

Meatpacking BID for COVID Recovery

the case for public space

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PLANNING

**MEATPACKING
DISTRICT**

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under the guidance of Weiping Wu, Francesco Rossini and Emily Junker

“The Meatpacking District is an epicenter of activity; with a wide range of restaurants and nightlife venues, people seeking quality experiences and atmosphere flock to the neighborhood.”

– The Meatpacking District

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source: Southwest Chelsea

Executive Summary

As residents of New York City and future urban planners, we have been observing and analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on the public realm. Inching towards recovery from a global pandemic forces us to rethink the way we navigate shared spaces. Meanwhile, insufficient sidewalk widths lead us to reimagine our streetscapes to comply with physical distancing protocols. How we plan for post-pandemic public space will undoubtedly affect social interactions and economic revival across the city.

This report – the culmination of our Urban Planning Studio at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation – addresses the aforementioned issues within the Meatpacking Business Improvement District. Once home to the meat packing industry, it is now among the most cherished and visited neighborhoods of NYC. Today, this commercial hub’s sources of income are jeopardized, as well as its vibrant social scene that makes the area so attractive.

Our study explores planning possibilities at the Chelsea Triangle, and is predicated on the opening of the 9th avenue slip lane between 13th and 14th street to pedestrians and cyclists. Existing site conditions in the neighborhood make it almost impossible to safely physically distance. As such, opening the street to pedestrians and rerouting traffic will provide essential relief. Past precedents and recent city-wide initiatives further support our case for public space. Indeed, the economic, social, environmental, and health benefits to be derived from street openings far outweigh surmountable regulatory challenges.

Furthermore, we anticipate BIDs can and will play a major role in reshaping streetscapes and spearheading business recovery efforts. Our recommendations highlight three pillars for successful recovery from the current crisis: Community Outreach, Business Strategies, and Urban Design in the Public Realm. These three main themes can also be viewed as phases, part of a broader outlook for the neighborhood in the months and years to come.

Firstly, prioritizing continuous community engagement will prove vital to successful policy and planning interventions. By building upon existing online channels, the BID can crowdsource design and involve residents in development and implementation processes through questionnaires, contests and open online meetings. Limiting physical interactions does not preclude communities from engaging in meaningful ways to reshape the future of their neighborhoods.

Secondly, developing strategies to maintain their customer base will allow businesses to better recover from the economic crisis. Businesses can transition from their current online virtual realms to the outdoors in the form of sidewalk extensions, parklets, plaza-stationed kiosks or centralized delivery hubs. Selling products or providing services in public space will allow for open-air, low-contact, and affordable experiences for customers.

Finally, we propose to incorporate the above strategies into urban design tactics that will allow for a safer, more inviting and viable public realm. A series of new placemaking ideas in the Chelsea Triangle and along 9th avenue prioritize physical distancing and sanitation while celebrating the strength of the Meatpacking community. This includes safer forms of urban furniture and creative wayfinding to direct pedestrian traffic flow.

These strategies and recommendations are crafted with replicability in mind. The Chelsea Triangle can act as a pilot for street openings and its principles applied across the Meatpacking district, New York City, and beyond. The process takes into consideration regulatory challenges and the required analysis and conversations that will need to take place in the short term – as restrictions are slowly lifted – and longer term – as we reassess our habits.

In this exceptional time, community leaders and decision makers are inclined to rethink how we define public space. As urban planners, it is exciting to reimagine spaces that above all else prioritize the health and wellbeing of local communities.

– New York City, May 2020





Scope & Limitations

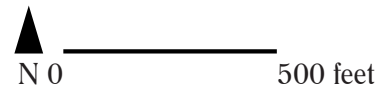
Meatpacking BID

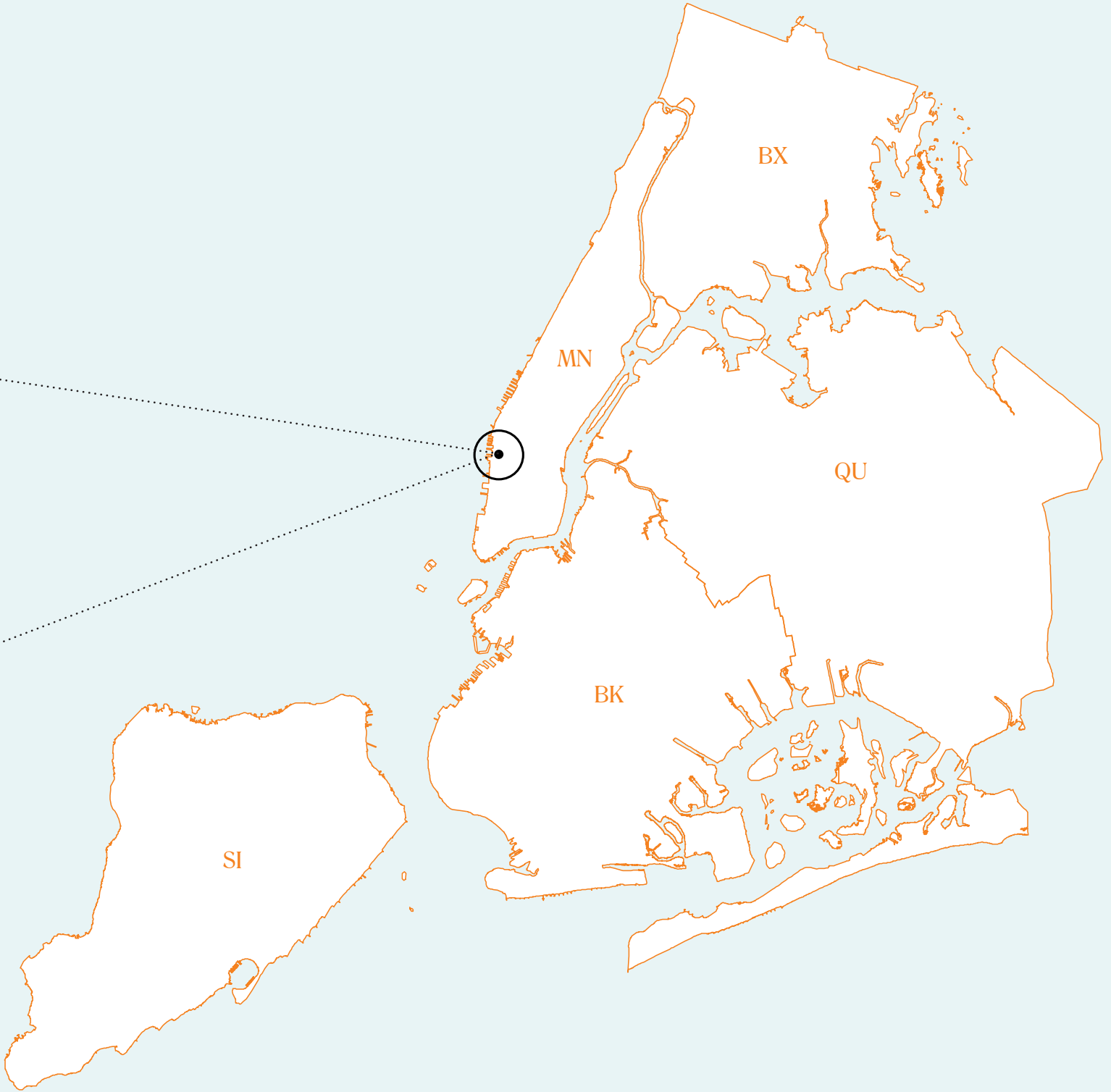
Location & boundaries

Maps by Zeineb Sellami - Data sources: NYCDOP Borough Boundaries, MapPLUTO, DoITT Sidewalk and Building Footprints

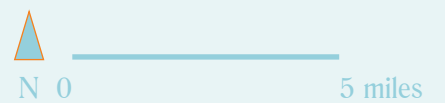


-  BID boundary
-  Parks & Public Space





New York City boroughs



Business Improvement District (BID)

“A Business Improvement District (BID) is a geographical area where local stakeholders oversee and fund the maintenance, improvement, and promotion of their commercial district.” [NYC SBS]

New York has 76 BIDs citywide.

Leadership | Each BID is run by a not-for-profit organization with a Board of Directors made up of property owners, merchants, residents, and representatives of local elected office.

Funding | BID programs and services are funded through a special assessment billed to property owners within a district. The amount collected is decided by BID stakeholders.

Responsibilities | “BIDs create vibrant, clean, and safe districts.” They typically deliver services and improvements to supplement (not replace) those provided by the City. “BIDs also serve as a liaison between local businesses and stakeholders and the City government,” and work as “a collective voice for the neighborhood and help inform City policy based on their unique local knowledge.”

In tackling and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, BID's can play a crucial role in setting the foundation for long-term recovery in line with the district's specific priorities. They mediate between numerous stakeholders that are important towards the neighborhood's recovery. Working with government authorities, businesses and local communities, BID's can:

- improve and adapt public space and associated services for safer usage by implementing COVID-safe strategies;
- provide assistance to businesses in the area;
- maintain communication with local communities and the general public;
- plan for relief and long-term recovery strategies.

Scope

Scope of work and the role of the Meatpacking BID

This report constitutes a set of recommendations for re-engaging public space in the Meatpacking BID post-COVID-19. The plans center on opening the slip lane at 9th Avenue between 14th and 15th street to extend the Chelsea Triangle. For the purposes of the report, this public plaza will serve as a case study in which to anchor high-level planning ideas and creative options that can translate to other public spaces in the BID and more broadly across New York City.

The following questions gave this report a sense of direction in reimagining public space in the Meatpacking Business Improvement District: **How will we ‘go back to ‘normal’? Will we use public space the same way? What about the shops, restaurants, and markets that for so long brought life to New York City sidewalks?**

In an attempt to answer these questions, three priorities emerged. First, the importance of continuous community outreach in implementing successful interventions in the months to come. Second, imagining creative business strategies to allow for a more steady economic recovery. Lastly, incorporating residential and business needs into urban design to allow for a safer, more inviting and viable public realm. We believe BIDs can and will play a major role in reshaping streetscapes and spearheading business recovery efforts.

