

# Pedestrian Plazas: A Case Study of Best Practices in Three US Cities

A thesis submitted by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning

Tufts University

August 2017

Adviser: Mary Davis

## **Abstract**

Pedestrian plaza programs, which convert excess roadway into pedestrian-priority spaces, have emerged in several large cities in the US in recent years. Cities are experimenting with different ways to activate public spaces, while working towards public health, active transportation, and economic goals. Public plazas are a result of these motivations. Relatively little has been written in the academic literature about the recent growth of pedestrian plazas in urban centers. This paper explores the implementation, data collection techniques, and evaluation of pedestrian plazas in the United States using three case study plaza programs in Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco. Individuals from the city planning departments and community partner organizations were interviewed to better understand how these cities structure their pedestrian plaza programs, maintain the plazas, and gather and analyze data from the plazas. Twelve key themes emerged from the research, and recommendations and best practices are discussed to support other cities that may be considering creating their own pedestrian plaza programs.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Cities are searching for more creative ways to activate public spaces to serve the public health of communities, while simultaneously working towards the increased active transportation goals of their city. In recent years, several cities have shown the economic benefits that come from increased bike and pedestrian traffic in downtown areas (Bridges 2014). Active transportation infrastructure upgrades are necessary for vibrant, walk- and bike-friendly cities.

Emerging out of this intersection of community needs and city goals, the past decade has seen a handful of cities creating pedestrian plaza programs, which transform excess or poorly used portions of street space into pedestrian plazas. These programs use techniques which are based in tactical urbanism to transform these spaces into plazas. Tactical urbanism is an approach to creating change in cities which relies on low-cost, quick-build projects, which allow communities to experiment with new ideas with less time and money invested.

This thesis seeks to gain a better understanding of how pedestrian plazas are created, how they function, and what kinds of impacts they are having on communities. During the course of my literature search, I discovered that, thus far, very little peer-reviewed academic literature has been published about the process of cities converting street space into pedestrian plazas. While this made my literature review more challenging, I am excited by the prospect of being able to contribute to a relatively new body of literature.

I wish to explore the ways that cities are using pedestrian plazas as a tool to achieve desired outcomes in their cities. I want to investigate the impacts of city-sanctioned pedestrian plazas, which come about as the result of reclaiming and converting street space, on the communities where the plazas exist. I will conduct interviews with staff from city planning departments and community partner organizations. These interviews will be used to create case studies and these will serve as the basis for my methodology. I hope to demonstrate through my case studies that pedestrian plazas have been promoted, especially in recent years, as a community-building and planning tool, which can be used to get residents outside more, calm surrounding traffic patterns, promote informal social gatherings, generate increased foot traffic to nearby businesses, and foster a more active lifestyle.

I expect that most of my case study cities will be collecting data around pedestrian plazas' economic impact on local businesses, safety improvements, and rates of use. However, I want to find out if there is a gap in the data collection efforts in terms of how pedestrian plazas are actually impacting the health, social lives, and welfare of the communities where they are located. More generally, I want to investigate the ways that cities are evaluating their pedestrian plazas, what kinds of data they are collecting, how they define success, and what kind of barriers there are to data collection.

I am hoping to look beyond the safety data and traffic counts to ask how, if at all, pedestrian plazas are impacting people in that city. My hope is to identify

best practices that could be used by other cities interested in installing interim or semi-permanent pedestrian plazas or simply looking to evaluate a plaza that they already have.

The primary research questions I will be investigating are as follows:

- 1) How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be – who is initiating them, where does the funding come from, and how are they implemented?
- 2) What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts?
- 3) What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas?

The case study cities I discuss in this thesis were selected by first conducting online research to understand which United States cities have pedestrian plaza programs operating. I looked for cities which had websites for their plaza programs with application instructions, programmatic language about their goals, and which had already installed multiple plazas. I identified five cities that met this initial criterion and eventually narrowed this down to three cities which would create the basis for my research.

