The Strengths, Weaknesses, and Potentials of Pedestrian Malls: a discussion

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, members of the *American Downtown Revitalization Review*'s (ADRR) Board have engaged in a near continuous e-mail dialogue about a wide range of issues, trends and opportunities that do not, in our opinions, always receive the attention they need and deserve in other media outlets and industry publications. The vitality of these conversations is evident in the number who join and/or read these back-and-forths more than two years after the ADRR's launch; indeed, over time, non-Board members have added to the ferment with their own observations and insights.

We at the ADRR have followed with particular interest the reimagining of public space that represents one of the welcome developments of the pandemic era. It led us to wonder whether the time was right for a reevaluation of the pedestrian mall experiment which had been roundly dismissed as an abject failure for decades. With this in mind, our Michael Berne wrote an article in July 2021, entitled "Pedestrian Malls: The Newest Fad?", which was widely read both on the ADRR site as well as Michael's LinkedIn feed. It can be accessed here:
https://theadrr.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/MJBPedMallsArticleADRRFinal.pdf

Then, on September 9th, 2022, *Bloomberg CityLab* published an article, "Lessons from the Rise and Fall of the Pedestrian Mall", by Stephan Schmidt, a Professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, based on his analysis of 125 of them from the postwar era.
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-09/why-america-fell-out-of-love-with-the-pedestrian-mall

We were delighted when, in response to an approach by one of our Board members, Dave Feehan , Stephan was willing to engage with us to discuss his findings, our (at times, critical) feedback as well as pedestrian malls more generally. Others joined along the way. The result was an extensive dialogue that grappled with the nuances and complexities of the subject, and that, we feel, would be of interest to others involved in Downtown revitalization. We have provided excerpts from this exchange below:

DATES: September 10, 2021 to October 31, 2021

PARTICIPANTS:

Jerome Barth, Fifth Avenue Association
Michael Berne, MJB Consulting
Katherine Correll, Downtown Colorado Inc.
Bob Goldsmith, Greenbaum Rowe

David Feehan, Civitas Consulting;
Gary Ferguson, Downtown Ithaca Alliance;
Kristen Fish-Peterson, Redevelopment Resources;
Andrew Manshel, Author of Learning From Bryant Park;
David Milder, DANTH, Inc;
Bill Ryan, University of Wisconsin- Madison, Extension;
Stephan Schmidt, Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University;
Ken Stapleton, Ken Stapleton & Associates;

THE DISCUSSION

DAVID FEEHAN:
Stephan, I enjoyed your article in Bloomberg this morning on pedestrian malls. I was particularly interested because of my long history working with these streets.

- I grew up in Minneapolis, and watched Nicollet Avenue became the famous Nicollet Mall, a transit mall where Mary Tyler Moore through her hat into the air in the intro of a tremendously popular TV sitcom.
- I was the first executive director of East Liberty Development, Inc, a community development corporation in Pittsburgh's East End, where three pedestrian malls were installed as part of a Victor Gruen-inspired redesign of the business district.
- *I was the first president of Downtown Kalamazoo Incorporated, where the first US mall was built in 1959, and later removed*.
- I was a consultant to the City of Chicago's planning department, advising the removal of the Englewood Mall.
- I advised perhaps a dozen other cities that were considering removing their pedestrian malls, many in the Midwest.
- I was the first president of the Downtown Community Alliance in Des Moines IA, where the Walnut Transit Mall is being revisited. I am part of a consulting team creating a new vision for downtown Des Moines.
- I was an advisor to the City of Miami Beach, regarding the revival of the Lincoln Road pedestrian mall.
- I was the president of the International Downtown Association and visited many cities with pedestrian malls.

I think your research was very valuable, however incomplete. I think the following factors also contributed to the demise of many of the 200+ pedestrian malls:

- Unnecessarily complicated designs. European shopping streets are simple, walkable, and some allow slow moving vehicular traffic. Via Garibaldi in Turin is a very successful street. http://www.turinitalyguide.com/garibaldi/ American planners and architects added fountains, planters, benches, play areas, and kiosks, making maintenance and management expensive. Even custom lighting fixtures were expensive to install and maintain.

