, the word "mode" came up as something we should try.

ELOISE: Where are the advocacy groups focused?

DAVID: I've been working with the MTA on 31 stations around the city, some of them are above ground, some of them are below ground. To transform the stations into better places. The design approach focuses on passenger experience, navigation. The design team that did the Fulton Street transit center is working on it now. It's a pretty tight schedule. There are a lot of things happening, both in terms of new technology for navigation, new fare rate systems, a lot of de-cluttering because there's so much crap in some of those stations.

MARY: That sounds like Times Square.

DAVID: Exactly.

MARY: David, are they actually going to become a place, or are they just going to work better?

DAVID: They're not places ... They're not even designed as places where

We have to start looking at streets as a place and not just as a way of moving people and start looking at the semi-public spaces that are there that we own, that we don't have to acquire, we just have to reprogram them for the public benefit.

— Mitchell Silver, August 9

people pause and linger, other than for the purposes of getting on the train. It's more about facilitating that experience. So the point of decision was navigation, and just making it a more pleasant experience in general.

MARY: I want to get my flu shot there, and to be able to pick up a book.

DAVID: That you won't be able to do!

MARY: When you get on to the platform there's a biblio right there.

CLAIRE: Susan Fine started a model with the Turnstile Project, to prove it could be done. Totally, privately funded.

ANDREA: This is exactly why Claire and I really felt we needed to get this going. There are so many people out there in countless organizations, doing little or big pieces, so many important initiatives with little to no networked understanding. Who knew that you were doing that? I'm sure a lot of people other than myself knew, but we have hundreds maybe thousands, that are not at this table that are doing really great things.

So if there is a coalition, there is a job in just finding out, and trying to be the conductor so that there is some coordinated effort. Because there's so much going on in the not-for-profit sector, in academia, in research, in the private sector, and all the design firms working with the city as David describes. Some design firms, like WXY, are doing it on their own now. The public sector operates according to individual agendas, we call them silos. There's so many agenda, so little organized transparency. A huge surge, actually, of atomized or quasi-coordinated activities.

CLAIRE: So what would the coalition do? It would aggregate the stuff.

ANDREA: At least gather the knowledge and communicate. At least make it their job to know and show what people are doing.

KATIE: Some of what you're talking about is just public awareness. The public is only vaguely aware of how their environment around them is changing. For most people this is what they're accustomed to or they don't remember what the city was like in the '70s. Once it becomes a priority for the public, the models begin to be recognized as such, then it starts to be integrated, advocated for, and discussed. What could that look like? How could you show the general public what the city could be like? What subway systems, or the subway stops could look like, how you could pick up or drop off a book there, smart roads, whatever.

To foster that kind of visualization, is it a design competition that people go and experience, or it's just a marketing and ad campaign, or social media, an app? And, share what it could look like, how we could re-imagine our city.

I think about the 9/11 Tribute in Light. That took the New York Times competition, and that front page picture in the New York Times magazine of what tribute in light would look like. Once it was there, and there was a visual, all a sudden people got behind it.

The biggest source of potential parks for New York are the streets. . . . 6th Avenue is about a 10 acre park. — Charles Laven, August 9

JOSHUA: This conversation is another kind of bubble. We are in the bubble of people who talk about this field and this language. If you were to put this conversation out on the street not everybody would know what we're talking about. How do you tell the story in a way that it has a broader access, that more people can enter into what we're talking about, and become owners of it? I think that's a language, that's a storytelling, that's a narrative.

ANDREA: I actually think that we have a good shot at doing that because people ... New Yorkers are not all born and bred here. They come from different places. They come from different countries. Everybody has, in their experience, something that they can relate this too. I think we're fortunate that we have a city that attracts people from all over, so that if we were to try to put this into language, people could understand. They could relate it, not just to where they have come to, but where they have come from.

MARY: The other thing is that sharing is a meme now. People are familiar with that. Can we expand sharing to not just being about the so-called shared economy, but also about shared spaces?

NAOMI: I feel that hits at the root of what No Longer Empty has been doing, different interventions in different boroughs, bringing people to that site, people from that neighborhood coming to that site. That's experiential learning, which I think is not as didactic. It's about contrast and comparison. If there were to be design competition, where do we choose to do it? If we're going to do a major civic project, where is that going to happen? How do we create a ground swell for everybody? Go around the five boroughs.

