A VISION FOR COLUMBUS AVENUE:

A Street for the 21st Century in New York City

December 2007

Columbus Avenue

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Prepared for:

Columbus Avenue

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

By:

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Introduction

Our goal is to make Columbus Avenue a superb public space that will be a magnet for residents, businesses, and visitors alike. Already a successful street, Columbus Avenue can be even more identifiable, more user friendly, and provide more of the amenities essential to supporting economic and social life.

Columbus Avenue is the perfect venue for a series of innovative pilot projects and best practice improvements. We are grateful to and inspired by Mayor Bloomberg, for his bold initiatives to create a greener, more pedestrian, and transit friendly city by the year 2030.

This report is a compilation of ideas generated by Upper West Side leaders and the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District (BID). The idea is to produce a vision for our avenue that fosters a healthy environment for business and social activity. We would like Columbus Avenue to become one of the first districts in New York City to implement best practices and innovations for a sustainable and greener City, and in the process, to become the City's most attractive commercial thoroughfare.

Recommendations for this report were guided by a public input placemaking process; a process that culminated in a vision for Columbus Avenue as a more sustainable, magnetic, complete, central, and connected street.

This report recognizes the qualities of Columbus Avenue's existing street life and makes recommendations consistent with the New York City Department of Transportation's desire to improve streets as "attractive, space efficient, balanced, safe, and sustainable places."

Process

The purpose of the placemaking process was to generate ideas for improving public spaces that can leverage the street's assets and enhance its magnetism.

The Upper West Side has a strong history of civic leadership and awareness, so it was no surprise that the placemaking process highlighted participants' keen understanding of public space issues and their desire to experiment with progressive designs and policies.

Working together with area businesses, institutions, and residents, the process identified a number of short- and long-term improvements that can be led by both the public and private sector.

The scope of this project was limited to the boundaries of the Columbus Avenue BID (W67th St. - W82nd St.), although the benefits of public improvements will benefit the entire city and visitors from all over.

Input techniques were designed to help the community define the issues facing Columbus Avenue as well as identify and prioritize opportunities for improvement.

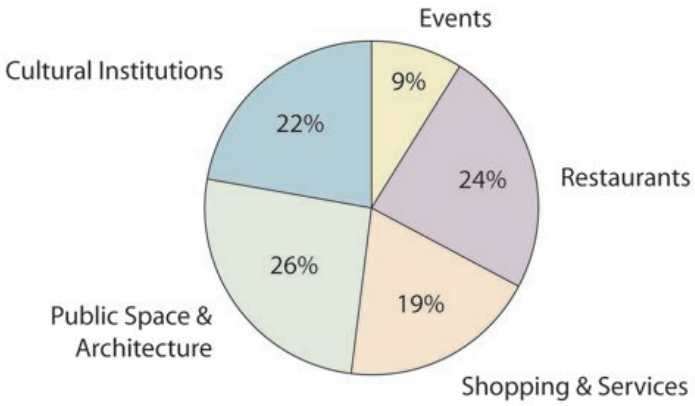
Study area: Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District between West 67th and West 82nd Streets

Macro Site Analysis

Surrounding Destinations

There are numerous civic, cultural, and open space destinations near the stores and restaurants of Columbus Avenue. These are all places that provide the avenue with people, culture, and commerce.

Asked to Name 3 Nearby Destinations, Survey Respondents Identified This Mix



Sense of Place

Great streets not only connect destinations, great streets are destinations themselves.

When asked to identify destinations in the area, only 1 person in 300 surveyed identified the avenue itself as a destination. On respondent described Columbus Avenue as "next to it, but not it."

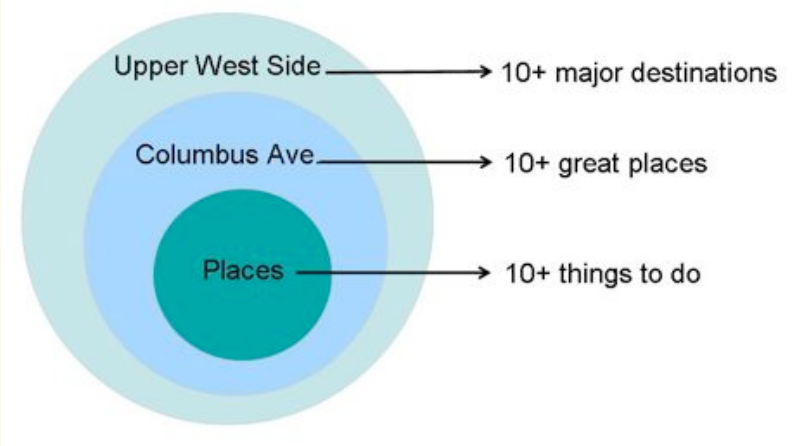
"District Spine"

Workshop participants believe Columbus Avenue has the potential to become the "district spine" for a larger cultural district just west of Central Park.

Power of Ten

Destination districts have strong identities forged by surrounding attractions both large and small.

When successful public spaces create synergies between destinations, the district becomes greater than the sum of its parts.



Pedestrian Shed

The 1/4 mile radius represents the distance pedestrians will comfortably walk. Research has proven that people will walk longer distances and stay longer in pedestrian-friendly environments.

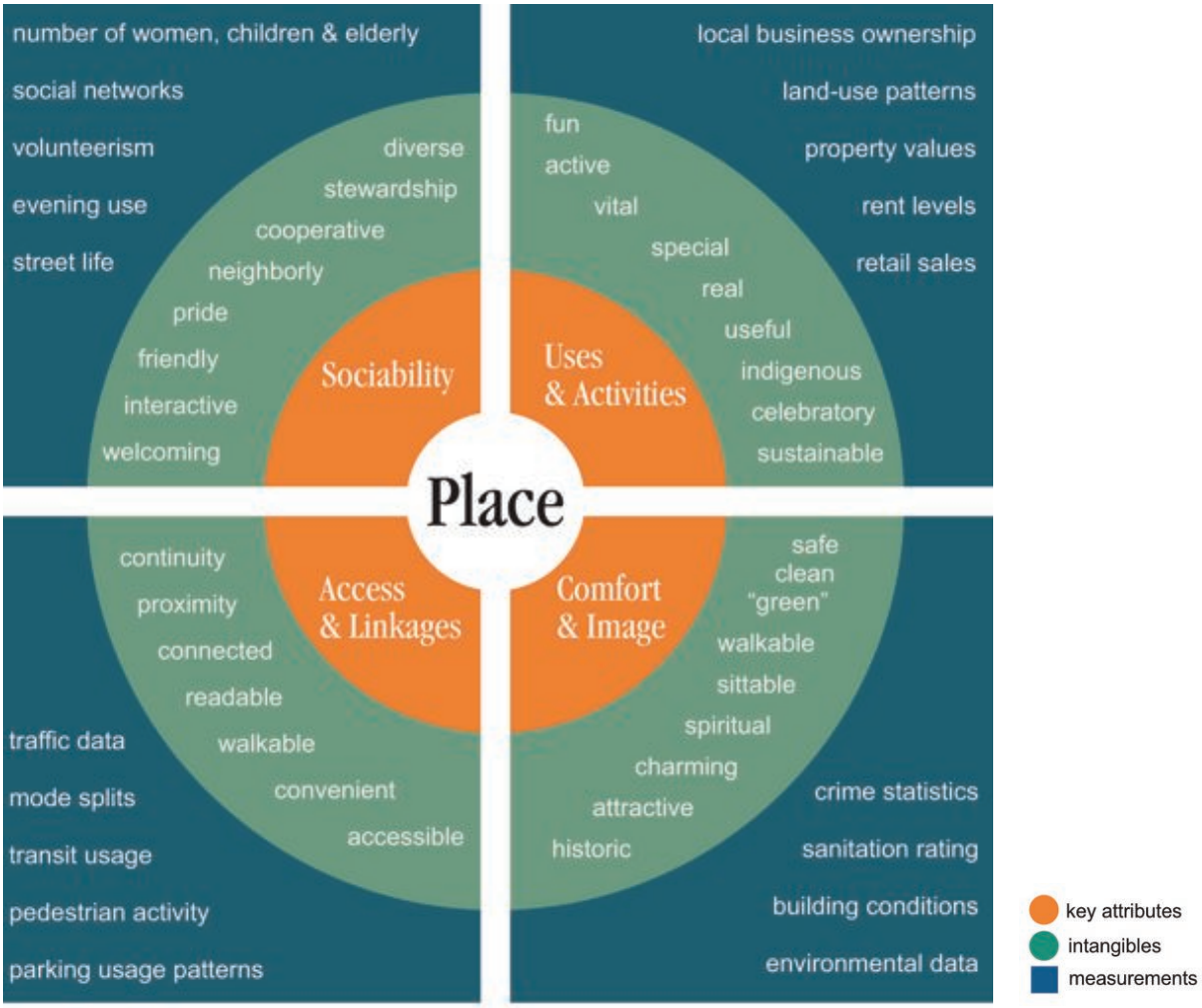
To capitalize on surrounding destinations and draw more people, Columbus Avenue needs to reach out with informative signage, create sidewalk diversions, and provide amenities that attract people.

