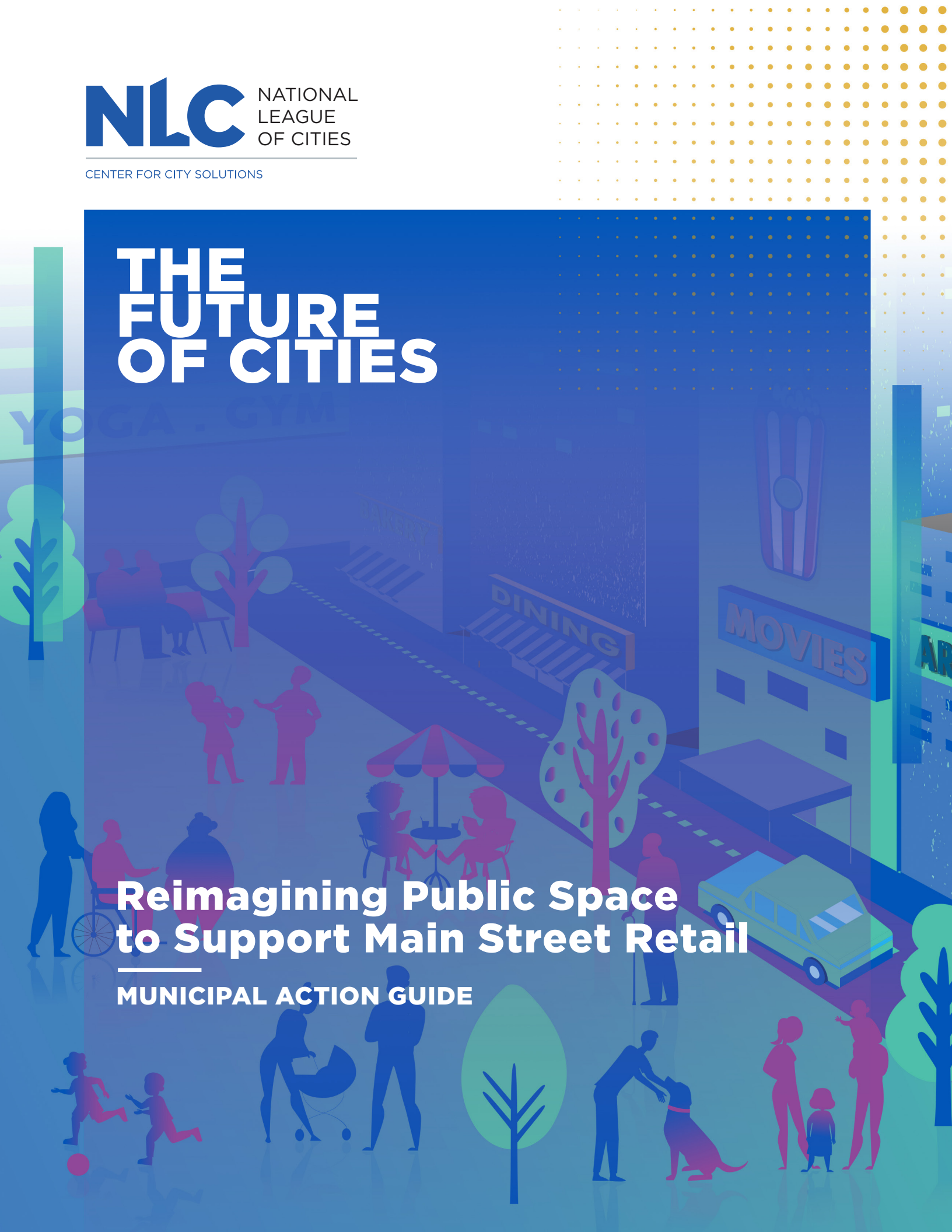


THE FUTURE OF CITIES

Reimagining Public Space to Support Main Street Retail

MUNICIPAL ACTION GUIDE





About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions. NLC's Center for City Solutions provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues, and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 changed the way cities use public spaces. It redefined how the built environment can serve community members. Cities made quick, significant changes to support their retail environments and enable safe business operations. Although many land use changes proved temporary, residents came to appreciate pop-up plazas, street closures, curbside pickup and increased options for outdoor dining. These changes served not only as adaptable response measures but also as proactive, socially cohesive, equitable initiatives if approached with care. City leaders must now ensure these spaces will continue to equitably meet community needs.

This action guide will explore how cities can reimagine public spaces to support main street retail and community needs. It highlights a series of recommendations based on a literature review and interviews with leaders in the economic development, placemaking and urban planning fields. The recommendations are broken down into three sections:

1. **Develop a Community Vision:** This section discusses key considerations in the process of creating the vision for reimagining public spaces, engaging stakeholders in this work and ensuring this space will meet community needs.
2. **Strategize the Program and Plan of Action:** This section discusses how to make the community vision a reality from selecting the location of this work and focusing on community empowerment when establishing ownership over the project to securing funding and establishing partnerships.
3. **Test and Assess the Program:** This section discusses how to launch the project, communicate about the reimagined public space and ensure a feedback loop of community input is driving the conversation about what is next.

The action guide aims to highlight the many benefits of reimagining public space. It includes information on how reimagining public spaces supports businesses and residents as well as actionable steps on how cities can launch their own programs.



**LOCAL LEADERS HAVE
A RESPONSIBILITY
TO LEARN FROM
PAST DEVELOPMENT
PITFALLS AND
ACTIVELY CREATE
HOLISTICALLY
BENEFICIAL PUBLIC
SPACES SUPPORTED
BY THE COMMUNITY.**

RETAIL AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: A HISTORICAL REFLECTION

The retail landscape is constantly changing. Downtowns served as walkable destinations where residents could shop and dine in the 1950s. As people began to move out of cities and into the suburbs – shifting their shopping preferences to the suburbs’ malls and plazas – vibrant city centers drastically deteriorated into empty retail spaces. Parking spots disappeared to make way for wider streets in the 1960s, consequently deterring pedestrians from fast passing traffic in previously walkable locations. During the 1970s, big box stores along highway arterial roads boomed to the point that the United States encompassed more per capita retail space than any other country in 1990. Downtowns lost their allure and were no longer destinations.¹

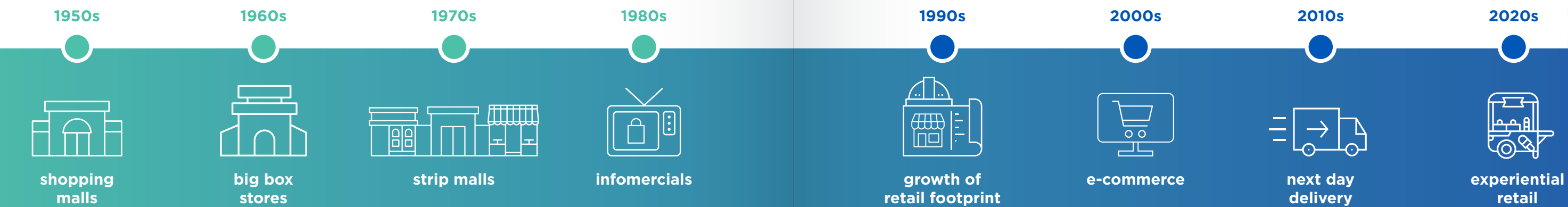
The upsurge of delivery services and online retailing in the early 2000s negatively impacted the retail that remained in downtowns and along main streets. Local leaders began investing in mixed-use developments and reconsidering the viability of main streets as retail centers. These mixed-use investments commonly collocated housing and businesses, suggesting increased housing stock and economic activity. These investments, however, were commonly associated with luxury housing, big box retail establishments and other high-end businesses that led to gentrification and displacement. Many of these mixed-use development practices were inequitable in their distribution of benefits, favoring White, wealthier residents over residents of low-income status and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC). Local leaders required different ideas on how to approach

equitable development that benefits the most vulnerable residents and small businesses. Public spaces reimagined during the COVID-19 pandemic opened doors for new ideas.

