



# 9 WAYS

## to Transform New York INTO A CITY OF GREAT PLACES

**Together We Can  
Make It Happen**



## About this Commentary

For 31 years, Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has conducted intensive investigation into some of the world's greatest (and largest) cities, guiding civic leaders to shape the urban environment in ways that celebrate community and enhance the essence of "place." Since 2003 we have compiled this knowledge in a series of commentaries covering London, Paris, Barcelona, and now, New York. *Nine Ways to Transform New York* is a companion document to the complete New York City Commentary (available at [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)).

Our work on this commentary arose from the belief that New York needs to step back and take stock if it is to remain one of the world's most exciting cities. Like other global cities, New York faces the enormous challenge of preserving, sustaining and creating great public spaces both large and small – to provide its citizens with neighborhoods worth living in.

For PPS, New York is not just another global metropolis, it is our home. We hope you will read this commentary and join us in shaping the future of New York through its public spaces.

The Staff of Project for Public Spaces



# What Makes New York a Great City

**N**ew York is a great city for two important reasons—its wealth of public destinations and the energy of its citizens. If city government and the private sector build on these assets, New York’s neighborhoods and districts will continue to flourish.

Both strengths are being challenged today, from the slow erosion of the sidewalk experience by worsening congestion, blank-walled buildings, and heavy-handed security measures, to the rapid increase in suburban-style proposals for big box stores and lifeless parks in prime waterfront locations. As New York grows at a breakneck pace, decision makers tend to pursue projects at the expense of the qualities that have made the city’s neighborhoods so successful. Thankfully, opportunities abound to roll up our sleeves and make sure New York remains the world’s most exciting city.

## Places to go, things to do

The whole world knows New York for its livable neighborhoods, excellent parks, first-rate cultural attractions, and seemingly inexhaustible supply of new places to explore. Where these destinations are linked by walkable streets and continuous ground floor activity, the city thrives. However, New York’s attractions are becoming increasingly disconnected from each other. Large sections of the city’s pedestrian environment are now overwhelmed by traffic and sterile, anti-urban developments conceived by vanity designers.

When destinations are isolated amidst traffic-dominated urban fabric or buildings with monotonous blank walls, driving and parking become the experience of the city rather than walking and transit. Visitors and residents alike encounter dead

zones, which they want to hurry through or avoid altogether. This is the beginning of the disposable city. Luckily, the solution is straightforward: Link the city’s great public spaces, neighborhoods, and institutions together into lively walkable districts.

## New York’s unseen strength

You can’t see the other reason New York is a world-class city, but even the first-time visitor senses it intuitively. There is a powerful force that infuses the city with life and constant change: the energy of its citizens, who play a huge role in defining their neighborhoods. It is an incredibly diverse city where waves of immigrants continually put their stamp on the physical and cultural landscape. Indeed, the success of New York neighborhoods arises from the passionate participation of residents, activists and local entrepreneurs rather than from the clout of city officials or big business. When city government steps in to control or restrain this energy, things go awry.

All too often city officials fail to recognize, and sometimes even oppose, the citizen initiatives that create strong neighborhoods. New York has city departments overseeing transportation, parks, economic development, and police, but no successful mechanism to coordinate efforts in all these fields or connect them to neighborhood priorities. We’d see a big change in what could be accomplished if city agencies treated neighborhood associations as partners, rather than obstacles to overcome.

Above: New York City Marathon, Fort Greene, Brooklyn  
Right: Museum Mile Festival, 5th Avenue, Manhattan



# The Choice New York Faces

MAKING THE RIGHT DECISIONS REGARDING TRAFFIC AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

## The weakest link: traffic

New York has clear options about the direction it will take in the 21st Century. The city can choose to either stay the course of worsening traffic and sterile streets, or redirect its energies to promote great public spaces and lively streetlife.

The greatest opportunity to make the right choice lies with the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT), whose policies have a huge impact on community life in all five boroughs. While New York residents over the past 30 years have worked tirelessly to improve the public realm in their neighborhoods, DOT has yet to keep pace. The rejuvenation or creation of many valuable public spaces has been accomplished largely through the dedicated work of citizens' groups and the private sector. These efforts have had to contend with a bureaucratic bias in favor of more cars and busier, more dangerous streets. If this wellspring of civic energy were fully embraced by city leaders, it would revolutionize how things are done in New York.

However, New York's current policies favor cars and trucks, even in residential areas, and most city streets no longer serve as vital public spaces. Vehicles move at dangerously high speeds for city streets—even in the vicinity of schools, senior citizen housing, and neighborhood shopping areas. "Rat running" (barrelling down neighborhood streets to save time) has become an accepted solution to congestion. The streets of New York have become torrents of hostile traffic, not the rivers of city life. If we continue to plan for cars and traffic, we will get more cars and worse traffic. If we start planning for people and places, we will get happier people and better places.