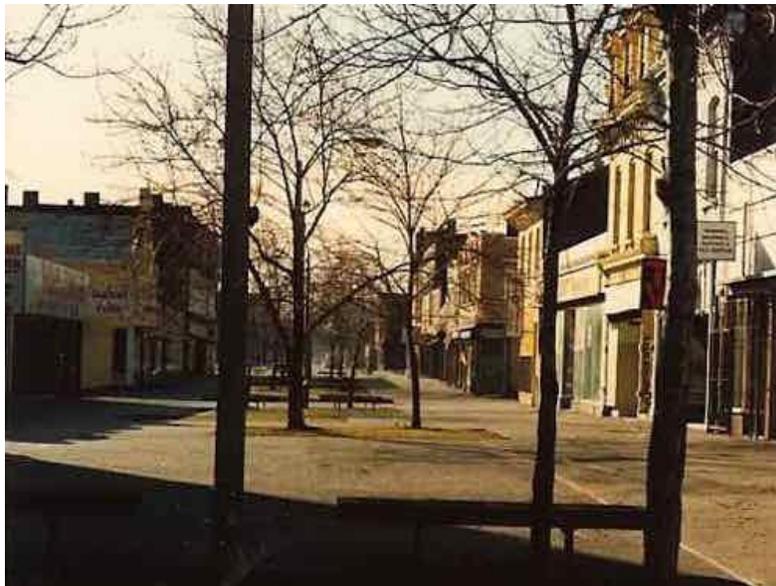
## **Chapter 2: Background**

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the pedestrian plaza conversion programs that are being implemented in several United States cities in recent years. As such, the three research questions which create the framework for this thesis are as follows: (1) How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be: who is initiating them, where does the funding come from, and how are they implemented?, (2) What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts?, and (3) What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas?

With these goals in mind, the following literature review is intended to place the research study into a larger historical, cultural, and sociological context. The literature review begins with an historic overview of the treatment of public space in the United States and compares it to that of Europe. This is followed by a review of sociological studies that have evaluated public space in the United States, asking the question: What makes a good public space? Different evaluation metrics are presented and discussed, which have been used to quantify the success of active transportation programs and the impact of public spaces. Finally, tactical urbanism is defined and the relationship of tactical urbanism to pedestrian plaza programs is explored.

## **The Historic Construction of Public Space**

In the 1970s, around 200 pedestrian-only spaces were installed in cities around the U.S. (Baker 2010). These areas were characterized by having fixed seating, and in general were barren, wide-open places that were not very inviting to the public (Baker 2010, Smithsimon 2008). An example of this can be found in Saint Louis, MO. From 1977-2010, two blocks along North 14<sup>th</sup> Street were closed to vehicular traffic to create a pedestrian mall. Local residents felt that the mall had been a failure long before it was converted back to accommodate a mixture of pedestrians and car traffic in 2010 (Patterson 2014). The photos below show two views of the pedestrian mall from 1991, devoid of people and any activity (Figure 1 & 2).



**Figure 1: St. Louis Pedestrian Mall 1**  
Source: Patterson 2014



**Figure 2: St. Louis Pedestrian Mall 2**  
**Source: Patterson 2014**

Spaces like these often felt cut off from the surrounding city life, because they were primarily located around office buildings rather than in bustling shopping or dining centers (Baker 2010, Smithsimon 2008).

Gregory Smithsimon, an assistant professor of urban studies at Barnard College conducted a study of 291 plazas in front of Manhattan office buildings and spoke with developers and architects. He found that oftentimes, developers specifically designed plazas to discourage certain types of people from using them (Smithsimon 2008). His research pointed to the idea that developers were designing for certain types of users at the exclusion of those who would be considered undesirable.

Due to poor placement and a lack of understanding of user needs, many downtown pedestrian areas were deemed to be failures (Baker 2010). These areas lacked purpose, management and a critical mass of users. By the 1990s

and early 2000s, most of the 200 pedestrian-only spaces from the 1970s were opened back up to car traffic (Baker 2010). For these reasons, pedestrian plazas historically have a negative connotation in the United States.

Europe, on the other hand, has a very long and rich history with pedestrian-oriented spaces. Harvey Rubenstein describes these spaces in Europe, whether they be squares, plazas, or marketplaces, as the hub of business, government, and public forum (Rubenstein 1992). He suggests that urban plazas in Europe hold an important cultural significance, which is simply not found in the United States and he argues that European cities as a whole have historically placed a higher value on the construction of public space (Rubenstein 1992).

However, around the world, both abroad and in the United States, the important role that public space plays in the lives of citizens has been placed at the forefront of many social movements, especially in recent years. Public space is not merely a construction of the built environment, it is also a stage, of sorts, on which democracy and civic engagement plays out (Radywyl and Bigg 2013). In 2011, demonstrations against systemic marginalization took place in cities such as Pearl Square, Bahrain; Placa de Catalunya, Barcelona; and Tahrir Square, Cairo (Radywyl and Bigg 2013). The authors make the argument that public spaces are societal leveling points for communities and that there is more equal footing between individuals when interacting in public.

