



Tishman Environment
and Design Center



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Street Futures: How Covid-19 Has Changed our Streetscapes



Blog by Ali Sahin

After two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, how has our conception of public space changed? Over the past two years, the citizens of metropolitan cities have minimized the use of vehicles in the streets due to the restrictions for travel and ‘stay home’ mandates. With the absence of traffic jams and parked cars, the citizens of New York occupied the streets in their own way. Restaurant owners built new outside patio spaces to accommodate social distance to meet the requirements, communities prioritized the pedestrians and cyclists around their block and most importantly youth

went back to the streets to support public space equity while promoting art and culture.

The transition from staying at home for public health to going outside for public health did not happen in one day. Before the pandemic broke open our imagination for the ways we can evaluate the streets as public spaces, streets were just designed for accessibility and transportation routes. Even then, it was not made for vehicle transportation—the Manhattan grid system was designed in 1811, before the invention of modern cars. This doesn't mean that the New York grid is a poor design for public accessibility, but it gives an idea about what other ways we can approach the future of streets and what the role of design in it.

One of the most visible effects of design and outcomes of streetscapes after the pandemic are the outside patios and street seats. Certain institutions, restaurants, cafes, shops and retail stores all developed smart designs to occupy the streets. The question that came up through this process was whether these designs would will be temporary or permanent. The approach to this question may differ according to

material and the need of parking spaces. In total, streets and public spaces make up 36% of Manhattan's surface area. A huge piece of this percentage is composed of parking spaces, and what will happen to the parking spaces after the pandemic is still a question that the citizens of New York have to answer. With the absence of parking spaces, the block typology shaped again around the communities and neighborhoods while it showed us how other ways there are to design accessible spaces and open areas.

Although it is a very romanticized idea to have streets without parking spaces or even vehicles, we have to acknowledge that it is unlikely to have this transition is unlikely in the near future. Almost 90% of the goods in Manhattan are transported with trucks using highways, tunnels, boulevards and streets. Almost every accessibility option axes is molded around streets and major highways. In order to approach open spaces with a more diverse agenda, we have to acknowledge that the city needs its streets and streets need its elements and programs.

To learn more about the future of streetscapes, listen in to our Earth Week 2022 panel featuring:

Emily Weidenhof, Director of Public Space, [New York City Department of Transportation](#)

Fauzia Khanani, founder Studio Fōr and Vice President of [Design Advocates](#)

Martha Snow, Associate Program Director, [Urban Design Forum](#)

Daphne Lundi, Deputy Director for Social Resiliency, [Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice](#)

Moderators [David Lewis](#), Dean of [Parsons School of Constructed Environments](#) and [Joel Towers](#), University Professor and Co-Director of the Tishman Environment and Design Center

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