Limitations

Limited access to site and to stakeholders

Planning in the midst of a pandemic is not without complications. The work for this report began in early March just a few days after New York Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered residents to shelter in place in an effort to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19. We were unable to conduct site visits, speak with local stakeholders, visit businesses, and assess the urban landscape in a more tactical way.

All work has been conducted under the “social distancing” conditions required in a city under quarantine. All interviews, meetings and research have been conducted virtually. This includes regular meetings as a group, with professors and classmates, as well as weekly scheduled online meetings with our client.

We made an effort to stay on top of the news cycle and regulatory changes. As new information regarding public health, stay at home mandates, and the Open Street Program emerged rapidly, the city’s realities shifted on a daily basis.



Meatpacking BID facing COVID



Neighborhood History

Historical role as marketplace

In the mid-19th century, the Meatpacking District was a mix of residential buildings and heavy industry, including coal, stone and lumber yards, an iron foundry, a turpentine distillery and others. The area began to thrive commercially after the Civil War as New York City solidified its position as the financial center of the country. It was around this time that the city pushed for new clean open-air markets which became a defining feature and dominant business in the meatpacking district [Shockley et al., 2003].

At the start of the 20th century, Manhattan Refrigerating Co. installed a system of underground pipes in the neighborhood to bolster these markets by carrying refrigeration throughout the district. Around the same time, the docks at Gansevoort and Chelsea Piers opened to receive trans-Atlantic steamships bringing in meat, poultry and seafood for sale to hotels and restaurants around the city. This positioned the neighborhood at the center of meat processing, packaging and distribution business, hence its name.

By the end of World War II, poultry- and meat- packing had consolidated as the main commercial activity throughout the district. In 1959, the Meatpacking District was referred to in the New York Times as “the largest meat and poultry receiving market in the world” [Alden 1954].

The decline in maritime commerce along the Hudson River waterfront during the 1960s brought changes to the neighborhood. The rise of suburbia coupled with shifts in the distribution of meat and poultry that were made possible through frozen foods, refrigerated trucks, and home freezers, brought an end to meatpacking businesses in the area [Shockley et al. 2003].

By the 1970s the neighborhood became home to a vibrant nightlife catering mostly to New York’s gay community. Artists and others looking for affordable spaces to live and work moved in after. In September 2003, the neighborhood was designated as a historic district.

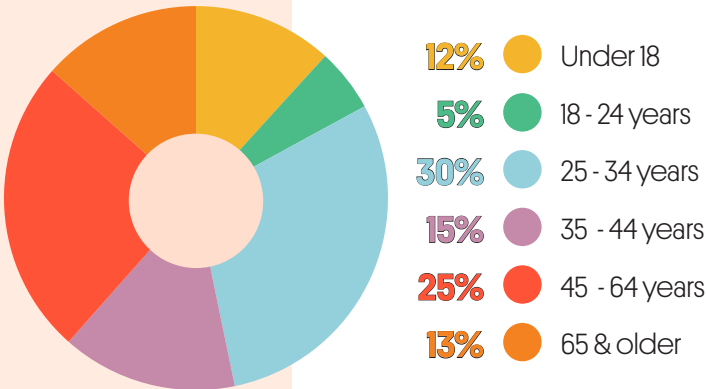
In 2010, the Meatpacking Business Improvement District was founded by the Meatpacking Improvement Association (MPIA) made up of a group of neighborhood property owners. Among other things, the BID has invested considerably in public space, restoring streets and sidewalks and revitalizing public plazas to accommodate the neighborhood’s millions of annual visitors traveling to see places like the Whitney, Chelsea Market and the High Line. The BID’s beautification efforts have built the neighborhood into one that is today known for its “stylish hotels, rooftop cocktail lounges, luxury boutiques, overpriced brunch spots and nightclubs with velvet ropes” [Margolies, 2020].

Contemporary Facts

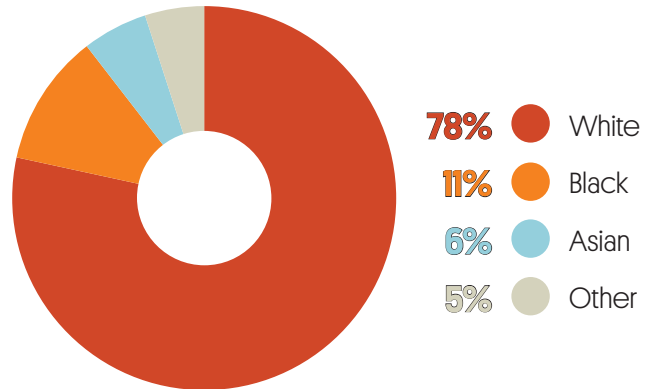
Demographics

Today, the average resident of the meatpacking district is young, white, wealthy and well-educated. Ninety-four percent of residents report having health insurance. In the 2018 Community Health Profiles covering the Meatpacking District and surrounding neighborhoods, an overwhelming majority of residents reported their health to be “Excellent, Very Good, or Good Health.”

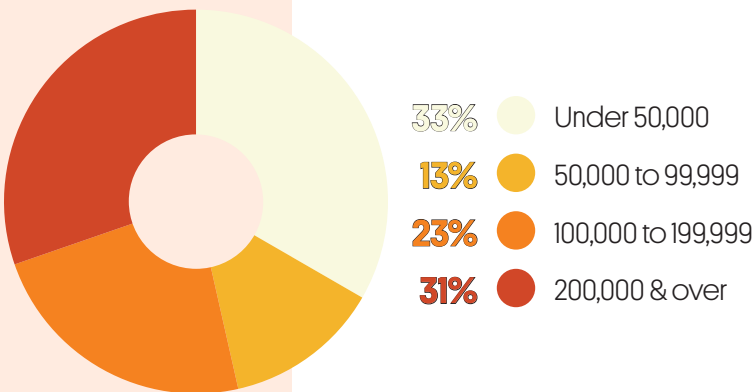
Age



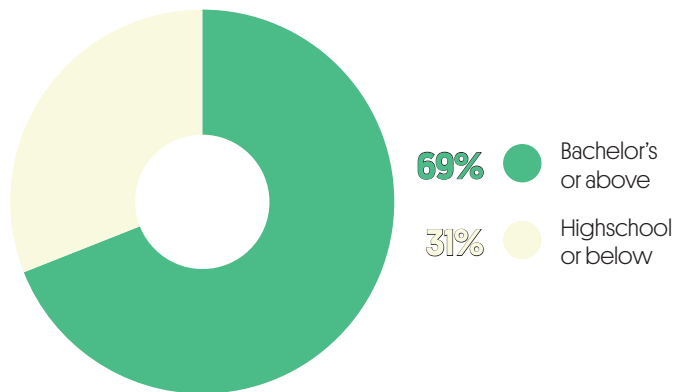
Race



Household Income

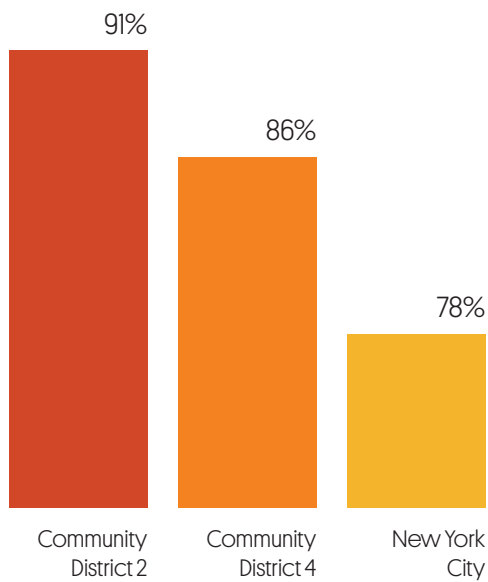


Education



Health Considerations

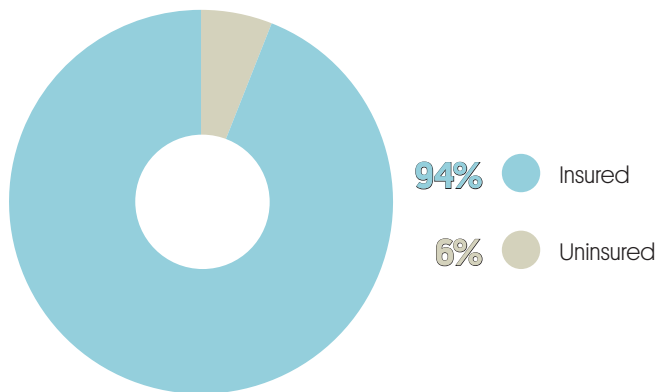
While this may suggest comparatively better outcomes for the neighborhood as a whole, data indicates that some neighborhood residents are still at risk of severe illness if the virus is contracted. And if the virus does not take a physical toll, forced lifestyle changes will almost certainly take a psychological toll.