- Failure of city governments to budget for maintenance. Often built with federal grants, cities failed to anticipate ongoing maintenance costs. When brick pavers broke, lights burned out, and plants died, there was no money to keep these streets in good order.
- Lack of a capable management organization. BIDs had not yet appeared, and there was no centralized management, maintenance and marketing entity. Merchant associations were dying, and city employees lacked the skills to market these places. After the initial burst of publicity, the mall was soon forgotten.
- Fear of crime. In the 1960s and 1970s, urban areas were perceived as high crime places. Pedestrian malls often were victims of graffiti, and trash and litter indicated no one was in charge.
- Downtown residential had not yet become popular. Many downtowns were empty after 5 p.m. Yet we know that most retail sales occur after 5 p.m. and on weekends, times when malls were empty.
- Poor solutions to parking and traffic issues. Confusing one-way streets and poorly managed, unfriendly parking systems were common.
- Unfriendly to woman. Read my book, "Design Downtown for Women - Men Will Follow." https://www.amazon.com/Design-Downtown-Women-Will-Follow/dp/169881870X/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=design+downtown+for+women+men+will+follow&qid=1631274633&sr=8-1
- Many downtowns are very woman-unfriendly - a recipe for failure.

DAVID MILDER:
I wonder about the representativeness of the pedestrian malls that Stephan Schmidt analyzed. Back in the late 1970s, when I was running the Urban Institute at UNC-Charlotte, I came across a good number of smaller towns that were flirting with ideas of a pedestrian mall. Hendersonville, NC, was one that decided not to go that route, but some others in NC, SC and VA did, like Winchester (VA). I think there were a lot of pedestrian malls built by then, and most were in these medium and small sized downtowns. I also wonder if Stephan looked at Division Street Plaza in Somerville, NJ, a one block pedestrian mall in a town of 12,000 people that seems to be a success.

Is longevity really the critical dependent variable? The 165th St Mall in Jamaica Center, Queens is a one block long pedestrian mall that has been around for about 40 years, and the site of drug dealing/use and other problems over the years. Most downtown experts see it as adding little value during its best years but being a real problem area in its troubled years. But it has lasted because getting rid of it is just more trouble than the effort needed to do that is worth.

The 16th Street Mall in Denver is over a mile long, and I walked the length of it several times in several years, and I could not find a really weak spot, and it seems to be getting stronger with each visit. What may be the explanation is that it is a linear collection of several functionally different commercial nodes, and that might be the secret for having successful long malls.

It is interesting that the 3rd Street Promenade had a proximity to the beach in its early struggling years as well as in more recent years of decline. Lincoln Road Mall also has had several periods of tough times, and in the mid 1990s there was a serious discussion about disbanding it -- but its location near a beach remained constant. So, such an asset may not be a deciding factor for their success.

DAVE FEEHAN:
Great response, David. However, I would argue that one of the critical factors is the presence of a BID or similar organization. Since the early 1980's, Denver has had the Downtown Denver Partnership, with strong leadership from Dick Fleming to Bill Moser to Tami Door. Minneapolis, by way of contrast, did not create a BID until decades later.

ANDREW MANSHEL:
Exactly right, Dave. The 165th Street Mall in Jamaica, for which Carlisle Towery used the Nicollet Mall as a model, has a BID but it is severely under-resourced, with a budget that is still less than $200,000.

DAVID MILDER:
I agree about the BID in Denver, but I think their leadership also counted. Fleming and Moser were very impactful, whereas Raleigh had an MSD – the North Carolina version of a BID -- but its leadership was nowhere near as insightful as Denver's. I think both are needed.

As with all things, there are well run BIDs and those that are not.

STEPHAN SCHMIDT:
Thank you all for the thoughtful comments and responses to the article, I really enjoyed reading them. I particularly appreciate reading about some of your personal experiences and interactions with these pedestrian malls.

Our dataset is incomplete, as there were close to 200 malls built; however, we were limited to pedestrian malls that we were able to find relevant data about. Some of these malls disappeared without much of any public record: in some cases, we had to contact individuals who were involved in their planning and implementation.

You are correct, David, that some of the 43 malls we identified as 'successful' are probably not worthy of the qualifier (I agree with your Ithaca Commons assessment), and many would disagree with our definition (that if it still exists today, it is, by definition, "successful"). We did toy with other descriptions -- 'survivor', for one, as we did employ a survival model, but this didn't seem right either.