Legend

- Parks and Plazas
- Civic/Cultural Institutions & Entertainment
- Greenmarket
- Hospital
- School
- NY Public Library

Micro Site Analysis

Qualities of Great Spaces



A great public space is like a magnet for people. People go there not only because they must pass through on business, but because it is just pleasant to be there. What are they drawn by? What makes an otherwise ordinary plaza, street or square into a magnet for people?

In over 30 years studying public spaces, PPS has found that four key attributes typically characterize a great place.

Columbus Avenue has Many Qualities of a Great Place

Social opportunities

Cultural destinations

Comfortable sidewalks

Public space destinations

Food and dining identity

Attention to detail

Regular events

How Columbus Avenue Rates as a Great Place *

Uses & Activities

Positives

- Concentration of cultural institutions
- Recognized restaurant and shopping district
- Weekly, monthly, and yearly events

Needs Improvement

- Should have more free activities and spontaneous entertainment
- Spaces adjacent to the American Museum of Natural History too passive
- Scarcity of flexible, programmable spaces

Comfort & Image

Positives

- Historic landmarked district
- High quality sanitation and maintenance
- Historic and well-kept low-rise buildings
- Many attractive storefronts and window displays
- Canopy of street trees and seasonally planted tree beds

Needs Improvement

- Lacks a clear image and identity
- Few public seating opportunities
- Gaps in street trees, generally due to sidewalk vaults
- Congestion, noise, and air pollution

Access & Linkages

Positives

- Wide sidewalks, minimum of 16’
- Access to public transportation
- Clearly illustrated BID map

Needs Improvement

- Needs safer and more convenient pedestrian crossings
- Lack of bicycle lanes and bicycle parking
- Inadequate wayfinding signage and information about area

Sociability

Positives

- Theodore Roosevelt Park serves as a daytime gathering place
- Community leadership committed to improving the neighborhood
- Popular restaurants and bars

Needs Improvement

- Outdoor sidewalk activity lags in the evening
- Interactive and educational opportunities are missing outside the cultural institutions
- Few pocket parks or sidewalk spaces for group activities, games, or resting

* Based on public workshop participants grading how Columbus Avenue meets the Qualities of a Great Space (pg 5).

Problem Statements

Public input is a valuable tool for identifying the challenges facing Columbus Avenue. Without defining the right problem set, finding the right solutions is impossible. Below is a summary of the top three issues participants identified throughout the BID.

Pedestrian Comforts

The number one issue identified throughout the public process was the lack of pedestrian amenities. Public seating, street trees, greenery, gathering spaces, public art, signage and information topped the list of desired comforts.

Some blocks in the BID must identify other ways of greening the sidewalks where vaults prohibit the traditional placement of street trees

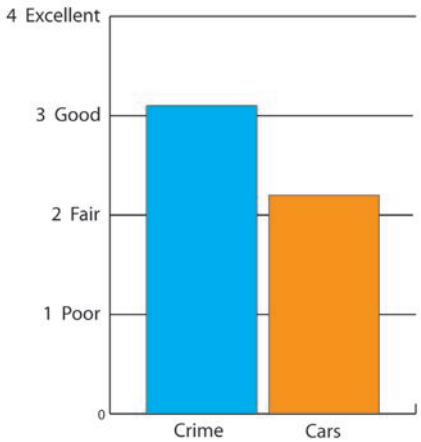
Parking, Loading & Unloading

Throughout the surveys, parking issues consistently ranked near the top of people's concerns. Customer parking, loading and unloading, and bicycle parking were all issues shared by both residents and businesses.

Double parking is a challenge for both customer parking and deliveries

Public Safety

When asked to rate how safe they feel on Columbus Avenue, survey respondents said cars and traffic were a bigger threat than crime.



Vision Statements

The public process generated a number of specific ideas for improving Columbus Avenue. These five statements summarize the community's vision for the avenue.

Complete

Street design will accommodate all users of all abilities. Balanced street design will support all modes of transportation including pedestrians and cyclists. Transportation choice will improve safety, health, and efficiency.

Sticky

Sidewalks, storefronts, and other public spaces will provide more amenities, visual interest, and programs that activate places and make people want to spend more time on Columbus Avenue.

Sustainable

Greener and less congested streets will improve air quality and encourage physical activity. Environmental street designs will improve storm water management and support space-efficient transportation modes.

Connected

Columbus Avenue will become the central "spine" for nearby neighborhoods, cultural institutions, and public spaces. Columbus Avenue will become a recognizable destination in and of itself.

Managed

The Columbus Avenue BID will continue to provide top-quality management while expanding its role along the avenue. A broad range of partners will work together to coordinate and publicize events and programs.

Complete

A "Complete Street" is designed and operated to provide safe access for users of all ages, their abilities, and their mode of transportation.

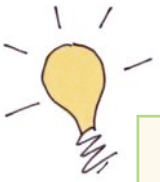
Today, Columbus Avenue is 'incomplete' because it is designed primarily to accommodate cars and trucks, failing to consider the safety and efficiency of other modes.

Pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, children, senior citizens and the disabled would all benefit from a "complete streets" approach.

A complete street is comfortable and meets the needs of all user groups

Some ideas recommended through the public input process:

- bump-outs
- differentiated crosswalks
- lighted bollards
- bike lanes
- bicycle parking
- bicycle sharing program
- bus / bike lane
- Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)
- bus bulbs



DID YOU KNOW?

75% of Upper West Side residents don't own cars

Only 2% of people surveyed on Columbus Avenue had driven there *

* Columbus Avenue Pedestrian Intercept Survey - July/Aug 2007, Project for Public Spaces.

Separated bus lane

Separated bicycle lane

Sticky

A sticky street is more than attractive – it reaches out to pedestrians and slows them down to shop, sit, and socialize more.

Columbus Avenue has a number of inherent advantages, including its comfortable human scale, architectural details, and attractions that differ from other streets.

Longer and more frequent visits benefit businesses and improve the social capital of a neighborhood. When the avenue becomes a destination, it shifts from a place people pass through to a place people don't want to leave.

Sticky streets encourage people to linger, shop, and socialize longer

Some ideas recommended through the public input process:

- benches
- curb extensions
- signage and wayfinding
- window display contests
- sidewalk merchandising
- flowers and plantings
- information boards
- food kiosks

PRIMARY ACTIVITIES

Primary activities are what people go to Columbus Avenue to do. Theodore Roosevelt Park is a successful destination. However, pedestrian intercept surveys indicated that people visit the park primarily as their destination of original intent.