Initial pandemic at-home orders meant full street closures and no business operations. The phasing reentry to normal operations showcased various forms of retail and dining operations. Immediate responses saw business owners only able to operate delivery, takeout or drive-through services. Despite accommodations to assist businesses during the pandemic, about 200,000 have closed in the U.S. since March 2020.² In-person operations with six-feet social distancing, per the recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), presented business owners an opportunity

to reconsider new outdoor spaces. The dire need to reclaim lost revenues increased business owners’ urgency to make their surrounding spaces into assets that attracted visitors. They experimented with outdoor tables, parklets, alley vitalizations, tenting, heat warmers, landscaping, games and more. Although many of these public space changes have become well-loved and used, many were temporary changes expected to revert to pre-pandemic conditions.

Local leaders now stand at another inflection point. They have a responsibility to learn from past development pitfalls and actively create holistically beneficial public spaces supported by the community, aligned with community desires and focused on equitably benefitting local businesses.



WHY CRITICALLY REIMAGINE PUBLIC SPACES?

The positive reception and outcomes of public space changes during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that reimagined public spaces benefit communities when approached with care. New funds from the American Rescue Plan Act and the upcoming Infrastructure Bill will give municipalities the flexibility to reconsider how they use, revitalize and develop new public spaces to achieve community goals. Local leaders have an opportunity to look to the future of how to create viable destinations within their city, town or village where people can live, work, play and learn.

Pursue Health Recovery, Safety and Overall Wellness

Reimagining public spaces is a health and safety measure. Outdoor dining, pop-ups and other outdoor retail activities mean that visitors receive better air circulation and can more easily practice social distancing to deter COVID-19 transmission.³ The air quality outdoors is superior, as indoor air carries pollutant concentrations two to five times greater than outdoor air.⁴ Reimagining public space investments facilitate residents' enjoyment of environments that better protect and promote their physical health.

Outdoor spaces have a long-proven history of mental health and wellness benefits. Studies show that maintained public spaces such as plazas instill a sense of belonging, encourage feelings of safety, offer opportunities to connect with others and inherently serve as access to nature settings, all of which improve mental health.⁵ Social distancing in parks and closed streets allowed individuals to feel some degree of social connection, creating a bulwark against social isolation, loneliness and anxiety.⁶ Outdoor dining and retail followed suit by expanding reimagined public spaces to nurture visitors' mental health and wellbeing.

WHERE PEOPLE COME TO SHOP, TO DINE, AND TO SIMPLY INTERACT WITH THE WORLD ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR HEALTH AND MENTAL WELLBEING. LIKEWISE, OUR SHOPS, RESTAURANTS AND ESSENTIAL BUSINESSES ARE DEPENDENT ON US FOR THEIR SURVIVAL.”⁷

Prioritize People Over Vehicles

Reimagining public space can reclaim and rebalance public streets to serve community needs. Rebalancing public streets means reallocating road space and the public realm to prioritize people over vehicles. The term encompasses complete streets, reducing road lanes, shared streets and projects that increase space dedicated to walking, biking, transit and micromobility.⁸ A 2021 Yelp analysis measuring the consumer interest in “slow streets” and car-free zones from March 2020 to summer 2021 found more interest in dining in these zones

compared to traditional streets.⁹ Transitioning these spaces to more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly spaces offered numerous research-proven benefits. They promoted safety and safety perceptions of neighborhoods, improved air and noise quality from fewer cars, and fostered socially cohesive spaces where visitors could form relationships.¹⁰ Rebalancing streets increases business and retailers’ audience because it allows for more people to gain access to those locations, particularly people who may prefer — or only have access to — non-car mobilities.

“TRANSPORTATION PROFESSIONALS HAVE AN ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO ENSURE THAT OUR STREETS ARE SAFE AND WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE. THEY WERE NOT SAFE AND WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC AND RETURNING TO ‘NORMAL’ OR BUSINESS AS USUAL WILL SIMPLY PERPETUATE A DEEPLY INEQUITABLE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM.”¹¹

Photo by Bjorn Bakstad/Getty Images.

Create Space for Entrepreneurship

Reimagining public spaces supports local entrepreneurs’ opportunities and longevity. Public spaces, particularly main street corridors, serve significant roles in entrepreneurs’ ability to launch, grow and sustain businesses.¹² The rising cost of commercial space for traditional brick-and-mortar operations in recent years created a challenging environment for entrepreneurs. Even when commercial vacancies spiked during COVID-19 (i.e., more than 8,000 stores closed in 2020 alone), many spaces were unnecessarily large for small businesses’ needs.¹³ Despite these stark numbers, more than four million businesses launched in 2020, one of the highest rates in recorded history.¹⁴ New platforms in outside spaces meant entrepreneurs did not require large brick-and-mortar space to solicit business. Reimagining

public spaces boosts entrepreneurship by increasing the quantity and quality of places entrepreneurs can conduct business.

Devoting increased attention to reimagining public spaces helps to ensure prosperity during challenging economic conditions. By activating public spaces and supporting mixed-use downtowns, city leaders can advance their communities’ economic resilience.¹⁵ Envisioning new spaces that prioritize entrepreneurial activity does more than just support the local economy; it improves residents’ quality of life and boosts morale.¹⁶ It can empower residents with new platforms to influence the community’s development and identity, allowing for more holistic, representative decisions about the built environment and community overall.

“A TRULY ROBUST LOCAL ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM RECOGNIZES A LOCATION’S PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AS A CRITICAL FACTOR FOR ENSURING SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS.”¹⁷

Photo by Barry Winiker/Getty Images.

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SPACE VALUES

What makes a good public space? Through a literature review, evaluation of existing public space models and expert interviews, four core values of reimagining public spaces emerged. Reimagined public spaces must be:

These four values are not meant to be all-encompassing. They represent a necessary foundation for reimagined public spaces that local leaders must incorporate into their process. The recommendations section will describe actions NLC recommends local leaders follow to integrate these four values into their reimagined public spaces.

**WHAT MAKES A
GOOD PUBLIC SPACE?
THESE FOUR CORE
VALUES REPRESENT
THE NECESSARY
FOUNDATION
FOR SUCESSFUL
REIMAGINING PUBLIC
SPACE EFFORTS.**

Accessible to Destination Residents

Successful public spaces should be accessible to all. Accessible to all considers the existing barriers that prevent people from reaching, enjoying or feeling welcome in a space, and it considers the demographics of people who disproportionately suffer from those barriers. A reimagined public space accessible to all provides multiple means to access the space, accounting for varying abilities and circumstances. It reflects multifaceted ideals and community values to ensure visitors feel ownership of the space.

Access was historically — and in many circumstances continues to be — absent from the work of reimagining public spaces. Project planning and final outcomes frequently exclude or do not consider the circumstances of people of the LGBTQIA+ community, low-income status individuals, children, immigrants, seniors, those with physical or mental disabilities and BIPOC.

Local leaders must acknowledge and reconcile how historic policies produced barriers to accessing and enjoying public spaces. Land use policies, such as redlining and urban renewal, perpetuated systemic access issues that persist for residents today. Areas that endured these policies suffer greater burdens related to heat islands, flooding and infrastructure barriers that limit access to community amenities.¹⁸

Common public spaces, such as parks, plazas and pools, are increasingly becoming privatized or limited by hostile architecture (the design of public spaces to stop unwanted behaviors). This only serves to make these spaces less accessible, especially to people in transience or who are unhoused and to people with disabilities. Reimagining public spaces offers the opportunity to create universal designs that benefit people of all abilities and circumstances.



