Reimagining the Public Realm: The NYC Plaza Program at 20

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Introduction

Among PlaNYC's dozens of initiatives was one of the shortest—and ultimately one of the most influential. Deep in the open space chapter was an initiative aimed at creating new public spaces in neighborhoods that lacked parks. In a city as densely developed as New York, and with housing being the priority for any developable empty lot, the initiative suggested transforming underused roadway into plazas, thereby helping to achieve PlaNYC's goal that every New Yorker live within a ten-minute walk of public open space.

The initiative appeared under a heading called "Reimagining the Public Realm." To many urbanists working in public-space advocacy, the phrase itself stood out. City Hall wasn't simply proposing new parks; it was suggesting that the public realm itself could be reimagined—that streets, long organized primarily around the movement and storage of vehicles, could also become public spaces.

In a city where every parking space was deemed precious, this was an audacious idea. That the effort to find pieces of the street network that could be taken away from vehicles and turned over to pedestrians would be led by the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) seemed improbable. NYCDOT was known among progressive urbanists and planners as a car-centric agency. The first impression among many advocates was that this program would run into a wall of institutional and local opposition when proposing to take away traffic lanes from cars.

But PlaNYC was not merely a planning document, destined for office shelves; it was a funded action plan. The agencies that needed to implement it—from the Office of Management and Budget to the Law Department—understood that Mayor Bloomberg expected results. The status quo was not an option.

Just as important was Mayor Bloomberg's selection of Janette Sadik-Khan to replace Iris Weinshall as DOT commissioner. Janette had a JD from Columbia. She had led the Federal Transit Administration under President Clinton, worked for Mayor Dinkins' City Hall and most recently was a Senior Vice President of Parsons Brinckerhoff, a leading international engineering firm. She was also known as a forceful manager and communicator who knew

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how to navigate city government and drive change. Her appointment signaled that the agency was expected to adapt to a new reality.[1]

These factors were essential to realizing the initiative that eventually became the Plaza Program. Even so, as originally described in PlaNYC, the program could have been a relatively quiet effort to carve out "pocket parks" with benches and shrubs, giving neighborhoods a new public space in which they could sit, but do little else.

Inside DOT, however, the new leadership team was thinking bigger: this program could start to redefine what city streets were for and what they could become, through a radical planning process that would allow neighborhoods to propose, shape, and steward new public spaces that reflected local needs and identity.

While the battle over congestion pricing dominated the headlines in 2007 and 2008, NYCDOT began quietly rewriting the city's administrative rules to allow nonprofit organizations to become long-term partners in managing streets as public spaces. This was not easy to do inside of an agency and legal system designed primarily to move traffic. It required new legal authorities, procurement practices, budget procedures, and unprecedented cooperation across multiple city agencies and City Hall.

The program ultimately revealed that demand for locally shaped and managed public spaces was far greater than anyone in city government had understood. Nearly twenty years later, neighborhood groups, business improvement districts, and local institutions across the five boroughs continue to propose, program, and sustain public spaces in the street. And contrary to assumptions about the immutability of New York's street network, the city also possessed a surprisingly large supply of roadway space that could be repurposed to meet that demand.

What emerged was more than a public-space program. The Plaza Program's most consequential innovation was not the conversion of asphalt into public space, but the creation of a durable system through which communities could propose, steward, and defend those spaces over time. Twenty years later, that system continues to reimagine New York's public realm and has provided a model that cities around the world have adapted to their own streets, institutions, and political cultures.

[1] Janette Sadik-Khan and Seth Solomonow, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution* (New York: Viking, 2016)

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Part 1:

Andy Wiley-Schwartz

On May 22, 2007, one month to the day after Mike Bloomberg announced PlaNYC, I was invited to meet with Janette Sadik-Khan, the newly appointed commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation. We met three days later and I was offered a portfolio that included responsibility for several key initiatives in PlaNYC. At the time, I did not realize that one of those initiatives would become a key to unlocking an enormous latent demand across the city for places where communities could gather, shape public life, and make the street their own.

The program, officially Initiative 6 in the greening chapter, read: "Create or enhance a public plaza in every community."[2] The description of the program was 263 words. What would eventually become the NYC Plaza Program barely existed as an idea. It was a policy objective that needed to become a program.

I had spent the last decade at Project for Public Spaces, learning from and working alongside leaders of major public space efforts across the US both inside and outside the government. From them I had learned that the lack of specificity in a program description was a gift—it meant I could decide how the program should work, as long as Janette supported me and my ideas.

When I arrived for my first day at DOT on June 14, 2007, there was a team of young planners who had been seconded to develop the armature around all of the PlaNYC transportation initiatives. The team that was working on the plaza initiative (at that time it didn't actually have a name) had gathered together a list of existing capital projects that they thought had some potential to increase green space and could be considered plaza projects for the purposes of the PlaNYC "create or enhance" commitment. They collected these projects into a database and called them "Pipeline Projects" that could be automatically counted towards the goal of having a new public space in every community board.

City Hall had this list too. My job was simple: manage these capital projects and figure out how to get more of them to cover the rest of the city.

The pre-launch team also had a color-coded GIS map of every community board in New York City and its population divided by the amount of park space per resident in that community board. This was intended to identify "under-parked" areas that could be

[2] City of New York, *PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York* (2007), 37-38, "Initiative 6: Create or Enhance a Public Plaza in Every Community."

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prioritized in the development of new plazas. They had already generated a small list of suggested locations.

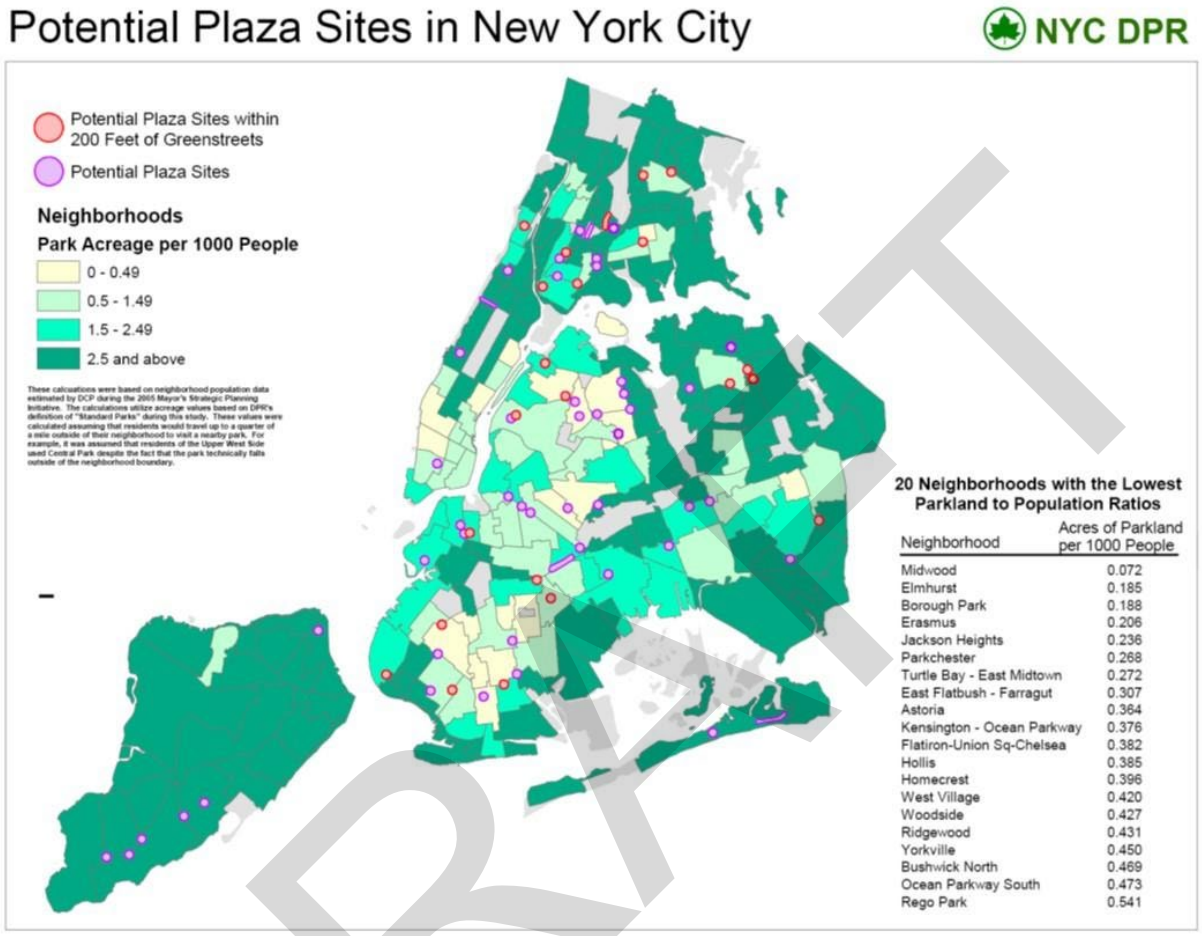

Figure 1. Potential Plaza Sites in New York City. Source: NYC Department of Transportation.

This process felt to me like a value-neutral, box-checking exercise rather than a program to add real community spaces in neighborhoods. It implied that the design, programming and community ownership of these spaces was not important. We just needed to capture some places for benches and shrubs and start ticking off community boards on a spreadsheet until we had a "plaza" in all 59 districts. There was no real concept of what a "good" plaza would look like or contain, or what the public space needs of that neighborhood were beyond the vague idea of "open space."

Working with the leadership at DOT, we started to build a case for creating public spaces that were authentic to their neighborhoods, carefully managed and programmed locally. If possible, they should be designed with flexibility so that the space could adapt to different needs and programs—a farmers market one day, a community performance space on

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weekends, and a neighborhood meeting space another time. This would lead to a different type of public space that was democratic, a little chaotic, of the neighborhood and not just for the neighborhood. To achieve this would require a lot of community control, and a relaxation of the city's role.

Previous planning had assumed that the agency, working with its partners at the Parks Department and Economic Development Corporation, would select these spaces and then gather support in the community for them. They thought this wouldn't be too hard because the spaces were small and didn't need a lot of maintenance. Plus the Pipeline Projects were already approved. Whatever community support looked like in the capital project plan had already happened. This is the old "design and defend" model of transportation planning, which didn't work well for street improvements and definitely wouldn't work for neighborhood public spaces.

Another assumption was that some or most of these spaces would likely wind up being adopted by the Parks Department. This wasn't articulated clearly anywhere, but the language in PlaNYC was that we were to "create or enhance" and the only things there were to "enhance" were existing public spaces and they were all managed by the Parks Department. It was logical to hand the spaces we created over to the Parks Department to administer. There was already an MOU between Parks and NYCDOT that allowed this to happen under the Greenstreets[3] program, although it didn't come with any extra funding for maintenance.

The GIS map and planning exercise were a helpful tool, but we needed to shelve it for the time being and figure out how to develop a program that would allow communities to raise up their own ideas for projects that we could then review, approve and then design and co-manage with them. As we developed the program with place-based outcomes including community support and stewardship, we ultimately rejected many of those pipeline projects as not reflective of the values the Plaza Program was promoting. They were fine projects, they were greening the city and creating more space for pedestrians, but they didn't fit our model.