The American Museum of Natural History's spray jets outside the Rose Center for Earth and Space, a gem nestled inside Theodore Roosevelt Park

SECONDARY ACTIVITIES

Secondary activities are the other things people do while moving along the avenue. Compared to Theodore Roosevelt Park, the Flea Market had a higher percentage of secondary users – undoubtedly, drawn partly by its active edges.

Flea Market at IS 44 is a typical New York City schoolyard. With the curb-appeal of a penitentiary, this paved lot has the greatest potential to contribute to social and environmental sustainability.

Sustainable

Sustainability is not an outcome, it is a process. Sustainability is a question of duration and replenishment.

Throughout this process, participants generated a number of sustainable design ideas that can be summarized as environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Participants felt the success of Columbus Avenue depends on a number of systems and these systems must be designed to work well together, "positively reinforcing one another."

Environmental

- more street trees
- reduced dependency on private cars
- improved bus efficiency and service
- better connected to bicycle network
- environmental storm water management

Bump outs in Indianapolis are being designed to capture storm water for planted areas

Social

- more gathering spaces
- community information boards
- "safe routes for seniors"
- "safe routes to school"

When put in the right place, a bench becomes a social gathering place, not just street furniture

Economic

- modern parking regulations
- sponsorship opportunities
- Shake Shack model

Small scale vending is an increasingly popular revenue generating opportunity

Connected

Relatively minor changes to streets and wayfinding would improve the BID's connectedness to the surrounding areas.

As one participant noted, Columbus Avenue has the potential to become a "spine" connecting Upper West Side destinations inside and outside of the BID boundaries. It is easy to imagine how adjustments to alternative transportation and wayfinding systems would dramatically elevate foot traffic from world-class destinations like the American Museum of Natural History, Central Park, and Lincoln Center.

Transportation Connections

- promote Columbus Avenue as a great place to walk
- better connect Columbus Avenue to Upper West Side bicycle network
- improve the comfort of all bus stops within the BID

Physically separated bicycle lane

Cultural & Recreational Connections

- Host American Museum of Natural History programs in the park and along Columbus Avenue
- Establish clear connections to and from Central Park
- reach out to Riverside Park, Lincoln Center and other cultural destinations

Lincoln Center

Information Connections

- signage area information
- district maps near transportation stops
- event publicity
- banners

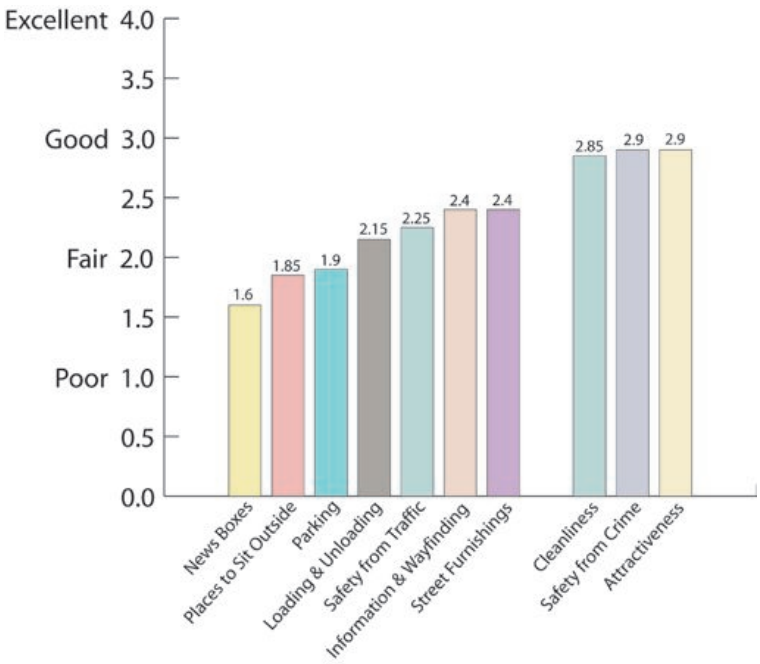
Local information and wayfinding

Managed

As BIDs succeed and their districts change with time, the BID's responsibilities should also change and grow.

Survey results found the BID scored highest in cleanliness, safety from crime, and attractiveness - all primary BID responsibilities.

Building on the success of these primary responsibilities, survey responses indicated the BID should expand its responsibility in the area of urban design, specifically: pedestrian safety, street furnishings, and parking improvements. Public input also prioritized a number of programming recommendations.



Some ideas recommended through the public input process:

- Seasonal Events
- Weekly Greenmarket
- Live Theater Performances
- Outdoor Concerts
- Outdoor Film Screenings
- Informal Music
- Schoolyard Playground
- Chamber Music Performances
- Chess and Game Tables
- Educational Programs

Coordinated and space efficient news boxes

Signage and wayfinding

Programming

You Can't Do It Alone

BIDs are a proven vehicle for delivering public improvements; however, good public spaces require more than any one organization can offer.

New Revenue Sources

In order for the BID to grow and play a greater role in managing urban design and streetscape improvements, the BID will likely need additional revenue streams. New revenue can come in many forms: taxes, pricing controls, donations, promotions, services in kind, and projects with local partners.

Parking Management

One possibility for additional revenue is a Parking Improvement District (PID).

PIDs rely on two important principles. First, curbside parking fees are set to reflect a market price. Second, additional resources generated from higher parking revenues are directed to fund local improvement projects.

Parking is a valuable resource for area businesses. Managing this resource more efficiently would create a competitive advantage for Columbus Avenue because as parking spaces turn over more frequently, more customers can find parking in the district, deliveries can be made more efficiently, and traffic congestion will be reduced.

While untested in New York, this concept has funded street improvements for special districts in other cities. Typically, PIDs are not imposed on districts, they are granted to districts requesting them. Given its excellent track record and commitment to improving public spaces, the Columbus Avenue BID would be an excellent partner in a pilot PID program.

PIDs are a win for everyone. Businesses benefit when their customers and delivery vehicles have access; customers benefit from the convenience of available parking, and the entire community benefits from streetscape improvements and maintenance that are paid for by additional parking revenue.

How do PIDs work?

1. Traditional parking meters are replaced with Muni Meters

2. Parking prices are set to encourage more turnover and a 10 - 15% curbside vacancy rate that makes parking easier to find