“DO PEOPLE, REGARDLESS OF IDENTITY, HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES AND SPACES AND TO THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BENEFITS OF LIVING IN CITIES?”¹⁹

Interactive Destinations to Explore and Enjoy

A reimagined public space is not a space to travel through; it is a destination to explore and enjoy. Visitors should feel drawn to a space by both its physical design and its amenities. These spaces must allow visitors to engage with the place in more than one capacity: sitting, playing, bicycling, eating, shopping, socializing, or other activities.²⁰ Project for Public Spaces, a **placemaking** firm specialized in creating community-powered public spaces, referred to this as The Power of 10+: places thrive when visitors have 10 or more reasons to be there.²¹ The COVID-19 pandemic showed that retail plays an important role in making a space an interactive destination. Street and small corridor closures served as

a popular redesign to create a destination to gather and engage with others, particularly beneficial for small businesses and dining. However, these efforts must go beyond changes to the built environment. Creating a sense of place is a vital piece to achieving the success of Power of 10+ long-term.



PLACEMAKING: “Strengthening the connection between people and the places they share, placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value.”²²



“HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC SPACES ARE MULTI-FUNCTIONAL AND SUPPORT A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING NECESSARY ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS GOING TO WORK, SCHOOL OR SHOPPING; OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS TAKING RECREATIONAL WALKS, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PLAYING; AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS TALKING TO PEOPLE AND PARTICIPATING IN ARRANGED SOCIAL ACTIVITIES.”²³

Photo by Conchi Martinez/Getty Images.

Adaptable to Various Community Uses

Effective public spaces adapt to community needs. “Adaptable” encompasses structure and programming, from flexibility with the street design to the type of activities one can participate in at the space. Street closures, parklets and repurposed parking lots for outdoor dining and shopping have quickly become mainstays in many cities. Live music and performances by local artists also gained popularity to further entice visitors to outdoor locations.

Flexible public spaces enable local leaders to pilot new ideas, adapt to community

desires and respond to those needs and desires in real-time. The COVID-19 pandemic caused local leaders across the country to view sidewalks, parking spots, alleys and streets as assets. It highlighted how pivoting and adapting longstanding transportation and public realm policies could benefit businesses in new ways. Flexible, adaptable policies allow local leaders to take advantage of their surrounding spaces. It offers the retail sector the opportunity to not only support the local economy but also to act as bridge builders to improve visitors’ quality of life and the neighborhood overall.




“THE LONG-TERM STABILITY OF PUBLIC SPACE AS A SYSTEM DEPENDS ON THE ADAPTABILITY OF ITS STRUCTURE AND ON THE ABILITY TO CHANGE ITS USES, ITS UNSPECIFIC MULTI-FUNCTIONALITY.”²⁴

Sociable to Encourage Meeting Neighbors and Foster Happiness

Enjoyable, sociable public spaces bring people together. Sociable public spaces exhibit characteristics that promote interactions, mingling and relationships. They enhance trust, collaboration, civic engagement and social cohesion.²⁵ “Sociable” does not necessarily relate to the design of the place; rather, it emphasizes the feelings and connections people hold about the space. Do you meet others at the space? Would you want to meet friends in the space? Do people know each other in the space? What feelings does the space bring up for you?²⁶ Reimagined public spaces integrated with these people-centered intentions can spur visitors to feel connected to public spaces beyond convenience or need of goods. These spaces can stimulate happiness and improve quality of life, leading visitors to form **place attachment** to these destinations.

Sociability values build visitors’ place attachment to public spaces. It promotes visitors’ desire to return to a space, where they are also inclined to support the destination’s businesses and activities. Furthermore, they are likely to participate in community input opportunities because the destination matters to them. These return visitors are predisposed to introduce others to the place when **place attachment** is formed, leading to a widened network of potential customers and retail business.



PLACE ATTACHMENT: The emotional connection, meaning and understanding people form with a place.²⁷ It reflects the person-to-place bond that may form from memories, experiences or thoughts at or about a location.



“WHEN PEOPLE SEE FRIENDS, MEET AND GREET THEIR NEIGHBORS, AND FEEL COMFORTABLE INTERACTING WITH STRANGERS, THEY TEND TO FEEL A STRONGER SENSE OF PLACE OR ATTACHMENT TO THEIR COMMUNITY — AND TO THE PLACE THAT FOSTERS THESE TYPES OF SOCIAL ACTIVITIES.”²⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO REIMAGINE PUBLIC SPACES

Local leaders stand at an inflection point in determining the future of public spaces. Cities quickly implemented significant changes to public spaces in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to support their residents and local businesses. Local leaders should capitalize on this existing momentum in city governments and in their communities to rethink their approaches to public spaces. Given current and historic inequities where public spaces are concerned, this is an opportunity for cities to thoughtfully reconsider how they engage with the community and to recenter the conversation around what the community needs and wants.

The following recommendations are structured to guide cities through a three-phase process:

1. **Develop a community vision**
2. **Strategize the program and plan of action and**
3. **Test and assess the program.**

In each phase, more specific recommendations are given. In each recommendation, a brief city example is highlighted.

Develop a Community Vision

Developing a high-level community vision is a necessary first step to successfully reimagining public space. The process not only gives residents, business owners, local institutions and other stakeholders an opportunity to voice their ideals for the future of their community, but it gives a diverse group of stakeholders — who may otherwise not be at the same table — the chance to listen to each other and reach consensus. Ideally, the community vision should *cultivate* a sense of public ownership and buy-in for future decisions made in the public space. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge and reverse some of the lasting impacts of exclusionary policy and planning.





Create a Shared Vision

Creating a shared vision for the future of public space in your community is a necessity. Reimagining public spaces initiatives have the best chance of success when residents and businesses are driving decisions made about the space.²⁹ By bringing in the viewpoints of people who use the space, rather than solely the views of those who manage it, the city can develop a more authentic understanding of what constitutes a good quality place or space.

Determine which stakeholders to involve

The city should work to identify and engage relevant stakeholders including residents, business leaders and community organizations to develop a shared vision. Stakeholder mapping may be a way to make sure cities are being intentionally inclusive, making a concerted effort to do targeted outreach to voices that are not typically at the table. A broad range of perspectives is necessary to do this work well.

Given historic inequities in the provision of public space, cities should intentionally engage historically excluded residents and consider how they engage with these residents. Cities should involve all age groups (particularly seniors and children), people of different abilities, cultural and ethnic minority groups, women, low-income households, local businesses, individuals experiencing homelessness, community and workplace groups, and other local organizations. Exactly who is included in this list will vary by city.

Determine where and how to involve identified stakeholders

There are different ways to involve identified stakeholders. Cities can conduct **open-invitation meetings** where all members of the community are invited. The downside to this approach is that not all voices are guaranteed to be in attendance. Alternatively, cities can leverage **invitation-only meetings**, where the city actively engages and secures specific community voices. In this case, cities might consider focusing on:

- People affected by what is happening in the area
- People who affect what happens in the area
- People with good information about the area.³⁰

Although desired diversity may be guaranteed, doing targeted outreach and invitation will require more planning effort.³¹ Regardless of which approach cities take, **cities should consider leveraging new forms of outreach and engagement to understand how places might work for the people who do not currently use or frequent them.**

Develop the community vision

In meetings with the community, city leaders must guide the conversation to co-create a shared community vision that resonates with residents, businesses and community leaders. **This conversation should be focused on identifying what will encourage visitors back into the space and attract newcomers for the first time.** Any community vision should align with NLC's four core values:

- Accessible to destination visitors
- Interactive destinations to explore and enjoy
- Adaptable to various community uses
- Sociable to foster social cohesion and nurture wellbeing.

This vision can then become a touchpoint for the community if conflict arises during future planning processes. Every choice made in the planning process must support one or more of the components of the community vision.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Atlanta, GA

The city of Atlanta's Department of Parks and Recreation hired Park Pride to support a public engagement effort to reimagine a park in the community.³² Through this community-driven visioning process, the city and community co-developed the following principles to guide park development:

- Prioritize beauty, safety and cleanliness throughout the park in all improvements or additions and ensure a high standard of maintenance for existing structures and amenities.
- Promote health, play and community building in all amenities programming and structures included in the park.
- Create a welcoming, safe and accessible experience at entrances, inside the park and throughout the city center.