Reported overall health to be "Excellent, Very Good, or Good"

CD2 and CD4 2018 Community Health Profiles

Health Insurance



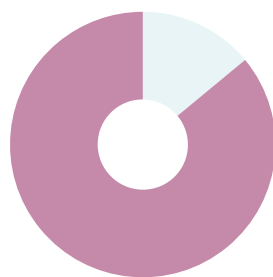
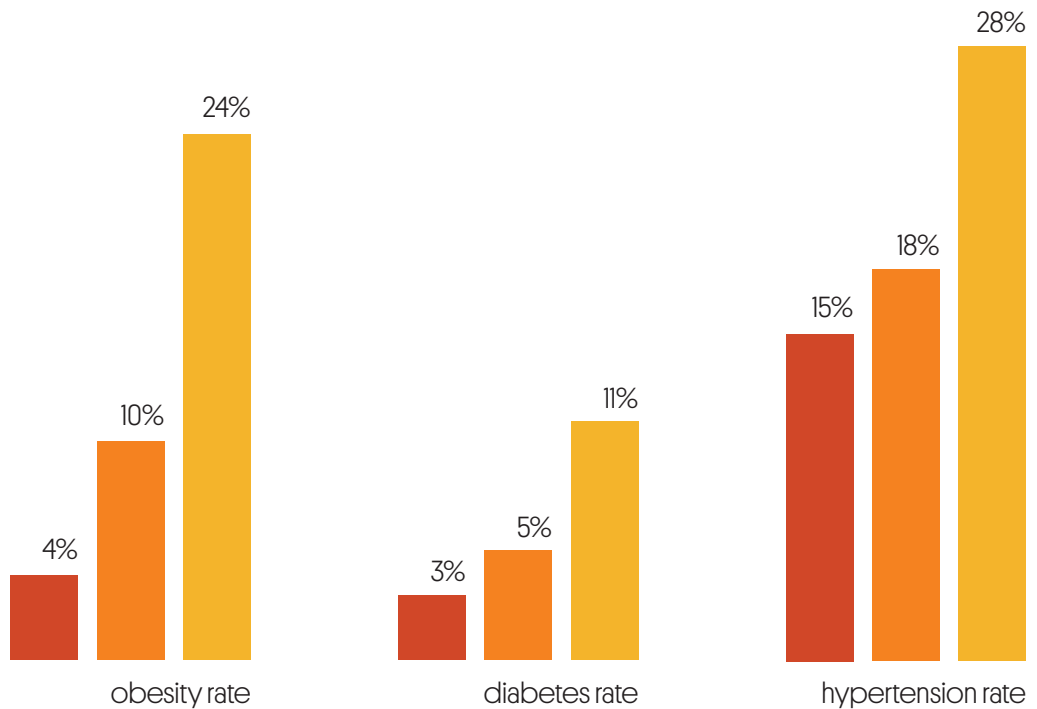
2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates
Block Groups 77-379-179-483-183-283-3

Physical Health

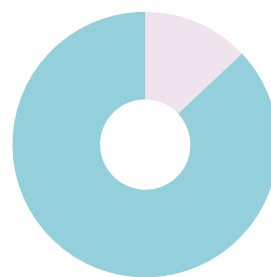
The CDC has published a list of people who they estimate are at higher risk for severe illness during the pandemic. Numbers below are estimates taken from **2018 Community Health Profiles** for Manhattan **Community District 2** Greenwich Village and Soho [CD2] and Manhattan **Community District 4** Clinton and Chelsea [CD4]. Because community health data is not available at block-level, these numbers represent the population of CD2 and CD4 to roughly approximate resident health within the Meatpacking BID community.

- CD2 ●
- CD4 ●
- NYC ●

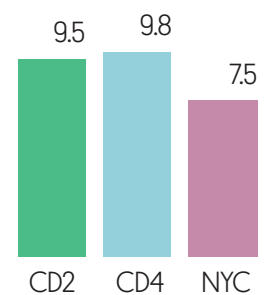
CD2 and CD4 2018
Community Health Profiles



14% of adults smoke



13% of adults are over the age of 56



PM2.5 per cubic meter

CD2 and CD4 2018
Community Health Profiles

Mental Health

According to the American Psychological Association, stress during this extended period of isolating can include [APA, 2020]:

Fear and anxiety | worry about personal, family, friends or community's health, heightened stress due to financial strain of unemployment or paycheck cuts

Depression, loneliness and boredom | feeling low or sad from an inability to engage in meaningful activities, isolation from friends or community and a lack of access to typical coping strategies such as going to the gym or attending religious services

Anger, frustration or irritability | loss of sense of agency, control or personal freedom during lockdown, anger or resentment towards others for perceived negligence or disregard for public health

The degrees and variations of stress responses listed above vary from individual to individual, but trends have been found amongst different demographic groups. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in late March, women, young people, those with lower incomes and those whose jobs or income have been cut by the outbreak are experiencing more psychological distress than others [Keeter, 2020]. Over 75 percent of the Meatpacking District's population is between 18 and 64 years old. According to Pew Research, approximately one in four adults in this age range are experiencing "high psychological distress" defined as anxiety, sleeplessness, depression and loneliness during COVID-19. Roughly the same proportion will experience "medium distress."

Other characteristics of the Meatpacking District may make psychological stress particularly pronounced. For example, before the pandemic, just 5 percent of residents worked from home. This, compounded with the fact that an estimated 49 percent of residents live alone, makes the community especially prone to experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness. [ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2018]

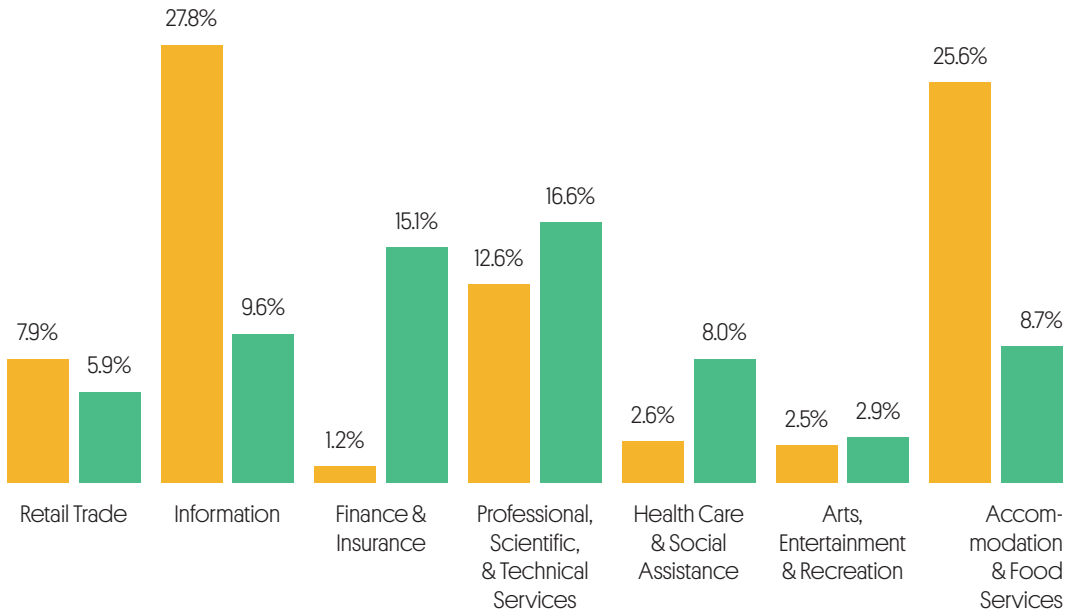
Economic Considerations

CCOVID-19 has also induced an economic crisis. Though many residents may keep their jobs through the pandemic, the unprecedented rise in applications for unemployment city-wide suggests that a significant proportion may not. For example, 11 percent of residents and 28 percent of the daytime workforce are employed in industries that have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic, including arts, entertainment, recreation, accomodation and food services.

Financial burdens that existed before the pandemic will be exacerbated to possibly change the neighborhood's economic profile. Before COVID-19, 7 percent of residents were unemployed, while 33 percent of households made under 50,000 per year. Furthermore, 33 percent of renters spent 30 percent of their income or more on rent pre-pandemic.

Re-engaging public space will require sensitivities to each of these factors. Affordability, health and community will need to be paramount in guiding outreach and design strategies moving forward.