CLAIRE: The work that the Design Trust and Municipal Art Society (MAS) did around the garment district, the flower district, Penn Station, the Penn district, West Midtown, East Midtown, showed a dependency actually on public ground investments and regulation as well. There is an intersection here between street life, retail, jobs, artistic spaces, all of it meets at the ground, and under.

ANDREA: I want to get back to this idea that sharing is a meme. There's a parallel with the so-called gig economy. We've empowered private car owners and private apartment owners to participate in an economy that they were previously excluded from. I know that the gig economy is highly private by nature, but it does sort of open up the pattern, it re-configures the pattern. I'm wondering is there any synergy between the gig economy, and what we're saying about sharing the city?

MARY: This is back to the dark side of design. If we could find a way to make this about democracy, that neighborhoods are being empowered to create their own shared spaces, that they want, and that meet their needs, and that they're not sitting, waiting for some fancy designer from City Hall...

That's the gig design economy. That would be Weeksville being able to create its own civic commons and its own shared spaces, to create its own hub and its own connective tissue in the way that it wants too.





NAUTICA
183

**It's kind of obvious,
but not obvious
. . . that the shared
experience, the
shared space, is
what's going to
make healthier
communities.**

— Andrea Woodner, August 17

YEOHLEE: Mary, what you're talking about is per community. There is a unified shared space. It's the subway car. Bring everybody together in a subway car from every neighborhood.

KATIE: The subway car is one thing, but then you get out, and what happens?

YEOHLEE: You can only do one thing at a time. The important thing I'm talking about is connectivity. Not public spaces that only benefit specific neighborhoods.

MARY: None of the things we're talking about in fact are currently funded. Let's say you adopted that as a project, or adopted anything else, how then do you actually make sure that there's a funding stream? Right now, it would be no easier than new public housing.

Yeohlee, a question: is the subway the most pervasive system across the city? Is that the best connection we've got that we could revolutionize through shared space? I'm just asking. I'm just stepping back and saying if you wanted to reach the most number of New Yorkers around the concept of the shared city, what would be the built-in distribution system for that?

Katie, is there an alternative to the subways?

KATIE: Making your streets safer and prettier and more welcoming.

ANDREA: Look at Rio. Rio wanted to invest in extending the subway to the poorer neighborhoods and ghettos in the outer rings with the windfall from the Olympics, and it didn't happen, and that was the big lost opportunity in Rio.

FINAL COMMENTS

JUSTIN: Connect to ideas about democracy. I work with a group called I.O.B.Y (In Our Backyards). They do crowd funding, very neighborhood scale. If you look across their full spectrum of projects, the transportation projects are the ones that have the most momentum because so many connect to that issue. So they're collecting five dollars, ten dollars for these projects. Also, they can scale from a \$500 project to a \$100,000 project. It's been used in communities across the demographic economic spectrum and has a lot of traction.

YEOHLEE: The subway system is one aspect of living in the city that touches everyone. Improving an aspect that connects everyone is a good way to look at public space.

ANDREA: I don't know what the next step is. I love the idea of building a powerful, influential coalition that's going to try to figure out what to lobby for, how to communicate that effectively, and also take on the responsibility pulling together all the various strands of what people are already doing, so that there's a comprehensive understanding of what's going on. Maybe there will be some better integration.

Maybe that's what we need to do, but in terms of what I think needs to sink

Now there are so many people out there in countless organizations, doing little or big pieces, a groundswell of important initiatives with little to no networked understanding, perhaps in need of cooperation . . .

— Andrea Woodner, August 17

in, it's that this shared experience is what people need, and they don't need it only in terms of parks and gardens, and they don't just need it only in terms of infrastructure and streets. You need to be able to interact with other people that you don't necessarily know in your own private unit, and if you don't want to interact, you need to be able to observe.

We need to message that this is a fundamental ingredient of our mental health and our civic urban life. I keep coming back to, it can be a tiny expense, or a grand expense, it could happen—it needs to happen—on any scale. We have to really get that ingredient soaked into all of the different things that we're working on. I think it's why we're in the city. So let's acknowledge it.