Not only was the process necessary for community members to share their goals and aspirations for the park, but it also encouraged participants to listen to each other, helped build trust between residents and the city and facilitated community buy-in. These high-level, community-driven principles are key to the success of reimagining public space efforts. They can be created for all different scopes and scales of a project, from a street corner or a park to the whole city.



Map the Existing Use of Space

Once a high-level community vision has been developed, the city should systemically zero in on specific changes the community wants. Understanding these changes will enable cities to identify barriers to realizing those changes and where and how the city can help alleviate them.

Engage the community

There are numerous ways to get the community involved in identifying specific changes community members want to see, from requesting more streetlights on a particular street repurposing a vacant property as a community center.

A community street audit is a good tool to engage the community.³³ It involves taking a small group of stakeholders (e.g., residents, businesses and local government workers) to evaluate a space on foot. By using this tactic, cities can better assess what problems exist and what changes the community would like to see.

Interactive boards are another way a city can engage the community. By printing a large map of the place in question and inviting the community to think through what changes they want to see, cities can collect a large amount of information in a short period of time. Participants can place sticky notes on the board to identify where and what they would like to see changed. However, it can prove difficult to identify who has voiced a particular concern.

Follow up to identify barriers

Following a comprehensive solicitation of feedback, cities should ask themselves the questions: “Do residents have access to the things they want? If not, why?” Once the gaps have been voiced by the community, cities need to identify the barriers, which can be some combination of physical, regulatory or social.

Cities must explore into why certain community members are not providing proposed changes to a particular space. For example, some residents may not feel welcome in a particular space or neighborhood due to gentrification and displacement. Cities should thoughtfully ground community feedback in local and historical context.

Consider city data sources

Regardless, cities should leverage the information they do have to complement the community’s input. For example, data on what businesses are where through business licenses and property tax rolls can bring an empirical lens to the conversation. Cities should leave this exercise with a laundry list of changes the community wants to see and a list of barriers that the city can help alleviate to make those changes a reality.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Cleveland, OH

Local community organization Asian Services in Action, Inc. (ASIA), in Northeast Ohio wanted to improve the walkability between a large senior housing complex to nearby grocery stores in the AsiaTown neighborhood of Cleveland, OH, as part of its **Safe Routes to Healthy Food** initiative. Through **walking audits**, the following problems were identified:

- Lack of park benches along the route
- Lack of a crosswalk at a major intersection
- Need for a curb ramp and a corner to corner passing on the route
- Properties on the route that were poorly maintained.

As a result, the city of Cleveland’s **Age Friendly Cleveland** program added the senior housing complex residents’ recommendations into its multiyear work plan.

This walking audit was successful because it was conducted in languages spoken by the residents and included time for the participants to grocery shop so that the barriers encountered on the walk back would be as realistic as possible.

Cities should consider not only instituting walking audits as a tool for to gather feedback for a specific program, but also advertising and leveraging it as a tool for community members to use to organize themselves and provide feedback to the city.



Be Strategic About Changes to Public Space

Changes to the public space can be limited or expansive in scope, or temporary or permanent in nature. It is critical to define the scope and scale of these changes at the outset to build agreement and to be strategic about what this work can accomplish. Beyond an idealized community vision, cities must make difficult tradeoffs given budget constraints, lack of political will and mistrust in the community when it comes to actual public space changes.

Determine scale

The scale of a project can range from a single intersection, street, or corridor to a whole neighborhood. The changes must be supported by the local community and must be realistic.

Smaller changes in the built environment can make a significant difference in how people experience and perceive a public space. For example, changes as simple as allowing businesses to move their operations to the sidewalk or street to entice shoppers or creating space for outdoor dining for cafes, restaurants and bars can make a big difference in attracting patrons to the main street and increasing the vitality of the space.

Some cities may be ready to make larger infrastructure investments, such as redeveloping a plaza. These larger scale investments must be supported by the local community even more so than infrastructure projects more limited in scope. They require strong community relationships and effective partnerships.

Particularly for cities who are resource constrained — whether by budget, capacity or time — focusing on pilots, or projects with

a limited life span and scope, can maximize utility for the least amount of effort and dollars and serve as proof of concept for increased investment down the line.

Experiment and iterate

Cities should consider experimentation or piloting of proposed changes, regardless of the scale of the project. Public space changes can make an important adjustment in public space design, social outcomes, and economic and retail impacts. By supporting a more iterative process, cities can better test what works and what does not in their communities and build stronger community buy-in over time.



LIGHTER, QUICKER, CHEAPER (LQC): is a local development approach that describes simple, short-term, low-cost and incremental changes to public space. They are less expensive and less time and labor-intensive than traditional top-down projects. The benefit of LQC is the ability to create and test a project immediately, with direct community involvement.³⁴



One way that cities can pilot changes, experiment and iterate is through **Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC)** projects. Regardless of the scale of the project, taking a more iterative and experimental

approach means that cities can develop community buy-in and a “proof of concept” that can then be used to justify more significant changes to the community and investors alike.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Ann Arbor, MI

In response to the pandemic, the city of Ann Arbor considered how to support businesses that needed better access to the curb to successfully weather the pandemic. Ann Arbor’s Downtown Development Authority decided to leverage parking in multiple ways to support retail businesses. Actions included but were not limited to:

- Converting on-street parking to 15-minute pick-up and drop-off zones
- Waiving sidewalk seating permitting fees for 100+ small businesses
- Launching a no-fee parking space repurposing program allowing small businesses to use their front-facing parking spots for extended patio space
- Unveiling holiday lights early in downtown areas to ensure a welcoming atmosphere for continued outdoor dining and retail.³⁵

Following the initial deployment of the program, the city installed new signage to clearly outline the rules for pick-up and drop-off zones after feedback from both the community and parking enforcement highlighted uncertainty around rules.

Ann Arbor highlights how small infrastructure adjustments can make a big difference in residents’ ability to access goods and services and businesses’ ability to serve their customers. Programs should solicit feedback after launching to make sure communication of rules is clear.



CITIES MUST TURN THAT VISION INTO AN ACTION PLAN.

Photo by Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images.

Strategize the Program and a Plan of Action

Once a community vision and accompanying principles have been developed, cities must turn that vision into an action plan. An action plan will outline the means for implementing the program and ideally have formalized processes, goals, a communication strategy, well-defined roles and responsibilities, and metrics to track performance and success over time. Action plans should be centered on the community and its input.



Identify the Target Site

Beyond the idealized community vision and list of changes the community wants to see, the city still needs to decide **where** changes to the public space will be made. Cities must continue to prioritize engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders, reach community consensus and be transparent while identifying the target site.

Engage the community

In looking back at the list of community desires, it is not just effective to look at what has been asked for the most. Cities should consider who has asked for what and the local and historical context behind the asks. Prioritizing equity is necessary to bring all residents the amenities they deserve.

This is an opportunity for the city to present the community-specific list of requests and barriers the city has identified to making those requests into reality. In this context, community members can further refine their initial ideas with a better understanding of the barriers that exist.

Be transparent in identifying the target site. This means being upfront with the community about what is feasible financially, what barriers the city can realistically address and the reasoning behind decisions made.

Reach community consensus

The process of site selection should also be a community-driven process. Consider questions such as:

- Is one site more accessible to the target groups than another?
- Is one site more important to retailers than another?
- Is one site likely to be better supported or maintained than another given existing civic infrastructure in the community?
- Does one site have more historical or other significance than another?
- Does one site better tie into other efforts underway in the area?

These are all difficult considerations but get at the most important question: **Who is the reimagined public space really for?**



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Hartford, CT

The city of Hartford, CT, launched the **Love Your Block Program**, a mini-grant program that supports residents by funding their ideas. Community groups or individuals are eligible to apply for up to \$2,500 to fund volunteer-led projects that will revitalize and beautify their neighborhoods. All project proposals within those parameters are reviewed for approval.³⁶

The **Art Box Lot** is one of the selected projects. It focused on a vacant lot chosen by the city in the heart of Hartford's Latinx community. With \$1,000 from the city and an additional \$720 from cash and in-kind donations, the neighborhood was able to create a 200 square foot mural and remove 120 pounds of trash with the help of 51 volunteers. Partners included youth groups, an elementary school and public library.