We did find that length of the mall (in feet) was significant in explaining "success" -- shorter is better. You are of course right, that there are examples of the opposite. Most

likely other factors (design, retail, adjacent land uses, etc.) are significant in explaining why these malls continue to exist, not their length.

As you point out, many smaller places experimented with ped malls in those days (and received urban renewal funding to do so), and some of them have been successful, like Somerville, NJ's Division St, Ithaca, etc. We too had originally expected that smaller places would in fact be more conducive to supporting pedestrian malls, but one of the surprises in our findings was that in the end population size was not significant. It could be that when we controlled for population density, size became less relevant, or that other factors were more important.

Dave (Feehan), you are correct in that the analysis is limited and we did not include a number of important characteristics that led to the removal of these pedestrian malls. We did have a broader discussion that included many of the points you raise, particularly about the management and governance of these spaces (although the gender argument you make is interesting and one that we did not discuss). However, because we were trying to empirically model whether or not a mall was successful, we had to limit our analysis to quantitative data that we could actually collect and specify in the model -- the editors at Bloomberg understandably did *not* want a discussion of the model specification! The more qualitative aspects - management, design, etc. – would probably require a different research methodology to discern their impact on a pedestrian mall's longevity.

Thanks again for your interest and commentary. We are currently examining street closures during the pandemic. Although most of these were always designated as temporary and have since re-opened, there are some that are in the process of being made permanent. Quick research teaser: Compared to the earlier generation of ped malls, the places that experimented with pandemic inspired street closures tend to skew wealthier.

DAVID MILDER:
Thanks for the reply, Stephan.

I really think that the research design needed to be more contextual, and look at conditions in the pedestrian mall area when it was constructed and then compared with when it closed or was deemed successful. I don't think the Raleigh Mall, for example, ever had a chance. The customer base had shifted and the merchants I interviewed there back then really did not want the new customers.

Also, looking at the role assigned to the ped mall is important. The very strong ones are not tasked to be downtown saviors, but as a kind of turbocharger that makes a decent retail or visitation situation reach significantly higher levels.

BTW: I do think Ithaca Commons is finally headed in the right direction, but one that is not retail led.

Thanks again for your article and for engaging with us.

STEPHAN SCHMIDT:
Apropos this discussion: San Mateo OKs pedestrian malls (https://www.smdailyjournal.com/news/local/san-mateo-oks-pedestrian-malls/article_bfa585ce-1c23-11ec-b21d-c79caad1dc4c.html)

MICHAEL BERNE:
Why do we say that pedestrian malls cannot work in the U.S. when enclosed regional malls, which worked for decades, utilize the same basic layout except for a roof? We park on the outside, walk in and around, then return to our cars -- just like we do when visiting medieval towns in Europe...

What if the first round of pedestrian malls had lasted long enough to benefit from the urban renaissance starting in the 1990's? Would we then call them successes today?

Do pedestrian malls stand a better chance of attracting suburban day-trippers now, because, unlike those who had fled the cities in the '60's and '70's, a growing share of today's day-trippers are themselves transplanted Millennials who have recently suburbanized for reasons related to family formation and/or affordability but who retain their urban sensibilities?

Why do we claim that college towns are ideal settings for pedestrian malls when most of the ones that have succeeded in such communities are in fact located at a remove from the campus (which has its own adjacent "college drag) and cater just as much (if not more) to non-student markets?

To what extent was the industry's definition of failure rooted in subjective notions of success, specifically as they relate to the demographics of the customer base and the unfamiliarity of the storefront retailers?

Why is warm weather considered a necessary ingredient when a slew of pedestrian malls long deemed successful exist in decidedly harsher climates?

All of these questions poke the bear of received wisdom -- so what do you think? I cannot imagine that all of you are in full agreement! Let's get feisty on this subject, because the whole point of the ADRR is that if we don't, no one else will! So, bring it on!

ANDY MANSHEL:

As with so many things, it is not about the idea of a pedestrian mall — it's about how the idea is executed. And by that, I'm not referring to the design or the amount of capital dollars spent on pedestrianizing the mall.

Properly programmed pedestrian malls are successful. Malls that don't self-generate activity, or don't have intensive programmed activity aren't.

You can't just put up sawhorses at each end of the block (as has been done on my block) and walk away. Activity doesn't spontaneously generate.

BILL RYAN:
The success of Ithaca NY and its downtown "Commons" is truly inspirational. This small city with an urbanized population of 60,000 is a shining star in upstate New York.