Above: Times Square

## How Cities Around the World are Conquering Traffic

Lessons to help New York overcome the biggest threat to its vitality

Leading cities around the world are years ahead of New York when it comes to turning transportation policies into genuine community building efforts. **Barcelona** is building new pedestrian-friendly Ramblas and Boulevards. **Hong Kong** is addressing its congestion problem by strategically reclaiming its streets as public spaces. Each summer, **Paris** transforms major highways along the Seine into urban beaches, complementing ambitious efforts in every neighborhood to prioritize pedestrian needs above those of cars and trucks.

The world is talking about **London's** bold and very successful congestion pricing system, which has reduced traffic in central London by charging a fee to drivers entering the city—an idea borrowed from **Singapore** and **Oslo**. London has also embarked on grand plans to create or improve 100 new public spaces in the city and boost public transit.

Over the past 40 years **Copenhagen** has systematically reduced the amount of city space reserved for cars by adding bicycle lanes, widening pedestrian walkways and creating pedestrian streets—which have made it one of the most vital, pleasurable cities in Europe. **Zurich** revolutionized its transit system by reducing parking and replacing auto lanes with bus lanes, which were later converted to streetcar lines, resulting in an extremely livable city that's beginning to catch the world's eye. **Portland**, Oregon has built light rail and streetcar lines instead of more downtown parking facilities, and **Seattle** has pioneered new programs to make its neighborhood streets pedestrian-friendly.

**Bogotá**, Colombia, is now a world leader in urban livability thanks to its many new parks, bikeways, pedestrian streets and much talked-about bus rapid transit system.



The misplaced focus of New York transportation officials on moving vehicles has had serious consequences for the city, limiting its potential as a vibrant place where streetlife flourishes. By contrast, many other cities PPS has studied are taking major steps to level the playing field between cars, pedestrians, bikes and transit (see sidebar). DOT can catch up to these leading cities and even surpass them. Recent initiatives suggest a newfound willingness to use transportation planning to complement community development, though it remains to be seen if DOT will follow through in practice.

The negative impact of traffic on New York neighborhoods is compounded by a short-sighted city policy that enables suburban-style “big box” stores to locate in areas underserved by transit. Any long term vision for New York’s future should decrease, not promote, urban residents’ need to own and use cars. The Red Hook waterfront, for example, is the wrong site for an auto-oriented IKEA outlet, which will generate scores of vehicle trips. Big retail stores fit best in areas that are already well-served by transit and don’t require parking lots, while the neighborhoods where such stores are currently sited would benefit from more creative strategies for economic and community development.

## A new role for government

**T**he energy found in the neighborhoods of New York is inspiring, evidenced by the attention people devote to what happens around their homes and in nearby parks and shopping districts. However, as in other global cities we have examined (Paris, London, Barcelona), the public is far removed from the basic decisions that affect the vitality of public spaces—which are crucial to so many people’s lives. Citizens understand how critical these matters are to the health of their neighborhoods. But city officials have kept concerned citizens at a distance from the larger citywide issues of transportation, development, and urban design. New York needs to involve communities in addressing these larger issues. The city has a propensity to shoot itself in the foot by embracing developments that are out of scale, too dependent on vehicles, damaging to local businesses, or characterized by flashy but impractical design unsuited for urban neighborhoods.

We believe the biggest challenge in assuring the future vitality of New York is to bring its major municipal departments (Planning, Transportation, Economic Development, and Parks) back into alignment with the rich vision for the city articulated by its citizens. When government officials map out plans according to the dictates of certain disciplines (seeing their audience as other members of that profession, not the citizens of the city) they are no longer serving the public. Our view, which comes from what we’ve seen as we travel and work all over the world, is that by focusing on creating places, you do everything differently. A “Placemaking” approach would mark a fundamental shift for the city, a transformation that would pay off for New York in a big way.

Above: A pedestrian- and transit-oriented boulevard, Paris, France, one of many ways the city is reclaiming streets from excessive traffic



# Nine Ways to Transform New York into a City of Great Places

In all five boroughs, the term “public space” is still limited to parks and plazas in many people’s minds. Without a doubt, the city’s major parks are top-notch, but any city, let alone one as vast as New York, needs more than a few flagship parks to sustain a thriving public environment. It also needs squares, neighborhood parks, streets and community institutions to all function as active, welcoming public spaces.

Although the city prides itself on its public life, New Yorkers inhabit a public realm that pales beside what it could become. Many neighborhood streets and most major avenues are hostile settings for pedestrians; too many plazas outside major buildings are lifeless and cold; smaller parks, plazas, and

squares are poorly maintained; and local institutions such as schools and libraries seldom enjoy the strong public presence they deserve.

These problems are intertwined. The only way to untangle the knot is to strategically coordinate solutions that complement each other. In that spirit, PPS proposes nine steps to transform New York into a city of great places.



