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# Recuperación del espacio público para la equidad sanitaria

Cómo las comunidades pueden aprovechar creativamente los espacios públicos para mejorar la seguridad, la salud y la seguridad alimentaria, recuperándolos como activos compartidos y canalizando las inversiones públicas hacia resultados positivos de amplio alcance.





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## Conclusión



Los espacios públicos son el corazón de la vida urbana; son la música que se escucha entre el hormigón del entorno construido. Dado que sirven como terceros lugares esenciales donde nos reunimos, nos mantenemos activos y nos conectamos, estos espacios fomentan un sentido colectivo de pertenencia, transformando los barrios y las ciudades en comunidades vibrantes. Los espacios públicos pueden contribuir a la resiliencia climática de un barrio, mejorar su calidad del aire y dispersar las emisiones, crear oportunidades económicas localizadas, crear espacio para modos activos de movilidad y contribuir a comunidades más saludables y felices al acercar a las personas entre sí.

Si bien el término “espacio público” suele evocar imágenes de parques, plazas, pasarelas u otras imágenes de espacios urbanos bucólicos. Definimos el espacio público como un concepto más amplio que incluye todas las áreas donde se reúnen las personas, ya sean de propiedad privada o pública. En esta concepción, un vagón de metro es un espacio público, al igual que una autopista de seis carriles, en el sentido de que ambos admiten diversos tipos de interacción humana y en distintos grados. Esta definición amplia permite que los espacios públicos se conviertan en mucho más que terceros lugares para la infraestructura: los espacios públicos pueden transformarse en centros de salud comunitaria, proporcionando acceso a alimentos frescos y atención médica. Pueden abordar las injusticias derivadas de una planificación disruptiva y convertirse en centros de mejoras de seguridad holísticas impulsadas por la comunidad. Pueden atraer inversiones públicas y privadas para mejorar las comunidades desatendidas. De esta manera, los espacios públicos pueden servir como infraestructuras de atención comunitaria, al tiempo que permiten a las comunidades recuperar estos espacios e integrar la pertenencia y la identidad cultural de formas innovadoras.

Este informe fue elaborado por:



Obtenga más información sobre esta asociación nacional que aborda la equidad en la salud en la planificación metropolitana.

The following case studies exemplify this potential by showcasing how communities creatively leverage public spaces to improve safety, health, and food security, reclaiming them as shared assets



and channeling public investments into wide-ranging positive outcomes. Within each of these cases, we have identified elements and exemplary practices that public agencies, private partners, community-based organizations, and local residents can adopt for future interventions in the public realm for more equitable and community-supportive uses of public space.

**Learn more** about other place-based strategies for health equity, along with examples of regions implementing such strategies in our “Pathways to Health Equity” report.



Planning.org



Explore Flint and Genesee

Community care and collective wellbeing is at the heart of its mission at the Flint Farmers’ Market in Flint, Michigan.<sup>00</sup> While speaking with Market Manager Karianne Martus, it was clear that all market staff, vendors, and partners were dedicated to ensuring there were multiple avenues to accessing all that the market offers.

Dating back to 1905, the Flint Farmers’ Market had undergone numerous transformations before officially relocating to the downtown Flint area in 2014. The market’s new home is the former *Flint Journal* printing facility, which underwent adaptive reuse to provide the market a new space that was roughly double the footprint of its old facility. The move to downtown Flint, a central location in the city, was critical to the market’s wide-reaching success. Flint is 34.7% white and 56.7% Black, and almost 36% of its residents live below the federal poverty level.<sup>00</sup> With the new location, the market began to see far more diversity in its customer base, and residents were having less difficulty accessing food.<sup>00</sup> The market also saw a larger customer base, as it now serves around half a million customers per year.



Downtown relocation of the Flint Farmers' Market provides a larger venue and greater accessibility to all nine wards via public transportation, walking, and driving.