However, retail is only part of the mix. New investment in apartments (all price points), hotels (high REVPar), Office space (solid tenants), parking garages, transit and the arts, have been built or are underway after thorough study by dedicated local leaders, including an exceptional downtown district executive.

Yes, it's home to Cornell, Ithaca College, and a highly respected Community College, but there is a second downtown adjacent to Cornell accommodating student needs.

The UK's Guardian rates Ithaca among the very top small cities in the U.S. due in part to its cross-generational, community-focused appeal. This appeal is visible seven days a week on the "Ithaca Commons."

In my opinion, the Ithaca pedestrian mall has more to do with geography and demographics than retail mix. The small footprint of the city requires density, which concentrates more people in the core of the downtown. It serves as a central business and social district.

Everything flows downtown including the Gorges, the waterfalls, even Trader Joe's as well as the area's big-box stores (located within one mile of the Commons). The college populations gravitate downtown despite the 500-foot elevation drop.

So while retail is important, it is only one part the formula behind pedestrian mall success.

(EDITOR's NOTE: As a student residing in Ithaca, Bill won the contest for naming the DOWNOTWN'S new pedestrian mall.)

STEPHAN SCHMIDT:
As a point of clarification, the presence or absence of a local college or university was *not* significant in our model to explain pedestrian mall longevity. Instead, the average age of residents *was* (younger implying the mall was more likely to survive). Of course, a college

or university does serve as a source of young people (and I imagine there was some multicollinearity between these 2 variables), but there could be other sources of young people: local economy, etc.

As noted, a pre-existing source of foot traffic (whether from said young people or local tourism, etc.) is certainly a deciding factor; ped malls were generally not able to generate sufficient pedestrian traffic on their own.

To Michael's question about weather, while we did find that percent of sunny days was significant, there are plenty of dreary-sky examples (such as Ithaca!), so clearly there are other factors at play, some of which are outlined by Bill. Studies of demographic migration have consistently found that mean January temperature explains sunbelt migration, although there are clearly other factors at play (affordable housing, etc.)

As mentioned by Andy, the management/programming of these spaces surely plays an important role, but we had difficulty in capturing this information from a historical perspective (many of these malls started disappearing in the 1970s and public records are scant)

On a related note, we have collected some data on pandemic-inspired street closure programs (also referred to as open or shared streets) that I thought might be of interest to this group: we found that there were a total of 163 different programs across 157 municipalities. Of these the majority were from the beginning designated as temporary (a total of 18 are being considered for permanent status), and the vast majority lasted less than 6 months. Interestingly, the geography of these interventions is quite different from the "earlier generation", both in terms of which cities are involved and which neighborhoods within those cities chose to block streets.

Note: Since this ADRR dialogue ended, Stephan has published a follow-up article in *Bloomberg CityLab* that summarizes the research he references immediately above.
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-03/the-unequal-geography-of-covid-s-open-streets

DAVID MILDER:
Again, Stephan, interesting findings from your study. Some questions:

1) Do 163 open streets programs mean that just 163 "projects" were done? Here in NYC there's one program, but many streets where traffic was closed or restricted.

2) Were street projects that just took parking spaces included? I think an argument can be made that in some ways they are analogous to transit malls. The ped malls of the future may limit auto access in different ways than in the past.

3) What was the average age above which ped malls did better? What does "younger" mean? Younger than what? The term can denote someone youthful, but it also could mean a middle-aged person compared to a 65+ year old. For understanding how successful, popular ped malls work that might be a critical data point.

4) What would a sample of ped malls for which data about their programing is available look like? While not optimal, couldn't some useful analysis still come from it? I have long argued that a useful way around imperfect data is make appropriate qualifications to any conclusions. I thought your research was certainly systematic, but also incapable of looking into what are for me the most interesting hypotheses because of a lack of appropriate data. My fear is that will lead to our understanding of ped malls being limited to what quality data allows us to look at. For me, that is not satisfactory. I'd much rather have an understanding based on imperfect data for which I have an 80% level of subjective confidence, than to reject that line of inquiry because we cannot have an error estimate of .05 at the 95% level. Business and government people are making decisions like that every day. That understanding is certainly imperfect, but far better than nothing.