[3] For more on the history and evolution of the Greenstreets Program, see New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, "Oversight—Greener NY: A Look into Parks' Tree Planting Strategy and Other Greening Programs," testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation, December 19, 2006; and City of New York, *Sustainable Stormwater Management Plan* (2008). See also the New York City Council's 2021 joint hearing on green infrastructure, in which Parks Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh described the transition from the standalone Greenstreets program to a broader green infrastructure approach beginning in 2010.
https://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_newsroom/archives/pdf/2006_testimony_12-19_greening_and_open_spaces.pdf

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Of course, if we didn't offer the new plazas to the Parks Department, then we had to create a new program for the agency that required entirely different skill sets, roles, responsibilities and new legal mechanisms. DOT wasn't in the business of making public spaces. There were no contracts in place with landscapers and no internal expertise in doing this work. Who would water the plants and clean up the trash? Who would change the flowers in the planters seasonally and shovel the snow in the winter? The closest DOT came to that at the time was the Arterial Maintenance crew that mowed the lawns along the edges of parkways.

At DOT we felt strongly that these new spaces should not, by and large, be turned over to Parks.[4] The practical reason was that there wouldn't be adequate funding for them to maintain these spaces. I saw the look on Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe's face during a multi-agency meeting at City Hall where this idea was floated. As we left that meeting I pulled him aside and said something like "this isn't going to be your problem." He looked back at me with a skeptical expression. He knew how hard the road was ahead of us. Building partnerships or the internal capacity to take care of the new spaces would take enormous effort.

In fact, we developed a much bigger agenda: we wanted to redefine the role of streets in the city by transforming them into public spaces and continuing to administer them as streets. This would change people's ideas about what streets are for and show that they are a crucial part of our public realm. Janette strongly supported this decision and her law degree helped us navigate the various new precedents we had to set to allow this kind of space to work inside the city's legal structure.

The decision to build the internal capacity to manage a potentially huge portfolio of public spaces required nearly every one of the dozens of departments at DOT.

Also, Janette had given me, and the other staff she brought in as change-agents, a directive. She said she wanted us to build our new programs "into the DNA of the agency." From that point forward, every design, legal, and management decision was filtered through the lens of long-term sustainability. We wanted to outlast the Bloomberg Administration (which at the time we thought only had two and a half more years) and become the standard operating procedure for the way the agency approached its streets.

[4] There were and continue to be plazas that are either adjacent to parks or for other reasons were taken over by the parks department, but that is only a small number of the total projects.

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What we learned along the way was that the effort was well worth the trouble it took to create the program and work through the stickiest issues, some of which are still being fought out in 2026.

Process, Pilots and "Proof of Concept"

Whether we accepted all the Pipeline Projects or not, we still needed a program that would generate four plazas every year for the next 10 years. We clearly needed a proper framework to build this program. In August, I invited in a task force from the progressive urban planning and advocacy community to help me think this through.[5] I recall bits and pieces of those meetings, but official meeting notes and my weekly reports from this time reveal that in these sessions, we roughed out the basic value proposition and scaffolding to hang the details of the program on.

We discussed how to generate projects, what types of organizations would make good partners, how to solve for maintenance and what the criteria for approving projects would be. The conversation was a dramatic shift from the previous work that was focused only on project delivery. We weren't talking about pipeline projects and capital planning workflows; we were discussing equity, stewardship, nonprofit partnerships, application procedures, capacity building, funding, governance, and long-term maintenance. Now we were talking about a program, not simply a collection of projects.

Another one of my directives, handed down to me from Mike Bloomberg through Janette Sadik-Khan, was to account for maintenance but not rely on city funding. I distinctly recall getting pushback on this issue from the task force. The advocates were both skeptical that this could result in projects outside of affluent commercial districts, and they were in general opposed to the idea that a city project should have to rely on private money to remain viable. They weren't wrong, but I didn't have a choice. I needed to forge ahead with the funding I had.

We recognized, both at City Hall and DOT, that the issue of long-term maintenance had been left unsolved when PlaNYC was launched. The program was given a budget that included $11,000 a year in expense funding per plaza for three years. It was a nod to the issue but far from a solution. This was something we talked about quite a bit both at my regular check-ins with Rit Aggarwala at City Hall and among ourselves at DOT. Also who exactly that money was supposed to go to was unclear.

[5] TA, PPS, Pratt Center, NYRestoration and TPL were involved. I can only find one official working group meeting memo from August 23, 2007 to verify who was there.

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In the months leading up to the PlaNYC announcement, DOT's Pedestrian Planning Unit, led by Ryan Russo, was already working with a few Business Improvement Districts on plaza projects. Working carefully in the pre-PlaNYC environment at NYCDOT, the unit had been using some 'tactical' materials to plan plazas at Pearl Street in DUMBO, on Willoughby Street in Downtown Brooklyn, and on 9th Ave and 14th Street in Manhattan.[6]

All three of these locations had organizations that could maintain new plazas—even planters, movable furniture and umbrellas.[7] We learned a tremendous amount from these first "pilot" projects, and formally opened the DUMBO plaza with an announcement that gave the public their first glimpse of what we were developing at DOT.[8]

For example, on 9th Avenue in Chelsea, there was a collection of property owners who funded the maintenance of that new space and, in part based on its success, were able to bring the commercial owners together to create a BID. From this we learned the plazas could build the capacity of local organizations.[9]

The Willoughby Street Plaza was flanked on one side by the blank wall of a large, pre-war office building at 345 Adams Street. Less than two years after the plaza was installed, the property owner created a new entrance, windows and a ground floor restaurant on the plaza side of the building. In this case, the plaza directly contributed to local development, commercial opportunity and job creation. [10]

On Pearl Street in DUMBO, the new plaza was across the street from a beautiful stone archway that formed part of the abutment of the Manhattan Bridge. The archway was closed to the public for nearly two decades, cutting off the street grid and serving as a storage and staging area for the DOT Bridge crew that maintained the bridge. Less than two

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[6] Eventually, implementing a tactical or temporary project before capital reconstruction became the standard practice. We would pursue this route even when capital funding was not earmarked or even forthcoming for a project.

[7] Downtown Brooklyn Partnership managed the Willoughby St Plaza, The DUMBO BID managed Pearl Street Plaza and the Chelsea Improvement Corporation, a coalition of property owners who eventually formed The Meatpacking District BID, were paying Biederman Redevelopment Ventures to take care of the 9th Ave plaza.

[8] Sewell Chan, "Parking Lot in Dumbo Becomes a Public Plaza," City Room, The New York Times, August 9, 2007; Aaron Naparstek, "City Launches 'Public Plaza Initiative' at DUMBO Pocket Park," Streetsblog New York City, August 10, 2007.

[9] Manhattan Community Board 4, letter to Dan Biederman, Chelsea Improvement Company, June 6, 2012; Mathew Katz, "Business Improvement District Proposed for Chelsea and Meatpacking District," DNAinfo New York, January 31, 2014; Lauren Elkies Schram, "Meatpacking District-Chelsea Twofer Aims to Become BID No. 70," Commercial Observer, February 19, 2014.

[10] New York City Department of Transportation, "NYC DOT Commissioner Sadik-Khan, DDC Commissioner David Burney, Elected Officials and Downtown Brooklyn Businesses Cut Ribbon on Willoughby Plaza, Providing Enhanced Pedestrian Space in Booming District," January 18, 2013; Noah Kazis, "Willoughby Plaza, Already a Hit, Gets a Capital Upgrade," Streetsblog New York City, April 18, 2012.

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years later, it was part of the Plaza Program, becoming a signature public space in the city and further catalyzing the pedestrianization of the street adjacent thereby connecting the archway and the Pearl Street Plaza into one continuous public space.[11]



June 22, 2007 July 9, 2007

Figure 2. Pearl Street Plaza, Brooklyn. Source: New York City Department of Transportation.

Willoughby Street, Pearl Street and 9th Ave all showed the kind of results that proved the model worked when a solid partner was present. And all three of those "temporary" projects eventually became permanent parts of the city landscape and public realm.

In 2007 it was exciting that these groups were willing to increase their budgets and potentially their assessments to manage public space. BIDs are collections of property owners who believe that the value of their holdings will increase if they upgrade the public realm. It was not a given that they would think that limiting traffic will provide them with that uplift. There was tension on the BID boards, but publicly we had their support.

[11] Sarah Portlock, "Mr. Bloomberg Tore Down This Wall!," The Brooklyn Paper, September 9, 2008; Mike McLaughlin, "DUMBO's 'Berlin Wall' Is Finally Down," The Brooklyn Paper, April 24, 2009; Alfred Ng, "Tiny DUMBO Street Would Go Car-Free Under New Plan," The Brooklyn Paper, July 11, 2012.

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These projects also revealed the obvious truth that it was a lot easier to work in neighborhoods and with partners that wanted you to be there and were happy to work alongside you to help create a great project. This dynamic was uncommon in transportation planning since there was typically a silent majority (of say, commuters) and a loud minority of locals who didn't want the facility in their neighborhood. Since plazas were local, not regional or network-dependent infrastructure like bike and bus lanes, we could recruit partners and only go where we were wanted.

Critics on the task force believed that success in neighborhoods like DUMBO and Chelsea was evidence that the formula would only work in affluent areas where there were BIDs. I wasn't so sure. Working in cities around the US, I found associational life to be present and rich in neighborhoods of all income levels. In fact, sometimes there were more and better partners in low-income neighborhoods, in the form of housing associations, community development corporations and other groups. And BIDs were growing all around New York City, including East New York in Brooklyn and Fordham Rd in the Bronx.

I wanted to test this hypothesis. It turned out that we were both right.

The Partnership Innovation: Broadway as the Test Case

By February 2008 I had assembled a small team to help me build the program. My team included Ed Janoff, who came from Dan Biederman's Bryant Park Restoration Corporation; and Vaidila Kungys, a planner who was working for the Myrtle Avenue BID in Brooklyn. I wanted staff with experience on the BID/partner side of the equation. They could help me see that perspective, and they also understood the strengths and limitations of who we were partnering with.[12]

Handing responsibility for a public space in the street to a third party requires a formal agreement governing maintenance and use. To me, the logical template was the parks conservancy model that I had written about and worked on during my time at PPS.[13] It seemed like something we could easily borrow for our purposes and rework with a minimal amount of fuss. After all, the city had at least a dozen high-functioning parks partners including Central and Prospect Parks, Madison Square, Riverside and Battery Parks. These groups raised philanthropic funds, substantially improved the care of essential city assets,

[12] Earlier in 2007 I had the good fortune to bring Mike Flynn onto the team as my first staff member. Mike was crucial to helping unpack the dynamics of the agency I was unfamiliar with, and as a planner, could make sure our designs offered the best possible outcome for all modes. After a hiatus in the private sector, Mike was appointed by Mayor Zohran Mamdani to be the NYC DOT commissioner in January 2026.

[13] Andrew Schwartz and Shirley Secunda, eds., *Public Parks, Private Partners: How Partnerships Are Revitalizing Urban Parks* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 2000).

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and provided programming, art, food, and other amenities that the Parks Department lacked the capacity to deliver. Why would it be any different here?

I tried to spell out my vision for a parks-style partnership to the DOT legal team. This would include, among other things, that the partner agree to certain maintenance responsibilities and the city would give them certain rights to operate programs, including revenue-generating activities, on the plaza. This seemed logical to me. If we were asking a partner to spend money planting rotating flower displays, shoveling snow, bagging trash and keeping after movable furniture, we should allow them some revenue provisions to offset that responsibility.

At first, the legal team, led by the longtime DOT General Counsel Phil Damashek, thought this was a non-starter. Phil and his team of lawyers thought it was impossible to give any amount of real control over the street to a third party. They argued that there were all kinds of franchises and other agreements governing the right-of-way, which is not only used for cars and trucks, but also for fiber-optics, electricity, gas and water. This sounded to them like a huge jurisdictional problem.

But to their point, the city didn't just "give away" city property to a third party and allow it to profit off of it. This was the principle behind a sidewalk café license: a business paid for the right to occupy part of the public sidewalk for commercial use. However, that mechanism, and DOT's existing maintenance agreements with private organizations, were poor analogues for the stewardship relationship we were trying to create.