Despite the perception of the 1990s that pedestrian malls had largely failed, since the mid-2000s, cities in the United States have seen an increased interest

in projects and plans that encourage people to make use of public space in a variety of ways (Baker 2010, Walljasper 2008). Walljasper wrote in 2008 about the shift in attitude among many cities in the U.S. towards support for non-motorized forms of transportation; namely increasing their planning efforts for biking and walking (Walljasper 2008). These plans were not simply about putting in more bike lanes and better sidewalks, they also focused on strategies that would build the community at the same time. His report showed that while cities were looking to increase active transportation options for citizens, they created pedestrian-only spaces in their cities, bikeshare programs, and many enacted Complete Streets policies (Walljasper 2008). Other research highlights the growing awareness of public space as part of Open Streets programs. These programs consist of temporary road-closures and concurrent programming, as well as installed parklets, which are mini-parks usually constructed along the curb in an empty parking space (Baker 2010).

All of these efforts speak to a greater “movement” of sorts among municipal departments and a strong desire among many citizens to take back their cities’ streets and reimagine how all of the pavement that is currently devoted to the movement of cars could potentially be reallocated to encourage a diverse set of activities. Streets are a public good after all, and they certainly cover a much larger area than parks do in cities. Even though the pedestrian malls of the 1960s and 1970s have largely been deemed failures since their creation, planners are rethinking the way that public spaces can serve pedestrians. The research

identified in this thesis falls squarely within this field of inquiry. While the United States has not always placed great emphasis on the cultivation of good quality public space, this is starting to change as new ideas about what is possible to do in the street become more popular.

### **What Makes a Good Public Place?**

To further understand the role of the public plaza in the United States, we must explore the sociology of public spaces. While academic literature looking at the sociology of the specific type of pedestrian plazas that this thesis explores is limited, I was able to find articles looking at similar types of public spaces.

Among the many urbanites who have performed sociological fieldwork in public urban settings, William H. Whyte believes he has captured many of the critical elements for successful public spaces in his classic City: Rediscovering the Center (1988). Whyte uses time-lapse photography to examine street life and pedestrian behavior in New York City as well as several other major cities. In it, he describes the fact that mixed uses for a space are often the most important aspect of successful plazas. Whyte suggests that food vendor placement near public plazas will draw people in, and when the vendors are kicked out, much of the life of the plaza goes with it. In addition to food, public art can act as a centering force within large public plazas. Whyte observed people walking up to, inspecting, and stopping to have prolonged conversations around a large outdoor sculpture in the Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York City. Whyte

emphasizes the desire for spaces that are multifunctional, rather than those that are designed to be used once or twice a year.

Whyte identifies the concept of “triangulation” as critical to social interaction in public spaces. This refers to the “process by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to other strangers as if they knew each other” (p.154). For example, this can be seen in most city centers when a street performer is putting on a show or an interesting sculpture with a video or light feature draws people into a space. Two or more people, who otherwise would almost certainly have passed each other without ever speaking, may be united over their experience around this performer or art installation, and remark on it to one another. Public plazas in this way can act as a place for social interaction, bringing people together over a shared experience.

Multifunctionality is extremely important, as this was identified as a common failure of the plazas of the 1970's. However, I believe that some of Whyte's recommendations apply more to the very large plazas that were common in United States cities at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These spaces can much more easily accommodate lots of programming than the smaller, street-turned-pedestrian plaza type of space that is studied in this thesis. In my opinion, not every small pedestrian plaza can or should support the level of programming that he recommends. This will be an interesting aspect to explore in the case studies in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Ray Oldenburg is another urban sociologist who explored this topic a decade

after Whyte (Oldenburg 1999). Rather than describing the specific elements that should be included to create a good public space, Oldenburg believed that free social spaces were becoming fewer and fewer, as people turned more often inward to their home spaces. He highlights the needs for “third places,” areas he describes as public space, free of charge, with opportunities for social interaction (Oldenburg 1999). In his view, pedestrian plazas contribute third places for people who wish to socialize outside of their homes or workplaces. The benefits of plazas can be reaped by anyone, since they do not cost anything to the user. When designed for universal access and in an inviting manner, he suggested they can be places where the community can come together over common ground. Oldenburg and Whyte would certainly agree about the importance of having such urban gathering spaces for citizens.

The ability of a good public space to bring the community together is found throughout the literature (Baker 2010, Radywyl 2013). Baker believes that pedestrian plazas can not only help the environment, health of citizens, and lessen congestion by getting people out of their cars, but that they can also reimagine streets as community-building spaces. Radywyl even goes so far as to argue that active, healthy common areas in a city are indicative of more sustainable social practices among its citizens (Radywyl 2013).

