WHAT IS TO BE DONE? What's next for downtown management?

By Andrew M. Manshel



Corner of 42nd and 6th South East Corner -- across from Bryant Park

Walking along 42nd Street towards Bryant Park right after the November election in the U.S. I was shocked to see the windows boarded up on two jewelry stores facing Bryant Park. The essence of the revitalization of the park was creating the perception of safety for its potential users. *This* was definitely not *that*. Boarding up windows is not what George Kelling and Katherine Coles had in mind when they wrote "Fixing Broken Windows.[1]" The revitalization of Bryant Park was led by a business improvement district (BID), which was associated with two other BIDs focused on the areas around the transit hubs of Grand Central Terminal (Grand Central Partnership) and New York's Penn Station (34th Street Partnership).

The issues around public disorder in connection with the election were both overstated and transitory. But the underlying concerns about safety in public spaces reflected in the impulse of store owners to protect their merchandise caused by the pandemic are real and will be lasting. In order to attract people back to commercial corridors and downtown public spaces, they will need to be convinced that the probability of contracting the COVID-19 virus by visiting downtown is small or negligible. Once again, as in the early 90's, Business Improvement Districts will need to create the perception of safety and figure out how to communicate it to the public – this time, however, the issue isn't the absence of crime, but protection from infection.

Downtown managers will need to follow the science. Right now, despite the gallons of ink being spilled, we still don't know very much about how the virus is transmitted and don't have a complete, detailed protocol for practices in public and retail spaces. We know masks work. Outside activity appears to be better than inside activity. However, we also know that indoor dining and drinking seemed to be major venues for transmission. But beyond that, we don't know much, and a vaccine is only beginning to roll out. Even so, we won't know how long it protects recipients (weeks, months, a lifetime) for a considerable time thereafter. All that being said, if I had to guess (and my guess is as bad as anyone else's), I'd say the pandemic comes under control in the industrialized countries in late second quarter/early third quarter of 2021.

Programs and Services

In "Learning from Bryant Park[2]" I argued that BIDs, particularly the larger ones, ought to look beyond providing the traditional "clean and safe" programs, particularly since so many urban centers have experienced renewal over the last thirty years and the perception of lack of crime has been well established. But now, the definition of "safe" has changed radically – and as I said, downtown managers are going to need to follow the science closely. It would probably be a good idea for the International Downtown Association to create a task force, including experts in epidemiology, to create, and continuously update as new information becomes available, best practices for virus containment for public and retail spaces. BIDs will need to figure out how to integrate those practices into their programs, and more importantly, communicate the efficacy of the practices and the fact that they are being scrupulously followed downtown in order to increase the public's perception of safety there. Just as we relied on trial and error, and iteration, in mid-town Manhattan in the early 90s to determine what worked in making office workers and visitors return to the center, creative municipalities and organizations will have to try a range to vehicles, as yet unidentified, to make people feel safe downtown. Some things will work, some things won't. By sharing information on successes and failures among cities and towns, it is likely that a menu of best practices will emerge fairly quickly.[3] There are things we know that animate public spaces and commercial corridors that we ought to be doing right now:

- Providing resources to ground floor tenants to enliven commercial corridors. BIDs, even in this difficult time, have resources they can deploy to support local businesses. Rather than simply allowing restaurants and stores to occupy sidewalks and parking lanes, government and BIDs should buy required supplies in bulk and distribute them along commercial corridors. Those supplies, which aren't expensive, include moveable tables and chairs, umbrellas, space heaters, temporary structures (including the elements for parklets in parking spaces), and, in particular, lighting equipment. Restaurant activity is key to animating commercial corridors. On my block, our favorite French bistro has been aggressive in taking over the sidewalk (beyond their storefront), putting out tables, chairs, protective bubbles, a shack in the parking lane and festive lights on trees and over the sidewalk. Its business is booming. But more importantly, it makes the neighborhood seem alive. I've altered my dog walking routine to include that block face, just because walking there is such a pleasure. Providing free stuff to businesses, regardless of their financial situation, may be a blunt instrument, but we're in an emergency situation and every reasonable measure and every available resource deployed to get business activity downtown going again. The relatively small investment will be money well spent to bring people downtown through the winter and spring and get them to spend time there.

- Creating a supportive environment for experimentation (in other words getting government regulation out of the way). New York City essentially threw out the rule book for its wildly successful "Open Restaurants" (https://www1.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/openstreets-restaurants.shtml) and

"Open Streets" (https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-03327) programs. The on-line application process is easy, and the issuance of permits is near automatic. The rules that there are, are straightforward and reasonably easy to follow. The City stopped charging for the use of the sidewalks for cafes. The results have been nothing short of spectacular and a godsend for neighborhoods all over the city. BIDs need to advocate for local government doing this everywhere.

- Lighting. Nothing will be more important to getting us through the upcoming dark, cold and unusually depressing winter than lighting. Where local government and the private sector has otherwise not taken up the call, BIDs will need to step in to creatively light public spaces. This goes beyond the usual holiday lights (which this year, should remain up through the end of February to keep things lively), but getting creative with the tremendous capacity, and low cost, of LED and laser technologies. I recently attended a socially distant, outdoor event in a cemetery that was entirely lit with battery powered theatrical lighting.[4] Center City District has creatively lit Philadelphia's City Hall's facade as an attraction.[5] The small city of Caldwell, Idaho does amazing things with lighting at a winter festival.[6] The Freemont Street experience in Las Vegas has long been remarkable revitalization project using lighting.[7] FERMOB, the maker of the Bryant Park movable chair, for example, has developed some interesting cordless lighting products that recharge via a USB cord.[8] My favorite recent example of the use of new lighting technology is in the small town of Conques, in south central France, where the lighting of 12th Century tympanum of the historic Abbey Church has made the doors to the church a tourist attraction in its own right.[9] When it comes to lighting this winter nothing is too little or too much.