The legal team saw this relationship as an agency-vendor one—the partner organization was receiving a "benefit" in the form of city property. In that situation, the city should be indemnified for anything that happened on the plaza, and asked our "partners" to hold insurance policies to protect the city further from lawsuits. The first draft maintenance contract was over 30 pages.

Janette and I found that framing deeply frustrating. These organizations were not seeking access to public property as a business opportunity; they had agreed to perform work the city could not do itself. I argued back—these were our partners, and they were nonprofits. They already had agreements with the city through their BID contracts, and they were making these new public spaces active, vital, and authentic to their neighborhoods. We should make this easy for them. If parks could make these arrangements with their conservancy partners, including full indemnification, why couldn't we do this for plazas?

The early plazas at Willoughby Street, Pearl Street, and 14th Street helped establish a visible model for the citywide Plaza Program. While the physical transformation of

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Broadway has been told elsewhere,[14] less visible was Broadway's role as the testing ground for the legal and financial arrangements that would eventually govern DOT plazas citywide.

The plazas that we created on Broadway between Times Square, Herald Square and the Flatiron Building were where we developed the formal, legal partnership model that became a cornerstone of the Plaza Program. These projects were not only internationally significant in their vision and scope, but also in the partnership mechanism that we developed together.[15]

The negotiations over the partnership agreements were hammered out over a year of regular, difficult meetings between DOT legal, DOT public space and representatives from the Garment Center BID, the 34th Street Partnership and the Flatiron/23rd Street Partnership. These three BIDs covered almost exactly one mile of Broadway between 41st Street and 22nd Street and were the first plazas we created along the corridor. Later, the Times Square Alliance also joined the effort—they became the fourth Broadway BID and the most high-profile to become our partner.

Unlike the neighborhood plazas, the Broadway projects were not generated through the application process; we approached the BIDs ourselves, based on our pre-existing relationships. Because of their visibility and scale, this work depended on sustained support from Janette, our chief counsel Phil Damashek, our chief contracting officer and many others. Their support was especially helpful in getting the revenue provisions into the agreement, something we agreed was a critical success factor for partners in dense commercial areas where a lot of maintenance and programming were needed.

The agreements ultimately allowed plaza partners to solicit sponsorships and subconcessions, using the resulting revenue to offset their operating expenses. The solution was to stop treating the arrangement as a simple maintenance contract and structure it as a master concession agreement. This not only gave them some revenue; it also activated the spaces, connected them to their local businesses and provided an additional program of use.

But the real income source for the Broadway BIDs, and eventually several other partners as well, was a partner fee added to the city's permit fee for commercial events. Now, when a company wanted to promote its brand with an event on one of our plazas, they had to pay

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[14] For example, see Janette Sadik-Khan and Seth Solomonow, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution* (New York: Viking, 2016), 73-103.

[15] Eventually the entire Broadway corridor from Columbus Circle to Union Square became part of this program.

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both the city and the partner for that right. This was good, but it only went partway to offsetting the extra costs they incurred from cleaning, planting, otherwise maintaining the plaza, as well as the burden of insurance that the city required them to hold.

However, the task force's warning about lower-income neighborhoods would prove correct if we only had this "concessionaire" model for helping our partners deal with the costs of managing and maintaining these new spaces. Managing and maintaining a plaza was a larger and more expensive undertaking than any of us had initially understood. Plazas outside the major commercial districts were also unlikely to generate meaningful revenue through concessions or commercial events.

Therefore, while the negotiations continued with the partners that had the capacity and the neighborhood demographics to consider the revenue potential of holding a master concession agreement, we started to figure out how to get other neighborhood groups as partners and how to help them shoulder the responsibilities of the partnership.

We needed the application concept to work this out for us.

The Application Innovation

From the task force sessions and the work on the "pilot" projects in DUMBO, Meatpacking and Downtown Brooklyn, we understood that we had to work with communities that wanted us to come. That required opening up the process to some type of RFP, RFEI or competition. I think, although I can't definitively prove it, that the Plaza Program application was the first of its kind to ask nonprofit partners to apply to the city to reshape the traffic network and create new public space, with the agreement that the partner would assume risk by maintaining the space on behalf of the city.

Creating an application for the program was an idea that started right at the beginning of our conceptualization of the program. This could serve a whole host of purposes, some of which only became apparent later on.

A decade of helping communities and municipalities interact around public space had taught me that if the city didn't need to own the idea from the beginning and would let the neighborhood have some agency over the decision to have the project come to them in the first place, we would remove a lot of the complaints and issues that are typical to the interaction between government and citizens—that "nobody asked us," and "this is an improvement to you but not to us," and the good old cry of "not in my backyard."

This is also a huge benefit to the city, which has typically taken a defensive approach to working with neighborhoods. This was especially true of departments of transportation. Transportation planners and engineers are mostly dealing with networks, not places.

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Correcting downstream problems in a network may call for changes to a local intersection or street widening. Although directly relevant to a homeowner or shop owner on a street that is being redesigned, the intended benefit is either somewhere else on the network that needs a stronger connection, or the hyper-local needs (parking, crosswalks, foot traffic, etc.) are being subjugated to a perceived more important need (getting more vehicles through faster, etc.). So the city has to "defend" a project's benefits to a neighborhood that is not receiving those benefits and potentially being degraded as a result of them. In our playbook, instead of playing defense we were playing offense with the neighborhood—we were a team. [16]

Second, I knew that the more a neighborhood felt ownership over a public space, the more likely they were to add the key ingredient that makes public spaces really special—stewardship. When spaces are self-policing ("hey, don't leave your garbage on that bench please") and encourage volunteers to participate in plantings and cleanups, host local events and gatherings and promote local businesses and activities, you have the kind of space that people really value and that adds to their enjoyment of living in their neighborhood. This kind of magic is hard to generate at all, but impossible if the space is thrust upon a neighborhood that didn't ask for it and is one of a hundred other spaces just like it.

A typical issue raised at DOTs is that communities often ask for things that the agency isn't able to deliver. In our application there were guidelines and a toolkit. It showed exactly what you could expect when you were asking for a plaza. It didn't lead communities to believe that they were getting more than the city could give them.

The idea of creating a strict set of guidelines had another unexpected effect. Traffic engineers are generally reluctant to try "new" things. New approaches are hard to justify, especially when decades of practice have validated an old approach. [17]

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[16] The idea of playing offense or defense comes from the Context Sensitive Design movement where "Design and Defend" was labelled as the typical way that agencies dealt with community process.
See: "Rethinking the Urban Speedway," *Governing* 2010, Project for Public Spaces, "The Road Ahead," 2003, https://www.pps.org/article/the-road-ahead

[17] There is lots of good writing about the problems with standard practices in traffic engineering. See, for example, Donald Appleyard, Livable Streets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), on the effects of traffic volume and speed on neighborhood life, social interaction, and pedestrian activity; and Reid Ewing and Eric Dumbaugh, "The Built Environment and Traffic Safety: A Review of Empirical Evidence," Journal of Planning Literature 23, no. 4 (2009): 347–367, which challenges conventional traffic engineering assumptions that wider, more "forgiving" urban roadways are necessarily safer. See also National Association of City Transportation Officials, Urban Street Design Guide, "Design Speed," on the consequences of applying highway design principles and high design speeds to urban streets.

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The engineering manuals that are used to justify decisions like how much traffic can be processed through an intersection of a certain size, or how wide a corner should be for a large vehicle to turn through it, didn't at the time have much to say about plazas or pedestrian priorities. [18]

So when we went to our city engineers to help us develop our guidelines, they put conditions on the types of locations we could accept. Two-way streets of a certain size were a no-go. Streets with bus routes on them were off-limits. A dozen other conditions came down to us from our first effort. It really felt at first like they were throwing a wet blanket over our program.

The good news was that New York City is filled with overdesigned streets that met their criteria. The better news was that we didn't have to find them ourselves–the communities would find them for us. We published all the criteria and let them figure out where they could be met. This also led us to neighborhoods and locations we never would have found on our own. Moreover, once the engineers saw something working in one place, they were more comfortable relaxing the criteria and making room for more types of places.

Once we understood where we couldn't make plazas, we needed to come up with the evaluation criteria for where we could make them. It was important that this was transparent and that we had a ranking system so that we could accept or reject projects based on a score that we could then relay back to the losers. That way, they would understand (we hoped) why they didn't make the cut.

We came up with a system that had four criteria plus a ten-point income bonus:[19]

1. Open space – whether or not the neighborhood lacked open space (this was the PlaNYC goal, it came first); 30 points

2. Community initiative – the extent to which an applicant had developed a community plan, consensus for the site, and gathered local support; 30 points

3. Site context – what was the site's relationship to surrounding land uses and businesses, proximity to transit, the presence of significant view corridors or

[18] American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, *A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets* (Washington, DC: AASHTO, 2004); U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways* (Washington, DC: FHWA, 2009).

[19] New York City Department of Transportation, "Pedestrian Plazas," accessed October 15, 2026, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/nyc-plaza-program.shtml.

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historic sites, and pedestrian activity? 20 points

4. Organizational capacity – we wanted to know that the proposed partner was not only willing but also able to program activities, maintain, and manage the plaza once it was built. 10 points

5. Low/moderate income eligibility: We added an additional category for neighborhoods in census tracts that qualified for CDBG funding from the federal government. That would tip the scale in their favor if they were tied with another proposal in a more affluent area. 10 points

Round One

We took a deep breath and launched the program and the open call for applications in June 2008.[20] It was almost one year to the day after I was hired and joined the DOT. We asked the Pratt Center for Community Development to host us. That reinforced our community-based approach. They offered their event space in Manhattan on 14th St. Brad Lander,[21] the director of the Pratt Center at the time, was a key early supporter. In addition to providing the space, he also agreed to provide wine, something I wasn't able to procure with my city funding.

We invited city agencies, LDCs and BIDs, community boards, and the alphabet of professional and advocacy groups such as Transportation Alternatives, MAS, NYRP, AIA, APA, RPA and PPS, as well as potential philanthropic partners. About 80 people were there to hear Janette announce "the first community-based planning program that has capital funding attached to it," and announce there was $43.1 million over three years for planning, design, and construction.[22]

[20] See New York City Department of Transportation, "DOT Launches NYC Plaza Program, Bringing Community-Based Planning to Create Public Spaces Throughout the City," Press Release No. 08-016, June 24, 2008. See also, Aaron Naparstek, "Want a New Public Plaza in Your Neighborhood? Apply Now," *Streetsblog New York City*, June 25, 2008.

[21] Brad stayed a staunch supporter of the program as he made his way up the political ladder. Soon after this, he replaced Bill de Blasio as the council member for District 39 in Brooklyn, which included Park Slope and Kensington. During Lander's tenure, Council District 39 became home to at least two NYC Plaza Program sites: Kensington Plaza and Avenue C Plaza.

[22] New York City Department of Transportation, "DOT Launches NYC Plaza Program, Bringing Community-Based Planning to Create Public Spaces Throughout the City," Press Release No. 08-016, June 24, 2008, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pr2008/pr08_016.shtml.

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Applications were due August 19, 2008, and the application was not a casual nomination: applicants needed nonprofit status or a fiscal sponsor, financial documentation, and roughly five letters of support, in addition to meeting the other criteria.

The press release went out that day and we scheduled outreach meetings with community boards and interest groups to raise the volume and spread the word.

That August we received 22 proposals from nonprofits and community groups in all five boroughs. Manhattan supplied nine, Brooklyn six, the Bronx five, Queens and Staten Island proposed one each. We were overjoyed.