With the support of the city, the Art Box Lot succeeded in creating a space for passive recreation and community events. The event space allowed residents to strengthen connections through hosting movie nights and a market, increasing neighborhood pride.³⁷ Hartford shows how powerful giving communities the option and ability to choose where they want to make changes to their public space can be.



Ensure Space is Accessible to All

Cities should ensure the space is accessible to all, making a concerted effort to remove physical, regulatory and social barriers to allow people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, gender identities, sexual identities, abilities, family statuses and ages to use and enjoy the space.

Remove physical barriers and prioritize accessibility

Physical barriers can range from blocked wheelchair ramps and spaces without step-free access to a lack of transportation options that access a space. Although some of these barriers may be easy to understand, not all physical barriers will be apparent without intentional engagement with a diverse set of people who use the space. **Community street audits** are a powerful tool for understanding how people experience a physical space and its barriers.

Universal design principles can ensure that a place can be easily accessed and utilized by the greatest number of people. By improving transportation infrastructure and mobility options, more residents can enjoy the public space and local businesses can enjoy an expanded customer base.



UNIVERSAL DESIGN: Requires the design of public spaces and places to prioritize equitable, flexible and intuitive usage with the lowest physical effort possible.³⁸

Reconsider regulatory barriers

More flexible land use codes enable commercial property owners to transform spaces to meet the needs of potential and future tenants as the use of retail space evolves. Pop-ups and other short-term uses can help fill vacant store fronts, meeting customer needs and providing retailers a way to test their businesses for longevity. Broader, more accommodating definitions of commercial uses have helped cities ensure responsiveness to market adjustments and encourage shorter periods of vacancy during COVID-19. Restrictions like temporary sign ordinances, change-of-use permits and parking adequacy studies are in many cases overly cumbersome and restrict flexible uses of space that are more responsive to community needs in real time.

Eliminate social barriers

Social barriers are less tangible factors that may contribute to a feeling of unwelcomeness in a space or place. Many of the social barriers that exist today are a result of exclusionary land use policies, such as redlining and urban renewal. Cities must acknowledge and honor existing cultures and communities when reimagining public spaces, taking time to understand how and why efforts to improve the public realm may be met with hesitation by community members.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Oakland, CA

The **Oakland Slow Streets Program** was launched in April 2020 as part of the city's COVID-19 response with the aim of supporting safe physical activity and alleviating overcrowding in parks and on trails by discouraging through traffic on certain local streets.³⁹ However, upon evaluating survey feedback from residents the city realized two-thirds of respondents were White residents and 40 percent had annual household incomes of \$150,000 or more. In Oakland, White residents only make up 24 percent of the population and the median household income is \$76,000.

The city began to work closely with communities that were not represented in the survey, namely residents in East Oakland, a neighborhood where a large percentage of residents are Black and Latinx. According to these residents, the city “missed the mark” with their Slow Streets program. Residents did not want places to walk or bike. They wanted changes that would make it easier for them to get to essential places, such as health clinics, schools and grocery stores. Through intentional engagement with these residents, the city learned that what the community really wanted was a safe streets program that took better account of the cultural context of the community.

The city introduced its **Essential Places** program with the goal of helping pedestrians in lower-income areas get around safely and providing funding to strengthen traffic barricades — which drivers were running over.⁴⁰ The community members and a local artist worked to create more aesthetically pleasing Oakland Slow Streets barricades and culturally relevant signage that better reflect East Oakland's community.⁴¹

By listening to the community, the city was able to introduce a new iteration of the existing program that better served the needs of a historically marginalized residents. In response, community members not only feel safer on the streets, their voices were heard by the city.



Focus on Community Empowerment

Community empowerment can serve to make long-lasting changes that uplift communities, particularly when working in historically disinvested neighborhoods or neighborhoods that are on the decline. Ultimately, changes to the public space should be about fostering civic connections and building social capital that will have impacts far beyond changes to physical infrastructure.

Formalize roles and responsibilities

Ongoing consultation of the community is necessary for the success of any placemaking effort. Cities should focus on formalizing roles and responsibilities for residents, business owners and other local leaders to ensure community buy-in, continued engagement and relationship building. One approach is to put together a working group made up of stakeholders that will serve as ongoing consultants throughout the lifespan of the project. By leveraging and framing the community as the expert, the city can foster a sense of community ownership over a project, which will elevate the space’s importance in the eyes of its residents.⁴²

Appropriately value and compensate residents and business owners for their participation.
This means giving residents and business

owners a stipend or honorarium based on their time working on the project set at a living wage.

The process of defining roles and responsibilities should also be collaborative. Instead of telling community members “this is the role assigned you,” give them the autonomy to organize themselves in a way that meets the program needs. This can mean giving community members a list of roles and responsibilities and allowing the community members to choose which they would like to take on or allowing the community to decide the structure of their working group.

Formalizing roles and responsibilities can also ensure city accountability and build trust with community members that may not have a history of positive experiences with government and government programs. Letting the community lead signals to them that they are in control.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Memphis, TN

As part of the city of Memphis’s riverfront revitalization strategy, the **Memphis River Parks Partnership** is working to increase connectivity between historically disinvested neighborhoods by installing pedestrian and cycling coordinates linking the riverfront and surrounding neighborhoods. By focusing on a nearby park as an anchor, the city is using the built environment to promote unity among neighborhoods and bring social and economic gains to historically underserved residents.⁴³ Beyond the high-level goals, the program is digging deeper to ensure the operations of the development are centered on community empowerment. The project is also focused on:

- **Staff development** to build capacity in city government and support future project. Base pay was raised from \$8.25 to \$13 an hour and leadership began promoting long-term skill development for all level of staff, particularly those who maintained the riverfront and historically had little ability to advance into mid-level jobs.
- **Contractor development** to support minority- and women-owned businesses. The Partnership has committed between 38 and 66 percent of its operating budget each quarter to minority- and women-owned business spending.
- **Community engagement and stewardship** to share the direction of the space. The Partnership is intentionally bringing in high school students to work alongside the design team, enabling them to gain resume-building skills and shape the direction of the parks’ future.
- **Connecting adjacent neighborhoods** to increase opportunity across districts: The Partnership is working to not only remove physical barriers between neighborhoods, but symbolic barriers rooted in historical inequities.
- **Free programing** to bring together diverse neighborhoods: The Partnership is focused on offering activities with low or non-existent barriers to entry, such as basketball, concerts and yoga. In addition, there are free kayak rentals and lessons available all day.⁴⁴

Memphis highlights the power of larger infrastructure investments to promote equitable development and focus on long-lasting community empowerment through employment opportunities, procurement practices and ensuring all can access the space with low or non-existent barriers to entry.



Thoughtfully Consider Funding and Partnerships

In developing a public space project, cities must thoughtfully consider funding and partnerships. Cities do not have to undertake projects alone and should not do so given how advantageous it is to involve partners in program development and execution. A multi-pronged and well-rounded approach that brings in community organizations, nonprofits, philanthropy, private sector and government is important.

Secure funding

Adequate funding is key to meeting community needs. Funding will likely come from multiple sources, including but not limited to public, private and philanthropic dollars. This is also an opportunity to pool community dollars, such as those from local businesses invested in improving streetscapes. Cities should also be aware of state and federal sources of funding, including funding from the American Rescue Plan Act.

Regardless of the scale of a project, cities should be mindful of maintenance costs, which are one of the most overlooked parts of the funding picture. For **LQC** projects, this may involve questions such as who will maintain a community garden or planter box? In Oakland, CA, youth interns in the East Oakland neighborhood were trained and tasked with watering planter barricades following their initial installment.⁴⁵

Establish partnerships

Partnerships are indispensable from a financing, development and implementation standpoint. Partners can range from private sector businesses, public agencies, philanthropic organizations, nonprofits and community-based groups.