Baker goes on to echo many of Whyte’s sentiments by describing good pedestrian plazas as having a mixture of businesses, culture and entertainment, and a context sensitive design (Baker 2010). This emphasis on a mixed use

environment makes sense when considering that Radywyl sees the creation of the city's institutions happening at the street level, a culmination of interactions between people, businesses, institutions, culture, and the built environment. Therefore, it makes sense that plazas and other socially-oriented public spaces thrive when located in areas that already have high levels of foot traffic, are high density, and are open and accessible, rather than feeling cut off from the surrounding land uses (Baker 2010).

With this in mind, studies have shown that people who live in walkable neighborhoods have higher levels of "social capital," a broad term which describes the quality of one's networks of relationships, and can also encompass the levels of reciprocity, trust, cooperation, as well as links and other shared values that are held within a particular society (Leyden 2003, Semenza 2003). Both Leyden (2003) and Semenza (2003) linked the improvement of the walking environment or a placemaking enhancement to an increase in well-being and social engagement between neighbors. However, both studies took place in small cities, one in Ireland, and one in a neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. While the results of the studies are encouraging, the differences between these communities and the neighborhood of a much larger city should be taken into account before generalizing these outcomes of other projects in other cities.

## **Evaluation Metrics**

Vikas Mehta, author of *Evaluating Public Space*, identifies three key aspects of great public space: it must be responsive to the public's needs, democratic in its accessibility, and meaningful (Mehta 2013). However, there are few established measurement instruments to understand the quality of public areas (Mehta 2013). Seeking to create his own measurement instrument, Mehta conducted a comprehensive study of the existing literature on the topic of public space evaluation. From this, he created a "public space index" which can be used to evaluate the value of urban public open space (Mehta 2013). Inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability were used as the five main evaluation dimensions of public space, and combines techniques of observational data collection with surveys and interviews of users (Mehta 2013).

Although specific information on the topic of how converted pedestrian plazas are evaluated is limited, a basic review of program evaluation as an analytical framework is helpful to understanding how these plazas might be evaluated in the future. Program evaluation is "the systematic assessment of the operation and/or outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy..." (Shackman 2016, p.2). Simply stated, program evaluation assesses a program or policy, based on a set of standards, in order to advance the program. Program evaluation should be a systematic, carefully

thought out process, with a clear goal and set of methods for how the evaluation will be conducted (Shackman 2016).

Program evaluation is most often used to answer two main questions about a program: What outcome(s) resulted from the program; and how did the program achieve that outcome(s)? Practitioners create evaluation sub-questions based off these two main questions, which aim to understand how well the program is working, whether users are satisfied with the program, how the program could be improved, and so on. I will be asking my interviewees similar questions to these, so I will be relying on the interviewees having conducted their own program evaluation of the pedestrian plazas in their cities.

Looking specifically at evaluation studies focused on active transportation, the one most related to pedestrian plazas is Safe Routes to School (SRTS), which covers a variety of programs and techniques, all with the common goal of students being able to safely and comfortably walk and bike to school (Safe Routes To School 2016). According to the Massachusetts Safe Routes to School (SRTS) website, the organization is structured around the “Five E’s:” Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, Evaluation, and Engineering (Safe Routes To School 2016). In the literature, the main focus of evaluation studies is centered around two areas: changes in students’ mode choice before and after exposure to the Safe Routes to School programming, and safety benefits that resulted from engineering improvements as part of the program (Weigand 2008). Studies have shown that implementing SRTS programs result in statistically significant

increases in active school travel, such as walking and biking (Stewart et al 2014). Stewart et al (2014) found in their study of four SRTS sites that overall active school travel modes increased from 12.9% to 17.6%. The study compared pre-project and post-project student mode choice rates, using data taken from a project tracking database (Stewart et al 2014). However, it is important to understand that Safe Routes to School is a national program, established in 2005 from the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act, a federal transportation bill (Stewart et al 2014). Therefore, its resources for evaluation are far greater than most non-federally funded projects.

### **Tactical Urbanism and Pedestrian Plazas**

In order to understand pedestrian plazas better, we must also understand tactical urbanism. As planning departments are met with an ever-growing list of competing priorities, these departments are increasingly turning to an approach known as tactical urbanism to meet these needs. Tactical urbanism represents one of the most flexible and resourceful tools in the planner's toolkit. The approach allows planners to experiment with different streetscape elements and roadway configurations before committing thousands of dollars and hundreds of staff hours to complete a full roadway reconstruction. This kind of experimentation also means that the community has time to experience a change first-hand and weigh-in with their opinion before the change is made permanent, allowing for a more interactive and responsive planning process.