It wasn't just BIDs in Midtown. In fact, we only heard from one BID in Midtown–the Grand Central Partnership for Pershing Square. The only other Manhattan applications we received at all for areas below 125th Street were for 9th Avenue and 41st Street and Forsyth St in Chinatown.

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Table 1. NYC Plaza Program Round 1 applications: sites, boroughs, and applicants (2008)

#	Site	Borough	Applicant
1	Forsyth St (Canal/Division)	Manhattan	Renaissance EDC
2	Pershing Square	Manhattan	Grand Central Partnership (GCP)
3	Hamilton Pl (Broadway/138th)	Manhattan	Heritage Health and Housing, Inc.
4	175th (Broadway/Wadsworth)	Manhattan	Washington Heights & Inwood Dev. Corp. (WHIDC)
5	Boston Rd & E 169th St	Bronx	South Bronx Overall EDC (SoBRO)
6	58th & 1st Ave	Brooklyn	United Puerto Rican Org. of Sunset Park (UPROSE)
7	Myrtle Ave (Grand/Emerson)	Brooklyn	Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnership
8	Marcy Ave & Fulton St	Brooklyn	Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corp.
9	Knickerbocker Ave & Myrtle Ave	Brooklyn	Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council
10	Humboldt St (Moore/Varet)	Brooklyn	Moore Market Merchants Assoc. Inc.
11	Jackie Robinson On Ramp	Brooklyn	LDC of East New York
12	Harrod & Morrison Ave	Bronx	Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice
13	E. Tremont at BRAC	Bronx	Bronx River Arts Center
14	161st & 3rd Ave	Bronx	LDC of West Bronx
15	166th & 3rd Ave	Bronx	Outreach Project, Inc.
16	Audubon & 165th	Manhattan	Alianza Dominicana
17	W. 155th & Frederick Douglass	Manhattan	Harlem Congregations for Community Development (HCCI)
18	185th (Amsterdam/Audubon)	Manhattan	Yeshiva University
19	41st and 9th Ave	Manhattan	Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association
20	Academy & Harlem River	Manhattan	Friends of Sherman Creek
21	Beach 20th	Queens	Rockaway Development & Revitalization Corp.
22	Bard Ave Street End	Staten Island	North Shore Water Conservancy

Source: NYC Department of Transportation

From Labor Day through Thanksgiving we went to each of these locations, talked to the partner organizations and tried to figure out what could go forward under our new guidelines. Out of the 22 applications we accepted nine projects. We had two years of funding for the first round since the fiscal year we were in counted towards the capital funding. They included the "Plaza de las Americas" at 175th and Wadsworth in Washington Heights, Beach 20th Street in the Rockaways and Marcy Avenue at Fulton Street in Brooklyn, an application that came in from the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation.

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Over the next decade, eight of the nine proposals that we accepted went through the capital process and were constructed. One of them, Hamilton Place between Broadway and 138th St in Harlem was adjacent to Montefiore Park and we gave the Parks Department our funding to completely redesign the park to include the street.[23] Only two partner organizations were BIDs, Grand Central Partnership and Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn.

At this point there were four of us in the Public Space Unit. But the Plaza Program was relying on the whole agency to support it. Top of this list of course was our commissioner, but her staff, including Margaret Newman, John Orcutt and Linda Bailey were critical in marshalling staff, advocates, elected officials and community boards in support of the program. Joe Jarrin, Deputy Commissioner for Finance, Contracting, and Program Management, found the money, processed the contracts and oversaw the teams that handled the capital process. Mike Premeggia and Gerard Soffian's huge team of traffic planners and engineers rerouted buses and cars, painted new crosswalks and installed new signals.

Of course, the program had its political skeptics. Despite all the hearty support we heard from councilmembers or community boards that were excited to have an opportunity to create new public spaces and foster opportunities for public life, there were plenty of others who thought this was a terrible idea, bound to destroy businesses that thought they relied on easy car access and believed that our program was developed in response to the rejection of congestion pricing by the state assembly—that we were punishing car owners.

This opinion had a whole operatic range of voices. We were an easy target for politicians speaking for outer-borough neighborhoods with less transit access. By 2011, City Council Transportation Committee chair Jimmy Vacca, who represented the relatively car-oriented East Bronx, was channeling the suspicion that the failure of congestion pricing had led DOT to pursue other measures intended to "drive car owners crazy."[24] Even in Vacca's district, however, nearly two in five households had no car. But skepticism was hardly confined to the outer boroughs.[25] We also heard protests from theater owners in Times Square, major

[23] It only took 13 years: see New York City Department of Design and Construction, "City Completes $18.4 Million Project to Expand and Revamp Montefiore Square in Harlem," January 27, 2022; Nick Garber, "Harlem's Montefiore Square Reopens After 2-Year Rebuild: See It," Harlem Patch, December 20, 2021.

[24] Ben Fried, "Introducing 'Vacca Watch,'" *Streetsblog New York City*, May 6, 2011, https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2011/05/06/introducing-vacca-watch.

[25] New York City Council, Committee on Transportation, "Oversight – How Has DOT's Plaza Program Impacted Traffic, Pedestrian Safety, and Commerce in New York City?," May 4, 2011; Michael Crowley, "Honk, Honk, Aaah," New York, May 15, 2009; Chris Hayes, "Street Fighter," The American Prospect, November 21, 2008; Tri-State Transportation Campaign and Pratt Center for Community Development, "Council District 13," based on 2000 U.S. Census data.

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retailers and property owners in Midtown, and corporations headquartered in Lower Manhattan.[26]

This is another place where the application worked its magic. We didn't have to fight them. If there wasn't support from key stakeholders, then the application never got to us. If support was weak, the scoring process we developed didn't reward that application. As long as the demand for plazas outstripped our limited ability to deliver them, we had options. Many projects that got rejected at first came back later with support and were successful. People saw something that other neighborhoods were getting and wanted it for themselves. From the Financial District to the outer boroughs, plazas made their way across the entire city. We hadn't just created a program, we created demand and a market for our product.

Another benefit of the application was that it gave us neighborhood champions. The application came from local community groups. They literally asked us to come and create a plaza. We didn't greenlight a project until the local council member and community board supported it. This is a great benefit to an agency that is often accused of doing things "to" a neighborhood rather than "for" the neighborhood. Additionally, when reporters got calls from angry residents or shopowners who opposed the plan, Seth Solomonow, our communications director, could show them letters of support from local leaders and community board resolutions supporting the project. Another opportunity for us to play offense instead of defense.

This theory was put to its clearest test in 2012, when we received an application for a plaza on Liberty Avenue in Ozone Park, Queens. The applicant was the Bangladeshi American Community Development and Youth Services Corporation (BACDYS) and the location was a complex intersection in Queens Council District 32, right on the Brooklyn–Queens border.

We were not optimistic that this application was going to pass muster. Although it had many of the qualities we wanted in an applicant and location, it was in the council district served by Eric Ulrich, one of the few Republicans on the city council, and the member of the transportation committee who had told me in a council hearing on the Plaza Program just one year earlier that none of the three community boards in his district wanted plazas and he didn't want them either.[27]

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[26] Michael Crowley, "Honk, Honk, Aaah," New York, May 15, 2009.

[27] New York City Council, Committee on Transportation, "Oversight—How Has DOT's Plaza Program Impacted Traffic, Pedestrian Safety, and Commerce in New York City?," May 4, 2011. Ben Fried, "Eric Ulrich's Cure for BQE Potholes: Stop Building Public Plazas," Streetsblog New York City, May 4, 2011.

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You can imagine our reaction when, a few months later, DOT received a signed letter from Ulrich stating that he had no objection to the installation of a plaza at that location. "That location" was less than a mile from his district office.

On November 2, 2013, my deputy Emily Weidenhof cut the ribbon on the new Liberty Avenue Plaza with BACDYS, a UN delegate from Bangladesh, the local state assemblymember, representatives from two bordering police precincts, members of the two adjoining community boards, and Eric Ulrich.[28]

The Capital Problem

The capital construction program in New York City is a long and twisting road that has more obstacles and critical path threats than a barefoot walk through the rainforest at night. The biggest problem was that we weren't in control of it.

In 1996, the Giuliani administration had transferred most of NYCDOT's street capital construction function to the newly created Department of Design and Construction, which also oversaw the water and sewer work on behalf of the Department of Environmental Protection.[29] DOT retained the client role in the process, initiating projects, developing 30% design and assigning funding. However the handoff to DDC basically started the scoping and design process over again.

DDC's infrastructure division replaced streets that were structurally failing and couldn't just be repaved, or reconstructed streets that needed to have their water mains and sewers upgraded. This was not a simple job by any means. There was a ton of utility coordination and construction management. However, in terms of street design, it was mostly an in-kind replacement program. They had the procurement contracts for the basic materials they needed: concrete, granite or steel-faced curbs, asphalt. They had the engineering contracts to design these projects, and the capacity to rebuild some of them in-house.

The relationship between DOT and DDC was not friendly. DDC staff, having formerly been DOT staff, did not take input from DOT well. And the DOT capital projects team was always trying to get DDC to work faster or change its priorities. The first few meetings I attended were basically shouting matches.

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[28] The Uni Project, "Uni Helps Inaugurate Plaza in One of City's Most Diverse Neighborhoods," November 5, 2013.

[29] New York City Office of the Mayor, "Mayor Giuliani Appoints Luis M. Tormenta, P.E. Commissioner of the Department of Design and Construction," Press Release No. 396, August 10, 1996; City of New York, Mayor's Management Report, February 1997.

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We then threw into this mix a few dozen new landscape design projects that needed new designers, landscape features and complex community processes that DDC had never needed before.

One of the biggest problems was strictly bureaucratic and procedural. DDC had pre-approval for the standard materials they typically needed from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB approved all capital spending based on a cost accounting table similar to the Medicare fee schedules for operations and doctor visits. If a project had items and costs that weren't on the schedule, such as planting beds or rock walls (or benches), they were considered "amenities" and would be subject to straight-up rejection or a requirement that different funding be used for those elements because the funds assigned to the project were only for the in-kind replacement standard to this type of project.

There was no DDC cost schedule at OMB for the materials a DOT plaza required, and no explicit authority had been given to DOT to start asking to replace streets with different materials such as pavers instead of asphalt, benches, tree beds, or special lighting.

The only solution was to entirely reinvent a working relationship with DDC and OMB for scoping, design procurement, capital approval and construction. This became one of the most frustrating and time-consuming parts of our work. The original budget we were given for the plaza program predicted three years from project initiation to construction completion. The real timeline could be longer than a decade.

Looking back over the first five years of the program, from 2008 to 2012, we were consistently averaging nine months between project award and formal submission to DDC. This timeline would include everything from working out the new curblines and traffic pattern (geometric design, signs and markings, etc), community board and council member acquiescence to the conceptual plan, and then official approval from OMB which required a level of scrutiny typically reserved for tax auditors processing a major banking fraud case. Every penny had to be justified and come from the correct bucket of funding. It was excruciating and exacting work.

We were twisting in circles to justify the program to OMB when help arrived. The key to unlocking OMB approval came from Deputy Commissioner Joe Jarrin who was a former OMB analyst and had previously been the person approving DOT budgets at OMB. Joe's strategy was to give OMB a checklist of "new standards" explicitly for this program. Once they had the right tool, OMB accepted that we were going to put benches, planters, bike racks, water fountains and other elements in the plazas—standard items to us, but until then considered extra "amenities" to OMB.

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After OMB, we confronted other issues at DDC—contract awards, scoping, design development, utility surveys and coordination. This could take years, if, say, DEP planned to upgrade the water mains through there, but couldn't get around to processing it on their end until one or two years later, or if the project was near or adjacent to an elevated LIRR, MetroNorth or NYC Transit facility and needed approvals and a force account. The fastest projects went through and were built in four years. The slowest ones took more like 12. There were a variety of factors that contributed to the timing, including negotiations with and sometimes full project handoff to other agencies like Parks, EDC, or MTA.