KRISTEN FISH-PETERSON:
I've read each of your responses with interest! I'm also impressed that Stephen effectively used the term "multicollinearity". I'm learning so much! ☺

From my experience dealing with downtown retailers, they are desperate for customers to be able to park in front of their store. Between complaints from shoppers not being able to park in front of the stores and complaints from operators for the lack of that opportunity, I think closing a street now would be very difficult.

When I worked in Wausau, we opened a long-time pedestrian mall and provided one-way vehicular access and angled parking. Because the traffic has to move slowly through, it still has the effect of a more pedestrian-friendly street, and can be closed for major downtown events. Along the length of 3rd St. the angled parking alternates which side of the street hosts the parking.

I'd love to hear more about perceived parking issues (because I believe they are more perceived than real).

ANDY MANSHEL:
Thanks, Kristen.

You are 100% correct about the issue of parking at the curb in front of stores. There are so many things like this that "everyone knows" that turn out to be either patently incorrect, or dubious at best. This is why I think this work is so difficult to do successfully. It is just so difficult to persuade people otherwise, or to develop a satisfactory compromise.

Some time ago, I recall a study done in Jamaica, Queens that found that the people who parked in front of stores, taking up spaces all day, WERE THE OWNERS. This, like good storefront design, is one of those really stubborn issues. The thing that I know is that once a well thought out parking plan, limiting or eliminating curbside parking, is in place, and foot traffic and sales increase from pedestrianization, or better traffic patterns, you don't hear about the issue (so much). But it is often impossible to get there.

KEN STAPLETON:
Fun discussion! Let me add a few questions/ideas.

1. There are push factors related to market demand - poor safety, design, mix, programming, storytelling. But there are also pull factors - primarily new competitors that provide a similar or better experience nearby. For Lincoln Road, that was both Bayside and Bal Harbor Shops initially. And the push was crime concerns related to the Mariel Boat Lift event. Have there been analyses of which locations absorbed the lost market share and when? Any shared features of those places?

2. A huge competitive disadvantage for retail/experience locations in downtowns including ped malls is the plurality of property ownership. It makes strategies about mix, marketing/place brand management, environment, etc. take more time and money - at best. The rebirth of Lincoln was preceded by significant changes in ownership, including multiple properties by a handful of entities/developers. Has anyone looked at ownership patterns over time related to the rise and fall of ped malls?

3. Ped malls evolve - or they die. Many started with cultural anchors as non-traditional retail anchors. Some recruited them. For Lincoln Road, these were the South Florida Art Center and New World Symphony. What does the research say about such anchors and success? About evolving the mix and success (both SFAC and NWS have moved off LR)?

4. Finally, given significant safety concerns when most ped malls died, who managed place-brand messaging about safety for the malls that survived? In my experience, City governments are not typically very good at that, and only a handful of non-profits/BIDs have been. Malls rock at managing safety perceptions. This one may be hard to research, but it ranks as very important - and very difficult to manage even with all my own experience focusing on it. Anyone looking at this dynamic?

DAVE FEEHAN:
I was going to make many of the points Ken made so well.

Don't forget that ped malls and transit malls were often made with federal grants and cities never budgeted for maintenance; then architects and engineers designed custom lighting, steel furniture and other elements that were expensive to replace if they were even available. It took only a couple of years for these streets to start looking neglected

and unsafe. No BIDs existed at this time, and merchants associations were dying. The cards were stacked against these streets from the beginning.

ANDY MANSHEL:
So true, Dave.

Today, the Jamaica BID in Queens is struggling with lack of resources to maintain red brick pavers installed thirty years ago. Their cost of liability insurance is apparently through the roof, as a result.

GARY FERGUSON:
Now here's a subject near and dear to my heart. Here are a couple of random thoughts from my perspective here in Ithaca.

1. We have had the Ithaca Commons since 1975. It continues to be a place that works for primarily independent small boutique retail.

2. Our pedestrian counters show that foot traffic on the mall has almost returned to pre-2020 conditions.

3. Visitors are a staple for our Commons businesses. The pedestrian mall is a crucial attraction for their customers. Without visitors/tourists, the mall probably would not be sustainable.

4. We, like lots of other places, have seen a growing shift in business mix with food and beverage replacing some traditional retail. It is a concerning trend.

5. It would be challenging to compare closed streets during the pandemic with a fixed pedestrian mall. That said, we did close an adjacent street to create "the Streatery" for about 10 different restaurants on the block. It was successful and the traffic counts during the pandemic outpaced other areas- due to the prevalence of outdoor dining.