ABBY: I agree. It's this notion of shared experience, shared cities, and everything that goes into that. I like the idea of continuing the work to get to the questions. I don't think we've pinpointed all of the questions quite yet, of what's going to be the next game changer, what has to happen from an action perspective, but I've come to really feel that we have to differentiate neighborhoods. This is not just about where the connection is—we have to talk about transportation, we have to talk about subways, all that kind of stuff but, neighborhoods have different needs. They will experience shared life in different ways. There are people in neighborhoods, and Brooklyn, and probably Staten Island, that have never been to Manhattan, have never taken the train.

KATIE: Similarly, lots of Upper East Siders have never been to the borough of Brooklyn, let alone Brownsville.

This is very enlightening, so thank you for including me. It certainly helped me to think differently. I really like the idea of a coalition for the reasons that were said, but also because I think that there's a need for shared resources, and to actually even know what's out there. I think about Creative Time and what I do, and if it weren't for Claire, and getting connected to the Brooklyn Army Terminal, we wouldn't have this incredible fall project.

I also think about Tia Powell Harris at Weeksville. She's new to New York, and she's not the only director out there, but how do they learn about the resources that could also be available? And how do we also learn about what they're doing? I think that always continues to be a great need for non-profits.

Lastly, infrastructure definitely. I love the idea of thinking about that in regards to public space. I do think this idea of awareness campaigns and what that could look like. Data is great, but anecdotal stories always seem to be the things that resonate with people.

DAVID: I think about the issue of consciousness-raising. About conveying the importance of public space, so that it doesn't become just the poor cousin that's not as important as other parts of infrastructure. I was thinking about the metrics, and the way an organization like Straphangers does that for the subway. There's an index for parks, that rates them. Maybe we need a metrics for the walk-ability of the public realm, so that we can say, "Wow, here's the report this year. These neighborhoods are doing great. These are doing not so good." Just get it out there as an issue in everybody's consciousness.

The public is only vaguely aware of how their environment around them is changing Most people don't remember what the city was like in the 70s. — Katie Hollander, August 17

VIN: I think the scorecard is very useful. Hats off to Andy and Claire for your leadership on this subject of changing the game. You think about how to cut through, how to really make a difference. Not like, wait your turn. And I do think you've identified that there's a vacuum, and the idea of a coalition, or an alliance of some sort around these subjects to bring shared space, or common space in the middle of that conversation, rather than something that hangs off the edges. I do think that it hangs off the edges and can be just an afterthought. It seems to me when I think about that, I think about it from a national perspective, as well as the city's perspective, because I spend so much time in Washington.

Two other points. One is about incentives. As we all know, the incentives are all screwed up. So bad planning combined with top-down incentives have left us a mess in a lot of areas of the City. Getting at the incentives issues is a really huge part of this.

I put in a plug for Penn Station. Any of these nexus points where we are at millions of people a week that are interacting are really important to the completion of this conversation, and our future for the whole game.

ANDREA: I think it's a nice counter-balance to Yeohlee's subway, actually. The regional.

ELOISE: I love the idea of coalition, I just have the feeling that there's a step before the coalition, which does have to do with identifying everybody, and having some common space where a lot of people come together and share what they're doing. Because I think if you try to do a coalition too soon, everybody's passionate about what they do, and you can end up in not a good place to be.

I enjoy the part however, of the planning to do that. I think we should name it Shared Cities unless somebody's already got it.

MARY: We have bought the name. Sharing the City...

MIA: For me, the idea is that a coalition that has two sides. One side does fairly strategic, political advocacy, and they use words like infrastructure, that don't play well in the outside world. When I got my degree in Landscape Architecture I made a commitment to never use the word infrastructure, because regular people don't know what it means, and they don't care about it.

The other side is doing something more public facing. Last week we talked about the idea of the streets as the living room of the city. This nests it in terms people can understand. I think, to Eloise's point, it needs to be pretty strategic. It doesn't deal with all issues, maybe the top two or three.

Another piece, I don't quite know how it fits in but seems really central, is how real estate developers get pulled in as part of the force. As Claire and Justin are talking about: how does the return of that investment fuel the people ... I don't want to use the word gentrification necessarily, but how can there be feedback that's bigger than just the project itself?