Cities can evaluate the impacts of tactical urbanism projects and course correct in real time and allow the public to experience the space first-hand, all before investing in the project permanently. This allows cities to react more quickly to the needs of the public, while still working towards larger long-term planning goals.

The term tactical urbanism was popularized in 2012, with the release of *Tactical Urbanism: Short Term Action, Long Term Change* (2012), but it describes a portfolio of techniques that citizens have been implementing in their own neighborhoods for some time. Tactical urbanism is a means of city-making which contains five key elements: 1) intentional, 2) phased changes; 3) focuses on local solution ideas for local challenges; 4) consists of temporary time commitments and realistic aspirations; 5) limits risk while creating the potential for large rewards; and 6) improves relationships between public/private institutions, citizens, non-profits, and other affected constituents (Lydon 2012).

It is important to distinguish the different phases into which tactical urbanism projects can fall, as well as the benefits to using this approach. Many of the pedestrian plazas which are discussed in the following case studies draw heavily on tactical urbanist perspectives and approaches to implementation.

The different tactical urbanism project types typically can be classified as either Short-Term/Demonstration, Pilot, or Interim Design. These different phases allow cities to test out different design configurations and new concepts before investing in expensive construction budgets. Additionally, an incremental

approach to planning can help ease the initial political will and time commitment that typically is required with full-construction street projects (Lydon 2012, Radywyl 2013). Phasing in projects allow cities to gather feedback from the community before progressing the project to the next stage. These low-risk testing scenarios enable stakeholders to compile shared resources and experiment with different ways of maintaining the space (Radywyl 2013).

The key characteristics of a tactical urbanism project include a phased approach to change, an emphasis on local ideas for local problems, short-term commitment, low-risk, and building social capital between citizens, as well as building the organizational capacity between public and private institutions (Lydon 2012). Tactical urbanism projects use a hands-on approach, which enables the public to quickly see how a project could potentially function.

The concept of tactical urbanism is centered around the idea of testing new things and this can manifest in all sorts of events. For example, Park(ing) Day and Open Streets days are two well-known community-initiated programs that involve the repurposing of street space (Park(ing) Day 2016). Park(ing) Day and Open Streets began in San Francisco and Seattle, respectively, and grew into nation-wide events (Park(ing) Day 2016). Park(ing) Day temporarily transforms on-street parking spaces into public spaces, often small parks known as parklets. Open Streets events involve closing a portion of a street to automobile traffic in order to allow pedestrians and bicyclists to have sole access (Open Streets Project 2016). Both of these events are often combined with other programming

in the street, such as dance parties and kids activities (Park(Ing) Day 2016, Open Streets Project 2016).

Returning to the various stages of tactical urbanism projects, demonstration or short-term projects can last roughly anywhere from one day to one week and are often initiated by a city department, citizen group or both. The cost of these projects is typically very low, involving borrowed and improvised materials. At this point in the design, the main goal is to gain public input and collect data. The project will almost certainly undergo design changes at this early stage (Quick Builds For Better Streets 2016).

Pilot projects typically last anywhere from several weeks to one year. Due to the length of these projects, government leadership or involvement is required. These projects are more expensive than demonstration projects, because the materials used must be able to last the length of the pilot. Public involvement and adjustments are still a large component of these projects. Pilot projects are often adjusted during the course of their lifetimes and various components can be removed if they are not deemed to be meeting the goals of the project (Quick Builds For Better Streets 2016).

Finally, Interim Design projects last the longest out of the three phases, ranging from approximately one to five years. These projects are initiated and usually led by a governmental department. The materials used for these projects must be durable and fairly low-maintenance. These projects are often adjusted

during their duration, though the expectation is that they remain in place until funding for capital upgrades are available (Quick Builds For Better Streets 2016).

The pedestrian plazas that are discussed in the following case studies all fall somewhere along the spectrum of these stages of implementation, based on the budget for the project, the length of time the plaza has existed, and the overall goals of the project. For example, in 2010, New York City decided to permanently close some portions of Broadway, following a successful experiment with pedestrian plazas in Times Square and Herald Square. The previous temporary closures were often simply demarcated with paint and traffic cones, but have since been made over with permanent installations as part of NYC's larger Plaza Program (Baker 2010).

### **Positioning the Research**

This literature review identifies a need for greater understanding of how public space in the United States is being used. In particular, the tactical urbanism principles which are utilized in many of the temporary plaza conversion projects described in further chapters point to a fairly recent development in cities involving sanctioned, experimental street projects. While some cities have begun to publish their own reports, at this time little is said within the academic literature about how these plazas function, are implemented, and are evaluated. While comparisons to other public life studies

and other forms of active transportation evaluation can be made, this is a poor substitution for studying these plazas directly.