MapFlint

Food-purchasing assistance and programs are key elements in accessing healthy food, and the Market integrates these initiatives into its programming in unique ways. Twenty-five separate vendor businesses accept Bridge Cards, containing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance benefits (SNAP). In 2011, the Double Up Food Bucks program was introduced to the market, which allows Bridge Card users to double the value of their purchases to obtain local fruits and vegetables.<sup>00</sup> The market also partnered with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, to implement Project FRESH, a federal assistance program providing seniors and low-income parents – particularly breastfeeding mothers – with coupons to buy fresh locally grown fruits and vegetables during the Michigan growing season.<sup>00</sup>

Outside of being a space for healthy food access, the market is a multi-use space for community gatherings, cooking demonstrations, and market space for entrepreneurs. Partnering with the

Michigan State University Extension and Hurley Wellness Services, the market hosts Lunch and Learn Cooking Demonstrations that are free to the public. The demonstrations focus on meals that are high in calcium, iron, and vitamin C to help reduce lead absorption. The market has also partnered with Flint Food Works to help food-based businesses establish a product, perfect their recipes, and develop a business model with access to full-service kitchens located in the market. On the second floor of the market is the Hurley Medical Center's Pediatric Residency and Speciality Clinic. With the center's goal of focusing on the relationship between prevention and nutrition, this seemingly odd partnership works well. Through the Flint Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program, pediatric and prenatal patients receive a \$15 fresh produce prescription at the end of each of their medical visits. <sup>00</sup>

The Flint Farmers' Market is open all year, three days a week, from 9:00am to 5:00pm. For vendors who are farmers, it's no secret that time is a precious commodity. When speaking with Karianne, she shared how getting locally grown produce to the market without overworking farmers is often difficult, and how an increase in labor shortage on farms makes it difficult for them to adapt or remain. With the help of the Flint Fresh Food Hub, it is easier for the market to support local farmers and growers. Through partnerships with local and regional farmers and distributors, the Flint Fresh Food Hub and its portable food truck bring fresh and healthy foods directly from farms to its patrons. With this, farmers can continue to work on their land, and consumers still have access to fresh and healthy produce.

Considering that farmers markets have a reputation of drawing from a narrow demographic of customers, the Flint Farmers Market demonstrates how a diverse range of customers can be drawn by ensuring access on all fronts. The Flint Farmers' Market offers direction to others: by reflecting on accessibility, affordability, and acceptability, a farmers market can establish itself as a vital asset in its given community and be accessible to a diverse range of users.

## **The case of the Flint Farmers' Market offers several lessons for public realm interventions, especially spaces like farmers markets that are hubs for essential resources and services.**

- Affordability is a central tenet of ensuring access to public spaces and the services that they offer, and the Market found unique and differentiated ways of making fresh food affordable and accessible to its users. The Market achieved this by partnering with philanthropic organizations such as HAP (a Michigan-based non-profit health plan). Such partnerships can be a potential avenue for funding or non-financial support for public spaces to help increase affordability.
- One of the Market's goals is to "remain a recognized leader in providing dignified access to healthy food for nutritional assistance recipients." Public spaces can be venues for a host of essential basic services like healthy food, drinking water, shelter, nursing stations, and restrooms, and the Market demonstrates how they can do so while maintaining dignity for their users and a high level of service quality.
- The Market capitalizes on its central location and massive building footprint by making space for partners that also align with their mission of holistic health and nutrition for all. Additionally, it becomes a stationary hub for other satellite mobile services connected to it, like the Flint Fresh Food Hub's food truck, further ensuring that their services reach as many of their intended users





A rendering of the Community Grid proposal along Almond Street, Syracuse. NYS DOT



The reimagined Crouse Avenue at I-690 Interchange. NYS DOT

As a result of widespread discrimination, redlining, and Jim Crow-era segregation, an almost exclusive concentration of 90% of the Black population in Syracuse, New York, lived in the 15th Ward. Towards the mid-20th century, the 15th Ward quickly became a refuge from discrimination: a vibrant, close-knit, working-class community. It was also a frequent stop for Black travelers as a safe haven from “white-only” establishments.<sup>00</sup> But with the birth of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, Syracuse’s urban renewal programs called for the 15th Ward to be reborn as a government complex, cultural center, and high-rise residential neighborhood. Community members were initially hopeful. They believed the plan would lead to better housing, more city-wide integration, and a chance to improve their lives. It soon became apparent that that wouldn’t be the case: the 15th Ward was completely demolished, an estimated 1,300–2,200 families were permanently displaced, and the newly constructed Interstate 81 now ran through its center.<sup>00</sup>