Above: At Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, the emphasis on traffic precludes nearby institutions from creating a strong public presence  
 Below: New York’s streets can support its great institutions, but are only afforded the chance to do so during car-free events such as the Museum Mile Festival



# 1

## Create a Comprehensive Public Space Agenda

The first step in transforming New York into a city of great places is to identify locations throughout the five boroughs where existing public spaces are underperforming, or where new development should be accompanied by new public spaces. The final product of this census would be a comprehensive public space agenda—a plan to guide future improvements. Such an approach is already taking off in London, where Mayor Ken Livingstone has initiated the “100 Public Spaces Programme,” declaring that “creating and managing high quality public spaces is essential to delivering an urban renaissance in London.” The first ten pilot projects—a mix of squares, parks, streets, mixed-use districts, and waterfront areas around London—are now underway.

The Bloomberg administration could take this idea even further by targeting the key public spaces in New York’s neighborhoods. Using the city’s 59 Community Board districts as the standard unit, the goal should be to identify the ten most important public spaces in each neighborhood. A district-by-district approach would encourage residents and city officials to look at their neighborhoods anew and bring unexpected possibilities to light, resulting in a broad public space agenda that puts everything on the table and expands New Yorkers’ very notion of what constitutes public space.

For instance, a vast number of asphalt-and-chainlink-fence schoolyards are begging to serve a broader purpose—for both students and the general public—than their current incarnations permit. Few

people in New York are even talking about the unmet potential of these neighborhood assets. In contrast, Chicago, under the leadership of Mayor Richard M. Daley, has achieved a resounding success by making school grounds multi-purpose destinations.

Any public space agenda must also be integrated with new development projects. New York City real estate is more valuable than ever. The Bloomberg administration should take advantage of this climate by creating incentives for developers to preserve and enhance the public environments that are so greatly affected by their projects. In addition, a small tax on new development (successful in Chicago) could fund many of the improvements identified in the process of creating a public space agenda. For this to happen, the city must cease acting out of fear that investment will flow elsewhere if it stops coddling developers. Twenty or thirty years ago, that approach made sense, but not anymore. New York neighborhoods have become so desirable to developers thanks in large part to the hard work of residents and community groups; now that developers are cashing in on citizens’ hard work, it’s imperative that those same community groups are listened to about what shape new development takes. Otherwise, the city may lose some of the very qualities that sparked its real estate resurgence in the first place.



Above: Petrosino Square, an example of a key neighborhood public space and how it can be transformed  
Right: Volunteers in Tompkins Square Park



## 2 Balance the Needs of Pedestrians, Transit, Bicyclists, and Cars

If streets are New York's circulatory system, then sidewalks are its capillaries and pedestrians its lifeblood—delivering essential nourishment to businesses and other institutions. Yet the city continues to design and manage streets and sidewalks in a way that emphasizes the movement of cars and trucks above all other uses, even though just six percent of Manhattan shopping trips involve a private car (Schaller Consulting, *Necessity or Choice? Why People Drive in Manhattan*, 2006). The result is a public environment that marginalizes pedestrians, bicyclists, and bus riders. Even worse, it puts everyone in danger, including motorists. So long as moving traffic remains the major goal of local transportation officials, New York will continue to have mean streets, where being run over by a car is one the leading external causes of death for most demographic categories. Doing away with outdated practices that favor the auto will make New York a much healthier city. Here's how to do it.

**Allocate more space for pedestrians.** The highest and best use of New York's street space is to support pedestrian activity and access. On nearly all the major avenues in Manhattan—and many in the outer boroughs—traffic capacity should be reduced and sidewalks widened. Times Square is a prime place to start implementing this strategy. This kind of pilot project at the city's most heavily trafficked location will demonstrate the economic value of a

pro-pedestrian approach and dispel the myth that reducing car capacity in one place results in more traffic elsewhere. (Empirical evidence shows that people consolidate car trips or choose other modes of transportation if driving becomes less convenient [S. Cairns, S. Atkins and P. Goodwin, *Disappearing traffic? The story so far*, 2001].)

**Reform parking incentives.** The more parking is available in a given location, the more people will choose to drive there. If parking is reduced, people will still travel to that location, they'll simply do it by other means. Rockefeller Center, for instance, remains as popular as ever even though its parking garage was recently removed. Today there is too much parking in New York, because the price of parking does not reflect its true costs. A tax on parking garages and an increase in parking meter rates at high-demand areas and times of day will provide strong incentives to travel by means other than the auto, with revenue set aside for groups like BIDs to use for neighborhood improvements

**Institute congestion pricing.** London's well-known congestion pricing system has significantly reduced traffic in the center city without hurting business. New York could implement its own version in Manhattan with similar results. The majority of workers who drive into Manhattan already have a viable transit alternative, while people who have no

Above: St. Mark's Place



choice but to drive will enjoy significant time savings to compensate for the added cost. Congestion pricing will also reduce the impact of cars on the outer boroughs, as fewer people will drive through them to reach Manhattan.