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

This thesis develops a qualitative approach to answer the following research questions: (1) How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be – who is initiating them, where does the funding come from, and how are they implemented?, (2) What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts?, and (3) What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas?

The methods described in this chapter aim to evaluate the pedestrian plaza programs in several U.S. cities. In order to obtain a well-rounded view of pedestrian plaza programs, interviews were first conducted with a planner from each case study city, followed by one to two interviews with community partner organizations who work with the city to help manage a plaza. The majority of interviews were conducted by phone, while a few were conducted via written email response. City-published reports and information from community partner websites were also used to supplement the interviews. Finally, the narrative data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into 12 themes related to the research questions.

### **Selecting the Case Study Cities**

Online research was conducted to understand which U.S. cities have formalized pedestrian plaza programs that involve converting underutilized

roadways to plazas. The sample size of cities with established pedestrian plaza programs is limited. Pedestrian plaza programs were sought which had dedicated websites, a history of constructing and supporting plazas for at least a few years, and displayed an advanced level of intention and research behind the practice and evaluation which was displayed through their online materials.

Based on this research, the following list of potential case studies was created:

- 1) New York City's Plaza Program
- 2) Philadelphia's Pedestrian Plaza Program
- 3) Los Angeles' People St Pedestrian Plaza Program
- 4) San Francisco's Pavement to Parks Program
- 5) Chicago's Make Way for People Program

Because the interviews were all conducted by phone or over email, proximity or cost of traveling to meet participants was not a concern.

### **Background Information Gathering**

In order to obtain a basic understanding of each plaza program prior to recruiting interviewees, some background research was conducted on each of the five cities' programs listed above. This background research allowed me to better inform my interview questions, while also providing additional context to triangulate the information gleaned from the interviews themselves. A combination of city reports, pedestrian plaza program websites, newspaper

articles, and other sources were evaluated, in order to answer as many of the following questions prior to the interviews:

- 1) What was the date of the first pedestrian plaza that the city installed?
- 2) What are the general program guidelines and location selection guidelines for plazas?
- 3) How many plazas have been installed thus far?
- 4) Is there an application for the community to fill out? What is the community application process like?
- 5) What kinds of partnerships allow the plazas to operate?
- 6) How many, if any, temporary pedestrian plazas have been made permanent?

### **Recruitment and Interview Procedures**

After collecting background information on each city, the recruitment process began and a preliminary list of potential city planners was established. All recruitment materials referenced in this section can be found in Appendix A: Subject Recruitment Details. The first stage in the process involved sending an initial recruitment email to each of the city planners on the list. The Consent Information Sheet was attached to this initial email, including the requisite Institutional Review Board language. A similar follow up email was sent one week later. Finally, a follow up phone call was made and a voice mail left if needed, again requesting a phone interview.

All phone interviews were recorded using the researcher's phone, to increase the credibility of the analysis. Because every participant was sent a copy of the consent information sheet, their agreeing to be interviewed served as their informed consent to be interviewed and recorded. Verbal confirmation of their consent to be interviewed and recorded was obtained on tape at the beginning of each phone interview.

### **Participants**

As described earlier in this chapter, a preliminary list of city planners from each case study city was created. As it turned out, Chicago's Make Way for People Program does not actually convert street space into plaza space, rather their program *activates* already existing plaza space by creating programming and other physical enhancements to the space. Therefore, this program was not used as a case study. Recruitment was unsuccessful for interviews with city planners in Philadelphia's pedestrian plaza program, so Philadelphia was also not used as a case study.

For each of the three remaining case study cities, a city planner and at least one community partner representative were interviewed. The community partner group is usually a nonprofit or neighborhood organization that works with the city planning department to deliver and manage one or more of the plazas in that city. Each of the city planners who were interviewed were asked to recommend a list of two to three people from different community partner organizations who they thought would make good interview candidates. Finally, Alice Brown, Project Manager at Go Boston 2030,

was also recruited in a different capacity in addition to the case study city planners. A phone interview was conducted with her to learn more about how the City of Boston is thinking about public spaces that prioritize pedestrians.

Table 1 shows the list of city planners and community partner representatives who were successfully interviewed.