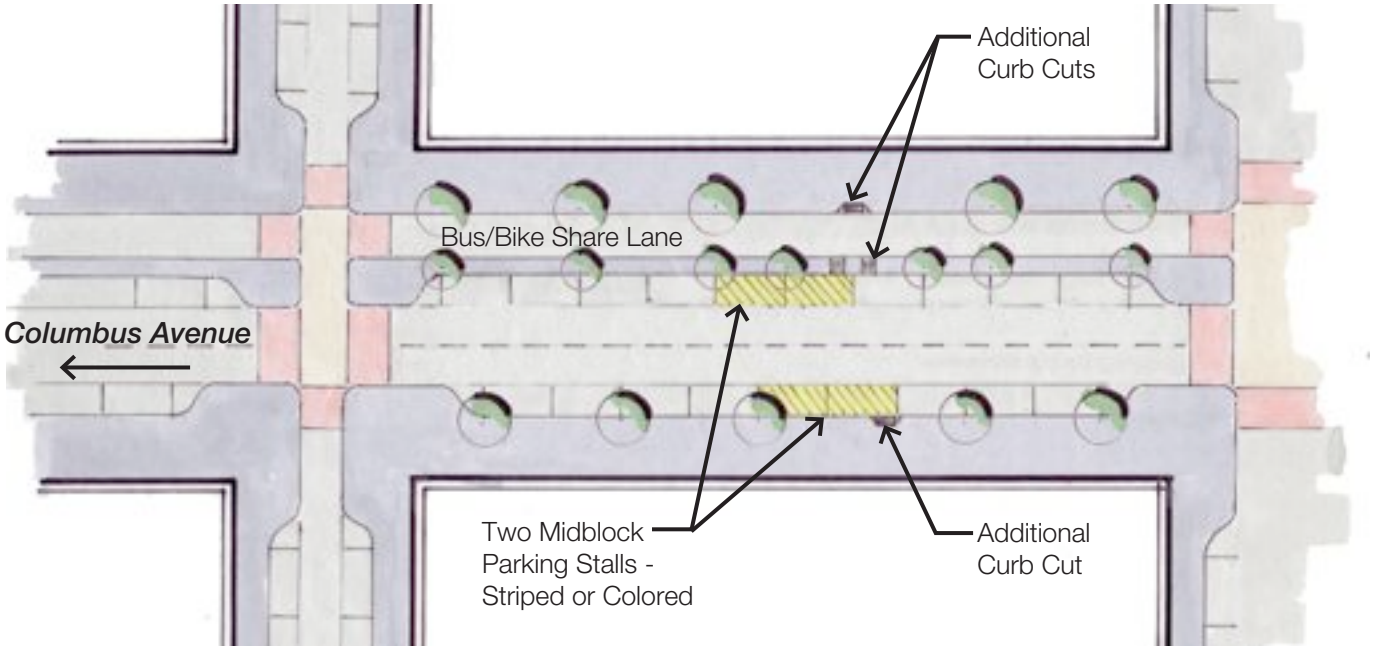
3. The increased revenue is returned to the district to finance public space improvements

Parking Management

Designated Delivery Truck Loading Zone

Double-parked delivery trucks are a common problem along Columbus Avenue. The plan below illustrates the dedication of two midblock parallel parking spaces for commercial deliveries during peak delivery times. Special striping, clear signage and additional curb cuts will facilitate deliveries and maintain customer parking during off-peak delivery hours.

Delivery trucks double park to load and unload goods.



Bicycle Parking

Well placed bicycle racks should be available for delivery personnel, shoppers and bicycle commuters. Central Park is one of New York's greatest bicycling destinations and Columbus Avenue can cater to this crowd. For convenient access, between six and eight single bike racks should be spaced along each block.

Crowded bike racks have become an eyesore and fail to provide convenient places to lock up

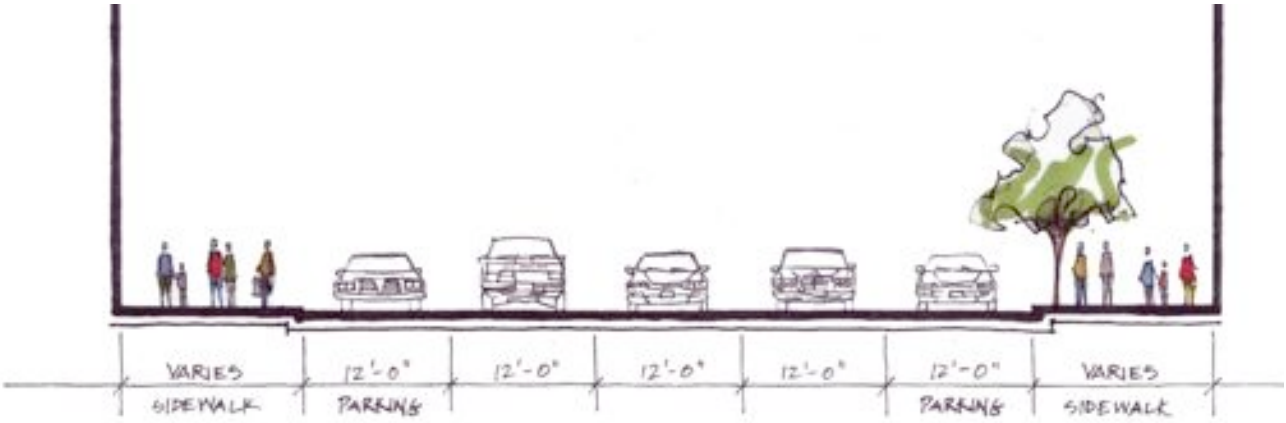
Recommendations

Cross-Section Improvements

Existing Columbus Avenue Cross-Section

Currently, the Columbus Avenue cross-section is five 12-foot lanes, including two parking lanes. Sidewalk vaults prevent street trees from being planted on some blocks. Public seating is limited. No street space is allocated to sustainable transportation modes.

Improvements to this cross-section would provide greater opportunity for gathering spaces along Columbus Avenue. The mix of improvements can be unique to each block and triangulate new amenities and desired activities with surrounding land uses.



Triangulation

Triangulation is a Placemaking principle that can guide the placement of sidewalk amenities.

Triangulation refers to clustering amenities in a given space; by bringing together different comforts and conveniences, it contributes to sidewalk vitality.

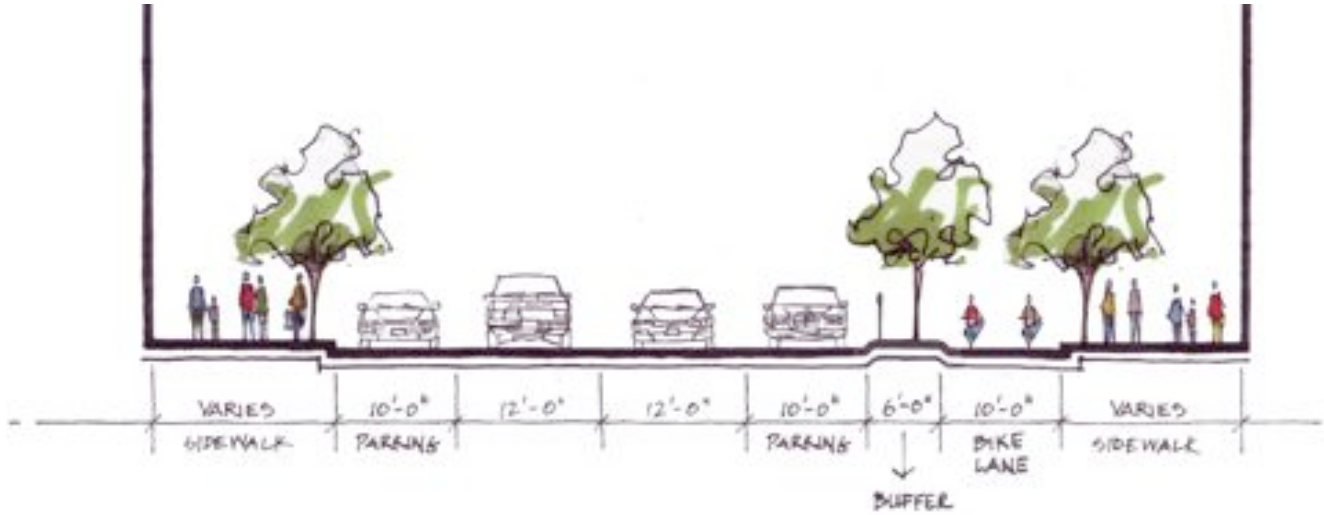
A good example of triangulation: seating, stationary tables, newsracks, and trash receptacles under shade trees, and pedestrian-scale lighting.

Alternative A:

A sustainable and balanced approach preferred by workshop participants, Alternative A provides a shared bus and bicycle lane buffered by a five-foot planted sidewalk median. This alternative provides for safe and efficient transportation alternatives and the planting of additional street trees.

Alternative B:

Alternative B includes a 10 foot bike lane physically separated by a 6-foot planted sidewalk median. Providing additional street trees for the entire length of Columbus Avenue, the planted median allows for street trees in blocks limited by sidewalk vaults.