Public-private partnerships are increasingly common in the area of reimagining public spaces. They can bring additional funding, resources and expertise in ongoing maintenance and space programming.⁴⁶ However the private sector does not necessarily have the same mandate a city does to ensure that a space is equitable and inclusive.

Regardless of how a city establishes partnerships, cities should strive to have the right mix of partners at the table. Cities should set a clear goal and mission against which to evaluate potential partners for a particular program. Clear expectations will lead to a successful partnership and enable the city to ensure the community vision takes precedence.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Salina, KS

The city of Salina, KS, approved a \$154 million downtown redevelopment project that includes private funding, state-issued STAR bonds, community improvement district sales tax funds and tax increment financing property tax funds.⁴⁷ Through this project, the city will get a downtown hotel, field house, updated streetscapes, theater improvements, a museum and low-income apartments.⁴⁸ Updated streetscape improvements include narrowing the main thoroughway from four lanes to three to allow for more sidewalk space, opening up outdoor seating for downtown businesses.⁴⁹ The impetus came when a small group of community stakeholders began investing in the area through infrastructure improvements. These early projects served as a catalyst for the effort to redevelop the entire downtown area.⁵⁰



Develop Meaningful, Equitable and Trackable Metrics

Develop metrics to determine if a project is reaching its stated goal. These metrics should assess whether a given project is successful and determine if community needs are being met. A benchmark should be identified against which future progress can be measured.

Establish quantitative metrics

Foundational quantitative data points can help assess the success of a space. Consider how many people use the space, at what time of day people use the space and how people get to a space. By having the numbers spread over time, the city can test different types of interventions to iterate and evaluate what works and what does not.

Consider how to leverage program evaluation as a resident engagement tool. In addition to gathering important information about a program, it helps ensure ongoing feelings of site ownership. Residents can, for example, be involved in foot or bike counts. These can be paid or volunteer opportunities.

Value qualitative metrics

Qualitative data is just as valuable as quantitative. Ongoing surveys are an effective tool for gathering qualitative information from residents and businesses. Questions can be open-ended or multiple choice but should align with community principles. For example, a question to gauge accessibility could be: “Do you feel welcome and comfortable in this space?” A question to

gauge business satisfaction could be: “Do you feel like this change in public space has drawn more customers into your store?”

In these surveys, cities should collect demographic information to identify any disparities in how certain groups experience and perceive the space. If survey results are not representative of the makeup of the community, consider conducting targeted outreach and hosting listening sessions with unrepresented groups. This is another opportunity to engage community members or **neighborhood ambassadors**. Response rates for surveys are likely to be higher if trusted and recognized members of the community engage in survey outreach.



NEIGHBORHOOD AMBASSADORS: Key stakeholders and partners for the city. In some cities, neighborhood ambassadors are formalized roles; in others, they may be more informal. Regardless, cities should consider who has an “in” with certain community groups and build connections with them.

Leverage existing data

Cities can leverage a variety of data sets to gain additional insight (e.g., building permits, business licenses, real estate transactions, property tax values, vacancy rates, programming and event schedules). Some of these indicators may be lagging and therefore make more sense to leverage in showcasing longer-term change and return on investment.

These suggestions are neither expansive nor comprehensive. Relevant metrics for each city and project can vary. Regardless of the exact metrics employed, cities should set meaningful goals or key performance indicators that will give the city and stakeholders a better idea of whether the community vision is being reached.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Long Beach, CA

The Downtown Long Beach Alliance (DLBA) is a nonprofit organization operating on behalf of tenants and property owners of two of downtown Long Beach’s Business Improvement Districts. The organization is dedicated to management, marketing, security, maintenance, advocacy, and economic and community development in these districts in cooperation with the city of Long Beach and various private sector stakeholders.⁵¹

In 2016, the DLBA adopted a strategic planning document: **Vision 2020**.⁵² Although the strategic planning document has been updated multiple times since then, the most recent update emphasizes necessary changes brought on by the pandemic that heavily involves the city. For example, the DLBA will be working with the city to streamline business licensing, permitting and entitlement processes. The DLBA will continue to work with the city’s Economic Development Department to support business recruitment and retention, entrepreneurship and real estate development.⁵³

The organization has also launched a series of dashboards intended to track and report DLBA departmental progress on the strategic plan.⁵⁴ The dashboard includes information such as finances, metrics (e.g., maintenance and repairs), and progress on place assessment surveys.⁵⁵ The dashboard not only shows that the DLBA is keeping track of important metrics, but that it is committed to the transparency of those metrics and keeping the community updated.



Create a Marketing and Outreach Strategy

Communication is a necessary element of any successful program. Cities should develop a marketing and outreach strategy to keep the community and stakeholders engaged and up to date while building the credibility of the program.

Inform the community

A dedicated communication strategy can help ensure transparency of the program plan and build support and trust from stakeholders. A good communication plan includes outreach and participation, as well as ensuring that appropriate media channels are identified.

Cities should focus on using trusted community partners to get the word out as well. Depending on the program type and target audience, leveraging schools, local nonprofits, social media, local news stations and **neighborhood ambassadors** can engage the wider community and make them aware of the program.

Inform stakeholders

A successful communication strategy will make all stakeholders aware the city is serious about improving the public space, encourage transparency and may serve to aid the city in future efforts to secure funding or start a new program.

Cities should be mindful of how external communications may reach community organizations or partners and thoughtfully consider how to internally keep communication up between stakeholders that may not engage as frequently.

Consider the framing

Depending on the local context, cities may want to adjust their marketing and communication strategy. For example, in a city where residents may push back against prioritizing pedestrians over cars, local leaders may reframe a “slow streets” initiative as a public health measure or to support children’s safety. The intervention is the same – slow streets – but the framing for the community is different.

Promoting the co-benefits of public space (e.g., health, safety, food security, air quality, access to basic services and local economic development) is a good way to cover all bases and may build and sustain political support for the program’s implementation.⁵⁶



CITY SPOTLIGHT

St. Paul, MN

In response to the development of a light rail network in St. Paul, MN, many small, independent business owners in west and central St. Paul were concerned about losing business due to long-term construction and a rush of commercial development spurred by the light rail. To address community concerns, the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA) took the opportunity to rebrand the area in an effort to support local business owners and ensure the lasting legacy of a strong immigrant community.⁵⁷