Along with being frustrating and time-consuming, this threw a wrench into our first effort to solve for the equity issue.

Spreading the Love

Shortly after we conceptualized the program in 2008, we went over to the Department of Small Business Services (SBS). That agency oversaw the business improvement districts, economic development corporations and other groups that would make up the largest pool of candidates that would be applicants to the program. They had grant-making authority, something DOT did not have. DOT could contract with vendors, using a formal, competitive process; but we could not grant funds directly to nonprofit organizations. The idea was to have SBS support the applicants that qualified for funding to hire or support a staff member who would represent the organization during design development and the construction process and then go on to manage the plaza for one year. After three years, the organization would have to fund the position themselves. To qualify for a grant, the group needed to be in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) census tracts. We used an existing SBS community development funding mechanism not simply to deliver a physical project, but to strengthen the organizations that would eventually steward it.

SBS created the grant and funded three of our first-round partners. However, after a year battling our own approval processes, we realized that the three years would be over before the plaza was even in construction, much less completed. And since the original plaza program applicants didn't get the temporary treatments (an oversight on our part for sure) that funding couldn't pull its weight.

This iswhen I started meeting regularly with Laura Hansen, the program director for the JM Kaplan Fund. Kaplan is a family foundation that was helping to fund some of DOT's priority initiatives, such as the strategic plan and the work of Jan Gehl and his firm.

Laura and I wanted to figure out how to get support for smaller partner groups. We figured there had to be a way to create an economy of scale where they could all pitch in a little

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and get a maintenance provider to come to each plaza in turn. If we could create some kind of workforce development component that would be ideal.

From 2008–2011, Laura and I met every six months or so to think through this issue and in the summer of 2011, Laura offered to leave Kaplan and focus exclusively on this project. We set our sights high. Could creating an economy of scale allow lower-income and smaller partners to buy into an affordable insurance package? Could they be relieved of the responsibility to water the plantings and tie up tables and chairs in the evenings? Could there be some kind of training program for new partners and a programming handbook? We put all of this on the table.

By December, she had created a feasibility study and by March of 2012 we had a model budget, fundraising plan and implementation structure. Laura wanted to run the program. She found a fiscal sponsor and host at the Horticultural Society of New York (the Hort), a former "ladies who lunch" organization that had been transformed into a gritty workforce development and training program that was designing, installing and maintaining planted spaces across the city on streets, in public housing, around schools, and in other public and needy places.

Sara Hobel, the Hort's director, was a willing partner and sponsor and linked the new "Neighborhood Plaza Partnership" with ACE Partnership for the Homeless, a program that trained unhoused men to clean sidewalks and maintain planters in and around SoHo. They performed many of the tasks that a street force would do for a BID, but were instead employed by The SoHo Partnership, an association of property owners and philanthropists.

Working across multiple locations in various parts of the city would require a significant ramp-up for ACE, and a major investment in the new program. We envisioned a program that covered 20 plazas and employed 100 workers. Janette took the case to City Hall and Patti Harris helped secure an $800,000 leadership grant from JPMorgan Chase to launch the program at scale.

Janette launched the program with Mike Bloomberg and Patti Harris at the home of Henry Buhl, a former financier and SoHo art collector who was funding the operations of ACE and founded the SoHo Partnership. Buhl had a quirky art collection in one of the original renovated SoHo lofts. The event included a long list of local foundations, park and public space advocates.

We wanted the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership to become a kind of association of partners, providing training and even programming for smaller-scale partners to be able to participate in the program. Six months after the launch, we handed the program over to the

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de Blasio Administration and new leadership at NYC DOT under Commissioner Polly Trottenberg.

At that point in time, there were 44 plazas open to the public and 17 more in planning, design or construction. The changes to the streets in those places and the changes in the communities were obvious and palpable. What I didn't realize at the time was that we had not only broadened the understanding of streets as public spaces, my chief goal; we had also set up an imperfect but usable structure on which subsequent administrations and planners would use to allow residents and businesses to use and enjoy their streets in many different ways.

The original model demonstrated that communities across the city wanted plazas and would help steward them. It had not yet solved the problem that the neighborhoods most in need of public space were often least equipped to assume the obligations the program imposed. Even the BIDs in more affluent areas were struggling to meet the heavy requirements of the maintenance contract. The program was going to have to grow and figure out how to rebalance the responsibilities. Solving that problem would define the program's next phase.

Last Licks

In December 2013 a group of us joined Mayor Bloomberg on Broadway between 42nd and 43rd Streets to "open" the first capital-reconstructed plaza in Times Square. Janette, Margaret Newman and I represented DOT. Margaret, a trained architect who served as Janette's chief of staff, worked closely with me to oversee the design development of the Times Square permanent plazas. Gail Brewer, the Manhattan Borough President, Tim Tompkins from the Times Square Alliance, Robert Wankel from the Schubert Organization and Katherine Oliver from the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment rounded out the list.

In many ways, Times Square represented the high-water mark of the program. It was globally renowned as "The Crossroads of the World" and we had untangled it. The Times Square Alliance BID was our champion and partner through the process, helping to ease concerns from the Marriott Marquis, Broadway League and other critical stakeholders as we made our way through the thicket of issues, from capital project bureaucracy to special event management.

The results of the project proved our point. The area was safer for pedestrians, there were fewer crashes, traffic flowed as well, or better, than before, and people lingered in Times Square longer, raising the amount they spent in the area. The real estate developers noticed. The Marriott Marquis and the Sheraton Hotel spent nearly $400 million in

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renovations, and the developers of One Times Square spent $500 million revamping the historic building where the New Years Eve ball drops from every year.

Times Square grabbed many of the headlines, but nearly everything we learned there were helpful lessons in engaging with other partners in other plazas. In that sense, and in its role as a global sensation, and it has been a successful standard-bearer of the Bloomberg, PlaNYC legacy.



Part II: Equity Redesign and Embedding Public Space in the DNA of a Transportation Agency

Emily Weidenhof

Concurrent with the NYC Plaza Program launch in June 2008, I was just starting graduate school at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation focusing on urban design. I had been working as an architect on a wide range of project programs and phases for the last four years, but I often felt downstream of many of the more impactful design decisions being made about our health care, arts and culture, housing and educational systems in the public realm. While working on construction management for NYC School Construction Authority projects, I spent a lot of time amidst the complex confluence of social and environmental systems that shape a community's access to opportunity. It was this work that led me from architecture to urban design. My intention was to join the decision-making

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process earlier with the hope of creating bolder outcomes at the neighborhood and citywide scale that could contribute to a more vibrant, thriving public realm.

One of my first assignments was to read PlaNYC 2030—still fresh and "all the rage" in planning schools—and select an initiative to critique. Little did I know how much that document would enable and propel my work to this day! After graduation, I worked with the Urban Design team at the NYC Department of City Planning, supporting transformative public-space efforts around Penn Station and as part of the Harlem Children's Zone expansion. These were big ideas with transformative outcomes that felt shorter than your typical 10-, 20-, or 50-year planning timeline. Even so, the outcomes of this work felt distant compared with the pace at which the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) was transforming streets in real time. I joined the Public Space team in 2010, as the Plaza Program entered its third round.

Institutionalizing incrementalism

In these early days I leaned heavily on my design skills, both technical and graphic communications, as well as my construction experience to support and round out the strong policy, management, operations, and planning skills on the small public space team. This strengthened the feedback loop between the unit's programs, partner relationships, and the physical public spaces we were co-creating—the full lifecycle of public space was interconnected in a way that allowed the team to be nimble and responsive.

One important development during my early years with the team was a dramatic shift in the Plaza Program. We transitioned from a program that awarded and implemented permanent plazas to one that institutionalized incrementalism in three phases—One-Day Plaza, Interim Plaza, and Permanent Plaza—creating a smooth runway for community engagement, proof of concept, stewardship onboarding, and, finally, a fully reconstructed public space.

As Andy mentioned in the previous section, the original Plaza Program awarded capital funding and then jumped immediately into design and planning for the management of a permanent plaza. At the time, a single plaza block could take five or more years to move from scoping to completion. A lot can happen in that time: opposition can strengthen; a partner organization's leadership can change, along with its mission or resources; significant adjacent land-use changes can occur; or entire buildings can be reconstructed. Any one of those challenges can easily compromise a project that exists only on paper.

The Public Space team, together with each of our plaza partners, invested a great deal of time and energy in workshops, surveys, community board presentations, and Public Design Commission presentations to get a plaza design over the finish line. There is a lot of work, public process, and daylight during the design phase, all of which stop when the project disappears into the black hole of construction.

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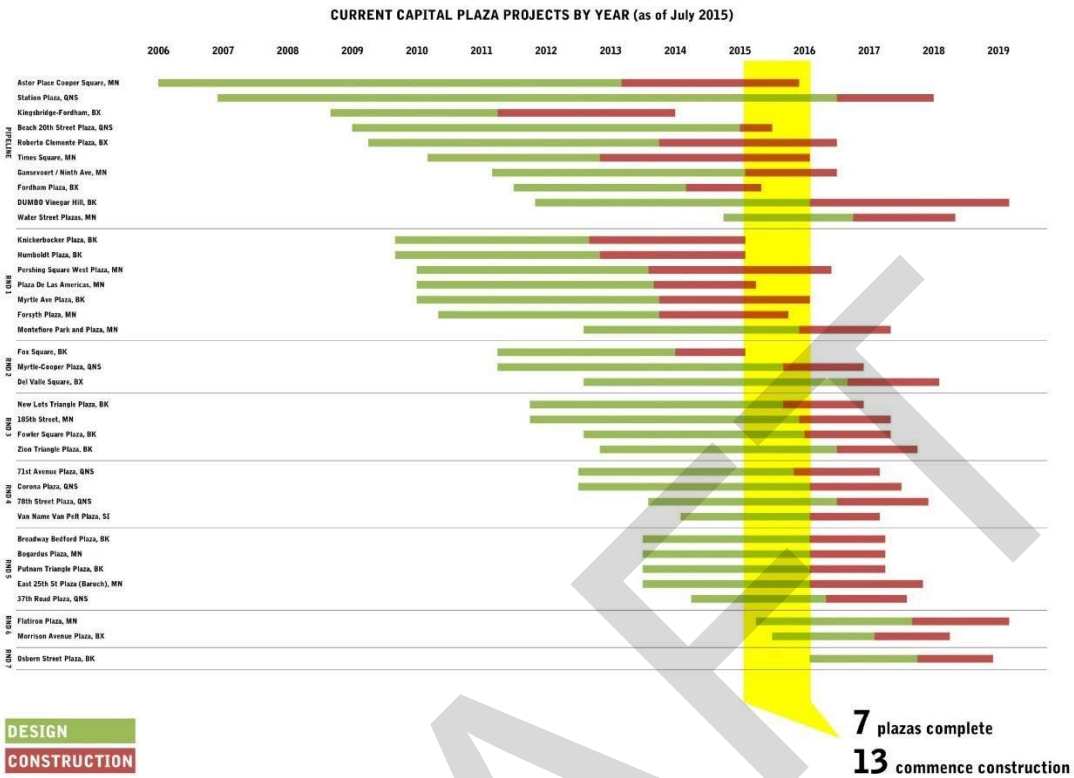

Figure 3. Plaza Capital Design and Construction Timeline Snapshot from Q3 2015.[30]

Because all permanent plazas are built by DOT's sibling agencies—DDC, EDC, or Parks—it takes years to move through procurement and construction. Those years without visual progress or any tangible space on the ground culminate in an inevitably messy and disruptive construction process. They leave our partner, having expended a great deal of local political capital, suddenly "holding the keys" to a shiny new public plaza with thirsty plants, daily waste to clean up and bag, and furniture and umbrellas that need to be set up and broken down.