- Leveraging empty space. Empty spaces, whether they are storefronts, parking lots or even cemeteries, can be dead spots and defeat even the best executed commercial revitalization programs. Unused spaces need to be lit and animated. Pop-up artists' studios and galleries (following social distancing guidelines) are easy to set up and are generally lit and active at night (artists tend to be nocturnal). Providing empty space for learning pods both activates empty spaces and solves an important pandemic generated problem. Creating socially distant workspaces with free Wi-Fi may be attractive to folks going stir crazy from working at home. Perhaps the most dynamic and valuable use of empty space is market. *Both* empty and active storefronts need to be well lit and the windows attractively and, ideally, actively decorated. Now is the time to experiment and try new ideas.

- Encouraging markets downtown. While the world of ground floor retail was already being revolutionized before the pandemic, the demand on the part of both buyers and sellers for markets of all kinds continues to increase exponentially. The essence of markets is a critical mass of small selling spaces, minimally outfitted, leased for short periods of time. Markets create opportunities for entry level entrepreneurs, many of whom are recent immigrants to the United States. They can be indoor (socially distant) and outdoor (in parking facilities, parks, athletic fields and empty lots). There are markets of all types, from the traditional farmers' markets, to food markets (like the phenomenally successful Queens Night Market [http://www.queensnightmarket.com]), to markets selling handmade artwork, textiles,

clothing, jewelry and other objects (https://bryantpark.org/eat-drink/holiday-shops), to mixed markets like the amazing Turn-Styles in a New York City subway station (https://www.turn-style.com). The recently opened Essex Market on Manhattan's Lower East Side was an immediate, high energy success (https://www.essexmarket.nyc). The vitality created by a successful market is unparalleled by any other use. As we learn more about best practices for virus transmission prevention, markets will become easier to execute. BIDs are ideally suited to sponsor markets in empty spaces, when the private sector has created one.

- Street level retailing. We don't yet know how successful sidewalk and curbside retailing will work.[10] Curbside pickup seems be something in which consumers are interested, and something BIDs need to help model and support. Retailers need to be encouraged to explore and promote multiple channels, internet sales in particular. BIDs can provide technical assistance in creating attention drawing websites and in how to pick, pack and ship products on a small scale are likely attractive and productive ways to sell from the sidewalk and the parking lane and downtown managers and EDOs need to take the lead in fostering experimentation. Some conventional retailers have figured out the secret sauce and are mixing conventional retail methods with social distancing. My local bagel store, Absolute Bagels (https://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g60763-d850467-Reviews-Absolute_Bagels-New_York_City_New_York.html) for reasons that are something of a mystery to me, generates a line with a routine half-hour wait every Saturday and Sunday through the pandemic (cash only, BTW). They are clearly doing something right, which is worthy of emulation by other retailers of all kinds.

- Leading the market. BIDs (EDO) are going to need to take more risks, particularly financial risks, in order to see their commercial corridors through to the other side of the pandemic. This is particularly true with sopping up (by lease or purchase) and repurposing particularly distressed properties. Where an uncooperative property owner, or local government, owns an empty eyesore in the middle of the downtown, BIDs need to step in, take control, rehabilitate, repurpose and light up those parcels. My experience with this kind of project is that over time repurposed properties can become quite valuable – and an annuity for the EDO, while in the short-term solving a pressing problem. BIDs also need to step in where the private or public sector have been unable to innovate. If there is no market, the BID may need to start one. Where ground floor spaces are empty, the BID may need to recruit artists and operate studios and galleries; or lease the space and sublease it for novel uses – like urgent care, pre-school facilities or classrooms. If no one else is taking on doing big, creative lighting downtown, the BID needs to do it. We need to be creative, take small risks and act fast.

In the wake of the pandemic, providing private street cleaning and downtown ambassadors are likely not the answer to keeping main streets and other commercial corridors and public spaces active and inviting. BIDs are going to need to expand their playbook and take a leadership role both in setting standards for safety in the use of public space and in generating activity in order to draw the public back downtown. History rhymes, and we once again face a set of challenges

like those confronting the urban core in the 80s and early 90s. I'm confident the current cadre of downtown managers are up to the task.

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[1]Free Press, 1998.
[2] Rutgers, 2020.
[3] Two good examples are suggestions made by the New York City Comptroller for small business support: https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/comptroller-stringer-proposes-plan-to-support-and-promote-small-businesses-this-holiday-season-amid-covid-19-resurgence/?mc_cid=b3ea7a4601&mc_eid=5f0ebc4c65; and the excellent work being done by the Center City District in Philadelphia: https://www.centercityphila.org/parks/dilworth-park/winter.
[4] https://www.deathofclassical.com/angelshare/to-america
[5] http://mms.tveyes.com/MediaCenterPlayer.aspx?u=aHR0cDovL21lZGlhY2VudGVyLnR2ZXllcy5jb20vZG93bmxvYWRnYXRld2F5LmFzcHg%2FVXNlcklEPTg2NDMyOCZNRElEPTE0MTk5NjI2Jk1EU2VlZD0xMTQzJlR5cGU9TWVkaWE%3D
[6] https://www.indiancreekplaza.com/winter-wonderland-festival
[7] https://vegasexperience.com/viva-vision-light-show/
[8] https://www.fermob.com/en/Products/Lighting
[9] https://www.tourisme-conques.fr/en/en-conques/the-tympanum#inauguration
[10] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/02/nyregion/nyc-outdoors-open-storefronts.html.