The generational setbacks of the highway decision still resonate today, and the social and environmental consequences of its creation are widespread. Residents nearest to I-81 (who are largely Black and brown) face challenges concerning noise and legacy pollution, concentrated poverty, inadequate housing, unprecedented rates of illness, and scarcity in healthy food.<sup>00</sup> It’s been clear for some time that it’s time to tear the viaduct down. The highway’s condition continues to deteriorate and the cost associated with continuing its upkeep is prohibitive. The Syracuse community at large has been advocating for its removal in hopes of reconnecting the city.

#### **I-81 removal proposal in Syracuse**

Aerial image of the existing interchange between I-81 and I-690, and the new Community Grid proposal, highlighting the resulting developable land. Marc Wouters Studios

In May 2022, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) jointly announced a Record of Decision to remove the I-81 viaduct through the heart of the City and replace it with the Community Grid alternative. This announcement was the outcome of a thorough Environmental Impact Statement process, which saw years of community feedback. The Community grid, a \$2.25 billion project, aims to reconnect downtown neighborhoods. It would create a new Business Loop 81, which would pass through the city distributing traffic along the way, and make other improvements that will improve mobility, enhance safety, create new recreational opportunities, and promote economic growth throughout all of Central New York.

As part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) established the “Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods (RCN)” Grant Program in February 2023. The program is a first-of-its-kind initiative to reconnect communities that are cut off from opportunity and burdened by past transportation infrastructure decisions,<sup>00</sup> and the I-81 project was one of its first beneficiaries.<sup>00</sup> More recently, the Community Grid received an infusion of more than \$180 million from the USDOT’s Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) Program which is intended to support neighborhoods closest to and negatively impacted by the Viaduct.<sup>00</sup>

To learn more about federal infrastructure funding, take a look at our blog post series including “Federal Dollars for Local Infrastructure” and “Demystifying Federal Funding for Healthy Communities”.

With the help of the RCN and NAE grants and other state and federal funding sources, the project was approved. The official ceremonial groundbreaking took place this July with federal, state, and local officials. Although support for the community grid is strongest for residents, concerns associated with its construction and its future still linger. Local organizations and advocacy groups have also been closely monitoring I-81 and the NYSDOT’s efforts to protect residents against the



potential of future displacement. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) New York affiliate (NYCLU) has been in conversation with residents closest to the viaduct since 2020. According to NYCLU, many residents are concerned that Syracuse's new zoning plan, known as ReZone Syracuse, will fail to provide any protections for low-income communities living near the I-81 viaduct. Many worry that without these protections, new development could increase the cost of rent, price them out of their neighborhood, and rip them away from their community. Residents want investments in their community that bring new, well-paid jobs and cultural opportunities to their neighborhoods, including a community land trust.

The I-81 viaduct project represents a complex history of injustice stemming from urban planning. The divide between residents and the city reflects a deep-seated mistrust, and the path forward will require transparent communication and a commitment to addressing and acting on the concerns of the most affected. The United States' highway-centric history and its impact on marginalized communities make it essential to ensure that the project genuinely serves the interests and wellbeing of all its residents, especially those negatively impacted by the harmful legacies of past planning decisions.

## **The demolishing of the I-81 viaduct and its replacement with the Community Grid shows how infrastructure funding can be used to support community needs and remediate the harms wrought by past planning decisions:**