Neighborhood workforce by top industry sector



32,995 ● daytime workforce

7,667 ● resident workforce

2017 U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Economic Studies, OnTheMap
Census Tracts 77, 79 and 83

Diagrams by Lanier Hagerly

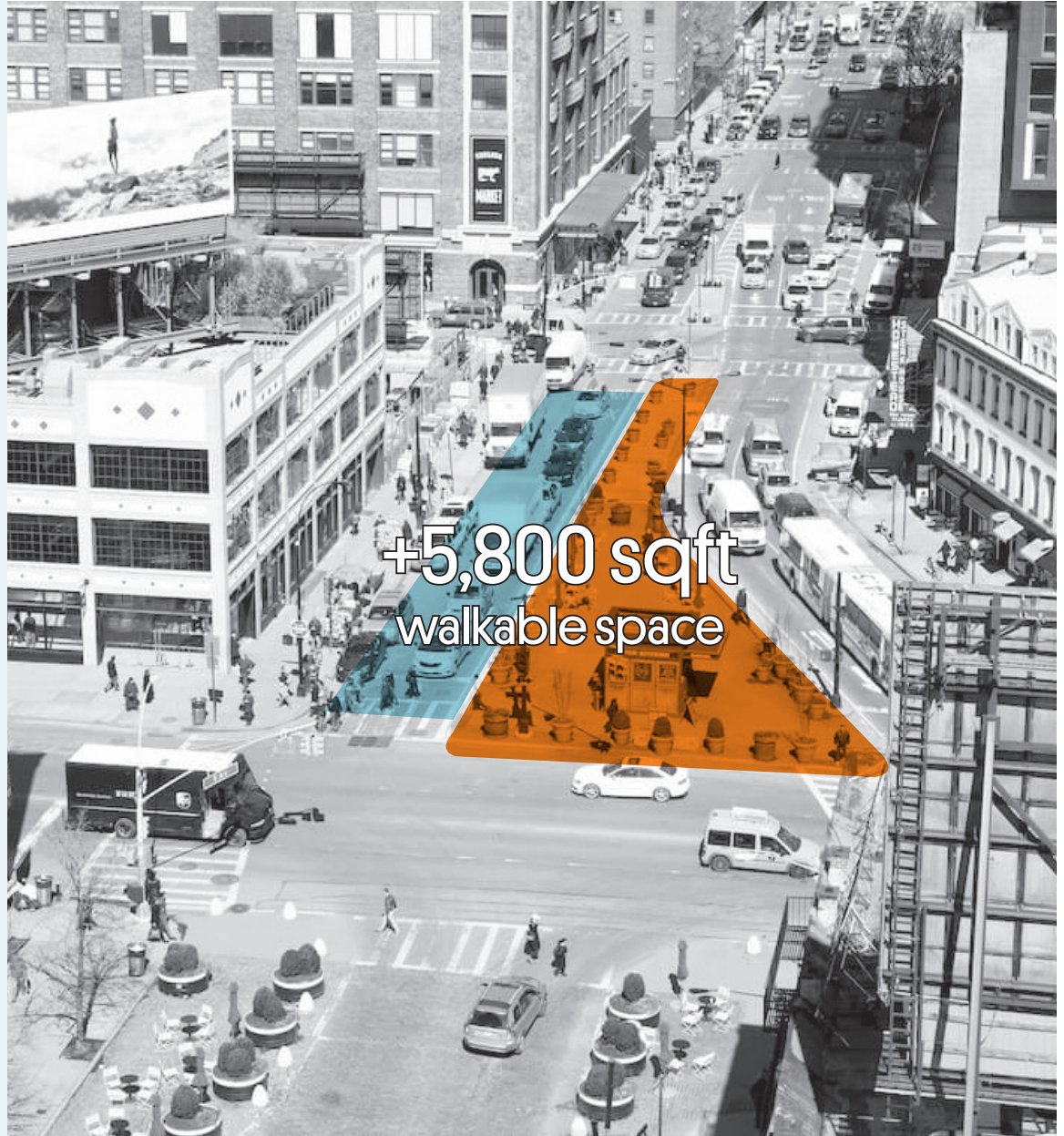


source: Meatpacking BID

Proposal

Chelsea Triangle

Opening the 9th Avenue slip-lane



source: Meatpacking BID

Located at 9th Avenue between 14th and 15th street, the lane directly adjacent to the Chelsea Triangle presents the ideal site conditions for an open street. Roadways could be configured so that through-traffic continues on cross streets and the easternmost slip lane, and deliveries can be overseen on either end of the roadway. The resulting ‘open street’ would function as an extension of the Chelsea Triangle, providing one large swath of open public space at the center of the Meatpacking District.

Closing the road to traffic and opening it to pedestrians would extend the Chelsea Triangle by 5,800 square feet. Taken together with the sidewalk and the Triangle, this creates a total walkable space of 16,200 square feet, expanding the Triangle by more than half of what exists now.

Site Conditions

In cities like New York, and particularly in neighborhoods like the Meatpacking District, businesses in the district are heavily dependent on foot traffic. The anxieties of COVID-19 and physical distancing protocols, along with inadequate room on the sidewalks have kept the streets from being populated. When restaurants and retail eventually do open, there will be the need to adhere to physical distancing standards – something that is not viable to do with a restricted footprint. Opening streets and widening pedestrian space will not only create more room for people to comfortably roam the streets and interact with public space, but could also enable restaurants, bars and other businesses to partially reopen and spread onto the street, reducing contact and adhering to physical distancing without fear of indoor ventilation and spread of infection. In this way, opening streets to pedestrians can jumpstart economic recovery.

Extending the Plaza

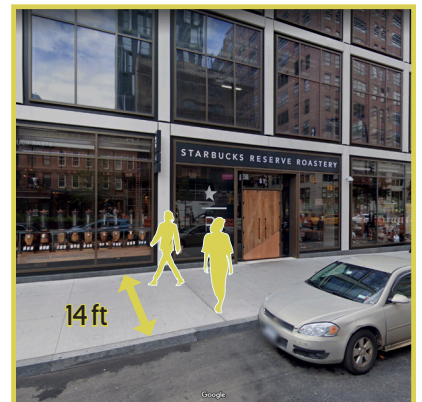
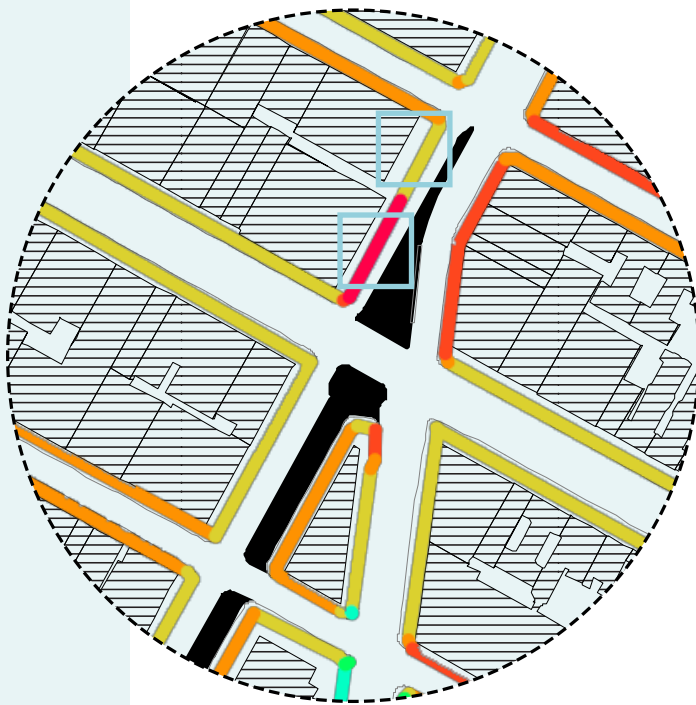
Sidewalk widths

According to the New York Department of Transportation (DoT), there are 12,750 miles of sidewalk in New York (NYC DoT). Despite its reputation as a pedestrian-friendly city, not all sidewalks are of equally generous proportions. The map to the right shows how current sidewalk conditions make it all but impossible to safely physically distance. The narrowest sidewalks are highlighted in red orange and yellow. Within the Meatpacking District boundary, there is very little green and almost no blue.

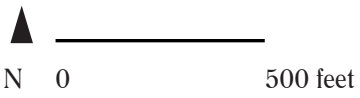
Sidewalk widths have an impact on pedestrians' ability to distance physically. Objects such as tree pits, street lights and planters narrow them even further. The images below also illustrate how the different distancing scenarios may occur along the same sidewalk. If physical distancing measures are to remain in place once businesses reopen, this will undoubtedly affect access to storefronts, and pedestrian flow in general.

The realities of the health crisis have embedded themselves in our physical surroundings and in our collective and individual psyche. The risk of tight sidewalks alone is enough to generate anxiety for community members and smother local business. Sidewalks were narrowed over a century ago to make room for cars; the current situation suggests it's time for a reversal.

Sidewalk widths along 9th avenue



Ability to physically distance



Impossible  Very Easy

Map by Zeineb Sellami
Data source: sidewalk widths NYC

Evolving Climate

Regulatory Challenges

Opening streets to pedestrians and businesses seems like the ideal solution for overcoming physical distancing challenges. Typically New York City law requires a case by case evaluation of street openings by the Department of Transportation. These include permit acquisition – Street Activity permit, Temporary Food Establishment permit – and can require abiding by the Sidewalk Cafe Designs & Regulations Guide. Elements such as diverting traffic and bus routes, accommodating business-related deliveries, replacing parking spaces, and ensuring access to emergency service vehicles must all be taken into account when considering closing off a street to vehicular traffic.

Socio-political climate

The socio-political climate is ripe for this kind of opening. Urban planners and architects are rapidly posting reflections and innovative design ideas online. Meanwhile, news outlets in New York City and across the globe are expressing the need for opening more streets to pedestrians. As of May 2020, Mayor de Blasio has announced the closure of 40 miles of streets across the city, with the goal of eventually expanding up to 100 miles before the pandemic ends (Hicks et al., 2020). The Meatpacking BID has also been in discussion with the Department of Transportation (DoT) as they have expressed interest in various locations throughout the neighborhood.

This mounting political support for opening streets suggests growing city-wide appreciation for the importance of public space in the midst of this pandemic and builds momentum in favor of a closure at the Chelsea Triangle 9th Avenue slip lane.

Bill 1933-2020: A COVID-19 Relief Package opening up 1 percent [75 miles of city streets] of streets across New York City to pedestrians and cyclists.

On Friday April 24, the City Council Committee on Transportation held a hearing on Bill 1933-2020, proposing temporary street openings across New York City for more walkable public space as stay-at-home orders and social distancing mandates carry into the summer months. Representatives of the New York City Council testified in favor of the bill, arguing that existing spaces for pedestrians [parks, sidewalks, plazas] are already crowded and will only continue to fill as the weather warms up and schools let out for summer. The need for space is particularly pronounced in black and latinx communities who disproportionately live on busy streets, in denser neighborhoods and are more likely to live in overcrowded apartments. Opening streets will give residents the space they need and currently do not have to enjoy fresh air while properly social distancing.

The New York Police Department and Department of Transportation opposed the bill, raising concerns about personnel and budgetary constraints [nearly 30 percent of uniformed officers are out sick]. Street openings are labor intensive for the NYPD who have to reroute traffic and protect pedestrians from drivers who may not respect barricades. The City Council asked the NYPD and DoT to consider staffing community members rather than police on street openings. School crossing guards who are out of work, or other community members who can be trained, can moderate public space. This practice would not draw resources from the NYPD and would ensure that the open streets were anchored in the community.

Corona Plaza

The conversion of the redundant Roosevelt Service Road into a bustling pedestrian ground through the DoT's Plaza Program gave rise to Corona Plaza. The plaza was initially built as a temporary interim plaza, later reconstructed as a permanent one.

Location & Context

Located in a commercial hub in Queens, just off of the 7 line on 103rd Street Subway Station, the plaza makes up 13,000 square feet of pedestrian and community gathering space [NYC Mayor's Office, n.d.]. The previous service road acted as a barrier between local shops and a nearby small green space. It saw fewer than a 100 cars in a day and the adjacent park lacked suitable amenities leaving it predominantly unused. Delivery trucks were mostly the ones to use the service road and illegally taking up parking spaces – blocking access to the local shops. Due to its proximity to a bustling subway station, the area attracts a lot of foot traffic without sufficient open space.

Despite this, the area hosted a weekly produce market and local community events by its diverse residents [predominantly made up of South and Central American immigrants].