**Table 1: List of Interviewees**

City	Interviewees
Los Angeles, CA	Aaron Aulenta, North Hollywood Business Improvement District
	Brian Oh, Transportation Planning Associate, LA Department of Transportation
New York City, NY	David Breen, Deputy Director of Public Space, NYC Department of Transportation
	Phillip Kellogg, Executive Director, Fulton Area Business Alliance
San Francisco, CA	Robin Abad, Planner & Urban Designer, SF Planning Department
	Reuel Daniels, Director of Neighborhood Partnerships, Yerba Buena Community Benefit District
	Alice Rogers, South Park Improvement Association
Boston, MA	Alice Brown, Former Project Manager, Go Boston 2030

## **Interview Questions**

The interviews with the city planners were intended to take approximately 30 minutes, though most took closer to one hour to complete. Each interview question was crafted to support one of my three research questions. The complete list of city planner interview questions can be found in Appendix B: Interview Questions. The first theme explored in the interview questions relates to my first research question: How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be? These interview questions explored the history of the project, its goals and funding structure.

The second set of questions related to my second research question: What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts? These interview questions explored the evaluation metrics the city used to determine success of the program, data collection techniques, and any barriers to successful data collection.

The third and final set of interview questions focused on my third research question: What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas? These interview questions centered around lessons learned and what the planners felt were keys to their success.

The interviews with community partners took place either over email or via phone interview. Those that were conducted over the phone took about 30

minutes. The complete interview questions can be found in Appendix B and is much shorter than that of the city planners'. These questions were meant to draw out more of the specific perspective of the community partners and focused on the role that the community group played in carrying out programming for the plaza and whether the community partner was consulted to help determine metrics used for evaluation of the plaza.

The community partners are often in a unique position to receive more feedback directly from the community regarding any impacts that the plaza might be having, given the partner's involvement in the local community and the fact that they are often located near the plaza. Therefore, these questions also attempted to get the partner's perspective on any changes that may have occurred in the community because of the implementation of the plaza.

### **Data Security & Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed, saved to the researcher's Tufts Box, and shared with the researcher's Thesis Advisor. The folder will continue to exist and be accessible on Tufts Box in the event that it is needed. Once the recorded interviews were transcribed and the thesis has been completed, the recordings will be deleted.

The transcribed data were then coded from the transcripts by labeling them based on the research question and theme. Because all city planners were asked the same questions, and all community partners were asked the same questions,

responses were compared across cities to look for similarities and differences. After the major themes were identified, they were illuminated by pulling out supporting quotations from the interviews. The review of associated city reports and community partner websites was used to triangulate this information and to further round out the description of themes.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

Using the methodology described in the previous chapter, this chapter attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be – who is initiating them, where does the funding come from, and how are they implemented?, (2) What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts?, and (3) What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas?

Each research question is addressed below. The themes were identified by analyzing the interviews conducted with city planners and community partners, various city reports, and the websites of city departments and community partner organizations. The 12 themes emerged by comparing the answers given by city planners and community partner staff to the interview questions. When a similar answer or insight was given by multiple interviewees, it was deemed significant enough to be considered a theme. Every interview question I asked is linked to one of my three research questions. Each theme discussed below is located within the corresponding research question from which it emerged.

### **How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be?**

This section describes the structures and processes that allow pedestrian plaza programs to exist. The first theme describes how pedestrian plazas work to

achieve a variety of goals. The second theme explains that these plazas exist due to the partnership model that is in place between community partner organizations and the city department that manages the program. The third theme delves into these programs' application processes, which attempt to ascertain whether the community partner applicant will be able to successfully promote and maintain the plaza. The fourth theme discusses how programming and events in the plaza are typically the responsibility of the community partner, and the fifth theme describes the importance of working collaboratively.

### **1. A Variety of Goals**

In my interviews with the city planners, they all spoke about the overarching goals of the city's pedestrian plaza program as a way to think differently about the use of city streets, repurpose underutilized roadways, improve pedestrian safety and circulation, and create more open space in the neighborhood. New York City specifically has a goal for every city resident to live within a ten minute walk of quality open space.

One area where the cities goals' differ is in their approach to permanency. New York City, for example, is very intentional about making their temporary plazas permanent through capital construction, while Los Angeles treats every plaza on a case-by-case basis and will happily leave their plazas in their "interim" state indefinitely. San Francisco intentionally created one of their plazas to be temporary, in order to provide a public space while a nearby park was closed for renovation.

## **2. Partnership Model**

In each case study city, the first step to creating a pedestrian plaza begins with a community organization that brings the idea forward to the city. In this partnership model, community partner organizations work very closely with the government agency or department that manages the pedestrian plaza program, in order to create and maintain the pedestrian plazas. Partners can include, but are not limited to the following types of organizations: Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), Central Business Districts (CBDs), Chambers of Commerce, local business owners, community organizations, Neighborhood Associations, Merchants Associations, or “Friends of” groups (Pavement to Parks 2017, Los Angeles Department of Transportation 2015).