- Grant programs like the RCN and NAE reflect shifting priorities in federal transportation and infrastructure funding towards supporting community planning, mitigating barriers and environmental harm, and improving access and community connectivity. This transformational shift can support infrastructure-focused projects that advance community wellbeing and drastically improve health outcomes, while furthering the strategic priorities of federal and state transportation agencies.
- The case of the I-81 illustrates how cities can reinvent themselves to move away from car-centric and highway-centric forms of development and undo the lasting negative effects of cars and highways on the built environment and community health. It's a powerful example of how federal funding can be a catalyst for such paradigm shifts and encourage more regions across the country to make similar highway-to-boulevard conversions.
- The I-81 Viaduct's demolition and the Community Grid alternative also benefited from a strong economic argument supporting its case, which pitted the cost of rebuilding the crumbling viaduct \$1.7 billion against the expenses that the Community Grid alternative would incur \$1.3 billion.<sup>00</sup> Such cost-benefit evaluations can help communities make the case for transformational approaches towards transportation infrastructure planning, especially when they account for the health benefits of mitigating environmental harms and the social benefits of ensuring access to a wider range of users.
- The Community Grid's visioning and design process followed a community-first approach to allocating the right-of-way and designing the public realm, instead of the conventional approach of allocating space for vehicles first and then other surrounding uses. In an interview with the CNU,



Josh Frank, a project manager working on the Community Grid, mentioned how the project began by gathering input from the local community on what they wanted to see and then reverse-engineered the street and public realm to reflect these priorities. Such community-first approaches to shaping the public realm allows it to accommodate a diverse variety of users and uses, transforming streets into vibrant and inclusive spaces and critical connective tissues for the community's urban fabric.

The Planning Exchange's Infrastructure for Healthy Communities report recommends the following framework for aligning federal funding requirements with local priorities and community needs



The Los Angeles Metro's Metro Ambassadors program shows how community networks can be supportive systems for safety in shared public spaces like transit systems. See a video from the launch of the program [here](#).

Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority

While Syracuse's Community Grid illustrates how physical infrastructure can help remediate historic harms, the Los Angeles Metro's Metro Ambassadors program shows how community networks can be supportive systems for safety in shared public spaces like transit systems, in place of punitive, police-first models.

For transit systems across the country, building public safety and increasing transit ridership are important goals. And historically, transit agencies have sought to create a sense of security and safety through an omnipresence of police. It is evident that this approach comes with shortcomings: When safety is framed in terms of law enforcement intervention, it in turn promotes greater health inequities for Black and brown communities, including trans/gender-nonconforming people, undocumented people, and people with mental illness.<sup>00</sup> For centuries, conventional practices of law enforcement and policing have been used to control the mobility of these communities, and alarming numbers of Black and brown people have died at the hands of policing and enforcement authorities. Current paradigms of public safety are based upon fundamentally flawed assumptions about safety, defined by a select few and resulting in a system that makes some feel safer at the harmful expense of other groups.



To reimagine safety in our transit systems we must explore alternatives, and this is crucial to our planning exchange partner Community Power Collective (CPC). Community Power Collective exists to build power with low-income tenants and workers through transformative organizing to win economic justice, community control of land and housing, and to propagate systems of cooperation in the Los Angeles region. In March 2021, CPC along with other partner organizations worked with the Alliance for Community Transit - Los Angeles (ACT-LA) on their report titled Metro as a Sanctuary - Reimagining Safety on Public Transit. The report focused on Los Angeles' Metropolitan Transportation Authority, referred to as Metro, which currently employs a multi-agency policing model to create a 'safer experience' for riders. Metro's flawed assumptions have often led to flawed policing, which results in harmful racial profiling and criminalization. Around 50% of Black riders account for half of Metro citations, although 18% account for less than a fifth of ridership.<sup>00</sup> Metro's approach has also failed to address any lasting ways that the lack of services and housing inaccessibility affect unhoused people. ACT-LA's report proposes community-led safety alternatives to reconstitute public safety, which includes deploying transit ambassadors, increasing and improving bus service, enacting fare-free transit, and more.<sup>00</sup> Ultimately, ACT-LA and CPC's goals are to have Metro divest from millions of dollars of policing contracts and instead invest in community and public health-based safety alternatives.