6. While I agree programming is an important part of the life of a pedestrian mall, so is the amenities package that accompanies it. Our flowers and plantings are significant by themselves. Our art and playground also are major attractors. Programming can also be informal. We almost always have buskers and street performers in the mall, nearly all impromptu. They provide a vibe that people appreciate.

7. Pedestrian malls require an extraordinary amount of maintenance and repair. Any community who is unwilling or unable to make that kind of financial and resource commitment should not be thinking about one.

8. As we quickly learned by closing a block for the Streatery, the impact of the mall/closed street extends beyond the boundaries of the mall. Our closed Streatery project resulted

in delivery and loading problems in the surroundings. The rerouted traffic also created backlogs that require a change in traffic signalization. Our pedestrian mall was built with these issues in mind. Our Streatery certainly was not, and we had to deal with the fallout.

9. There is a place in the toolkit of downtown revitalization for pedestrian malls, but I would be quick to argue (unlike the advocates of the 1960's - 1980's) that this tool is not for everyone and every situation. More research on these malls would be most welcome!

ANDY MANSHEL:
Gary, this is great and makes perfect sense.

As to programming, when I use that word, I mean it to be read very broadly — and that certainly includes horticulture. Maintenance is equally important, with particular respect to the perception of safety.

This is the essence of "broken windows" management. It has to feel like someone is taking care of the space and users can feel like they can positively predict the experience that they are going to have in the space. The perception of safety is all about predictability — feeling confident that the space is familiar and that nothing unfamiliar or uncertain is going to happen there.

MICHAEL BERNE:
I would also add that Ithaca has working in its favor the absence of a serious lifestyle-center competitor, for which the market is simply not big enough. When I was working there with Gary just before the pandemic, Cornell was contemplating something along those lines on the periphery, but it would be unlikely to attain the necessary scale...

DAVID MILDER:
While I think the discussion so far has been great, I think it has dwelled far too much on the past versions of ped malls and is not looking to what has been emerging during the pandemic, and what may be happening in the future. I differ from Andy in my belief that to live we need to plan and strategize, and we don't do that about the past or present but about the future. So, like it or not we are making bets about the future all the time.

I would like us to look more closely at 1) the open-street projects, the parking space mini-parks, and the outdoor restaurant-seating shacks and 2) how some of the existing malls have been transitioning. For example, I have been in Downtown Ithaca several times since the Commons was created, and on my last trip around 2017, Bill Ryan gave me a tour, and the downtown and the Commons seemed, even under reconstruction, to be shifting strongly to new uses and features which seemed to me far more promising than those I remembered on past visits. Also, the 3rd St Promenade in Santa Monica, a longtime favorite among downtown revitalization professionals I've known, has been failing and is now trying to reinvent itself.

Regarding open streets in NYC, I just found a report by Transportation Alternatives "Open Streets Forever: The Case for Permanent 24/7 Open Streets" https://www.transalt.org/open-streets-forever-nyc# that lamented that of 274 Open Streets listed by the DOT, only 46 percent, or 126 total Open Streets were active, and they covered 24.1 miles. Moreover, their data show that about half of the active open street were over 580 feet long.

I was astonished by the lament: it seemed to me that adding 24.1 miles of public space in 126 locations, with half being over 580 feet long, in about a two-year timeframe was an astonishing feat, more worthy of praise than lamentation. Yes, they are more frequent and stronger in wealthier and whiter neighborhoods, but who will be surprised by that?

One variable that was not considered among the less affluent neighborhoods is the level of social capital within them and how that associates with active and strong open-street projects. Stronger neighborhood organizations in these areas may be one way to make their open streets more successful. Also lacking was any info on how many of these streets has any substantial commercial functions on them or how these new public spaces were used. My bet is that activities like socializing with friends, neighbors and family, various types of play and games, and simple sitting and relaxing were dominant. If commercial activities are now not present in these spaces, could they be? If not stores, then things like food trucks and street vendors? How can such open streets fit in a downtown environment?