AMY HAU: We need to expand the conversation to a more general and diverse public. So raising the awareness of what design is, what design can do. I've seen in the Bronx that, just by opening up designing, it's an opportunity for people

**NYC Parks has
130 million visits
a year. Think of
where else on the
planet that that
many people visit
something
We have a built-in
constituency.**

— Mitchell Silver, August 9

to engage in the future of their neighborhood. We need to broaden that participation, ensure more civic engagement. Then, once people have a better sense of design, having the scorecard is important, and not just the walk-ability of a neighborhood, but what is the public input? How did it score on being receptive to what the community wanted, needed?

ABBY: Lawrence Halprin... This was his thing. The community outreach, and the engagement around public, shared space.

CLAIRE: That's my original training, which was Charles Moore. Which was Charles Moore and Lawrence Halprin.

ANDREA: That's where you need to become like the NRA and score the politicians.

AMY: As a resident of Western Queens I see a lot of differences between Gantry State Park, and Socrates Park. I mean, that's total inequity. Now, there's the BQX Project. People need to recognize what real estate development will bring to different neighborhoods, and what we're going to lose, and how to balance that. We don't have enough open space in western Queens. I hear that at every community board meeting. We don't have enough parks and green spaces.

CLAIRE: Because of technology, we're at a point where people, human nature, and our economic mechanisms are coming closer, and that's why we have things like the "what if" economy, the circular economy, the shared economy. What's not being articulated clearly enough is that this living room of the city is where people's first economic opportunities exist. It's not just a passive, recreational thing. They're first opportunities to become economically viable themselves and they are, I believe, endangered.

Equally, people's mental health is very dependent on a number of factors that are all in this living room of the shared city. We need to start recognizing public health as a big part of the discussion.

I'm not sure exactly where to go, but I did want to reflect that despite the victories, I think that there is something interesting happening in that New York is such a model, has a lot of lessons, good or bad, for the rest of the country. So maybe it is plugging into why or how the roots of this will get some national funding, and that there's a larger potential role for what we do that can then come right down to the neighborhood. I don't know. I feel like there's a reason why everyone at this table has talked about the word democracy, has talked about the word "infrastructure"—it's because there is something at stake here.

JUSTIN: A lot of discussion around equity has come to the people's right to the city. Whether it's how public space is constituted, or how government ultimately manages and controls these spaces. Do I have the right to be nude in Times Square? Do I have the right to be a black man on a street? Do I have the right to sell things? Public space is a right, in a way, not to be taken, as the NRA would say, out of our cold, dead hands.

Design is a big part of that conversation, because that's what is conditioning

Queens Library at Baisley Park
Photo Credit: Elizabeth Felicella





**Defining this as
a movement,
recognizing
the gains we've
made, and trying
to consolidate
that and move
forward is the
most important
question asked.**

—Paul Steely White, August 9

all those interactions. So the mental health thing, how do I feel in this space? Do I feel a part of this space? We need to get a large and diverse public to start thinking that. What's the "cold, dead hand" test for public space? What's that high up on their needs, and rights, and responsibilities? That's how you get to the equity issue.

ANDREA: So a bill of rights?

JUSTIN: Right. There's more public space in Cobble Hill and the Upper East Side just because it can be high up on the list. In Brownsville it's not.

DAVID: There are contested spaces even in Brownsville. Here's a telling story about unintended consequences. Putnam Plaza is one of the plaza improvements that DOT initiated. My students studied it last semester. It's on Fulton Street, which itself is a demographically gentrifying neighborhood. The Plaza, which is now bigger and better because of DOT's intervention, has for a long time been a site where older African Americans played dominoes at night. Then last fall the cops cleared them all out of there, and accused them of gambling because "businesses don't want a bunch of African American old guys playing dominoes". They want the new millennials coming in.

SHINGO SEKIYA: In Tokyo's subways, only some of the large intersections have a great interior large space like Grand Central, like a sitting room. So I think that the combination of these stops with the streets, and also with Tokyo's temples, are important in terms of having strong context in those areas. We did some research on which local shopping streets are good, and we found that the combination between public transportation, local shopping streets, and with other facilities or places which are meaningful to local neighborhoods, is quite important.

MARY: If you want to read something that talks about what's really at stake, read Zadie Smith's essay in the New York Review of Books talking about Brexit. It recounts what happened, how the investment happened, and looks at the implications on British society. That's what I think is at stake. That's my little apocryphal note.