In response to the report and community advocacy, Metro introduced the Metro Ambassadors program in September 2022. The program employs up to 300 green-shirted transit ambassadors, who offer in-person support to riders on trains and stations, connect riders to resources, and report maintenance and safety concerns. Ambassadors also receive training in trauma-informed response, disability awareness, mental health awareness, customer experience, station cleanliness/evaluation, conflict de-escalation, and homeless engagement.<sup>00</sup>

LA Metro recently conducted an extensive rider survey that found significant support for the ambassadors. About 63% of metro riders said the presence of ambassadors have made their experience on public transport feel safer, with a higher rate reported by low-income communities, women, and people of color. Outside of their designated roles, ambassadors have also helped report sexual harassment, criminal activity, and have summoned emergency medical assistance for riders in distress. Since April 2023, ambassadors have administered Narcan (a treatment for narcotic overdoses) 52 times and saved 20 lives using CPR and suicide prevention.<sup>00</sup>

In October of 2023, the Metro board unanimously approved making Metro's ambassador program permanent.<sup>00</sup> Although Metro Ambassadors are not intended to replace existing Metro security staff or law enforcement, advocates and community members believe it is a step in the right direction.

Social inequities in our policies, programs, and institutions have only recently become apparent for many, crystallizing the reality that 'safety' has a different meaning for different people. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority is offering a promising way forward for transit agencies across the country to fulfill their role as responsible transportation providers and ensure that transit spaces remain equitably safe and inclusive for all.



**By piloting a community-led alternative to ensuring safety in a public space, the Metro Ambassadors program demonstrates that it is possible to improve safety for all by shaping community-based systems of support, and move away from punishment and incarceration towards more care-centered, community-based resources.**

- The program actively challenges the assumption that police are the experts and arbiters of safety in the public realm, and understands that safety means different things to different people. For some, it may be a sense of comfort in a public space, the ease of navigation, or seeing familiar and friendly faces around, while for others it may be having access to life-saving treatments, getting connected to social services, or a safe space to rest. This alternative to punitive law enforcement is rooted in the public health approach to safety, which asserts that it is more constructive to improve mental, physical, and economic well-being than typical law enforcement actions. Such multifaceted and trauma-informed safety systems can help make our public spaces more inclusive and truly safer for all.

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- Research shows that higher levels of psychological ownership of a public resource can lead to increased feelings of public responsibility for that resource, and the Ambassadors program does exactly that.<sup>00</sup> When communities experience a sense of ownership and civic responsibility for shared public spaces, they tend to provide greater support for allied initiatives, higher levels of engagement in public outreach processes, and take care of spaces better through decreased littering and vandalism. Such models of community ownership can be developed for other public spaces as well to foster a sense of belonging and stewardship within surrounding communities.