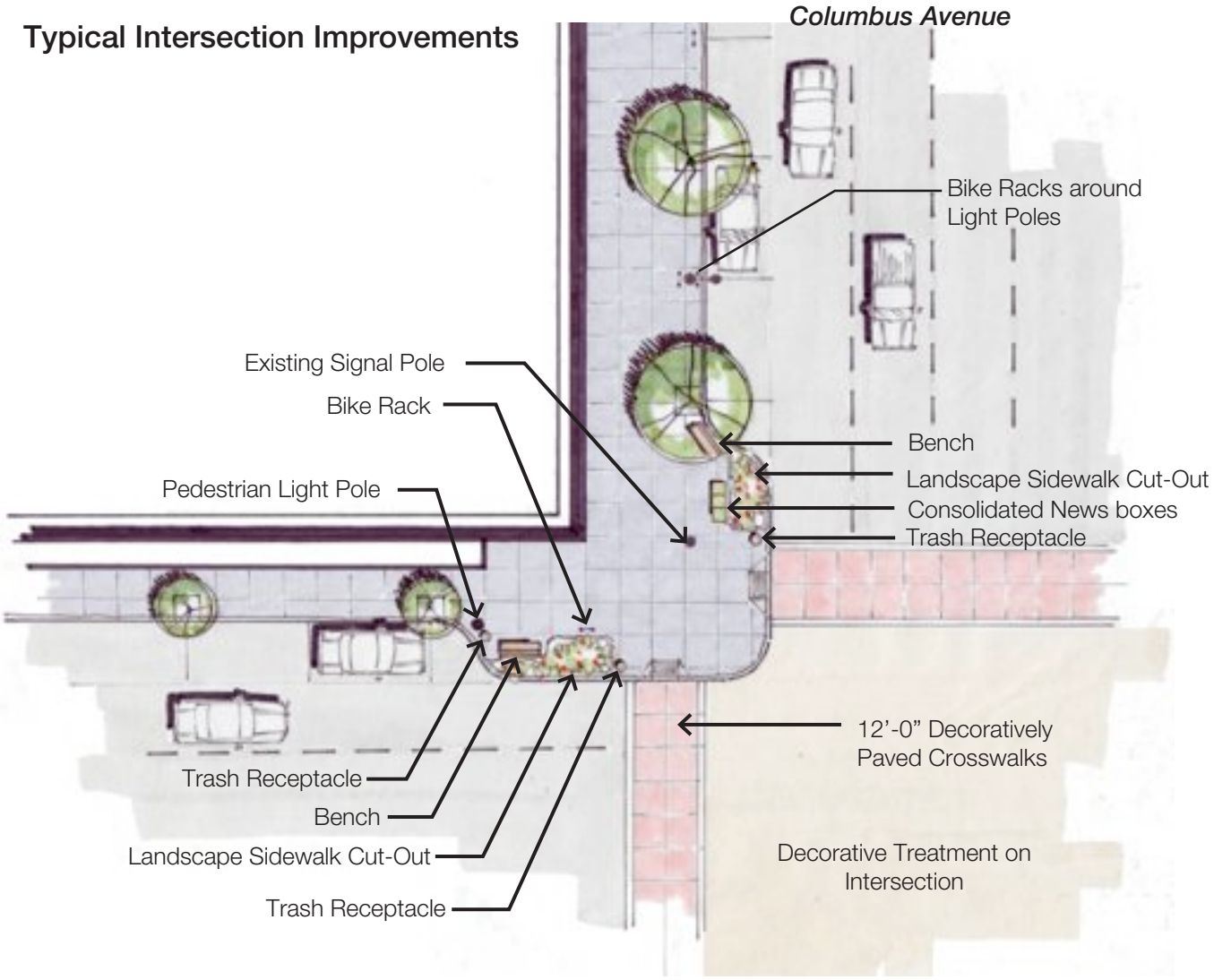


Intersection Improvements

Each intersection and corner along Columbus Avenue has unique characteristics. Some intersections connect to Central Park entrances; others offer unique shops or cafe dining. To improve the identity, comfort, and pedestrian safety of the avenue, these corners can be gradually transformed to create a series of "places."

Workshop participants proposed a number of universal design treatments and amenities. These included sidewalk bump outs, organized placement of sidewalk amenities, more bike racks, planting areas, and innovative ways to collect storm water runoff.