ANDREA: I want to thank everybody. There's a great deal that brings us together that we share. We may be in our bubble and all, but really we're doing such very diverse and important things. I think it would be tremendously exciting if this can radiate out. We're going to keep this going, and we hope that you'll stay with us. We want to thank you so much for the generous time that you've given us, and your brilliant ideas. It's been really inspiring. Thank you. We couldn't have asked for a better conversation.

Workshop Briefing Book

The Public Space Movement
in New York City

Work Sessions
August 9 & 17, 2016
8-10 am

Offices of Steptoe & Johnson
The Grace Building
1114 Ave of the Americas
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Organized by
Andrea Woodner and Claire Weisz
with Mary Rowe, Moderator
Mia Scharphie, Creative Agency

List of Interviewees

Hillary Brown

City College of New York

Cassim Shepard

SQ Projects

Maxine Griffith

Columbia University

Linda Cox

Bronx River Alliance

Deborah Marton

New York Restoration Project

David Berliner

Forest City Ratner Companies

Louise Harpman

Louise Harpman_PROJECTS

William Menking

The Architect's Newspaper

Brian McGrath

Parsons The New School for Design

Tessa Huxley

Battery Park City Parks Conservancy

Mary Rowe

Project for Public Spaces

Milton Puryear

Brooklyn Greenway Initiative

Laura Starr

Starr Whitehouse Landscape Architects and Planners

Andy Wiley Schwartz

Bloomberg Associates

Tim Tompkins

Times Square Alliance

Ray Gastil

City of Pittsburgh

Roland Lewis

The Waterfront Alliance

Andrea Parker

Gowanus Canal Conservancy

The following themes, *Changing Models of Governance*, *Issues of Equity*, and *Re-envisioning Public Spaces*, reflect the majority of comments and observations in the 18 interviews conducted between December 2015 and February 2016. While comments contained within the three themes overlap in terms of place, organizations, maintenance, social impact, etc., these themes reflect the overarching concerns of the interviewees.

In the following pages, interviewee quotes appear in quote bubbles and have been edited for clarity and brevity in the text.

Changing Models of Governance

The majority of conversations with interviewees identified the rise and proliferation of Public Private Partnerships such as Conservancies and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) as by far the most significant trend in New York City public space in the last twenty-five years. At various points of fiscal crisis, as government investment in public space shrinks, these regulated and unregulated organizations and partnerships have stepped in to perform a multiplicity of functions operating on spaces, systems and forms of advocacy, setting vision; providing maintenance, design talent and capital funding for not only specific places but also for larger networks of public space.

Visionary individuals and the organizations they founded were acknowledged for being transformative in advocating for the reinvestment of the City into public space expansion, redefinition and improvement. Examples included Betsy Barlow Rogers' Central Park Conservancy, Robert Hammond's and Joshua David's Friends of The High Line, and the Bronx River Alliance, the Trust for Public Land, Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project, and Warrie Price's Battery Park Conservancy. These organizations, all fairly young, whose missions are fundamentally advocacy through stewardship, have helped to transform specific city sites and have added immeasurably to its livability. Many of these conservancy-oriented organizations provide programming as well as maintenance; they were seen as game changers and have expanded beyond parks—the Citizen Pruner program and the Gowanus Canal Conservancy bioswale stewardship program are extending the concept.

Conservancies were credited with setting a new standard for public space design quality bringing creativity, vision and personal leadership to parks—one interviewee remarked about one conservancy founder, “you need the driven person that feels they have better taste than anyone else, and goddammit, they're going to do it.” The Central Park Conservancy has been credited with “grandmothering” public space leadership within New York City—training and inspiring leaders who have gone on to found other conservancies within the public space field.

A second group of nonprofit organizations work not as place-based stewards, but more broadly through specific lenses and issues or types of spaces—whether that's the mobility agenda of Transportation Alternatives, the design agenda of the Design Trust for Public Space or the professionally-tethered agenda of the Architectural League of New York. These groups take on

“Without the Central Park Conservancy knowing what a good park looks like, people didn't know what a park could look like.”

“We exported the Department of Public Works and the Parks Department. As great as it is to have to have consultants, you have to have a baseline of knowledge in the government. You can't push all professional or capacity competency out of the government.”