## Neighborhoods Now Toolkit

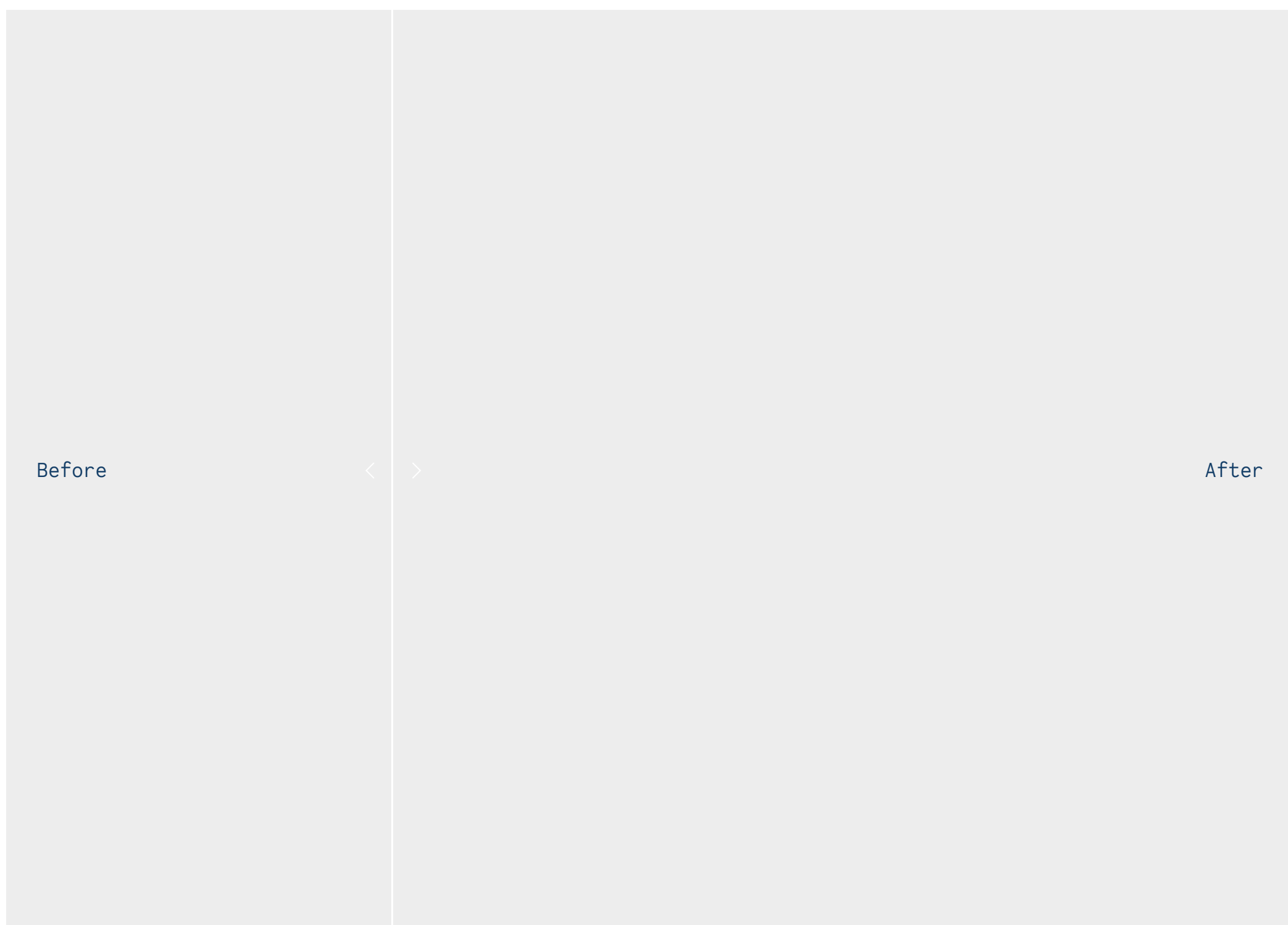


## Global Designing Cities Initiative

We often find that the best public spaces are those that reflect and respond to the character and culture of the community. Through New York City’s Plaza Program, the Department of Transportation (DOT) works with communities to provide quality open space that helps strengthen and protect that character and culture.

The NYC DOT Plaza Program was introduced in 2007, when former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg made a commitment that all New Yorkers would live within a 10-minute walk of an open space.<sup>00</sup> As a partnership-based public realm initiative, eligible organizations can propose new plaza sites for their neighborhoods through a competitive application process. NYC DOT gives priority to plaza locations that are in neighborhoods with few open spaces, and partners with community groups that commit to operate, maintain, and manage these spaces to maintain them as vibrant pedestrian plazas. As of 2022, there are around 90 public plazas throughout New York City.

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Before and after images of a corner in Pearl Street, New York. Global Designing Cities Initiative

Through a competitive application process, eligible organizations propose new plaza sites, with a focus on neighborhoods lacking adequate open space. This prioritization ensures that even the most underserved communities have access to quality public amenities, a cornerstone of health equity. Selected community groups take on the responsibility of operating, maintaining, and managing these spaces, infusing them with life and vitality. It’s not just about creating a physical space; it’s about nurturing a sense of belonging and well-being among residents.

However, challenges abound, especially in areas where resources are scarce. Recognizing this disparity, the OneNYC Plaza Equity Program (OPEP) was established by NYCDOT to provide crucial support to plaza partner organizations in under-resourced neighborhoods. This support extends beyond beautification efforts to include health-focused initiatives aimed at improving community well-being. With an initial capacity of supporting 30 high-need public spaces, the program has now expanded to provide resources to over 100 spaces. Additionally, the Neighborhood Plaza Partnership, an alliance between NYCDOT and The Horticultural Society of New York, provides additional services and capacity building to low-capacity organizations.