Process

Queens Economic Development Corporation [QEDC] partnered with Queens Museum to program the plaza [Queens Museum, n.d.]. Once funding was secured, QEDC put forward an application for DoT's 2011 Plaza Program, which was accepted. Stakeholder and community engagement involved community design workshops and bilingual outreach for delivery truck operators who parked illegally. The removal of 26 parking spaces was not contested due to the fact that it was inaccessible to customers either way. The Plaza was temporarily installed in 2012.

Design

Its temporary design involved the use of temporary materials. Granite blocks that were recycled from the Willis Avenue Bridge acted as a buffer between motorists from the road and pedestrians. Planters, umbrellas, benches and movable tables and seats animated the plaza.

A design team was contracted by the DoT in 2013, who shared their designs during Corona Plaza's one year anniversary celebrations to elicit public feedback. The capital construction consists of 30,000 square feet of space, consisting of a reconstructed roadbed, benches, planters, and vendor kiosk-friendly infrastructure [NACTO].

Pedestrianized plaza



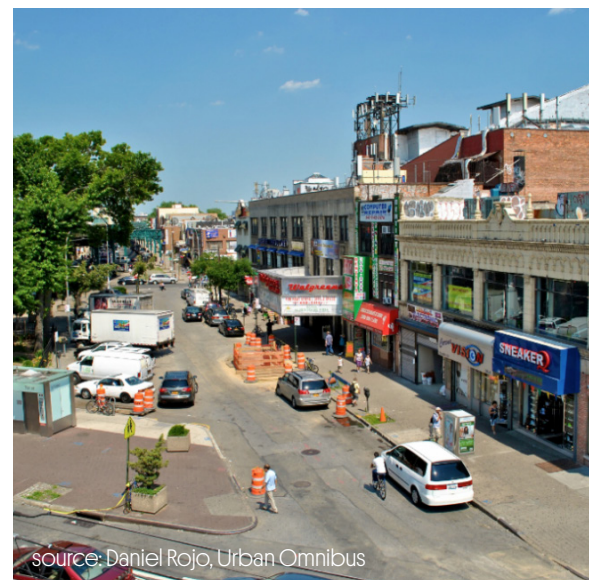
source: Victor Llorente, New York Times

Project rendering



source: NYC DDC rendering

The street before the plaza



source: Daniel Rojo, Urban Omnibus



Willoughby Plaza

Located in between Willoughby Street and Pearl Street in Downtown Brooklyn, Willoughby Plaza is a prime example of New York City's efforts to reclaim roadways as pedestrian spaces. It serves as a popular pedestrian corridor located between Brooklyn's main shopping district and civic center. Originally an operational project, the benefits this change brought solidified the DOT's plans to make it permanent. The purpose behind this project was to enhance pedestrian safety and accessibility, more open space, facilitate more biking space and amenities, and tackle problems of illegal parking on Willoughby Street.

Location & Context

The plaza is located within a busy, mixed-use locality and within the MetroTech BID in Downtown Brooklyn. It makes up approximately 120 feet along Adams Street East Service Road. It is surrounded by medium- to high-density commercial buildings and street-level shops.

Process

DoT undertook community outreach and analyses both, before and after the creation of the plaza. It included Environmental Impact Analyses and studies of traffic closure impact, pedestrian volumes, and deliveries.

Local stakeholders were also involved in the design process through the MetroTech BID – the ones to maintain and program the plaza.

During its interim phase, the plaza began by closing off vehicular traffic with the use of temporary planters, seating and bollards in 2006. After a capital construction process, the plaza was made permanent and opened to the public in 2013.

Design

A contiguous planter acted as a buffer between the service road and the plaza. Along with trees lining the plaza, it was made up of 200 fixed seating units and 200 movable ones. Pre-existing underground utilities allowed for a "green" draining system.



Benefits of Public Space

With a community driven into solitary and sedentary lifestyles and facing a worsening economic depression, now more than ever, public space should be understood as a “high-yield investment” in community’s economic, social and physical wellbeing [Hamblin, 2020].

Economic Benefits

After COVID-19, the public realm will play a new role in cities offering spacious open-air settings for interactions and transactions [Mehaffy, 2019]. For instance, as physical distancing puts limits on the capacity for indoor business, bringing shops, restaurants and other institutions onto the sidewalks and into the plazas will provide substantial opportunity for recovery.

Social Benefits

More than ever before, making public spaces comfortable, spacious and safe will facilitate social interaction and community building, which in turn fosters resilience. Safe and spacious public space provides more room for the elderly and vulnerable populations who will have to navigate the months post-COVID with extreme caution. Open areas also afford the opportunity for social interaction and exercise at a comfortable distance.

Perhaps most importantly, public space provides an indisputable opportunity to work against the loneliness and isolation that characterises what one author calls the “social recession” [Klein, 2020].

Health Benefits

According to Lidia Morawska, professor and director of the International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia “Outdoors is safe, and there is certainly no cloud of virus-laden droplets hanging around.”

“Firstly, any infectious droplets exhaled outside would be quickly diluted in outdoor air, so their concentrations would quickly become insignificant,” Dr. Morawska said. “In addition, the stability of the virus outside is significantly shorter than inside. So outside is not really a problem, unless we are in a very crowded place...it is safe to go for a walk and not to worry about the virus in the air”

[Parker-Pope, 2020]

The importance of prioritizing both mental and physical health in public space post COVID-19 needs little explanation. An area that is comfortably walkable will restore activity without fear of spreading the virus and help with stress reduction associated with being outside by seeing other people who have gone through similar experiences.

Prioritizing pedestrians over cars

The case for public space extends well beyond the demands of physical distancing. Over the last century, cities have been designed on the basis of car-centric development. In bringing our cities to a standstill and clearing our streets of traffic – COVID-19 has prompted us to rethink our streets, not just to survive this crisis but to lay the foundation for decades to come.

The transportation sector is single-handedly the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions [Clewlow, 2020]. COVID-induced empty streets and fresher air across the planet can be leveraged to rally for more sustainable futures and climate change equity. In opening streets, there is an opportunity for policymakers to reorient cities towards pedestrians, and in doing so, challenge the trajectory of transportation infrastructure. In fact, Phillipe Crist advisor for the International Transport Forum at the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD), sees COVID-19 as “the largest street planning experiment, ever” [Clewlow, 2020].

Opening streets to pedestrians can allow for a more comfortable public realm during a pandemic, but also afterwards. For now, it may enable people to safely go out onto the streets and experience public space six-feet apart. Long term, this has the capacity to encourage walking and disincentivize car dependency, making street space safer for pedestrians and bikers.



source: Insert Here

Community Outreach

Community Outreach

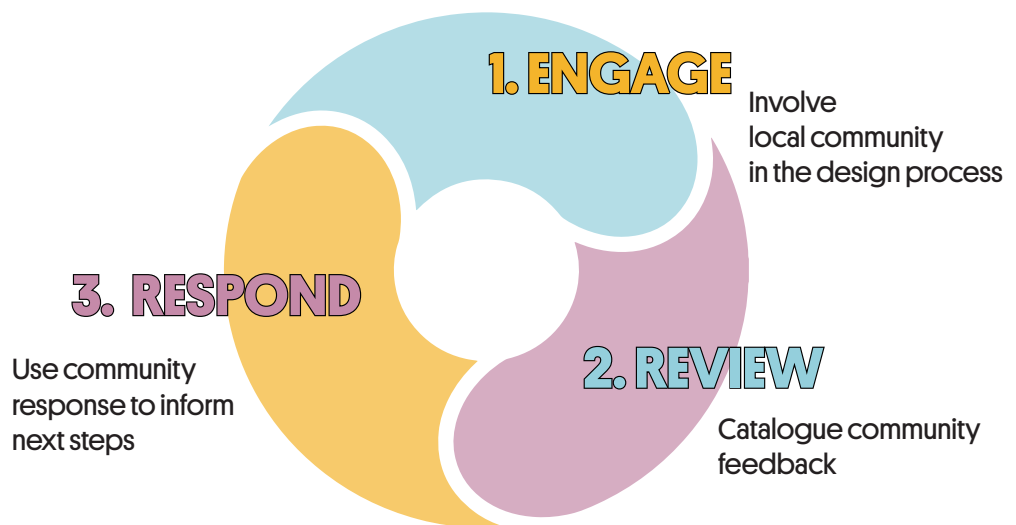
Preparing for the ‘new normal’

Maintaining community ties is especially important during this time of physical isolation. Before the pandemic, neighborhood foot traffic was dominated by tourism, with an estimated 7 million visitors to the Highline and 9.2 million to Chelsea Market in 2019 alone [Meatpacking BID District Report]. As people travel less and stay closer to home, it is essential that the BID prioritize the interests of local residents and workers, and allow the Meatpacking’s local community to guide future planning.

According to the APA, over 85 percent of adults and 95 percent of teens are regularly online [Nagl et al. 2020]. With stay-at-home orders especially, these numbers are likely higher. There is no better time for the BID to continue their digital correspondence and expand capacity for meaningful participation. We recommend that the BID use their existing online channels for communication including Instagram, Twitter and the newsletter to crowdsource design.

Nurturing the feedback loop

Nurturing a feedback loop by engaging with their digital audience and using responses to inform next steps can help keep community members connected to the BID’s goals and instill in them a sense of ownership over the neighborhood public space.



1. ENGAGE

When it comes to opening the Chelsea Triangle, the BID should maintain steady outreach to involve people at all phases of the project, allowing feedback to inform next steps.

Crowdsource Design | Through platforms that allow for visual feedback, post the BID's ideas on Instagram, create a hashtag for Chelsea Triangle's opening, ask people to like, retweet or post their own photos of what they love [or even what they don't]. Open design competitions to the neighborhood, invite local businesses to sponsor rewards like a gift card to Chelsea Market, a one-hour private cooking class over Zoom from a local chef, or a stay-at-home gift basket from a local spa.

Measure Expectations | Examples of outreach include sending out a simple multiple-choice questionnaire or poll with questions to gauge neighborhood hopes and fears for the coming months, expectations for public space, what businesses or services are missed the most, or services people did not have before, but now need.