**Reduce the effect of “choke points.”** New York’s bridges, tunnels, and important intersections act as choke points, creating huge bottlenecks of traffic as cars queue up to pass through them. So many vehicles accumulate that nearby neighborhood streets become mere storage space for cars, overwhelmed by traffic, noise, and exhaust fumes. This happens because the streets that feed into places like the Manhattan Bridge and Times Square are designed to carry much more traffic than the choke points themselves. Narrowing the feeder roads will not reduce overall capacity, since the choke points already cannot carry any more vehicles. But it will encourage drivers to seek other means of transportation, and rid the city of its worst, most aggressive driving. In Chicago, such a strategy has even been shown to improve capacity: With fewer conflicts and lane changing, traffic moves at a steadier pace.

**Invest in other modes of transportation.** London uses its congestion pricing revenue to fund transit improvements. Likewise, New York should invest in its most under-utilized transit option: the bus. With fewer cars on the road, bus routes can be made much speedier through improvements such as bus-only lanes, bus stop bump-outs, and bus rapid transit lines, which offer many of the advantages of light rail at a lower cost. Bicycling, too, can become a safe, mainstream transportation option and an enjoyable, healthy form of recreation for children, seniors and everyone in between.



Above: Grand Street envisioned as a pedestrian-oriented street with sidewalk amenities  
 Right: Bus shelter, Malcom X Boulevard



### 3 Improve Streets as Public Spaces

New York City streets and sidewalks are practically devoid of amenities for people on foot. To borrow a term from the traffic engineers, New York sidewalks provide grade “F” level of service to pedestrians. Making pedestrians a top priority is the first step to creating streets that function as comfortable public spaces. The ultimate goal is not just to give pedestrians space to move, but to make streets destinations unto themselves.

As part of the New York City Streets Renaissance—our ongoing collaboration with Transportation Alternatives and the Open Planning Project—PPS recently created several photo simulations depicting what real New York streets would look like if treated as public spaces. More pedestrian space makes it possible to place benches, cafes, shade structures,

and public art on the sidewalk. Street vendors can set up shop without cramping the flow of foot traffic. At irregular intersections like Astor Place and where Broadway crosses major avenues, there’s even enough room to create great public squares.

When New York’s streets serve as lively pedestrian destinations themselves, it will become easier for people to access other destinations—from new public squares to neighborhood delis, major cultural institutions to local playgrounds. In fact, this is perhaps the best way that our over-taxed transportation system can increase its performance. Simply put, by turning streets and sidewalks into destinations themselves, New York can connect more people to more places—accomplishing more while driving less.



Above: Spring Street could function as a comfortable public space with shade, seating and spacious sidewalks

Left: Sidewalk amenities like these tables on 23rd Street make it possible to gather on the sidewalk, a rare luxury in New York



## 4 Develop a Full-Fledged Public Market Program

For 25 years, New York’s Greenmarket farmers have brought produce from all over the region into the city, preserving family farms and creating vital urban-rural links while transforming places like Union Square for the better. In recent years, several dozen independent farmers markets have sprouted up across the city’s lower income neighborhoods, seeking to bring the same kinds of benefits as Greenmarket, while at the same time providing opportunities for youth, community gardeners, and local entrepreneurs.

The innovations should go far deeper, however. Most markets have an ephemeral quality—here today, gone tomorrow—which limits their importance in the communities where they operate. Strengthening markets’ physical presence would create mini “town squares” where a broad assortment of activities and events could thrive. In short, market sites would become more widespread, diverse, and meaningful destinations that benefit farmers, vendors, and communities alike.

In addition, the growing popularity of farmers markets has laid the groundwork for a new public market program. Such a program would build on the many positive effects of markets—from addressing health concerns like diabetes and social isolation to fostering local economies. It is the next logical stage in the evolution of New York markets from venues to buy food into full-fledged engines of community development that harness the creative energy of each neighborhood.

Opportunities abound for these new public markets. In a city where nearly three million people are foreign-born, a network of neighborhood public markets would open fresh avenues of opportunity for “new New Yorkers.” A 2003 study conducted by PPS for the Ford Foundation revealed that well conceived public markets are especially valuable in lower income communities where residents need low financial thresholds to launch new businesses.

New York City needs some mechanism, perhaps a non-profit development entity, to facilitate the start-up of new markets, especially on underused city-owned property or other public spaces that should be centers of civic life.



Above: Union Square Greenmarket  
Right: Customers at East New York Farms, Brooklyn



## 5 Ensure that Contemporary Architecture Creates Urban Buildings

As one of the first skyscraper cities, New York had to figure out long ago how new types of buildings could be successfully incorporated into a functional urban setting. Consequently, it boasts many of the world's best high-rise buildings. Rockefeller Center, for instance, is one of the rare mixed-use developments where the uses truly mix, as art, business and retail all come together. And the Empire State Building, still one of the world's tallest, is so human-scaled at the sidewalk level that people standing in front of it often stop passersby to ask where it is.