Map of the initial 30 plazas receiving support from the OneNYC Plaza Equity Program. The program has been expanded to include over 100 plazas today.

NYC DOT

The Plaza Program's success lies in its grassroots approach, empowering local nonprofit organizations to shape the design and programming of these public spaces. This ensures that each plaza reflects the unique character and culture of its neighborhood, fostering a sense of pride and ownership among residents. But beyond aesthetics, these plazas serve as vital hubs for community health. They provide safe spaces for physical activity, encourage social connections, and even offer programming focused on wellness initiatives. In a city where access to green spaces is often limited, these plazas become lifelines for residents seeking respite from the concrete jungle.

As the sun sets over the city skyline, these plazas come alive with laughter, music, and the vibrant energy of community. They are more than just public spaces; they are symbols of equity, resilience, and what can happen if we prioritize our public spaces and streets for people in New York City. And through initiatives like the NYC Plaza Program, cities can realize its vision of health equity for all its residents.



## **The NYC Plaza Program is an innovative partnership-based model that capitalizes on underutilized existing city spaces and transforms them into neighborhood destinations, offering several lessons for supporting public spaces in resource-constrained neighborhoods:**

- The Plaza Program shows how new public amenities and shared open space can be created even in space-constrained urban regions like New York City, by redesigning and reclaiming underused public spaces like roadways and parking lots.
- The Program was one among an innovative set of public realm projects in New York City that employed quick-build approaches using temporary materials to reimagine the right-of-way and public space (an approach termed as “tactical urbanism”). This process freed these projects from the onerous regulations and timelines of capital projects and allowed agencies to deploy projects in weeks, and sometimes even days.
- Another unique approach adopted by the Program is that projects are initiated by local communities and community organizations rather than public agencies – here, DOT teams take on the roles of project facilitators and resource-providers. This increases community buy-in for these projects and ensures that their programming and uses are closely tailored to the needs and capacities of local communities. Moreover, it ensures that these communities and community groups will steward and maintain these spaces in the long run, with public and non-profit programs like the OPEP providing additional support where needed. The Program also allows organizations to generate revenue from these projects through fundraising campaigns, sponsorships, and concession kiosks, which they can use to maintain and support programming in the plaza.
- While programs like these are intended to support community-led public space initiatives, program uptake may vary according to the resources and capacity available at each community’s disposal. With the Plaza Program too, it was observed that well-resourced business improvement districts, community-based organizations, and local development corporations were the most common initiators of projects, and under-resourced neighborhoods struggled to find funding and willing partners for plaza projects. The OPEP and NPP initiatives helped fill this gap, pointing to the need for additional resources to be integrated into such public space programs to foster equitable participation in such initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

The four cases presented above, as wide-ranging as they may be, illustrate various examples of how health equity and community wellbeing can be supported and upheld through thoughtful and empathetic interventions in the public realm. All of these examples uphold key principles of health equity: they address historical and contemporary injustices; they help individuals overcome

equity. They address historical and contemporary injustices, they help communities overcome economic, social, and other obstacles to health and health care; and they eliminate preventable health disparities.<sup>00</sup> They show how public spaces can be more than just places for people to pass through, and how they can be spaces of collective care and wellbeing, where past harms are attempted to be undone, where safety is redefined and translated into integrated systems of support, and where communities can collaborate with public agencies to transform underutilized sites into beautiful shared spaces. All four cases embody a new definition of public space – one that firmly establishes that public space is shared space that needs to be inclusive of all people. Such spaces encourage collective and communal harmony, allow us to find community in those around us and common ground where we least expect to find it, and – when done right – encourage us as individuals to become channels of the care and comfort extended by these spaces, branching them out beyond the boundaries of space and fence lines.

Los valores consagrados en estos casos y los enfoques creativos que los diferencian de las formas convencionales de construir espacios e infraestructuras compartidos pueden inspirar a las agencias públicas, los grupos cívicos y las comunidades a reimaginar sus bienes comunes urbanos compartidos para lograr una mayor equidad y beneficios en materia de salud que lleguen a todos sus usuarios.

## Expresiones de gratitud

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