Create Digital Spaces for Conversation | Host Meatpacking webinars with business stakeholders, and allow residents and business representatives alike to sit in on design conversations and contribute to ideas for public place.

2 REVIEW

Measure responses as much as possible. Document social media activity, count clicks used to open the newsletter, catalogue community feedback for future reference.

3. RESPOND

Close the feedback loop by responding to their ideas and acknowledging their hopes or reservations. In addition to keeping the public informed of the latest public health recommendations, they can be transparent about the changing regulatory landscape and how it aligns with progress on reopening the Chelsea Triangle. Let residents know how they can continue to stay involved in opening the space or support its opening in the first place.



source: Meatpacking BID

Business Strategies

268 Businesses

Location & types



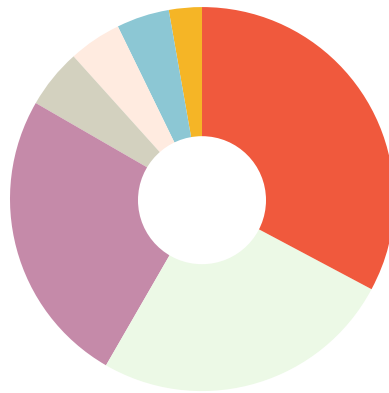
source: Meatpacking BID Map

The Meatpacking District, a dynamic commercial hub, is home to 268 ground floor businesses. Art galleries sit across from artisanal shops and the dream-like luxury retail storefront designs. The Highline, a must-see New York City attraction, brings in visitors from around the city and the globe. These alluring places are complemented by the bustle of Chelsea Market and the outdoor restaurant terraces of the iconic Pastis or Dos Caminos. The neighborhood is as lively by night as it is by day when the Chelsea Music Hall and the infamous Bain among others spring to life.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the majority of these businesses to a standstill. While few spaces have shifted to manufacturing masks, most ground-floor businesses, reliant on heavy foot-traffic, have literally boarded up their windows. The neighborhood's character prevails in some ways through the painted murals by local artists along the boarded up store-fronts; creating an outdoor gallery for local residents.

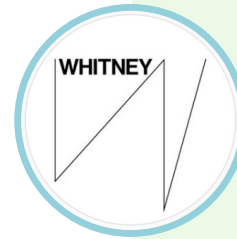
Business types

- 12 ● Arts & Culture
- 12 ● Community
- 88 ● Food & Drink
- 7 ● Hotels
- 67 ● Shop
- 13 ● Wellness
- 69 ● Other



Maintaining connections

Meanwhile, other local businesses continue to engage their customers through online platforms & social media. The Whitney hosts a series of online activities and tours for people to enjoy their collection from home. Chelsea market has made online shopping and delivery available. Other organizations in the area have also made efforts to stay connected to their customers. Following this extended period of social isolation, businesses can be a useful tool to bring vibrancy and social interactions safely back into the streets.



#WhitneyFromHome

- 1 Online Collection
- 2 Online Learning
- 3 Audio Guides
- 4 Virtual Tours
- 5 Internet Art
- 6 Artist Talks
- 7 Curator Essays

source: The Whitney Museum



"Some of you have been asking, are the plants okay? The plants are a little more unkempt than usual, but they're strong and will endure - just like the people of New York"

source: The Highline



"If you can't fill your basket in-store, try filling it online."

source: Chelsea Market



#MaskTogether

"For every mask sold, we are donating one to communities in need. Wearing masks is our shared responsibility to protect each other."

source: Alice & Olivia



"Stay strong together but at least 6 feet apart."

source: Equinox



"In response to ongoing efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, we decided to temporarily close Dream Downtown until further notice."

source: Dream Downtown

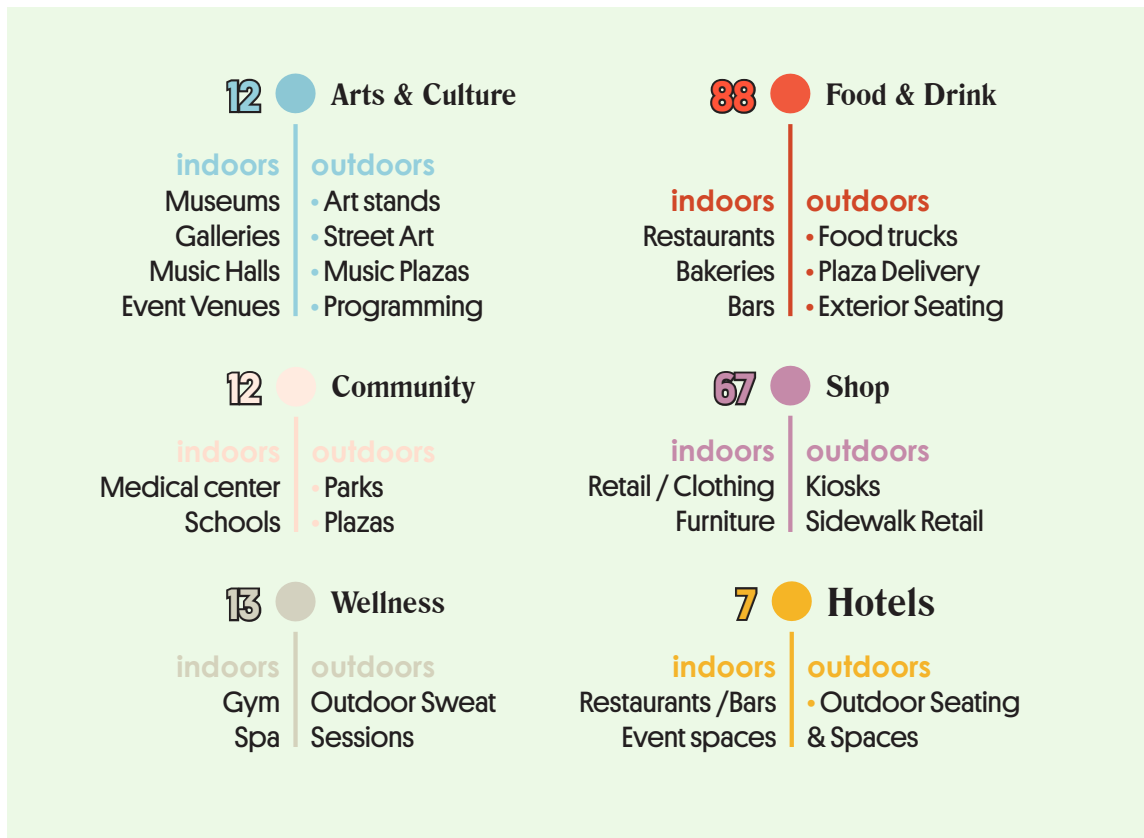
Artists paint murals on boarded up businesses

The BID commissioned local production designer Theresa Rivera to paint murals on boarded up businesses, offering vibrant colors and images of hope for the neighborhood during times of tragedy and uncertainty.



Indoor to Outdoor

Transitioning back into the public realm



A nod to the neighborhood's past

Harkening back to the wisdom of the Meatpacking District's open air markets of the 1800s, we propose outdoor retail options, giving customers an opportunity to support their favorite local businesses without the anxieties of indoor air circulation. Expanding public space with street openings makes room for business to interface with customers in person without infringing on precious sidewalk space.

Bringing business into public space also has the potential to address residents' and merchants' needs voiced long before COVID. In a 2018 Meatpacking intercept survey, more than anything residents were concerned about the affordability of goods in the district. Without abandoning all sense of luxury, a shift to outdoor business could encourage restaurants and shops to adopt more affordable options and cut costs by limiting menus. The same intercept survey revealed that merchants were eager for more neighborhood programming and ways to engage customers. By virtue of existing in public space, outdoor commerce addresses both of these concerns.

Even when stores re-open, physical distancing is likely to remain a standard by which we must abide until a vaccine is developed. That could mean anywhere from months to years of keeping a safe physical distance. Our goal is to prepare the businesses for when stay at home measures are slowly dropped, and pedestrians can once again peruse the streets of the Meatpacking District.



Site Design

Chelsea Triangle

Opening the 9th Avenue slip-lane



source: Google Earth

With the road open, the site would consist of a series of lanes prioritizing pedestrian flows and retail purposes for a safe and easily navigable stretch of street. The checkered walkway would be marked with 6x6 feet boxes to enable mindful physical distancing among its users.

Space on either side of the checkered walkway makes room for businesses. Kiosks and carts could be a semi-permanent option for businesses from elsewhere in the BID to have small scale storefronts in the triangle. The sidewalk could then be designated as a “queue lane” for the Apple Store, and Starbucks Reserve to the west of the Triangle. As stores would have to reduce indoor capacities, patrons would have ample room to comfortably line up on demarcated circles that are six feet apart. Additionally, stores like the Starbucks Reserve, could have an extension of their store onto the sidewalk to allow customers to pick up their orders without having to go into the store.

Similar to ‘pop-ups’ and kiosks in shopping centers, ‘business lanes’ can be repurposed or occupied on a revolving basis, changing each week or even during different times of day with different restaurants or shops. Businesses could also offer delivery and pick up services to the site. Through a centralized location for information, they could advertise using outdoor message boards in the Chelsea Triangle. The plaza would then function as a centralized space for delivery, creating a streamlined and safer system of transaction for customers and businesses alike.