We learned from this experience and updated our model in several ways. The first was to formally include an interim build phase, layering in the quick-build tool kit that the agency had developed and which worked so well for the early plazas in DUMBO, Meatpacking, and Downtown Brooklyn. Now the implementation process from a plaza application to paint on the ground could be as quick as 18 to 24 months. This allowed partners to grow along with their public space and eased the transition into permanent redesign. It also made for a much more informed permanent design conversation.

Interim plazas also changed the design process. From the program's beginning, partners had sat at the table with DOT, other agencies, and design consultants because they understood their neighborhoods and would ultimately manage the spaces. Instead of partners guessing what design moves might best support their events or where they needed water connections for cleaning and horticulture care—they knew. And they knew what they needed to level up in terms of additional infrastructure or circulation space or furniture layouts because they had been managing a real public space for years by that point.

[30] New York City Department of Transportation.

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Another important benefit from the interim plaza phase was our ability to use the pilot phase to ease concerns from the opposition, often a vocal minority, about the aftereffects of implementation. We were also able to leverage the 'pilot' and light-touch, easy-to-adjust paint to reach a compromise plan—keep some parking spaces here or put fewer benches there. These minor concerns were often quickly forgotten once the space was built and became beloved by the larger, silent majority.

The trial phase also created opportunities for the permanent designs to be more ambitious and build out more pedestrian space and amenities while smartly fine-tuning designs based on real-world experience. In other words, we were able to work out the kinks with the $100K project and design a bolder and more confident $10 million project.

Even with these adaptations, we kept evolving. After working on a solid plaza proposal with the Midwood Development Corporation in 2011, Brooklyn Community Board 14 rejected the application,[31] arguing, among many speculative concerns, that a "pilot" was effectively permanent because successful pilots rarely disappeared. In response, we developed an even lighter-touch phase: the One-Day Plaza. A short event could demonstrate what a street might become, collect real-time observations, and introduce the proposal to people who might never attend a weekday evening workshop. A child playing mini-croquet or drawing with chalk could participate in a street-design conversation without knowing that was what they were doing.

The one-day event was a subtle but important evolution to the program design that reshaped how we approached our work and community engagement. The pop-up was more than just a light-touch test to demonstrate that a small slip closure wouldn't trigger '*carmageddon'*, it was a powerful community-building exercise that helped our partner broadcast their organizational mission to a wider audience and allowed us to engage a more diverse set of stakeholders that might never have gotten the word, been motivated to attend, been able to afford the time, or felt safe attending a government-sponsored weekday evening workshop to provide feedback about a plaza proposal.

The next time we had a contentious situation, we used our One-Day Plaza event tool. On Newtown Ave in Astoria, we set up mini-croquet and chalk, planters and folding furniture, to create a One-Day Plaza on August 25, 2012. Despite its strong community support, Community Board 1 also voted not to advance a plaza.[32] While it was a loss in the short-term, the difference from Midwood was that the Astoria community experienced the plaza proposal in real life. Showing public space, not just talking about public space, can be a powerful motivator, especially for advocates in a neighborhood that significantly lacked open space per capita citywide.[33] In 2020, the 31st Ave Open Street Collective, Inc. and others stepped up to steward an Open Street during the pandemic, resulting in more public space in Astoria.[34] Their

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[31] Eli Rosenberg, "Midwood Residents: We Don't Need a Nightmare on Elm Avenue," *Brooklyn Paper*, March 1, 2012, https://www.brooklynpaper.com/midwood-residents-we-dont-need-a-nightmare-on-elm-avenue/.

[32] Stephen Miller, "Astoria Community Board Votes Against Plaza, Will Get Curb Extensions," *Streetsblog NYC*, September 13, 2012, https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2012/09/13/astoria-community-board-defeats-plaza-will-get-curb-extensions.

[33] New York City Department of Transportation and Central Astoria Local Development Coalition, Newtown Avenue Public Workshop (presentation, June 5, 2012), 16, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2012-06_newtown-plaza-public-workshop.pdf.

[34] New York City Department of Transportation, *31st Avenue, Vernon Boulevard to 51st Street: Community Workshop* (presentation, May 2024), https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/31-ave-vernon-blvd-51-st-may2024.pdf.

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advocacy for more public space continues, most recently with a Trick-or-Streets event around the corner from the original Newtown plaza proposal.[35] In hindsight, this light-touch program layer and its ability to show not just tell, critically equipped us to respond to the pandemic.



Figure 4. Timelapse photo of the Newtown Ave One-Day Plaza.[36]

Redesigning the program for equity

In 2014, the Bloomberg team that started the program, including Janette Sadik-Khan and Andy Wiley-Schwartz, left the agency; new leadership in City Hall and DOT inherited the Plaza Program, and I became its director. The program was then in its seventh application round. Commissioner Polly Trottenberg asked us to step back from annual delivery and consider the end state. What would a fully built-out, mature plaza portfolio look like? The question forced us to examine the end game of the plaza program with a sense of urgency and revealed unmet need for equitable public space if we stayed the course.

We overlaid the map of existing plazas with the program's priority measures, including open-space access, income, and proximity to transit. The result was sobering. We had not simply mapped the neighborhoods with the greatest need for public space; we had also mapped institutional capacity. The application model favored neighborhoods with organizations that had staff time to assemble a detailed proposal, the legal and financial capacity to enter a long-term agreement with the city, and the resources to manage a complex, heavily used public space. Those neighborhoods weren't always the most affluent, but they were not where need was greatest. The Neighborhood Plaza Partnership (NPP) provided important support—proof of concept was there—but it was too small to meet our mapped need citywide.

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[35] 31st Ave Open Street Collective, Inc., "Season 7 – Week 27," *31st Ave Open Street*, https://www.31staveopenstreet.org/blog/season-7-week-27.

[36] New York City Department of Transportation, August 25, 2012.

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The program requirements had helped make the first generation of plazas durable, but they also limited the program's geographic and social reach. If we were going to advance PlaNYC's goal of bringing open space within a 10-minute walk of every New Yorker, the city had to assume a larger share of the stewardship burden.

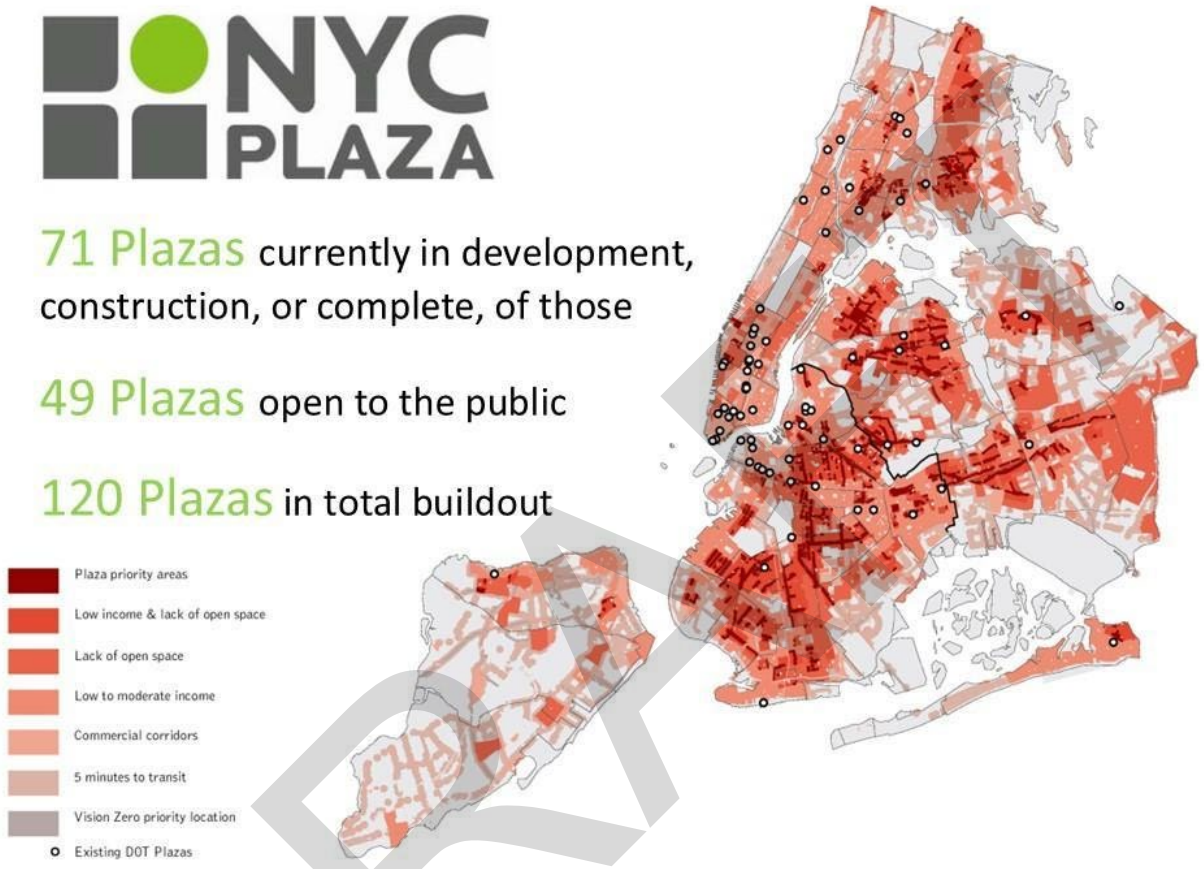

Figure 5. Map of plaza program criteria, existing plazas, and potential final plaza buildout based on highest need.[37]

Making that case within a new administration required sustained advocacy. The Parks Department had launched the Community Parks Initiative and Parks Without Borders,[38] while DOT was appropriately focused on Vision Zero. Through the interagency work that became Building Healthy Communities,[39] DOT joined the Health Department, Parks, the New York City Housing Authority, and other agencies in identifying shared goals and barriers. Those conversations gave us an opportunity to explain that the Plaza Program was not simply constructing street projects; it was operating a distributed network of neighborhood public spaces whose success depended on maintenance and local partnership.

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[37] New York City Department of Transportation presentation, August 11, 2015.

[38] New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, "Parks Without Borders," accessed November 3, 2026, https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/planning/parks-without-borders.

[39] NYC Strategic Partnerships, "Health Equity," accessed November 3, 2026, https://www.nyc.gov/site/partnerships/initiatives/health-equity.page.

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The opportunity to fund that operating model came through One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City, released in April 2015. PlaNYC's open-space goals had always carried an equity rationale, but OneNYC made that rationale explicit and central to the administration's governing agenda. That shift allowed us to build on the Plaza Program rather than replace it. Under the plan's commitment to expand the use of streets as places to play, congregate, and be together, the city provided $1.4 million annually in expense funding for plaza maintenance. The funding solved only the first problem. We still needed a defensible method for distributing limited resources among partners with very different needs.

After a brief naming exercise that produced several ideas better left on the whiteboard, including "No Plaza Left Behind," we settled on the OneNYC Plaza Equity Program (OPEP).[40] We approached OPEP as another application and evaluation problem. Commissioner Trottenberg drew on her federal experience with the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) discretionary grant program, which used common criteria to compare proposals of different sizes and from very different places. For OPEP, we developed a framework that considered both the needs of the physical space and the capacity of the partner organization.

We assessed partner need through organizational structure, staffing, annual budget, and public-space management experience. Plaza need included factors such as size, proximity to transit, and location on a commercial corridor, which served as proxies for use and sanitation demands. The combined score placed partners into three levels of need, which we organized, in true DOT fashion, as green, yellow, and red.