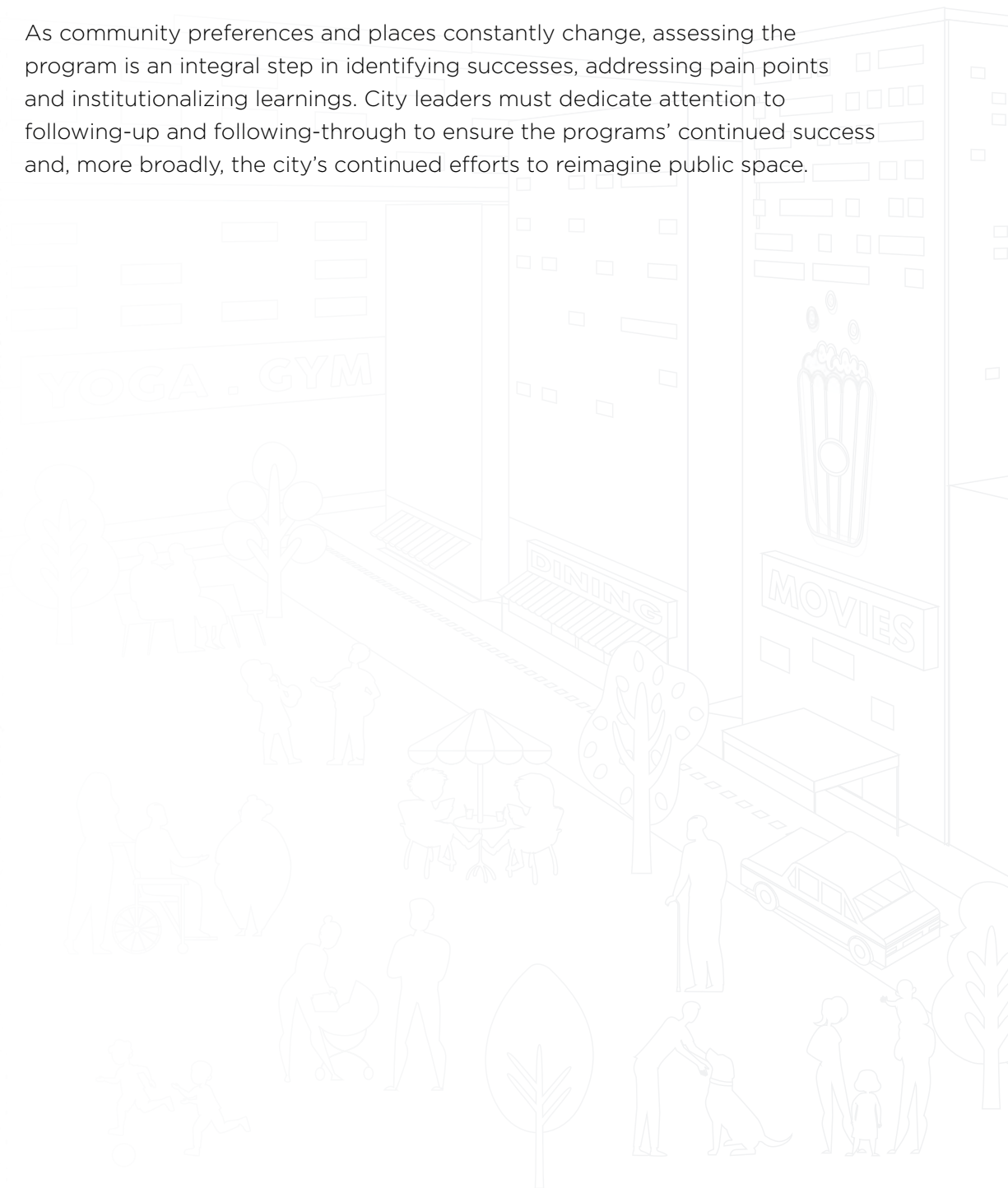
A partnership between the AEDA, Hmong American Partnership, city of St. Paul and the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation created a community gathering space on University Avenue called the **Little Mekong Plaza**.⁵⁸ Through a series of public charrettes, the community collaborated on the plaza’s design agreeing on green space, murals and public art as means to solidify the neighborhood’s identity and spur Little Mekong’s economy.

Little Mekong shows how powerful placemaking and dedicated marketing can support a specific neighborhood, its residents and businesses at risk of gentrification and displacement.

**FOLLOWING-UP
AND FOLLOWING-
THROUGH IS VITAL
TO THE CONTINUED
SUCCESS OF
REIMAGINED PUBLIC
SPACES.**

Test and Assess the Program

As community preferences and places constantly change, assessing the program is an integral step in identifying successes, addressing pain points and institutionalizing learnings. City leaders must dedicate attention to following-up and following-through to ensure the programs' continued success and, more broadly, the city's continued efforts to reimagine public space.





Communicate Success

In addition to communicating about program development, city leaders must communicate successes and shortcomings. By doing so, cities will foster a sense of transparency with the community and partners while helping community members stay up to date on the program.

Engage the community and boost morale

Cities can leverage a variety of communication strategies depending on the program it has put together, including social media, radio, printed collateral or other messaging venues. By continually communicating about the program, cities can keep the space relevant for the community and ensure that any adjustments are meeting needs.

Communication can also boost morale. For many community members, the process of instituting a program can feel drawn out, particularly with larger capital investments. Keeping up communication and celebrating little successes keeps morale high and the community engaged throughout the process.

Even if the program was not a success — either by the city's metrics or by community sentiment — it is critical to leverage the right communication tools when pivoting strategies or implementing changes to address project issues or meet emerging community needs. Being transparent about the program's

shortcomings and outlining tangible steps that the city is taking to rectify problems will help ensure the community feels heard.

Attract attention

Tracking wider impact and return on investment will help gain public or philanthropic support of the site or other proposed sites. Cities considering longer-term funding streams or other projects down the pipeline may want to communicate their successes. This can involve celebrating various stakeholders' role in making the program a success. Attracting good attention will help garner support.

In many cases, quick wins are an effective tool for overcoming resistance to change. By showing that a previously vacant lot can be transformed into a vibrant farmers market during the day and concert venue at night, cities can shift the perceptions of investors, businesses and residents, making them more open to the idea of larger investments in a particular area. This is also an opportunity to share successes outside of the city, elevating a great program and potentially inspiring other cities or creating new funding opportunities.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Memphis, TN

In 2010, Memphis, TN, launched **MEMFix**, a program aimed at reimagining Broad Avenue, a neglected commercial strip in the city's downtown in partnership with local business owners, residents and the nonprofit Livable Memphis.

With the help of local volunteers, Livable Memphis led an initial three-block streetscape exhibition, complete with protected bike lanes, pedestrian improvements, pop-up retail, and festive programming. Through programming that highlighted the value of the space and a dedicated marketing and communication strategy, more investment poured in. This additional support enabled the launch of **MEMshop**, a retail incubator program.

These compounding changes ultimately led to the transformation of Broad Avenue. Not only did Broad Avenue experience a surge in investment dollars and time from the city and community, but MEMShop also expanded to rural centers around the city.⁵⁹ MEMFix and MEMShop show how small, iterative changes can energize a space, stimulate longer-term investment and activate storefronts. A dedicated marketing and communication campaign has the power to uplift and expand reimagining public space programs.



Track Progress on Metrics

Identifying metrics is a necessary step in program development but tracking progress on metrics is key to program execution. By institutionalizing and incorporating findings from metric evaluation, cities can make data-driven improvements to the program that are more likely to fulfill its goals.

Track progress

Collecting data and information is not a one-time thing. Cities must prioritize collecting information multiple times over a designated time period. A city may consider nominating a person to analyze the data and provide regular updates to stakeholders. In doing so, the city can keep stakeholders involved in running the program up to date on the project’s progress.

Make metric-driven decisions

Tracking metrics is not enough. Cities must use them to make strategic decisions about the program. Cities should consider setting up evaluation periods, dedicated times where the city will pause to make necessary changes to the program based on program performance. If metrics signal that project goals are not being met cities can pivot, either within the same program or to a new iteration of the existing program.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Philadelphia, PA

The University City District (UCD) is a partnership of world-renowned anchor institutions, small businesses and residents to improve economic vitality and quality of life in Philadelphia’s University City.⁶⁰ UCD made several placemaking and public space investments over the years. In response to concerns of gentrification displacing Black residents, women and other genders feeling unsafe in public spaces, and a lack voices of from underserved communities, UCD reconsidered its engagement process. It created **Just Spaces**, a data tool, framework and accountability mechanism that analyzes how truly inclusive and just a public space is. The framework highlighted five realms:

- **Distributive:** Who has physical access (by walking, bike, transit, and private vehicle) to a space?
- **Procedural:** How do people feel about their influence over the design, operations and programming of a public space?
- **Interactional:** What makes people feel welcome or unwanted in a public space?
- **Representational:** Do people feel their experience and history is represented in a space?
- **Care:** How do people demonstrate their care for the space and each other?⁶¹



Reevaluate Current Initiative and Determine Next Steps

Public spaces require continuous refinement to keep up with changes in cultural and community preferences and needs. Reimagining public space efforts will require consistent monitoring of performance to evaluate the evolution of the space and whether it effectively balances and serves community needs. From an existing program, a city can take a few routes to replicate an initiative, launch new iterations of an existing program or launch a different program.

Identify lessons learned and build a feedback loop

Cities should gather lessons learned throughout and following the program. Insights should come from those who managed the project and those who use the space. Apply these lessons learned to new initiatives and build a feedback loop that extends to new projects. New projects can be iterations of an existing initiative or different ideas in the same neighborhood.