Existing Conditions



source: Rendering by Sanjukta Hazarika

Design Proposal

Furniture, services & wayfinding inspiration



source: Rendering by Sanjukta Hazarika



Kiosk



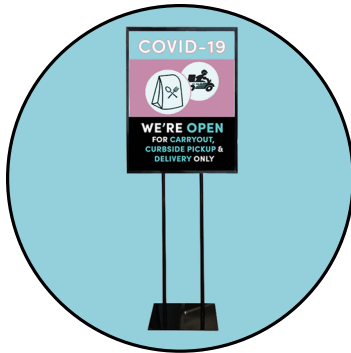
Source: Union Wine Company



Source: Cornet Ou Petit Pât



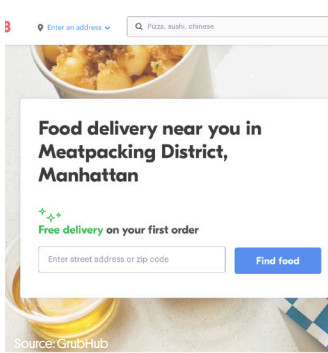
Source: Messner Architects



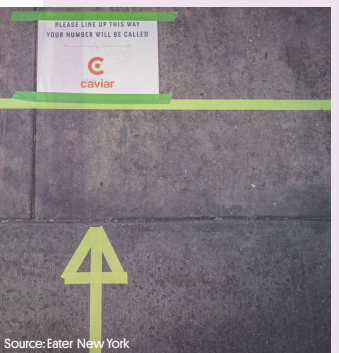
Delivery Stations



Source: Optimist Hall



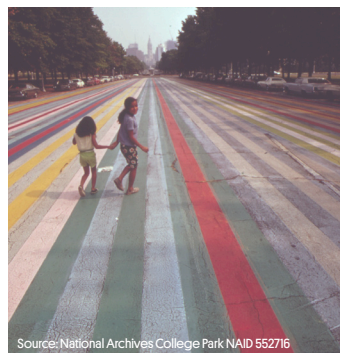
Source: GrubHub



Source: Eater New York



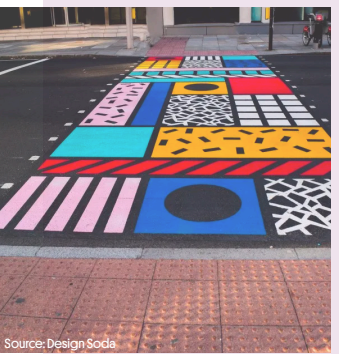
Physical distancing demarcations



Source: National Archives College Park NAID 552716



Source: @nargeeoh



Source: Design Soda



Moveable planters



Source: Razza Umara, Hoff Lab



Source: History Lover's Guide to Johannesburg



Source: Chris Keulen

New Urban Furniture

Prototyping new forms of public space



Planters with seating



Fixed tables and stools



Hand sanitizer dispenser
attached trees



Hand sanitizer dispenser
attached to streetlights

Working with so many unknowns, it is important that the BID have options available for micro interventions in the triangle that can respond to rapidly changing public health, political and even seasonal conditions. We have catalogued options for physically-distanced urban furniture that first and foremost signals to the public that the space can, in fact, be enjoyed safely.

Options for planters retrofitted with physically distanced benches, so that residents, especially the elderly, can linger comfortably outside while maintaining a safe distance from others. Folding chairs can be swapped out for stools anchored into the ground, to allow for contact-free seating around tables, allowing couples, families or small groups to gather safely. Hand sanitizing dispensers strapped to lamp posts and trees make sanitizer pods more secure than when on free-standing stands.

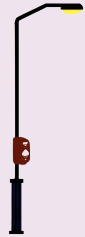
We would also encourage the BID to draw on its own creative residential and business communities to crowdsource design and push new urban furniture further. Strong design would incorporate health and safety considerations, requiring minimal user contact and promoting physical distancing. While urban furniture installed in the triangle could be heavier or more permanent, any additions for the opened street would need to be easily movable.

Second to furniture are pathway demarcations that can direct pedestrians to move through space or stand in line at a safe distance from one another. In the short term, the BID can use existing urban furniture like planters to divert cars and direct pedestrians. Long term, partnerships with neighborhood cultural institutions like the Whitney can also achieve this while incorporating art into public space.

Proposed



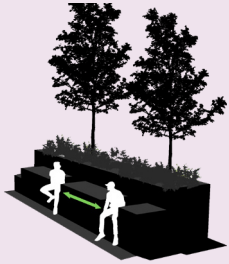
sanitizer dispenser



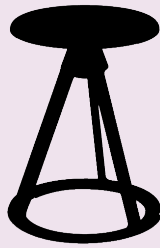
sanitizer [streetlight]



sanitizer [tree]



new seating



fixed seats



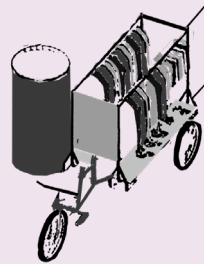
mobile kiosk



fixed kiosk



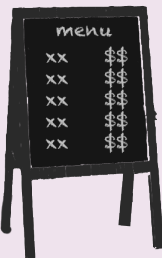
tents



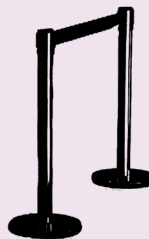
retail display



safety signage



outdoor menu

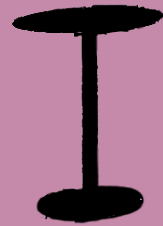


barriers

Existing



iconic umbrellas



tables



chairs



mobile planters



source: Meatpacking BID

Implementation

Timeline

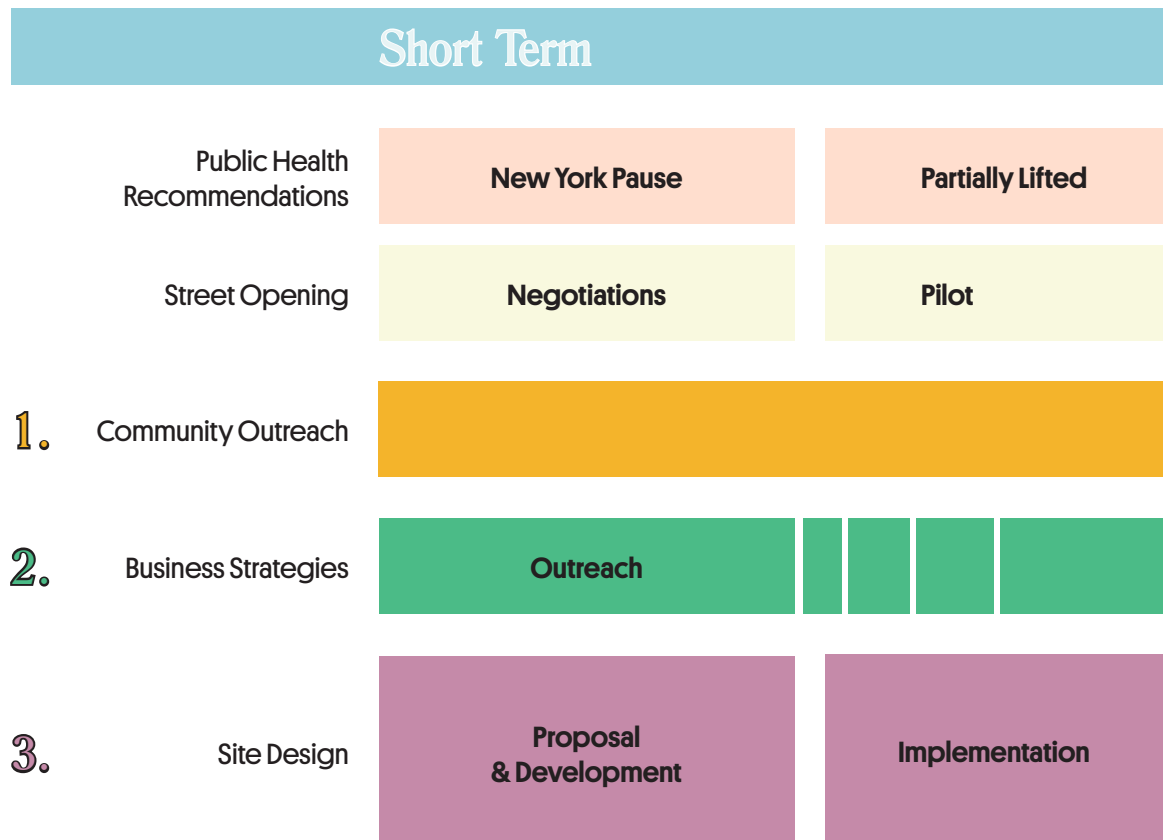
Pilot to permanent

Opening public space after a global pandemic is uncharted territory. With so much still likely to change, the timeline for each element of our proposal will need to be flexible to respond to public health recommendations as long as necessary.

In the immediate future, the BID will need to work with city and neighborhood stakeholders such as DoT and Community Boards to negotiate the temporality of the street’s opening. Meanwhile, working closely with local business owners will allow for a better understanding of their delivery and frontage needs. To accommodate delivery drivers for example, the street could remain closed to pedestrians early mornings and nights. With adjustments over time, the street pedestrianisation may become gradually more permanent.

Though physical distancing requirements will someday begin to lift, COVID is sure to leave behind lasting economic and psychological effects, hence the importance of sustained outreach. Indeed maintaining steady engagement strategies throughout the research, projection, and implementation phases will play a vital role in ensuring successful and measurable outcomes.