“The Times Square redesign was totally impossible without the public private partnership model.”

specific sites or topics through advocacy, research and/or public programming to reach their respective audiences, communities and beneficiaries. The overlap between their constituencies and funders is increasing, and funders are increasingly playing a proactive role in identifying and even managing worthy projects (for instance, the JM Kaplan Innovation Fund.) It was noted that, as “place making” organizations proliferate, competition increases over funding, branding and credit.

“Unless there’s a park conservancy, you don’t get design vision or design maintenance, because the City won’t allocate or does not have sufficient resources.”

With the introduction of these effective new governance models, the problem of navigating the roles performed by layers of not-for-profit, private interest and government agencies was of concern. Who advocates for, and acts on behalf of, the public, for both places and policy? Which sector is better at what, and what funding mechanism is appropriate?

Regardless of overlap, these diverse organizations and partnerships play a key role in shaping the public conversation, and serve as a go-to source for information and dialogue on City’s public realm. They deploy various research, advocacy and programming models to change the conversation. At their best, they bring vision and imagination to the dialogue on public space and sometimes use the power of design competitions and proposals to help re-envision spaces and often widen the frame by inviting expressive, fantastic, or futuristic ideas. As an example of this, in the aftermath of major tragedy of the World Trade Center, whose cataclysm razed what were originally 13 city blocks, an inclusive planning and design process brought a number of these groups together and transformed this crisis driven climate into a transformative, field-building role.

“With so many parks conservancies, foundation funding is getting harder to get.”

The work of the Bloomberg administration was seen as a paradigm shift, not as reinventing government but as changing mindsets. It achieved a higher standard of excellence with regard to public space design, ushering in flagship parks and public spaces, streets shared between cars and bikes, narrowly losing on congestion pricing, and revitalizing the pedestrian environment and improving the functionality and look of plazas. One interviewee said this was most significant change of the recent era because “it represents a change in systems, not just spaces.” The Bloomberg Administration moved from a “loss-based” to a “future-based” approach to planning and design. Twenty-five years ago public space design efforts focused on restoring what had been lost, today planners and designers tend to innovate in terms of aesthetic and programming. These changes were due in large part to the top-notch talent at the head of and within many agencies, as well as a confluence of leadership and popular support for a more multi-modal and vibrant public realm. Notably, in this time period public

“The upswing in public’s space’s importance is a sign of the economic health of the city, but the public realm is always on the cutting block when things are bad.”

procurement programs such as the Design Excellence program created pathways that encourage innovation in government-funded public spaces. One interviewee observed that this coincided with a movement within the professional and academic design community (beginning in the 1980's) that reappraised the value of the urban environment and public work, as cities began to attract suburban-raised millennials and affluent older adults.

One interviewee noted a subtle but important cultural shift reflected by the schematic orientation of recent real estate development projects. Projects that he had worked on during the '80s and '90s were inward-facing and campus-like, whereas today developments are outward facing—more likely to not only engage the street but to invite people in through retail, fenestration and circulation, and scheduled programming. (One example is Columbia University's new Manhattanville campus in Harlem.)

Another interviewee stated that the limiting factor to great public spaces is not funding but custody and management: "developers would build and fund public spaces as part of their properties if I could find someone to manage them," she said.

"The culture has changed around innovative design in public spaces, the last 5-10 years saw some really innovative projects that previously would not have been seen as a good use of public dollars."

Issues of Equity

It was said that the core value of public space is its availability to all. This raises the question: Should the standards of public space design and maintenance aspire to be ordinary or extraordinary? This has become a key focus of research and debate. However, many mentioned a downside to significant public space improvements: When public and private investment delivers high quality public space design and maintenance in low-income areas, property values rise, spurring gentrification. On the other hand, when high quality public space is concentrated in wealthy areas, there is no concurrent delivery of benefits to lower income neighborhoods, exacerbating a sense of polarization between rich and poor parts of the City; this model in fact lets the City ‘off the hook’ from providing basic services as well as new standards for public space and public needs for open space in underserved neighborhoods.