However, in recent years New York has been bombarded by a different kind of architecture, one that is fundamentally un-urban and incompatible with the pedestrian-oriented environment necessary to a vital city. The new Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle may be the most high-profile—and wrongly praised—instance of this type of building. This new breed falls into the same trap that marred Houston's downtown building boom in the 1980s—dead, blank bases that do not engage the pedestrian.

Several years ago an exhibit at the Municipal Art Society titled “No More Blank Walls,” based on the work of PPS's mentor William H. Whyte, called for an end to the practice of constructing blank-walled buildings that prevailed in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. We have still not absorbed the lessons of those failures. With New York's streets designed predominantly for cars, the continuity of engaging ground floor activity is the major reason why walking in the city remains a great experience. A concerted effort must be made among architects, clients, and city agencies to halt the deterioration of the pedestrian environment and ensure that new buildings are truly urban.



## 6 Restructure City Agencies

Implementing a public space agenda means improving the places that New Yorkers use every day. This approach encourages collaboration between city agencies, transcending the individual silos that define different disciplines today. The Bloomberg Administration can foster a new sense of partnership by forming small, interdisciplinary teams drawn from the departments of Parks, Transportation, Buildings, and City Planning. These teams could then join forces with community organizations to improve specific places, like Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza or Manhattan's Madison Square, where their responsibilities overlap.

The changes shouldn't stop there. High-quality public spaces are not just the concern of planning-related disciplines and departments: They can also make a dramatic difference for schools, small businesses, cultural institutions, public health initiatives, and environmental quality. It should become obvious that many city agencies have a stake in improving New York's public spaces, but they are not yet organized to act on this interest.

In his first term, Mayor Bloomberg restructured large public sector entities to deliver services more effectively; in his second, that same drive to improve government performance should be applied to the agencies responsible for our public spaces.

Above left: The Astor Place Tower, shown under construction, does not engage the pedestrian

Above right: Like the players at the West 4th Street courts, city agencies function best when they work as a team



## 7 Fulfill the Potential of the Waterfront

New York boasts one of the most extensive urban waterfronts in the world, an unparalleled asset that has been largely inaccessible for decades. In the 20th Century, the city made the mistake of replacing its working waterfront with a driving waterfront. Now, just when it appears that large swaths of the water's edge may finally become available to the public, New York is on the verge of squandering the opportunity again. Tomorrow's waterfront may prove just as one-dimensional as today's, with drab parks planned for the east side of Manhattan and the downtown Brooklyn waterfront, ground already broken on the Red Hook IKEA, the edges of north Brooklyn zoned exclusively for luxury high-rises, and a BJ's slotted to move into the old Bronx Terminal Market on the Harlem River.

Commercial and residential development belongs on the waterfront. Parks belong on the waterfront. The problem is that current waterfront plans support the domination of a single-use—be it apartment towers, green space, or big box retail. This is a recipe for mediocrity.

The world's best waterfronts feature a rich diversity of activity, with no single use outstripping the others. New York can still become a great waterfront city, but only if the new round of projects evolve beyond the narrow confines of one-dimensional plans. The full range of possibilities for waterfront sites must be explored. Instead of big box stores choking off activity with their parking lots and traffic, or high-rises erecting a visual and physical barrier to the water, or passive parks that monopolize space, waterfront development should strive to balance commerce, housing, recreation, maritime activity, and other uses. Connect this mix to interior neighborhoods with improved surface-level transit service and walkable streets, and New York will finally have the waterfront it's been yearning for.



Above: Water Taxi Beach, Long Island City, Queens  
Right: 68th Street Pier, Bay Ridge, Brooklyn



## 8 Reinvent Community Planning

Ideally, New York's Community Boards should take the initiative to help residents shape their neighborhoods, but that rarely happens today. More often, they are viewed as impediments to development. But the truth is more complex and offers a number of insights into how the promise of Community Boards can be fulfilled.

Community Boards tend to act as vehicles of opposition because that's how their role has been defined in practice. In a typical development project involving public property, the Community Board becomes involved usually after something has been proposed. This process does not encourage community representatives to exercise real creativity or leadership. They can only react to what's already on the table. Likewise, the neighborhood plans that Community Boards develop have little bearing on what actually gets built. New York encompasses 59 Community Boards, yet only seven community-based plans have been adopted by the city in the last 16 years (for more information, see the Municipal Art Society's excellent 2005 report, *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City*).

The city should reinvent Community Boards by adopting their plans as legitimate goals and asking communities to articulate their aspirations, needs, and priorities at the beginning of the development process. When officials, developers, and designers start working with communities as equal partners, they will benefit from the collective expertise of the people who have the most at stake in the project. The community, in turn, gains more say in changes to their neighborhood and thus becomes more invested in seeing them through.