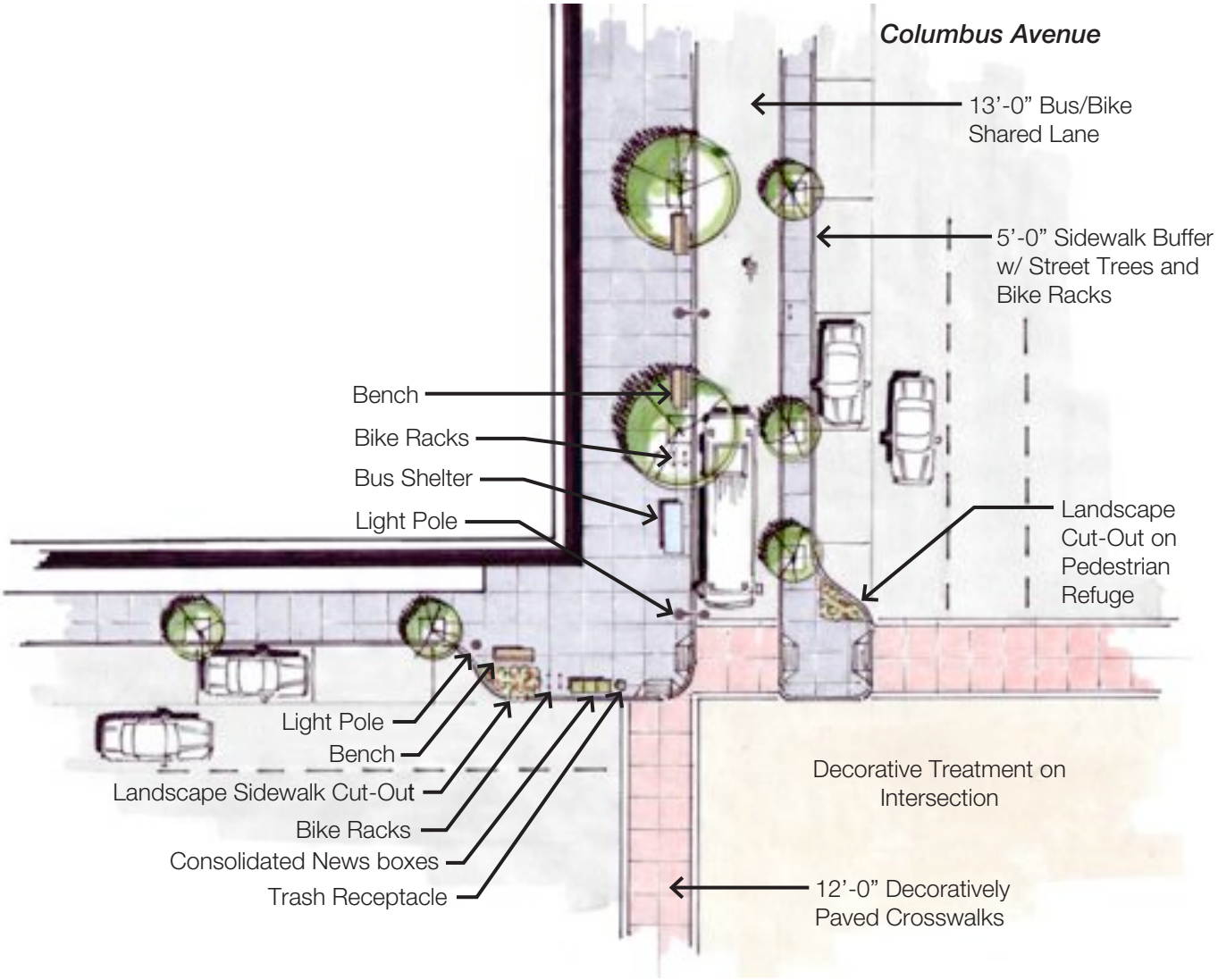
Typical Intersection Improvements



Intersection Improvements

Typical Intersection Improvements - *Bus/Bike Share Alternative*

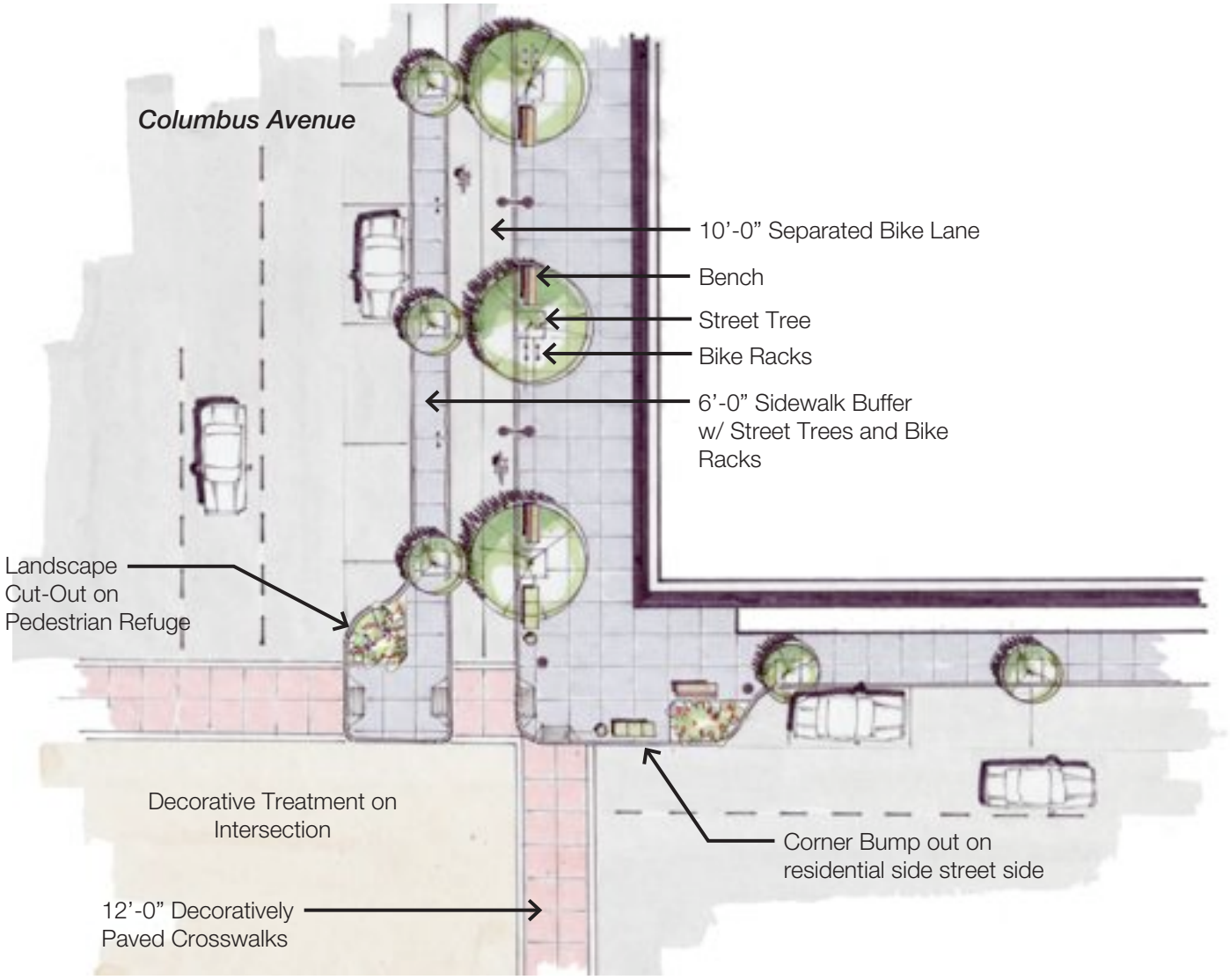
The 13-foot shared bus/bike lane affects the west side of Columbus Avenue differently than the typical intersection improvement described above. While sidestreets can still add a bump out, Columbus Avenue will gain a pedestrian refuge rather than a corner bump out.



Intersection Improvements

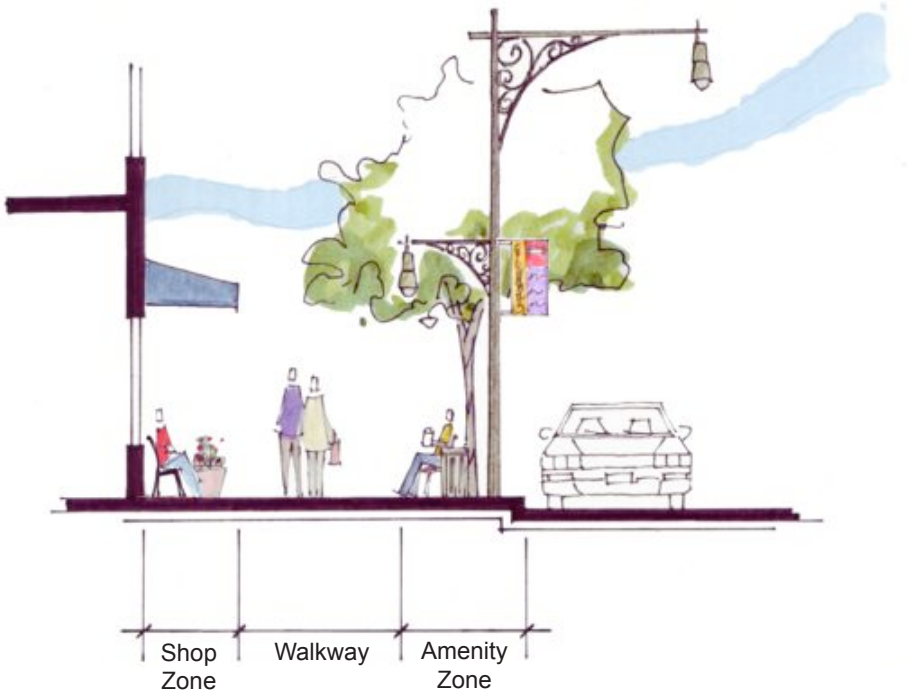
Typical Intersection Improvements - *Physically Separated Bike Lane Alternative*

A physically separated bike lane creates a unique situation on the east side of Columbus Avenue. There are opportunities to place amenities such as trees and bike racks on the buffer that separates the bike lane from vehicular lanes The bump-outs provide pedestrian refuges and shorten crossing distances.



Typical Midblock Improvements

The midblock conditions of Columbus Avenue vary in their level of comfort and amenities. Sidewalks are generally wide, a minimum 16 feet, and provide plenty of opportunities for public and private improvements. Some blocks have rows of shade trees, while others are limited by sidewalk vaults and have no trees or shade at all. Public seating is completely absent from most blocks.



To assist with the placement of amenities, retail displays, and the efficient pedestrian flow, the sidewalk can be divided into three different zones:

- The Shop Zone is three to five feet wide - a space for businesses to spill out into the sidewalk. For example: advertising, merchandise, public seating, cafe tables, and chairs.

- The Walkway is six to eight feet wide - primarily for pedestrian movement.