In today’s world, said one interviewee, “the City won’t invest in a park without a conservancy” and equally innovative public spaces like the DOT plazas can’t happen without a business improvement district. This challenges neighborhoods with lower real estate values without the means to generate private support of public space design and maintenance. On the ground it can lead to a patchy public realm that clearly expresses inequities of care and investment—one interviewee believes that BIDs, in concert with increased police presence and surveillance, make streets less equitable and democratic places, and “push the problem across the street.” Citing the difference in the sides of the street on Eighth Avenue and on Sixth Avenue near Bryant Park—those within the business district are clean, while across the street they are spotted with chewing gum. These inequities can be exacerbated by asymmetrical site and street conditions, for instance, when an elevated roadway or train track demarcates distinct neighborhoods.

The public-private partnership system has begun to spin off its own internal fixes to the equity problems it has generated—conservancies in wealthy areas form sister relationships with conservancies in less well-heeled areas, and Partnership for Parks helps local parks groups with resources, leadership, and helps them advocate for city resources. The Neighborhood Plaza Project helps low-capacity non-profits serving as DOT plaza managers in high need areas through subsidized maintenance service using a workforce training model and organizational support. Yet these are bright spots

“Public space nonprofits create an ‘Only in my Backyard’ effect. They reroute money that would go to local taxes that support some, but not all spaces of the City.”

“It’s good to have extraordinary spaces, but if you’re pouring this money into your extraordinary spaces you better be looking at your ordinary spaces.”

“The notion that entities other than government should pay for public space is misguided, that’s the city’s fantasy.”

“Where’s the revenue strategy for maintaining waterfronts citywide?”

“Although Bloomberg invested across the city there was a sense that he didn’t invest equally across the city.”

within a larger system. Interviewees expressed their desire to find another model and strategies for under-resourced neighborhoods that need better public spaces and parks.

Well-designed and managed public spaces can catalyze higher real estate values and development, as evidenced by the High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park, yet some interviewees were troubled by the precedent they set—of rising real estate prices or commercial interests cross-subsidizing park development, and by the resulting impact on low- and moderate-income residents. But while systemic inequities within the public space system mattered to interviewees, details and execution were seen as being able to ameliorate those inequities. One interviewee said, “I was afraid Brooklyn Bridge Park was going to be a front yard for one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in New York, but they gave the best seats in the park to the barbeques—and therefore to families from all over. The fact that the park gave the real estate to those folks was brilliant.”

Issues of policing and surveillance remain a hot topic. Tensions around privately-owned public space and the practice of democracy surfaced during Occupy Wall Street. For example, the Giuliani administration’s policing tactics were cited as a significant event within public space in the last twenty-five years, although the jury was split as to whether increased police presence was a prerequisite to the high quality public spaces that are now possible, which in turn helped encourage the return of the middle class to the City. Or, is this police presence a deterrent to the truly democratic, less regulated and less commercialized urban life that once gave New York its authenticity, creativity and character.

Alongside these concerns about over regulation of the public realm, multiple interviewees mentioned the expectation of engagement by multiple stakeholders in city-making, with one interviewee citing the PlanNYC process as a particularly successful example of visionary planning. That said, some maintained the stance that while engagement is well and good, “big projects are not a group project. We need the best minds in design and planning to make sure investments are the best.” Another interviewee noted that community voice has had its limits; that “communities have been very good at stopping projects but not at advocating for projects.”

“We need a for solution gentrification that doesn’t rely on, or blame individual developers and mayors.”

“I wish there was more confidence in the financial resilience of city, the city invested earlier in affordable housing and commercial rent control. No one realized we’d lose it so quickly.”

“It was laudable in the zoning process to ask people what they want and need, but hard to have those processes align with complexities of situations.”

Re-envisioning Public Spaces

Designers of public space—landscape architects, urban designers, civil engineers, lighting designers and architects—have conceived and created public spaces that function in significant new ways. These professions are perceived to have ‘come of age’, embracing an understanding of public space that is broader than one which specializes in parks and gardens, one that is part of a larger system of integrated spaces including streets, waterfronts, public transportation (even taxicabs.) Macro-scale of streetscape and infrastructure design (the public right of way) has driven this process, as has designing at the scale of greenways and linear parks (occasioned by the demise of New York’s commercial waterfront and the re-purposing of these conditions for active recreation). These large sites have proven especially effective at integrating multiple functions, and envisioning innovative new programming. As one interviewee noted, “the conversation is changing, NYC Parks Commissioner Mitchell Silver is talking about how parks can be active components of neighborhoods—there’s a broader conversation happening today, and it is looking our City more holistically.”