Keep testing

Interventions in the public space can serve as testing beds before larger infrastructure changes are made. Cities should keep taking opportunities to test, and test again, using a feedback loop to continuously improve and expand upon existing projects. At the root, cities should focus on institutionalizing learnings. A space’s success at meeting community needs continually evolves, and therefore changes to a space must also evolve iteratively.



CITY SPOTLIGHT

Philadelphia, PA (continued)

With knowledge gained from collecting and analyzing metrics and evaluating impact, the UCD team of anchor institutions, small businesses and residents made meaningful changes to public spaces:

- **Reprogramming** movie nights to include more films with BIPOC directors and cast
- **Relocating** parklets from food and beverage establishments to places like laundromats
- **Implementing** historic signage programs to highlight the role of notable women, people of color and members of the LGBTQIA+ community
- **Raising money** to fund supplemental horticulture and maintenance services in the parks near where employees live to ensure they also have access to quality public space.

Dedicated crafting of metrics with equity built into their core and tracking of those metrics is integral to making meaningful alterations to a public space that truly make it inclusive and just.



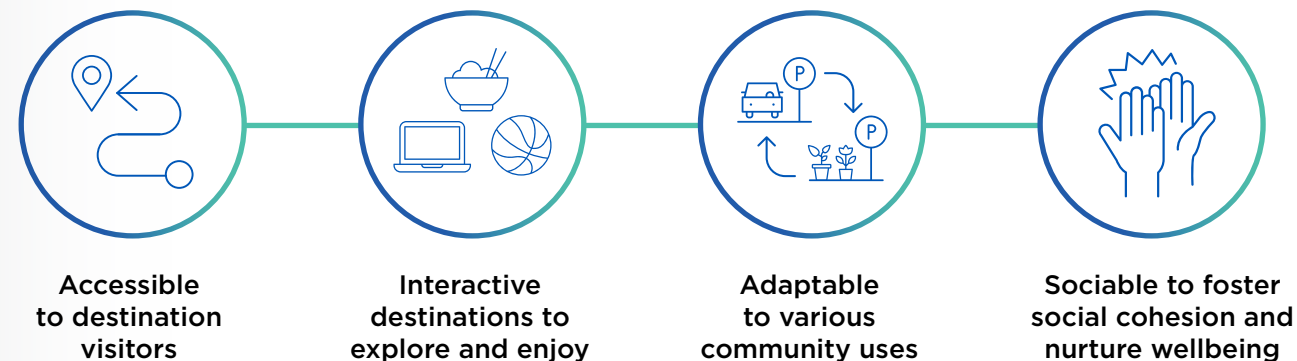
Reimagining Public Space at the Night Market in City of Milwaukee, WI

The city of Milwaukee, WI, identifies as a city of strong neighborhoods, each with its own unique look and feel. The city has been intentional in its efforts to reimagine its public spaces to support the needs of these neighborhoods, focusing on improving “the quality of life in Milwaukee by guiding and promoting development that creates jobs, builds wealth and strengthens the urban environment, and at the same time respects equity, economy and ecology.”⁶² As the city has changed, its neighborhoods have evolved. The Westown neighborhood, a central business district west of the Milwaukee River, has worked to combat misperceptions of safety and sleepiness to become a bustling area enjoyed by all residents. The Milwaukee Night Market, a series of events each summer along West Wisconsin Avenue facing the former Grand Avenue Mall (now The Avenue), is one way the community has reimagined public space in this neighborhood.⁶³

Launched in 2014, the Night Market is a free outdoor event showcasing local vendors, performers and artists. These events started as a true partnership between NEWaukee,

the city of Milwaukee, Art Place and Greater Milwaukee Committee, and has grown into a relationship with Westown Association. The Night Market aims to give residents living near the event space an opportunity to celebrate their neighborhood, bring people from around the city and the region downtown, provide a free and family-friendly event, and support local businesses and entertainers. These events now attract more than 60,000 attendees annually.⁶⁴

From the beginning city leaders were supportive of these events and saw their potential to activate the surrounding area by encouraging new businesses to move into once-empty storefronts. The city of Milwaukee took an active role in clearing the regulatory path for NEWaukee to ideate, engage stakeholders, plan and host the events, and iterate. Because the Night Market was a new type of event on West Wisconsin Avenue, the city supported NEWaukee in getting the correct permits to safely operate and making the cost of those permits more affordable. City leaders connected NEWaukee staff with the police department and the public



transit system to make sure the proper safety practices were in place, reroute the buses and inform the public how to get to the event easily. Night Market vendors were able to use a city-owned lot for free parking.

The Night Market is aligned with the four core values to consider when reimagining public space:

Accessible to destination visitors

Accessibility, both accessing the space and ensuring it is a space for all, was a high priority for NEWaukee. The events adhered to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards. There were no physical barriers to entering the space and no singular entry point so people could move freely through the event. This was a free event where strategic partners could host a vendor booth to provide free food or a small gift. Attendees could participate in the event, get a meal and enjoy the entertainment without paying for access.

The Night Market attracts community members of all different ages, backgrounds and family statuses, more so than other neighborhood events and block parties. West Wisconsin Avenue was chosen as a site that borders many other neighborhoods — a lack of perceived community ownership over the space was key to everyone feeling welcome.

Interactive destinations to explore and enjoy

From the first to second year, the market doubled in space. Each year, the market changes spatially, changing the vendor layout, the number of vendors, performances and stage location. Changing the market each year keeps it interesting and interactive for patrons to explore and enjoy the space.

The Night Market has helped revitalize the surrounding area, even outside of event hours. Several art installations have been set up around the event space for visitors to enjoy. Because the Night Market occurs several times a year, a wide variety performers and artists can participate.

City of Milwaukee, WI

Adaptable to various community uses

The first year of the Night Market served as an experiment, where most installments were temporary to gauge how the community would react to and use the space. Each year, this mix changes — keeping the space fun and dynamic helps bring people back.⁶⁵

The Night Market is part of a network of efforts by the city and other stakeholders to encourage investment into this neglected part of the city. In the last few years, an engineering company decided to locate its headquarters downtown, an old department store was converted into housing, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra located its headquarters downtown. These redevelopment efforts, which often involved repurposing of vacant lots shows that development does not necessarily mean having to put in a new construction five-story condo. There are other, more meaningful ways to activate a space and ensure it is adaptable to community uses.

Sociable to foster social cohesion and nurture wellbeing

The atmosphere at the Night Market is lively. Neighbors catch up. Residents from around the city connect with local businesses they might not have known about. Because surrounding residents have been actively involved in shaping the Night Market, they feel a sense of ownership in the project. NEWaukee wanted to make sure the surrounding residents enjoyed these events and felt connected to them, and they worked with the owners of nearby apartment buildings to personally invite residents to the Night Market. These residents are also encouraged to be vendors or performers at the events.

The Night Market is constantly changing and improving to meet the needs of the community and local businesses. NEWaukee believes the success of the program comes from the strategic partnership established with the residents, the city, the participating businesses, the sponsors and community service organizations. Cities must create a big enough table to include all perspectives and representation of the people for which the event is held.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

Local leaders are at an inflection point. The pandemic highlighted just how integral quality public spaces are to supporting resident and business well-being. The pandemic also highlighted how pervasive inequity is in our society. Cities have a responsibility to learn from past development failures and create spaces that are supported by the public, aligned with community desires, and focused on mutually benefitting local businesses. Although changes can range from temporary pop-up events to a complete redevelopment of a downtown area, successful changes to

public space ultimately lead to a boost in local economies and community happiness.

To make that vision a reality, cities must be laser-focused on community involvement and empowerment. Changes to physical infrastructure are important, but as a tool and conduit to creating spaces that take on a life of their own, fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion. Quality public spaces are integral to the development of a community's economy, and cities must be active participants in shaping those changes.

QUALITY PUBLIC SPACES ARE INTEGRAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY'S ECONOMY, AND CITIES MUST BE ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN SHAPING THOSE CHANGES.

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