I am going to classify any space that used to be for parking on a street where traffic still flows and is being used now as a public or commercial space as a "parklet." They have undoubtedly helped save many restaurants and, in my experience, once merchants get to use sidewalk or street spaces, they are loathe to give them back. Some of the streatery structures are OK in appearance, though many are not. Often, they block the visibility that other nearby merchants greatly need. Yet they sometimes bring a vitality to the sidewalks that is undeniable. What should be done with such blocks? Should other uses be added? I think so, and those should be about "play" and socializing, and that might mean reducing traffic to one lane.

Kristen, merchants, in my experience, always say parking is a problem, almost as if it is a mental reflex. The parklet structures to me are a key problem because of the visibility issue and then they are often so damned ugly. Will city governments be able to charge fees for the use of these spaces as Andy suggests?

My sense is that the existing ped malls will have to learn what the regular malls have learned: retail is no longer the overwhelmingly dominant use and social district functions such as I have been writing about should largely take its place. Maybe parts of these malls will resemble linear versions of great parks like Bryant Park? I wonder what Yaromir Steiner would have to say about this. His notions of lifestyle malls and town centers are certainly relevant here…

Finally, based on my prior experience with ped malls down South in the late 1970s, I think too many were tasked to be downtown saviors, a role they simply could never fill. I don't think that mistake will be made again with any new ped malls.

JEROME BARTH:
Thank you all for some very interesting conversations about pedestrian malls.

Touching on the topic, it so happens that the Fifth Avenue Association is working on an ambitious renovation plan for Fifth Avenue, with a daring timeline of implementation by 2024, in time for the 200th anniversary of this iconic street (and the 400th anniversary of New York City).

We are developing the plan with an eye to creating a great public space that will function both as the best walk in New York and an environment where multiple uses -- retail of course, but also hospitality and office -- can thrive.

DAVID MILDER:
Soho Broadway apparently is also developing what I think fits under the ped mall rubric. See: https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2021/10/14/plan-would-transform-soho-streetscapes

KRISTEN FISH-PEDERSON:
I love these concepts!

David, you are so right in zeroing in on the role of open streets today vs. years past. I was in downtown Madison last night and noticed that even the campus bar/restaurants off State St. are using the very cramped sidewalks for outdoor seating. In a mask-mandated county, there was lax enforcement and a lot of people out and about enjoying the indoor and outdoor spaces. It would be too bad if the City thought they should start charging for the use of this space…..

DAVID MILDER:
Downtown Brooklyn has also just announced a huge new street plan — see link below for Downtown Bklyn below. It is based on the concept of shared streets that has not emerged in our discussion of ped malls so far.

What say you all about this plan? See: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-21/slowly-brooklyn-s-car-free-reinvention-takes-shape?utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&utm_source=linkedin&utm_medium=social&utm_content=citylab

MICHAEL BERNE:
What's happening in Brooklyn, as outlined in the *Bloomberg* article, is exciting stuff, no doubt, but it worries me that the area's role within the broader roadway network might

be getting dismissed. I get that Adams St is a wide road, but a "multi-modal linear park"? Really? Will it knock out traffic lanes along the approach to the Bridge? These issues are discussed as if the only competing auto interests are single-occupancy private vehicles, rather than truck traffic that is responsible for filling the shelves of shops, providing the ingredients for restaurants, delivering the kegs for bars, etc. I was not in support of some of what Bob Moses did, but one thing he understood was that high-capacity roads are absolutely critical for modern economies. In their zeal to turn Downtown Brooklyn into a slice of Europe (a goal with which I largely sympathize), were such variables considered?

On a related note, I called Downtown Brooklyn an "area" here, as I refuse to call it a "neighborhood." Not because it lacks for residents -- it now has a lot of those -- but because calling it a neighborhood ignores and minimizes what all of these other important functions that it needs to serve. And that's what irks me the most about all of this -- it is based on a narrow and simple-minded understanding of how cities work and what they need, based mostly on the lifestyles, subjectivities and preoccupations of just one (highly educated and incredibly influential) constituency. It is admittedly the same constituency to which I belong, and yet I try really hard to stay on the lookout for my blind spots...

Regarding the Transportation Alternatives ED's comments about equity: I cannot cite specific data here, but my suspicion is that riding one's bicycle to/from work skews heavily by education and class. And as for this protected bike lane that they're planning on the Fulton Mall, I wonder how the street's long-time Black shopper demographic will feel about it -- specifically, whether they'll see it as yet another indication (among so many) that the powers-that-be remain intent on gentrifying (white-washing) the Mall's pre-Bloomberg character out of existence.