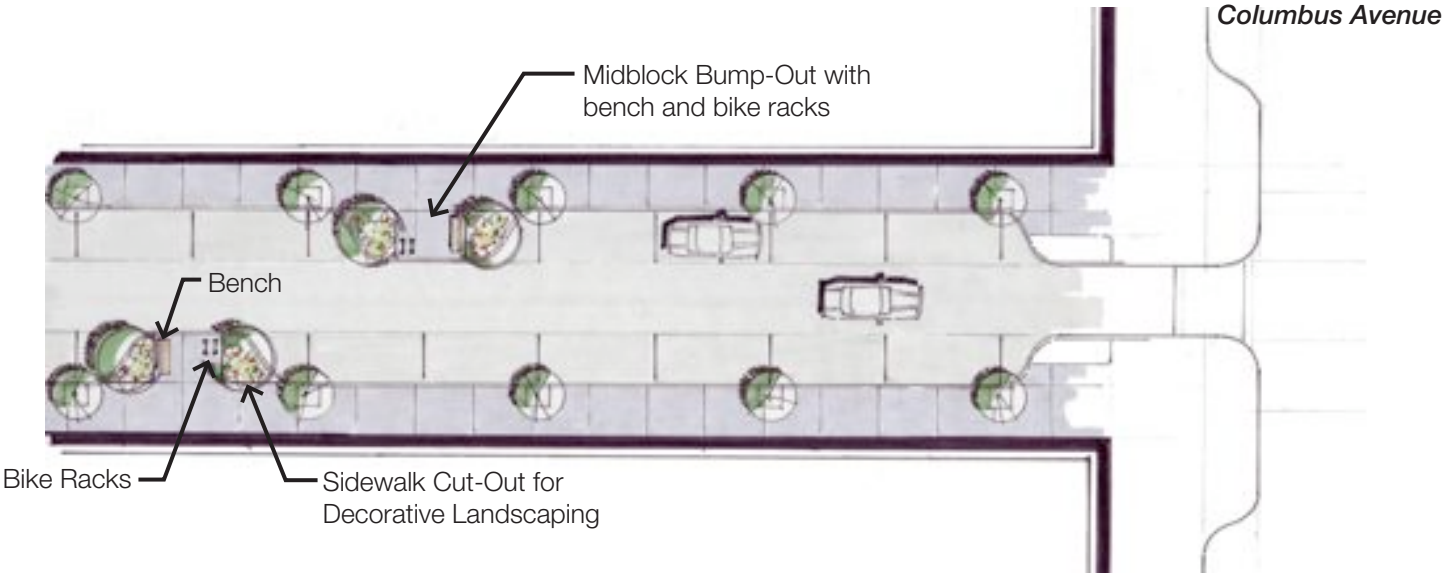
- The Amenity Zone is three to five feet wide - a zone for amenities such as seating, trash receptacles, landscaping, lighting, bike racks, parking meters, and public art.

Typical Sidestreet Improvements

Connections to the Neighborhood & Other Destinations

The BID boundaries extend just 50 feet off the avenue but the side streets leading to Columbus Avenue draw people to the district from surrounding neighborhoods and destinations.

Improvements to the sidestreets will primarily benefit the neighborhood by providing small public spaces outfitted with additional landscaping, street trees, decorative plantings, seating, and bike racks.



Some ideas recommended through the public input process:

- Bump-outs
- Speed bumps
- Residential bicycle parking
- Bollards
- Seating
- Midblock bump-outs
- Planting areas and more street trees

Columbus Avenue Between 81st and 77th Streets

Columbus Avenue at 81st Street

The northeast corner of Columbus Avenue and 81st Street is a major gateway to Theodore Roosevelt Park and an important connection to Central Park, the American Museum of Natural History, and the BID. This corner has the potential to be one of the strongest along Columbus Avenue.

The intersection and the corner should be more inviting and pedestrian friendly. The Park's entry is narrow, there is little information or signage; there is no seating at the corner; crossing distances are long; and in general, there is no place for gathering, activities or people watching.

The beautifully rebuilt sidewalks are a tremendous opportunity for programming, appropriate food and drink vending, informative signage, and general amenities like seating, game tables, or drinking fountains for people and dogs. The Museum has worked hard to make its outdoor presence a community attraction, and done quite wonderfully on the interior of the park. Adding a few edge uses and activities would bring life and public enjoyment to this well built corner.

Some ideas recommended through the public input process:

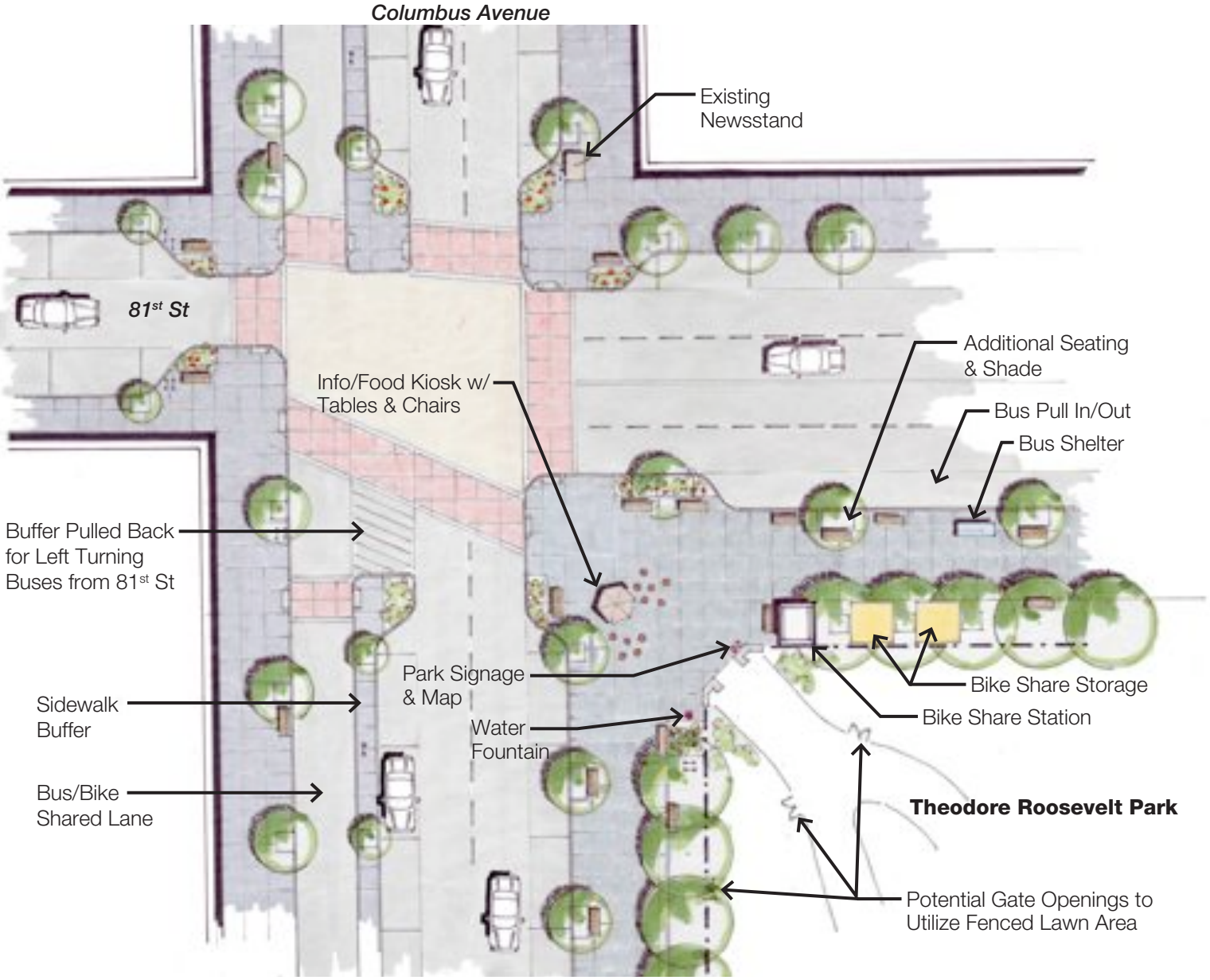
- **Markets**
  - Greenmarket
  - seasonal merchandise
  - flower market
  - book vendors
- **Entertainment**
  - game tables
  - sidewalk musicians & performers
- **Bicycle Amenities**
  - bike sharing program
  - bicycle racks
- **Special Events**
  - music
  - dance
  - natural history education
  - puppet shows
- **Information & Hospitality**
  - information booth
  - event staff
  - food and newspaper kiosk
- **Public Transportation**
  - bus shelter
  - bus pull in

81st Street Gateway

81st Street is a four-lane, two-way street east of Columbus Avenue, and a one-lane eastbound street west of Columbus Avenue. It is a principle crosstown intersection and serves as an entrance to Central Park, including the Delacorte Theater and the Great Lawn.