Green, or low-need, partners included well-funded business improvement districts (BIDs) managing plazas such as Times Square and Willoughby Plaza. These organizations had staff, experience with government agreements, and access to concession or event revenue. OPEP did not subsidize their routine operations, although DOT continued to work with them on agreements, installations, programming, and design innovation.

Yellow, or medium-need, partners generally had some organizational experience and contractor relationships but operated with small budgets and limited staff. Their plazas were often busy neighborhood hubs with fewer opportunities to earn concession revenue. OPEP could reimburse these organizations for eligible maintenance and management costs, allowing them to retain local vendors and direct the work themselves.

Red, or high-need, partners might have no full-time staff, bank account, or prior city agreement. Others were established housing or social-service organizations for whom public space management was an entirely new responsibility. They often represented neighborhoods with the greatest need for public space and brought deep community knowledge, but they could not assume the full operational burden required by the original model. OPEP therefore provided a suite of direct services, including routine maintenance, horticultural care, and technical assistance.

This system extended the work that Andy, Janette, and Laura Hansen started through the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership (NPP). Hansen's earlier feasibility work had shown how pooled maintenance, technical assistance, and an intermediary organization could support smaller plaza partners. The system preserved the value of local stewardship while right-sizing the division of responsibilities between the city and its partners. At launch, medium-need organizations could receive up to $20,000 annually in reimbursement,

[40] New York City Department of Transportation, "NYC DOT Unveils OneNYC Plaza Equity Program for Technical Assistance and Maintenance for Plazas Citywide," press release, November 23, 2015, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pr2015/pr15-122.shtml.

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while high-need locations received direct services and technical assistance valued at approximately $80,000 per plaza. The $1.4 million annual budget supported about 30 spaces. Commissioner Trottenberg and then-Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez announced OPEP in November 2015 at the ribbon-cutting for Plaza de Las Americas, one of the first-round Plaza Program sites.[41]



Figure 6. Commissioner Trottenberg unveils the OneNYC Plaza Equity Program on November 23, 2015.[42]

The procurement itself mattered. We were not seeking a generic, low-bid cleaning contract. We needed a provider that could maintain public spaces while tailoring technical assistance to each organization and neighborhood. NPP built this critical foundation and informed the multifaceted scope. DOT released a competitive public request for proposals and our review committee selected the Horticultural Society of New York (the Hort), with ACE New York as a subcontractor. Both brought workforce-development experience and a people-centered mission to the operational work, which resonated with our plaza partners.

Our original theory was that OPEP would build organizational capacity so partners could move from high need to medium need and eventually operate without subsidy. Some partners did grow, but the transition did not happen at scale. The lesson was important: uneven organizational capacity was not simply a temporary deficiency that training could erase. In many neighborhoods, high-quality public space required continuing public investment. OPEP never became a bridge out of support. OPEP did become a

[41] New York City Department of Transportation, "OneNYC Plaza Equity Program."

[42] New York City Department of Transportation.

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durable operating commitment with a high-quality, contextual outcome linked to specific partner and neighborhood needs.

That commitment also made the Plaza Program more resilient. Capital projects could take so long that a partner's leadership, mission, or existence changed before construction ended. In other cases, an organization discovered that it could not assume the scale of work it had anticipated. Because OPEP could provide services and maintain relationships with local stakeholders, DOT no longer had to choose between abandoning a completed plaza and imposing an unmanageable burden on a community group. The equity program gave the agency an operating capacity that the original capital program had lacked.

Securing legal permanence

Concurrently with our discussions about fostering a more equitable and sustainable Plaza Program and creating OPEP, the city's most famous plaza was rapidly becoming a victim of its own success. Times Square, with its proliferation of costume characters, ticket and CD sellers, and Desnudas,[43] experienced an oversaturation of people and negative activity—even as the plazas had more than doubled the amount of space available.

Children and families were being accosted, tourists felt scammed, and the plaza felt uncomfortable and, at times, unsafe. Given its national profile as a representation of New York City, this was not good news for the administration that inherited these plazas. As reported on August 20, 2015, then-NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton suggested ripping out the plazas.[44] This was a moment many had anticipated following Janette's transformative tenure at NYC DOT: Would the pendulum swing back? Would so much of the progress made in reclaiming public space from cars be reversed?

Bratton's statement galvanized plaza partners and advocates citywide. How could these spaces—which they had fought so hard to create, invested so much to maintain, and which were used every day by young and old, made our streets safer, and benefited the economy—simply be wiped off the map? The majority was silent no more.

From petitions to articles and eventually legislation,[45] New Yorkers let the de Blasio administration know that Times Square and plazas were permanent parts of our city. More importantly, we needed better tools to manage these important public spaces on our streets. The stewardship model's power was evident as partners, communities, and their elected representatives rose in support of these public spaces.

Times Square continued to be at the center of the paradigm shift made in the Bloomberg Administration, this time catalyzing change for the entire city. Thanks in large part to the advocacy and vision of Tim Tompkins, President of the Times Square Alliance, his team at the BID inextricably linked the fate of Times Square with the entire plaza program.

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[43] Colleen Wright, "The Desnudas of Times Square, Topless but for the Paint," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/nyregion/the-desnudas-of-times-square-topless-but-for-the-paint.html , accessed November 3, 2026.

[44] "1010 WINS Exclusive: Bratton Suggests Tearing Up Times Square Pedestrian Plaza," CBS New York, August 20, 2015, https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/bill-bratton-times-square/ , accessed November 3, 2026.

[45] Design Trust for Public Space, "Don't Rip Our Plazas," https://www.designtrust.org/news/dont-rip-our-plazas/ , accessed November 3, 2026.

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Local Law 53 of 2016,[46] which declared that pedestrian plazas enhance the quality of life in New York City, defined pedestrian plaza as a distinct type of space within the right-of-way, gave the DOT commissioner express authority to designate pedestrian plazas, and regulate their use through rules. It also compelled the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO) to promulgate rules specifically permitting events in pedestrian plazas.[47] Signed by Mayor de Blasio on April 21, 2016, the law did more than protect Times Square; it established the Plaza Program's legal place within the transportation agency.

So, we set out to write rules to help DOT better manage streets for people—not just for vehicles and the movement of goods.[48] We borrowed and adapted many of the Parks Department's code-of-conduct rules, which had proved durable through decades of enforcement and management of complex public spaces in New York City.[49] We also relied on the enforcement expertise of colleagues in the Police and Sanitation departments. Our plaza partners were important advisers because they understood the daily challenges better than anyone; the rules needed to support their operations and goals. We worked closely with SAPO on rules governing commercial-event scales and pricing to reflect public-space use and maintenance costs equitably.

In addition to use and management, we included rules codifying the annual plaza application process and selection criteria. We committed to publicly posting all plaza locations and establishing a process to rescind a pedestrian plaza designation that includes public notice and a public hearing.[50] We wanted to ensure that another Bratton figure could not make a unilateral decision. The rules also equipped the NYPD, DOT, and our plaza partners with important tools to manage public space more effectively. This complemented the resources OPEP was delivering to plazas with as many management needs as Times Square but only a fraction of its resources and attention.

There were also recommendations for Times Square-specific plaza rules, including designated areas for circulation, pedestrian flow zones, and space for commercial activity, or designated activity zones (DAZs). Although not perfect, these new rules, along with a specially trained Times Square-specific NYPD enforcement team, helped restore balance to Times Square.[51]

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[46] Local Law 53 of 2016, New York City Council (April 21, 2016), https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2597317&GUID=56AB0593-7AB9-4595-BED3-FB292E6E1FC6&Options=&Search= , accessed November 3, 2026.

[47] New York City Street Activity Permit Office, *Plaza Event Rules* (July 2016), https://www.nyc.gov/assets/cecm/downloads/pdf/sapo-plaza-event-rules-07-16.pdf , accessed November 3, 2026.

[48] New York City Rules, tit. 56, § 1-02, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/newyorkcity/latest/NYCrules/0-0-0-64546 , accessed November 3, 2026.

[49] New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Rules and Regulations," https://www.nycgovparks.org/rules , accessed November 3, 2026.

[50] New York City Department of Transportation, *List of Plazas*, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/list-of-plazas.pdf , accessed November 3, 2026.

[51] "NYPD Now Enforcing Rules for New Times Square Pedestrian Zones," ABC7 New York, June 22, 2016, https://abc7ny.com/post/characters-in-times-square-now-restricted-to-zones/1394486/ , accessed November 3, 2026.

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Figure 7. Pedestrian Flow Zones and Designated Activity Zones in Times Square Plaza.[52]

From plazas to a broader public-realm toolkit

In 2018, we celebrated the Plaza Program's 10-year anniversary in Corona Plaza.[53] Polly was still commissioner and invited Andy back to celebrate with our DOT colleagues, elected officials, and plaza partners. In 10 years, we had created 74 plazas in some phase of design, construction, or completion! The program's success and scale testified to PlaNYC's structural integrity: its compelling, defensible goals and the Plaza Program's application-based structure married local and citywide goals and nurtured the full life cycle of a public space. The model positioned DOT as the property owner—the landlord who cares deeply about its public tenants—and allowed me to fine-tune the feedback loop, right-sizing its tools across a spectrum of public and private players.

[52] New York City Department of Transportation.

[53] New York City Department of Transportation, "Plaza Party," https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pr2018/pr18-plaza-party.shtml.

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Figure 8. Andy Wiley-Schwartz speaking at the 10-Year Plaza Program Anniversary in Corona Plaza.[54]

I also helped expand the design language of our streets, catalyzing a substantial expansion of pedestrian and cyclist priority on New York City streets. Around the time OPEP launched and the plaza rules were nearing completion, I was leading the Public Space Unit, with David Breen as deputy. We were eager to transform more blocks of Broadway into plazas.

Surprisingly, despite our citywide success and the safety, economic, and public-satisfaction outcomes along Broadway, stakeholders in the Flatiron District—skittish about change, in part because they were trying to sell nearby residential units—pushed back significantly on pedestrianizing an obvious block of Broadway between 24th and 25th streets next to Worth Square. This was disappointing, but, like Newtown Avenue in Astoria, it was another short-term loss that delivered a long-term win. In close collaboration with our traffic engineers and following David's brilliant idea to reverse this single block of Broadway to northbound travel, we effectively removed this portion of Broadway from the through-vehicle network, relegating it to local access only. Now, only a handful of vehicles used the block making local deliveries at slow speeds, creating more space for people and cyclists and helping us prove a concept that would be a critical piece of our Broadway Vision Plan.

Janette, Andy, and the team transformed the jewels along the Broadway necklace—Times Square, the Garment District, Herald Square, Flatiron, and Union Square—into vibrant, world-class public spaces. In doing so, they changed the nature of Broadway as a through street for vehicles. Before Green Light for Midtown, Broadway around Times Square saw about 1,500 vehicles during the peak hour. A few years

[54] New York City Department of Transportation, July 14, 2018.

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after the projects, peak-hour volumes were closer to 300–350.[55] In a growing city with ongoing demand for public space and a strong Vision Zero mandate,[56] Green Light's success presented a new opportunity. Our answer was the Broadway Vision Plan.[57]

The plan focused on Broadway itself, moving beyond the binary of the street as either open or closed and using a more sophisticated gradient of street designs—slow streets and shared streets. This design "hardware" gave us flexibility to better manage the "software" of programming and use, including time-of-day management, large-scale citywide events, and the evolving landscape of micromobility, waste management, and deliveries.