Community Boards themselves need to adapt to this new way of doing business. They must become more open, transparent, and engaged with their constituencies if they are to proactively shape the future of their districts. They should become highly visible forums where leadership from every stratum of society is exercised. Working with the vast number of grassroots neighborhood associations in the city, Community Boards could facilitate Placemaking projects by convening and coordinating the efforts of these organizations. New York was once a leader in the movement towards community-based planning, and it can lead again by adopting a new model for Community Boards.

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Above: Volunteers paint the playground in Tompkins Square Park



## 9 Manage Public Spaces for Public Outcomes

Without good management, underutilized places will remain underutilized, and potential community assets will be wasted. To produce successful results over the long run, a public space agenda must include strategies for ongoing management. It may not sound dazzling, but PPS has found that management is responsible for eighty percent of a public space's success. Current public space management practices in New York, however, threaten to privatize places or limit their use to a narrow constituency.

Recognizing the importance of management, the city has turned increasingly to Business Improvement Districts to take responsibility for public spaces. BIDs have proven effective at the basics of maintenance, security, and beautification, but they have yet to explore a broader public role. Small Business Services, the agency that manages their funds, should lead BIDs to form more community partnerships, program their public spaces, and implement streetscape improvements. BIDs themselves would relish the new role. Some are already raring to work with surrounding communities on bold visions for what their public spaces could become—they just need the go-ahead.

The counterparts to BIDs are Park Improvement Districts, a new form of management with its own limitations. If PIDs follow the current BID model, these parks may be little more than well-maintained but passive green spaces. Furthermore, there is a risk that PIDs will mostly serve the property owners whose taxes fund them, rather than the public as a

whole. Rather than tread the dangerous path toward park privatization, PIDs should strive to achieve more public outcomes. In fact, a better name would be “Public Space Improvement District,” since the goal is not just to make parks financially self-sufficient, but to create spaces that engage the broader public.

The same public goals should apply to New York's multitude of privately owned public spaces, particularly its “bonus plazas.” These spaces are the result of a 1960s zoning law that allowed developers to build taller buildings in exchange for creating plazas at street level. The majority of bonus plazas are unfortunately just empty open spaces that provide little of the public benefit developers were supposed to deliver. Hundreds of these barren plazas could be converted to active public use if building owners, tenants, and neighborhood businesses collaborate to fund creative improvements and manage these public spaces to meet community goals.

The transformation of bonus plazas—and the evolution of BIDs and PIDs—depends on action by City Hall. Only a city-coordinated effort can thoroughly influence and coordinate the disparate organizations charged with managing public spaces. By setting performance standards, providing technical assistance, and sharing best practices, the city can make sure that New York's public spaces achieve their promise of becoming great places.

Above: Herald Square



## Some Places to Start with...

### HOW TO BEGIN MAKING MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS TO NEW YORK'S PUBLIC SPACES

**W**hen it comes to the city's public spaces, many New Yorkers have come to accept shameful conditions as inevitable facts of urban life. But the truth is that much can be done to improve the public realm. Chicago, London, and other large cities are already tackling public space problems head-on and discovering that the initial risk is well worth the final reward. It's time for New York to do the same. Here is a small sampling of places where New York could apply the nine strategies outlined in this commentary.

### Be Bold: Address Citywide Conditions

#### DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

While global rivals like London, Paris, and Barcelona put their weight behind major programs to deliver transportation infrastructure that supports public space and community life, New York City DOT's chief goal remains to move more and more traffic. A shift in priorities could get this crucial agency headed in the right direction. With innovative leadership and sufficient resources, DOT could dramatically transform the city's streets for the better, neighborhood by neighborhood, borough by borough.

#### SCHOOL YARDS

The typical New York City school yard comprises a flat swath of asphalt bounded by a chain-link fence. In stark terms, it conveys the message that kids should be hemmed in and separated from the rest of the neighborhood. Other cities are making impressive strides towards a more community-minded model for schools and school yards. New York owes

its schoolchildren an equally strong commitment to improving their daily environment.

#### BONUS PLAZAS

Manhattan's hundreds of "bonus plazas" have by and large remained dismal failures since their inception. Most were built during a time when developers wanted mainly to keep transients out, and designers just wanted the plaza to reflect the architecture of the building. Though attitudes have changed since then, hardly any bonus plazas have been transformed into active, publicly usable spaces. The city should implement a "Bonus Plaza Placemaking Program" to spur developers to work with building tenants and nearby residents on converting bonus plazas from wasted open space to valuable community places.

#### PUBLIC EMPLOYEE PARKING

When you come across vehicles parked all over a New York City sidewalk, it's a sure sign that a government facility is nearby. The city allows public employees to park their personal cars almost anywhere with impunity, and the consequences are serious. Sidewalks around courthouses, police stations—even schools and firehouses—are clogged with cars, forcing everyone, including senior citizens and children, to take dangerous detours into the street and contributing significantly to traffic congestion by encouraging government employees to drive. Putting a stop to this perk would pay huge dividends for New Yorkers' quality of life.