Finally, a larger point about all of these big ideas: innovation in NYC (and other similarly anomalous, extremely dense cities like San Francisco) going national always scares me -- and this is no exception. Pedestrianized spaces look great when they are busy, but in most cities across North America, heavy foot traffic is relatively rare, limited to commuter patterns (morning / evening rush, lunch hour -- back when there *were* large numbers of commuters), special events, etc. And there's no amount of design and programming that will change that.

DAVID MILDER:
The Spaces as Places program just adopted in San Diego looks very interesting, and it allows for while street closures. See: https://www.kpbs.org/news/local/2021/10/27/san-diego-city-council-outdoor-business-operations

Mike, I think that we need to look very carefully at the question of how large a pedestrian flow is needed to make a street with limited or no vehicle access function successfully. Many suburban downtowns that have been deemed as very successful have not had impressive pedestrian flows, and their parking capacity is often not concentrated

on the main drag. The recent conversion of Division Street in Somerville, NJ to a de facto one block ped mall was on a block that pedestrians used to fear walking on. I doubt that the ped mall in Winchester, VA was built on a street that had copious platoons of pedestrians. Indeed, if memory serves me correctly, the local leaders we spoke to there, back in the day, were concerned about *low* ped flows. Also, I know from living in Ithaca, that the downtown's main drag back in the 1960s seldom seemed packed with pedestrians before it was turned into the Commons. My bet is that the blocks that became the Church Street Mall in Burlington were not teeming with pedestrians prior to its creation — nor has it been often afterwards, but it always has enough to seem being used, active, and alive. I think our expectations have to be adjusted for the normal ped flow levels of these smaller communities. And local businesses seem to do OK off of those flows. After many visits to Westfield, NJ, a downtown that's attracted a horde of national retail chains, I have never seen its sidewalks filled with pedestrians save for some event days.

I would argue that our public spaces appear to be activated when local residents feel that it is a popular place, where locals like to go and where other users will be encountered if one visits it. There is no one number of visitors that serve as a threshold for applying the activation term.

Now I, off hand, cannot remember if Stephan's recent research holds otherwise. If so, then it would be interesting to explore why Somerville and Winchester can be successfully deviant.

What strikes me as I look at all the new public space projects that are now being unleashed is that whether they are called full ped malls, shared streets, transit malls, open streets, etc., they all share in some characteristics of the original ped malls: they aim to increase the amount of space on a street that is made available for pedestrian use, and this in turn means that vehicular traffic is in some way reduced or eradicated. My bet is that Mitchell Silver and Andy Manshel are right, and their success will depend on 1) how they're programmed and 2) such successful programming will be more social in nature and be far less reliant on boosting retail DIRECTLY.

ANDY MANSHEL:
There probably is a measurable "tipping point" number of how much pedestrian traffic is necessary to make a mall sustainable — regardless of where it is.

I don't know that such a number could be predicted in advance of implementation from the situation a main street currently finds itself in. What would be the variables needing to be measured? Car flow? Current pedestrian flow? Population density within a certain distance?

STEPHAN SCHMIDT:

The "tipping point" question is an interesting one, and is no doubt user and context dependent – for example, smaller spaces will have a lower tipping point for pedestrian traffic in order to feel 'successful'. Our research found that while many of the pedestrian malls were not able to generate their own traffic, they tended to have a greater chance for survival in areas where they were able to 'piggy-back' off of pre-existing foot traffic from another proximate source (tourist attraction, etc.) as well as higher population density more generally. Clearly more granular level data (pedestrian counts at specific ped malls/shared streets coupled with user perceptions of the functionality and relative 'success' of the space) could go some way toward answering this. Obviously, the data collection is complicated due to pedestrian traffic variation based on time of day, day of week, season, etc.

DAVID MILDER:
Yes, factors like commercial rents may also be important. I doubt that rents on Division St in Somerville were much above $20 PSF when the conversion was made, and as Mike has argued, those rents have probably remained lower than those on the main drag. The tenants did not have a very large "nut" to make. On the other hand, any attempt to turn South St in Morristown into a ped mall would be in the context of tenants having $50+ PSF rents and a much larger nut to make.

The existence of nearby traffic generators is certainly a factor. For Division St they were the central post office, the NJT commuter rail station, a county office building, and a strong relatively new supermarket and housing one block away.