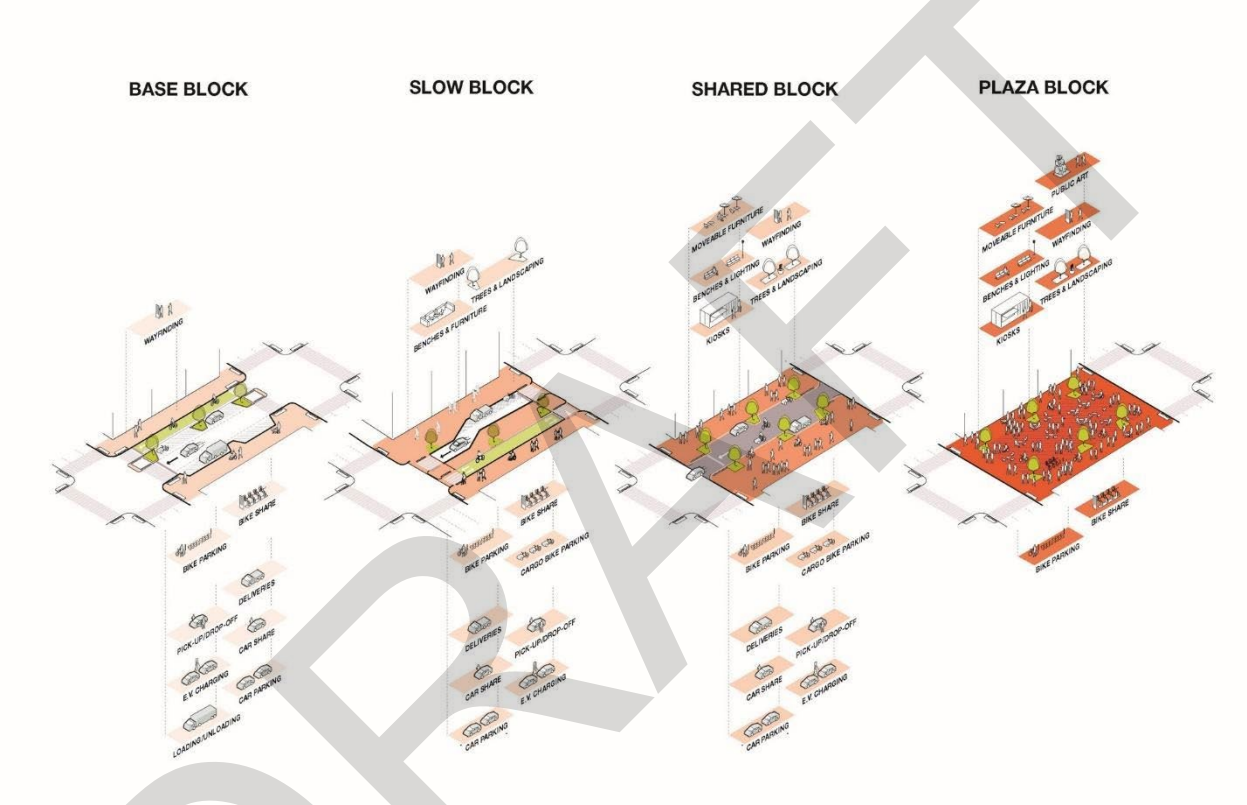

Figure 9. The Broadway Vision Plan Toolkit.[58]

With this gradient of block typologies, our team began to transform Broadway again, this time incrementally. Like paint by numbers, we could address a property owner's access concerns on a specific

[55] New York City Department of Transportation, *[Greenlight for Midtown]*, https://a860-gpp.nyc.gov/concern/parent/vm40xs61n/file_sets/gq67js37p , accessed November 3, 2026.

[56] New York City Mayor's Office, *Vision Zero Action Plan*, https://www.nyc.gov/html/visionzero/pdf/nyc-vision-zero-action-plan.pdf , accessed November 3, 2026.

[57] New York City Department of Transportation, *Broadway: Union Square to Columbus Circle, Community Board 5* (January 2020), https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/broadway-union-sq-columbus-circle-cb5-jan2020.pdf , accessed November 3, 2026.

[58] New York City Department of Transportation and ARUP.

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block while chipping away at vehicle volumes, slowing speeds with chicanes and direction reversals, and increasing pedestrian and cyclist numbers by providing two-way bike access, more bike parking, and more pedestrian and plaza space with greening, seating, and art.

Eventually, we could close blocks of Broadway, such as at Greeley Square, and the changes almost went unnoticed—a far cry from the "Street Fight" days. City officials noticed, however, and were ready to contribute hundreds of millions to permanently transform Broadway from the Flatiron Building to 40th Street.[59]



Figure 10. View of Broadway Vision at Herald Square.[60]

The pandemic pressure test

The COVID-19 pandemic tested that operating system at a scale we had never imagined. When New Yorkers needed more outdoor open space, we unlocked the potential of our streets through pandemic-response programs, two of which my team led: Open Streets and Open Restaurants. We drew on relationships and trust the public-space programs had built over more than a decade and launched Open

[59] New York City Mayor's Office, "Mayor Adams, DOT Commissioner Rodriguez Kick off New Phase of 'Broadway Vision' Plan to Create New Public Spaces, Enhance Street Safety From Madison Square to Herald Square," March 12, 2023, https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2023/03/mayor-adams-dot-commissioner-rodriguez-kick-off-new-phase-broadway-vision-plan-create-new , accessed November 3, 2026.

[60] New York City Department of Transportation and FX Collaborative.

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Streets in May 2020.[61] Although we were all working remotely, I picked up the phone and easily convinced our partners—many of them plaza partners—to take on barricades, programming, and street stewardship. Many agreed because the city and the organizations had spent more than a decade learning how to work together.

The program quickly grew to include hundreds of Open Streets citywide. We saw a similar response when we launched Open Restaurants in June 2020.[62] The program allowed restaurants to self-permit outdoor seating on both sidewalks and in parking lanes. We had 1,800 participants on the first day, 5,000 in the first week, and 8,000 in the first month, eventually reaching 11,000 restaurants during the early-pandemic program. Astonishingly, we discovered that we were now living in a city that understood the power of streets as public space.

The application model had built a large measure of civic trust. These relationships, sustained for more than a decade after the initial program's creation, allowed us to take the risk of creating large application-based programs to support access to safe outdoor space through Open Streets and to support the restaurant industry with outdoor dining through Open Restaurants. It was awe-inspiring to see an entire city agency reimagine its streets as public space and take on local stewardship, creating vital places to connect during an immense period of suffering and struggle.

Open Streets and Open Restaurants created one of the most important data sets driving our public realm work today. The applications generated a new map of demand. They challenged assumptions about where outdoor dining was viable and revealed gaps in access to parks, schools, libraries, and other social infrastructure. The Plaza Program had reached many neighborhoods, but the pandemic programs operated at a new scale and in geographies the plaza network had not yet served.

The tools we created for plazas to meet PlaNYC's goals prepared us for everything that followed for our pandemic programs: advocacy, legislation to make these programs permanent, and rulemaking to solidify process, operations, and codes of conduct.[63] We had been through it all before, but with new types of spaces, at a larger scale, and with a wider variety of partner organizations. We were also ready with design strategies, moving beyond barricades and evolving our Broadway Vision toolkit. We translated long corridors of slow and shared streets, cycling infrastructure, and varied public space into 26 blocks of

[61] New York City Comptroller, *Streets for People: Open Streets and the Future of Public Space Management in NYC*, https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/streets-for-people-open-streets-and-the-future-of-public-space-management-in-nyc/ , accessed November 3, 2026.

[62] New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, "Mayor de Blasio Announces Plan to Expand Restaurant Outdoor Seating Once City Reopens," https://www.nyc.gov/site/dca/news/025-20/open-restaurants-mayor-de-blasio-plan-expand-restaurant-outdoor-seating-once-city , accessed November 3, 2026.

[63] New York City Department of Transportation, "Open Streets," https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/openstreets.shtml , accessed November 3, 2026.

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34th Avenue in Jackson Heights;[64] 31st Avenue in Astoria; and Willoughby Avenue, Underhill Avenue, and Berry Street in Brooklyn.[65]

The pandemic disproportionately affected communities already experiencing systemic inequity and increased demand for OPEP. Again, we were prepared. With our partners at the Hort and through our OPEP contract, services scaled up rapidly as part of de Blasio's Clean Up Corps initiative.[66] Building on the success and scalability of our pandemic programs and OPEP, DOT announced the expanded Public Space Equity Program (PSEP) in March 2024, with more than triple the funding to support all DOT public spaces in need, not just plazas.[67]

Our programs, philosophy, and application-based approach contributed to our city's resilience during a global pandemic. As we transitioned out of the pandemic with more than 65 miles of Open Streets, 11,000 Open Restaurants, and 15 miles of Open Streets: Restaurants, these programs supported 100,000 jobs.[68] In "Streets for Recovery: The Economic Benefits of the NYC Open Streets Program,[69]" a report funded by and developed in collaboration with DOT and Janette and the Bloomberg Associates team, we found that Open Streets corridors significantly outperformed nearby corridors in restaurant and bar sales growth, overall numbers of restaurants and bars, and new restaurant and bar openings. Public Space programs, created and operated by DOT, were valuable for New York City.

Public realm in the agency's DNA

In 2022, Ydanis Rodriguez became DOT commissioner under the Adams administration. A longtime advocate for public space and a former community organizer and council member, he updated the agency's mission statement: "NYC DOT's mission is to provide for the safe, equitable, and sustainable movement of people and goods *and create public spaces that strengthen our communities.*"

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[64] New York City Department of Transportation, "34th Avenue Open Street," https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/about/34ave.shtml , accessed November 3, 2026.

[65] New York City Department of Transportation, "NYC DOT Celebrates Transformation of Brooklyn's Berry Street Into Bike Boulevard to Enhance Cyclist, Pedestrian Safety," November 21, 2023, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pr2023/berry-st-bike-boulevard.shtml , accessed November 3, 2026.

[66] Resilient Cities Catalyst, "Impact COVID-19 Recovery in New York City," https://www.rcc.city/impact-covid19-recovery-in-new-york-city , accessed November 3, 2026.

[67] New York City Department of Transportation, "NYC DOT Announces Expanded Resources Available to In-Need Open Streets, Plazas, and Other Public Spaces for 2024 Season," March 15, 2024, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pr2024/nyc-dot-announces-expanded-resources-available.shtml , accessed November 3, 2026.

[68] New York City Mayor's Office, "Mayor Adams Signs Bill to Create Nation's Largest Permanent Outdoor Dining Program," August 16, 2023, https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2023/08/mayor-adams-signs-bill-create-nation-s-largest-permanent-outdoor-dining-program , accessed November 3, 2026.

[69] New York City Department of Transportation, *Streets for Recovery: The Economic Benefits of the NYC Open Streets Program* (October 2022), supported by Bloomberg Associates and Bennett Midland, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/dot-economic-benefits-of-sustainable-streets.pdf.

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The Plaza Program's larger legacy is therefore not only the acreage converted from roadway or the number of plazas created. PlaNYC supplied a mandate and capital funding, but the program endured because DOT developed an operating model around it: an application that opened the agency to community initiative, design phases that allowed projects and partners to learn, funding that recognized unequal stewardship capacity, legal authority that made plazas part of the right-of-way, and a network of organizations able to act with the city during ordinary times and emergencies.

When a transportation agency understands streets not only as channels for movement but also as public space, it expands the range of problems it can help solve. That citizen agency does not replace public responsibility. The relationship must operate in both directions. The agency brings authority, funding, design, and scale; communities bring local knowledge, stewardship, and accountability. The enduring achievement of the Plaza Program was to place that relationship inside the agency's normal work—and to keep revising it as the meaning and demands of public space changed.

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