For an in-depth examination of many more New York places, view the full City Commentary on [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

Above: PS 29, Baltic Street, Brooklyn. Parking lot or neighborhood gathering place?



## Make Connections: Create Cohesive Districts and Corridors

### BROADWAY

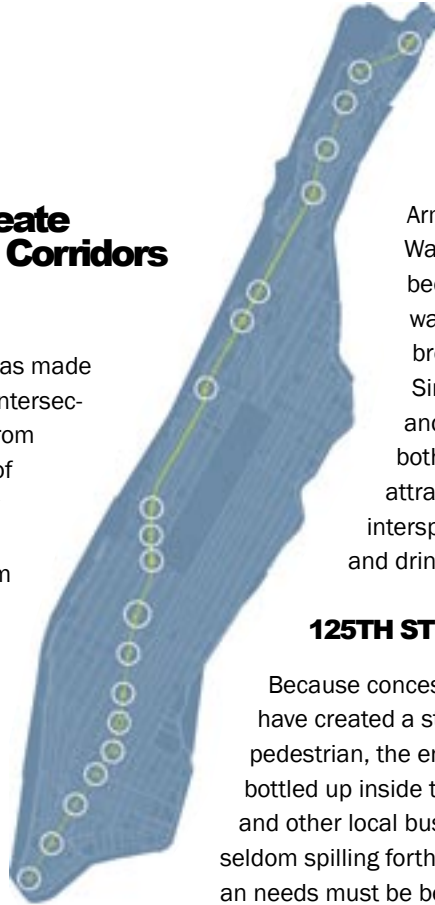
Broadway's angle to the street grid has made it the site of the city's most notable intersections, attractions, and institutions. From 218th Street to the Battery, it is full of promise as a public space, but today most of this potential is woefully unfulfilled. Reclaiming Broadway from traffic will enable it to serve as an island-spanning corridor of great squares and linear public spaces.

### CIVIC CENTER

New York's Civic Center—the government buildings and public spaces clustered around City Hall—is not a place that fosters civic pride. Jersey barriers mar the bases of beautiful courthouses and stately office buildings, while parked cars cover the streets and sidewalks as though the law has ceased to apply. If the city were to end the public employee parking perk, and the federal government were to adopt more innovative methods of security, the Civic Center could emerge as a major destination that New Yorkers would be proud to call their own and show off to visitors.

### FIFTH AVENUE

Fifth Avenue could regain its pre-eminence as America's great shopping street if the emphasis on through-traffic were greatly reduced. From 125th Street, past the world-class collection of museums alongside Central Park, to 59th Street and Grand



Army Plaza, all the way down to Washington Square Park, it could become a great boulevard and walking experience, home to a breathtaking array of destinations. Simply eliminating a travel lane and widening the sidewalks on both sides—providing space for attractive bus stops and amenities interspersed with small kiosks for food and drink—is a logical first step.

### 125TH STREET

Because concessions to the motor vehicle have created a street environment hostile to the pedestrian, the energy of 125th Street remains bottled up inside the restaurants, clubs, theaters, and other local businesses for which it is famous, seldom spilling forth into the public realm. Pedestrian needs must be better served, the street environment enlivened, and new businesses incubated, all while retaining the authenticity and small-scale appeal of the city's most recognizable African American neighborhood. Then 125th Street will be a public space befitting its historic significance.

### ATLANTIC YARDS

Brooklyn needs a great destination at the intersection of Atlantic and Flatbush. This means that buildings there should be easily accessible from sidewalks at grade and from transit underground, that retail and cultural uses should provide a strong identity, and that public plazas, courtyards and streets should function as active gathering places. Forest City Ratner's proposal will need to change drastically to accomplish these goals and avoid becoming a district full of traffic congestion, lifeless streets, and exclusive public spaces.

Above: 125th Street

Center: Broadway's major intersections present the opportunity to create a corridor of great places



## Get Local: Reimagine Underperforming Places

### TIMES SQUARE

Times Square must cease to be a place people simply pass through and gawk at, and become a true district with a series of destinations valued by tourists and New Yorkers alike. Defining Times Square as a pedestrian-oriented environment will enlarge the perception of the area beyond the “bowtie” formed by the intersection of Seventh Avenue and Broadway. Giving people more freedom of movement will enable even the most jaded Times Square office worker to enjoy the crowds again.

### MUSEUM OF MODERN ART EXTERIOR

Even after a major renovation in 2004, MoMA’s entrance and facade feel more like the side of a warehouse than a world-class cultural institution. MoMA’s influence is felt far beyond the immediate neighborhood; its continued insulation from the streets that surround it sends the backwards message that museums have no place engaging



the public realm. Its next renovation should focus squarely on how to create an exterior public space experience equal to its remarkable interior.

### ASTOR PLACE

Nowhere else in New York offers more opportunity to create something out of nothing than Astor Place. It is one of the few places in the city that has the form of a public square, yet there is so little vehicle traffic and so much asphalt that people are compelled to walk straight through the space rather than use it as a destination. It begs to be transformed into a pedestrian-oriented district binding Greenwich Village and the East Village together.

### BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

The downtown Brooklyn waterfront could become a world-class public space serving people from throughout the five boroughs. If it is built as currently proposed, however, the high-rise housing at its entrances and isolated, one-dimensional green spaces will effectively prevent Brooklyn residents from getting the most out of their prime waterfront. There is still a chance to return Brooklyn Bridge Park to the widely praised “13 Guiding Principles” that evolved from community hearings in 2001.

### GRAND ARMY PLAZA, BROOKLYN

Grand Army Plaza fails as a destination because it is basically a glorified traffic circle. Reducing the impact of traffic and creating streets and sidewalks that engage pedestrians will make Grand Army Plaza a place where people can gather in the heart of Brooklyn and link the borough’s premier cultural institutions together.

Above: Astor Place reimagined as a pedestrian-oriented environment  
 Left: MoMA viewed from 54th Street



# Together We Can Make New York a City of Great Places

**P**roject for Public Spaces found its inspiration in the streets of New York. Formed in 1975 to apply the lessons of William H. Whyte's Streetlife Project to public spaces around the U.S., we embarked on a mission that took us far afield from our home city. Eventually we found our expertise in demand all over the world. As we worked in more and more cities, we developed a richer understanding of public spaces that begs to be put to use back in New York.

## **PPS is committed to shaping a public space agenda for the city.**

In New York today, PPS is spearheading the recently launched New York City Streets Renaissance Campaign ([www.nycstreets.org](http://www.nycstreets.org)) together with Transportation Alternatives ([www.transalt.org](http://www.transalt.org)) and The Open Planning Project ([www.openplans.org](http://www.openplans.org)). The campaign involves a growing coalition of community groups, elected officials, business leaders, and concerned citizens from across the five boroughs who are working together to bring long-overdue, common sense improvements to our neighborhood streets. The exhibition "Livable Streets: A New Vision for New York" has been displayed at the Municipal Art Society, the Condé Nast Building, and as part of Open House New York 2006 (October).

This work follows in the wake of numerous New York projects that have engaged us since our inception. When PPS set up our first office over thirty years ago, in Rockefeller Center, New York was nearing its lowest ebb. PPS helped lay the foundation for many of the transformations that took root over the next fifteen years, including the turnarounds of Rockefel-

ler Center and Bryant Park. Our recommendations for Rockefeller Center's Channel Gardens helped transform corporate wariness about public use of urban plazas, showing that with good management, these spaces can benefit businesses as well as the public. And in 1981, PPS's report, *Bryant Park, Intimidation or Recreation?*, set the park's storied turnaround in motion, creating a place that today enjoys perhaps the highest use and best maintenance of any urban park in America.

Since then, PPS has worked on more than 200 projects in New York. We bring a unique perspective based on our knowledge of how parks, streets, public markets, civic buildings, transit stations and commercial districts are used by people, yielding improvements that have transformed these places in neighborhoods both large and small across all five boroughs.

## **Let's improve the future of New York together...**

**If you are interested in creating great places in New York and want to help push this agenda forward, we would very much like to hear from you.**

**Our role has always been to act as a resource, facilitator, and source of inspiration as we work with leaders, individuals and communities trying to make change happen.**

Please call us at (212) 620-5660 or email [pps@pps.org](mailto:pps@pps.org).

Sincerely,  
Fred Kent  
President, Project for Public Spaces

Above: Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn

# About Project for Public Spaces

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is an internationally recognized nonprofit organization that applies a community-based approach to the development and revitalization of cities and neighborhoods. We work with public- and private-sector organizations, including government agencies, NGOs, and foundations. We have worked with over 1500 communities in 48 states and 26 countries to improve their parks, main streets, commercial corridors, public markets, transit stations, libraries, and countless other public spaces.

## Recent Projects

**Detroit 300 Conservancy:** Developed the concept for a new central square, Campus Martius Park.

**City of Mississauga, Ontario:** Engaged 400+ residents and city staff in a civic center revitalization initiative that led to the creation of a new public department, "Building a City for the 21st Century."

**Ford and Kellogg Foundations:** Developed a national funding initiative to broaden the social and economic impacts of public markets and farmers markets in low-income communities.

**New Jersey DOT:** Trained hundreds of traffic engineers how to design streets that balance the needs of pedestrians and cars.

**Federal Highway Administration:** Launched and operated an online clearinghouse of information about Context Sensitive Solutions.

**U.S. General Services Administration:** Fostered partnerships to revitalize over 20 public buildings in downtowns across the country, and created a step-by-step guide for federal property managers to enhance the public spaces in and around their facilities.

## International Projects

Our current international work ranges from small-scale initiatives helping towns in Croatia and Serbia use public spaces to rebuild local economies and strengthen civil society, to public space planning for multi-billion dollar development projects in Hong Kong and Dubai.

Visit us on the web  
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