Bump outs, especially on the east side, would improve access not only to the area's retail shops and restaurants, but also to the neighborhoods to the west and northwest.

On the southwest corner, a sheltered bus stop, plantings, shade, seating, and other amenities would enhance the sense of place, and a kiosk would punctuate the location as a gateway to the BID as well as to Central Park and Roosevelt Park.



Theodore Roosevelt Park at 77th Street, Intermediate School 44

The intersection of Columbus Avenue and 77th Street is an opportunity to create a destination intersection by emphasizing underutilized assets like the south lawn of the park and IS 44.

There is ample seating and shade from mature trees along the south side of the museum, but edge uses are passive and have no relationship to the park lawn. The schoolyard could create a positive edge along the avenue that supports other areas and activities. The weekend flea market is a good example because it brings a high volume of people to the area.

Some ideas recommended through the public input process:

- **South Lawn**
  - passive recreation
  - food kiosks a la Shake Shack
  - book stalls
  - climbable dinosaur statue
  - dinosaur topiary
- **IS 44 Schoolyard**
  - decorative fence
  - more landscaping
  - shade trees
  - horticulture project with children
  - community movies
  - food event, "Taste of Columbus"

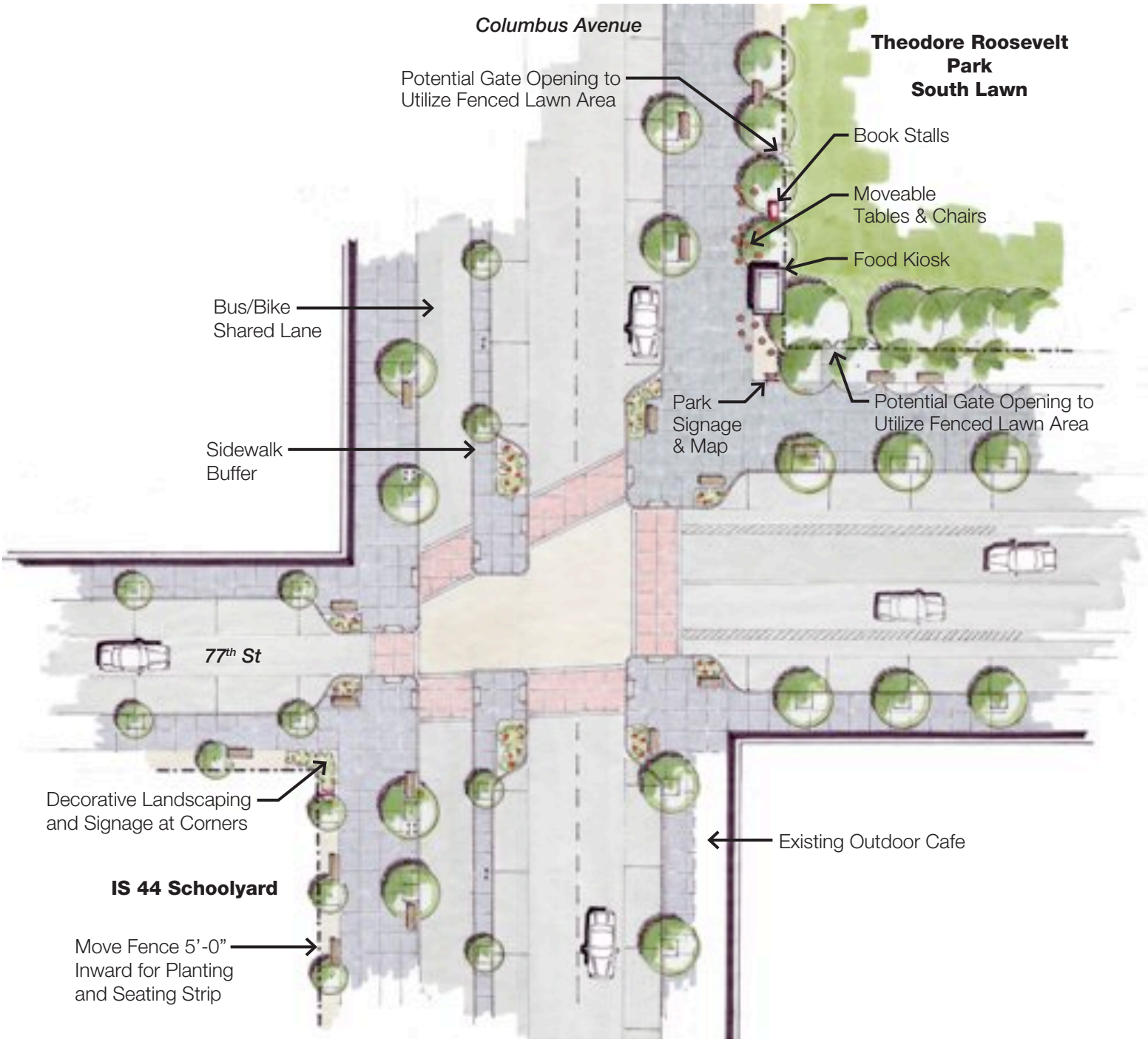
Book vending and reading spaces

Revenue generating kiosks

Theodore Roosevelt Park at 77th Street, Intermediate School 44

Corner bump-outs will provide shorter and safer crossings across Columbus Avenue, especially important given the higher pedestrian traffic between the park and school.

The edge that defines IS 44 is an opportunity for a more decorative and welcoming treatment. This includes a new and improved fence which make a more friendly edge to the schoolyard.



Next Steps

This report reflects a new vision for Columbus Avenue. Many of its recommendations and best practices have come from the community through a public input process and others have been culled from around the world as best practices.

Many of the recommendations remain untested in New York City; yet, this should not discourage the Columbus Avenue BID. A vision is the act of anticipating what the future holds. Prophetic and powerful, the community's vision is a valuable guide for future planning and design processes.

Placemaking is unlike many planning and design processes in the sense that, by their very nature, places are always changing - never finished. As daunting as this may seem, a series of small steps and incremental improvements can be a very rewarding process. Below are eleven considerations for the BID as it moves forward:

1. **The community is the expert**

   – continue to leverage local knowledge

2. **You are creating a place, not just a design**

   – avoid the ego; places meet the needs of people first

3. **You can't do it alone**

   – explore partnerships, engage local talents, and cultivate responsibility

4. **Professionals often say it can't be done**

   – what they really mean is, "we have never done it that way before"

5. **You can learn a lot just by observing**

   – evaluate your progress and regularly measure people's satisfaction

6. **Communicate your vision**

   – become an educator, shepherd the vision, and grow your flock

7. **Form supports function**

   – anticipate and satisfy human needs

8. **Triangulate**

   – create vibrancy by identifying large and small synergies

9. **Start with the petunias**

   – experiment, take small steps, and celebrate your successes

10. **Money is not the issue**

    – don't be discouraged, great places require creativity

11. **You are never finished**

    – management, stewardship, pride, and cooperation are ongoing