Interviewees remarked that public spaces can and should be multifunctional. Streets are no longer just for cars. Sidewalks accommodate more than pedestrians. Pervious street pavement does double duty mitigating storm water runoff and pollution; roofs grow vegetables! Retail, festivals and the arts have come to the streets in a more regulated and less ad hoc way, and artists are becoming increasingly legitimized, even commercialized, in engaging with the public realm.

While public space in New York has historically been the locus of political action, as one interviewee noted, public space itself has become a social justice issue today, with expectations of community benefit, expression and appropriation—and thus public space has become one of the components of the environmental justice movement in a way she didn’t think was the case twenty-five years ago.

Localized public space, particularly in underserved communities, is increasingly being tasked with producing economic and social outcomes (urban farms and community gardens, outdoor classrooms and performance spaces) and some, like NYRP, the Design Trust and Farming Concrete are experimenting with tools that help us assess its performance in those areas.

“The agenda has moved from aesthetic to functional public space, multivalent space, and now includes marginal public spaces.”

“There’s a real risk of equating public space only with its visual and recreational benefits, and not with its role as infrastructure.”

“It’s a shift to systems- and holistic-thinking—just like in medicine and sustainability.”

“City governments are rooted in a 19th century idea of core expertise, which doesn’t allow for planning holistically.”

Interviewees noted instances where the need of affordable and middle class housing directly conflicted with neighborhood public space priorities such as community gardens, with their positive economic, health and social benefits. The lack of a holistic, neighborhood-based vision during the Giuliani administration was blamed for residential redevelopment without adequate public realm infrastructure such as libraries, parks and schools.

“How do we advocate for the multiple functions of public space that don’t always get advocated for?”

Comprehensive approaches to transit and development are also perceived as an equity issue—one interviewee worried about low-income people increasingly forced by rising rents to live in transit-starved areas—and the effect of parents’ long commutes on family and neighborhood stability. Long term planning is needed, said one interviewee, to secure the land needed for neighborhood amenities and transit corridors, while the land is still affordable. Finally, interviewees saw a return within the City to the classic problem of tall buildings shading out parks and streets, and public right of ways that are too narrow for multi-modality and immersive spaces that give people mental escape—with the waterfront rezoning and the Williamsburg Esplanade as the key examples.

“The City is investing in green infrastructure but doesn’t have a plan to maintain it.”

Impediments to design excellence also exist at the boundaries between agencies resulting in conflicting, silo-ed agency concerns. A lack of shared vision between the City and the state resulted in East River Park as a less cohesive and immersive space than it could be. In another case, a fight between the City and the state over who would maintain a median resulted in \$3.5 million wasted on plants that are now dead. Working holistically also means bringing maintenance to the table earlier—one interviewee noted that porous pavement in one project was not achieving the performance it was meant to because it hadn’t been designed with the equipment the City owned in mind.

“One of the challenges to realizing multi-functionality is the way funding is siloed in government at the local, state and federal levels.”

One interviewee spoke about the inherent conflict between the timeline of elected officials who want demonstrable achievements in the short term and the time required for city building, which incentivizes a cycle in which the City invests “huge amounts of capital into building, but waits until our public realm is in state of disrepair before we rebuild.” One approach is to collaborate with mid-level City officials that stay where they during administration changes. But more substantive change is needed and one interviewee advocates for a reorganization of City budgets towards more continuity between capital investments and maintenance of those investments, a reorganization that would have economic benefits. “We’re missing that middle level of skilled people who care for things in our economy that we could be supporting.”

Discussions of design innovation often led to concerns that the funding, planning and management mechanisms in place now do not yet fully support complex, actively programmed shared space, and need retooling. Repeatedly, interviewees stressed the need to do more to ensure the future of well-conceived multi-functional spaces. “We need to put systems and funding in place for managing and maintaining these spaces that are being asked to do more, to perform spatially, ecologically and socially.”

What's Next?

What keeps you as a public space advocate or practitioner up at night? What gets in your way? Are we asking the right questions or do we need new frames of perception?

What do you dream of for the City in the next 25 years? Would you like to see some form of action agenda result from these discussions? Would a collaborative platform prove useful?

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I think that this group can't disappear—very important things have been said here and it just can't stop at one conversation.

—Amanda Burden, August 9

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