Anxieties of a viral “second wave” coupled with financial distress, underscores the importance of implementing creative design ideas that serve both business-owners and their customers. These strategies will surely remain relevant long after COVID no longer poses a threat.





source: Meatpacking BID

Long Term

Restrictions

Lifted Restrictions

Permanent

Outreach

Outdoor Retail

Wayfinding

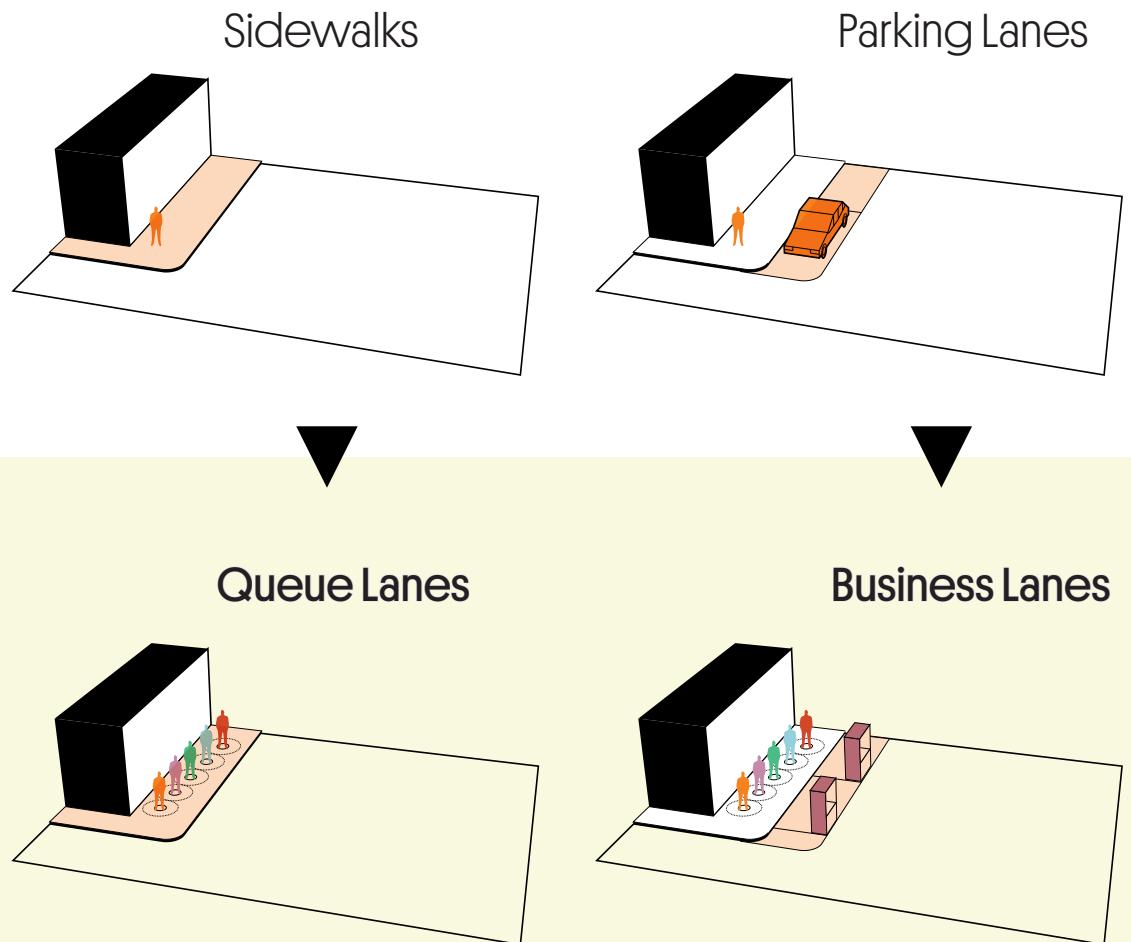
Existing Urban Furniture replaced with New Urban Furniture

Replicability

Next Steps

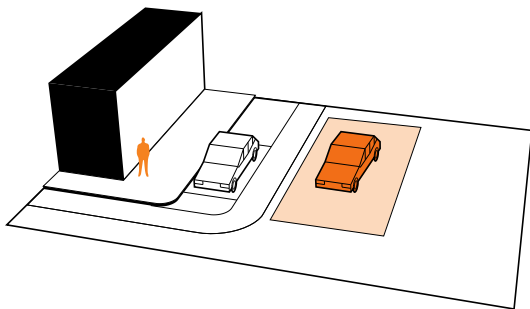
Ultimately, we see the Chelsea triangle as a pilot for the entire district and the rest of New York. These schematic diagrams, not only informed our plan for the Chelsea Triangle, but also distilled concepts that are replicable along many streets. The need to increase walkable space is pressing, particularly as the summer weather draws more and more people outdoors.

During this era of physical distancing and social isolation, New Yorkers have a renewed appreciation for public spaces. They are likely to welcome change to their environments and safer sidewalks and plazas for social interaction.

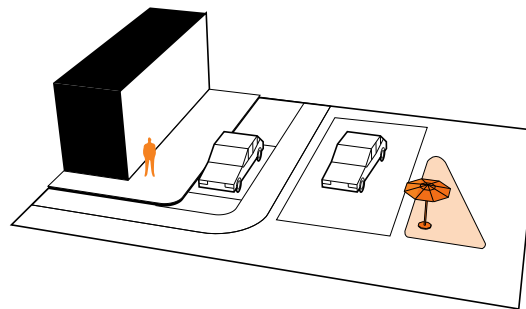


A renewed value is being bestowed on the public realm, encouraging us to focus on enriching public space by repurposing existing infrastructure. New York's grid structure makes these types of tactical interventions easily replicable. As we see it, the sidewalks of any neighborhood can be devoted to queue lanes. Parking spots can host outdoor business use. Roadways can become walkways, while plazas expand in size.

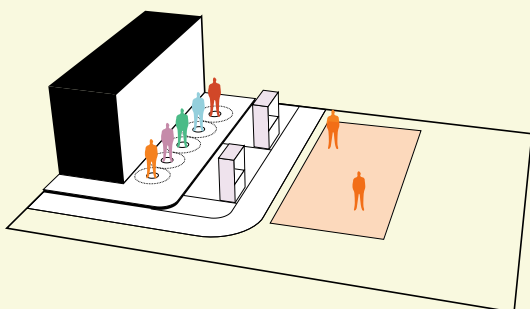
Roadways



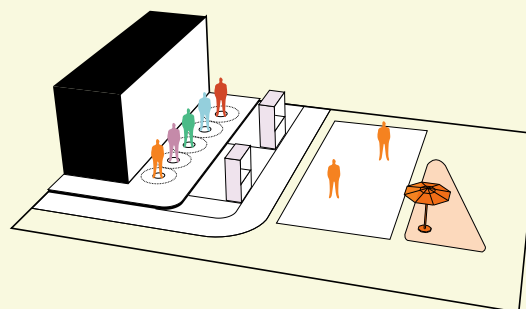
Plazas



Walkways



Plazas





sweetgreen

REBECCA TAYLOR

sweetgreen

REBECCA TAYLOR

REBECCA TAYLOR

Concluding Remarks

A note on planning in the midst of pandemic

COVID-19 has fundamentally transformed the way we experience public space. Over the past few months, as the virus has challenged our cities, livelihoods, and social interactions, we have responded by retracting ourselves from New York's streets, sidewalks and plazas. As we continue to practice 'social distancing', 'self quarantining', 'self isolating' in our homes, we have had to desert the spaces that for so long were at the center of life for New York City. In *The Great Empty*, the New York Times showcases a series of photographs of abandoned public spaces (Kimmelman, 2020). The photo-journal-like article includes a nighttime photograph of Times Square, where a rain-kissed sidewalk glistens below beaming billboards spewing familiar ads for an absent audience. Other photographs in the media portray urban landscapes that are both immediately recognizable, yet unfamiliar, apocalyptic, and deeply unsettling.

With businesses closed, a sense of hopelessness seeps in. Yet as social distancing and #stayhome become exceedingly widespread, we have come to rely on familiar and unfamiliar virtual networks. Facebook and Instagram have allowed businesses to remain connected with their customer-base, Zoom and GoTo Meetings facilitate inter-office dynamics during remote work, and online support systems have been created to reinforce communities in the face of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, along New York sidewalks, we no longer rush past each other; we patiently wait for a clear social-distance-complying path to materialize. People nod or smile in gratitude when you move to the side or steer away from their direction. Boarded-up storefronts, in once lively commercial neighborhoods, host local artists' murals in lieu of product displays. While these modest gestures spark hope, and as we adapt to our new realities, we begin to project what the world will look like once the crisis has passed. How will we 'go back' to 'normal'? Will we interact in public space the same way we used to? What will become of the shops, restaurants, galleries, and markets that bring our sidewalks to life?

It is inherent to our role as planners to think about these questions as we grapple with the realities of the current situation and find our footing. When the pandemic has passed, when stay-at-home measures are lifted, our job will be to translate the lessons learned from this time into the public realm. This undoubtedly involves transitioning the virtual connections that have formed during remote times back to the streets in safe, dynamic and innovative ways. While physical distancing may be required for the foreseeable future, social ties should remain and thrive.



Reflection

Urban Planning Studio

The aim of an Urban Planning Studio is to put students in real life situations with a real site, a project goal and a client. The three of us began our semester as a team of eleven, reimagining a decommissioned rail yard in Porta Genova, Milan. As with any professional project, unforeseen circumstances can and often do occur. COVID-19 challenged our approach on an unprecedented level. Without the possibility of visiting our site in Milan, the three of us were drawn to an opportunity to work locally. Yet even as we shifted towards issues in the Meatpacking District, concern of the virus escalated and New York City was placed on lockdown.

Indeed, part of what has made this studio project both extremely challenging and exciting is the rapidly evolving urban and socio-political landscape. If anything, this Spring 2020 studio may have been more in step with the ‘real life’ situations it is intended to teach than any before it. While restrictions on movement have made parts of our work difficult, necessity for rapid response during this exceptional time opened up possibilities that once were considered impossible. When we started this project, our idea for outdoor retail in public space was a pipe dream and hopes for any expansive street openings seemed like a reach. As we complete the final touches on our report, the Meatpacking District announces it’s first street opening.

Despite the immeasurable tragedies COVID-19 has wrought on our cities and livelihoods, it has forced politicians and inspired urban planners to reimagine spaces that above all else prioritizes the health and wellbeing of local communities. Our hope is that the lessons learned from the pandemic will continue to inform policy and planning in the months and years to come. To play even a tiny part in this movement has been enormously rewarding.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost we would like to thank Professor Weiping Wu, Professor Francesco Rossini and our Teaching Assistant Emily Junker for their thoughtful insights and guidance throughout the semester.

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We would also like to thank our friends and colleagues of the Milan Group for dedicating a portion of their studio time each week to share constructive critiques.

Thank you to Professor Ryan Devlin and Joy Huang for taking the time to speak with us and answer our questions.

Finally, we extend our thanks to the entire GSAPP community for making this work possible and for their enthusiasm and support during final reviews.

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