Community organizations usually identify the need for more open space or open space in a specific location through community visioning processes or other community processes. In the case of the Yerba Buena Community Benefit District in San Francisco, the community engaged in a visioning process, which resulted in the Yerba Buena Street Life Plan. From this plan, the community identified Annie Alley as a specific area that they wanted Yerba Buena to make into public open space. Yerba Buena took the idea to the city of San Francisco’s Pavement to Parks Program to see if the city could partner with them. Each of the three case study cities follow very thorough and similar processes through which the community partners apply.

### **3. Common Application Processes**

Ultimately, the cities review applications for pedestrian plazas with these goals in mind. Cities consider the existing open space in the neighborhood, how the proposed plaza would complement and be supported by the existing adjacent land uses, the strength of support from the community and local stakeholders shown in the application, and organizational and maintenance capacity on the part of the community partner. Some requirements differ from city to city, such as minimum size requirements for the proposed space, speed limits on the adjacent roadways, and emergency access considerations, but these differences do not seem to affect the overall intent on the behalf of the cities (Los Angeles Department of Transportation 2015).

Each city's pedestrian plaza website has links to application forms, required materials, timelines, and contact information. It is clear that each city follows a very structured application process for these programs. Application materials generally include the application form, letters of support from community stakeholders, an initial design plan, photos of the existing site, financial information, a maintenance plan, proposed programming prospectus or calendar, proof of notification to surrounding businesses and residents, and proof of insurance.

Once a community partner's application is approved, they sign a contract with the city, which outlines each party's responsibilities. The distribution of responsibility between the community partners and city agencies is fairly similar

across cities. The community partner is typically responsible for maintaining the space. This includes cleaning on a regular basis, power washing, and bringing any movable furniture in and out each day. In addition, the community partner is usually responsible for furnishing the plaza. There is an emphasis on using materials that are inspired by other tactical urbanism projects, such as the use of paint to designate the plaza space, planters around the perimeter, and movable seating and tables, though some plazas also have permanent seating incorporated.

#### **4. Programming**

Programming at the plaza is primarily the responsibility of the community partner, though the city sometimes helps to spread the word. Even if the city helps, the community partner is the main body conducting community outreach to get the word out about events and programs. Programming is important for most plazas and is incredibly diverse, including movie nights, concerts, yoga classes, chess boards, farmers markets and many other types of events.

Everyone I spoke to discussed the various types of programming that took place at the plazas and how it was important for creating appeal for the plazas. However, Reuel Daniels, Director of Neighborhood Partnerships at Yerba Buena Community Benefit District, talked about how spaces should be able to self-activate, saying that spaces that draw people in without needing to have events programmed at all times will be more successful than spaces which only attract people when there is programming happening.

Only one community partner I spoke with did not have any programming at their plaza. Alice Rogers from the South Park Improvement Association in San Francisco spoke about their temporary plaza, which was created specifically to fill the need for public space while a local park was being renovated. She said, “the plaza had no programming per se: it was intended as a spot for people to eat their take-out food, or simply gather with friends or be used as an outdoor work spot.” It worked well for this purpose, since it was taking the place of a park, which was a more passive-use space to begin with.

## **5. Collaboration**

Collaboration is at the forefront of the entire plaza creation process. The city must have a strong relationship with the community partner and the community partner must have a good relationship with the local community it serves, including businesses and residents. I will expand on this idea in subsequent sections, however, the application and installation process requires a very collaborative approach. Many different groups, both within the city, and between the city and the community, must work together to successfully open a pedestrian plaza. This involves input and cooperation from residents, businesses, activists, the city department of transportation, block associations, property owners, and local institutions.

## **What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts?**

This section describes how the case study cities are gathering data on their pedestrian plaza programs, which utilize a wide variety of tools and metrics to try to understand how these spaces are functioning. The impacts of the plazas that the interviewees chose to highlight were fairly diverse, depending on the location and needs of the neighborhood. However, one common theme that arose is the idea that plazas can be catalysts for community building. Finally, interviewees voiced many similar frustrations surrounding barriers to data collection and evaluation, including the challenges that are presented by pen-and-paper data collection.

### **1. A blend of data collection techniques**

All of the case study cities conduct rigorous pre- and post-installation studies as part of their evaluation methodology in order to obtain information about how the spaces are functioning both before and after the plaza is in place. The methods and tools used for data collection attempt to gather a very wide range of information, including both qualitative and quantitative metrics.

The quantitative metrics often used include the number of pedestrians, bikes, and vehicles moving through or near the space. Qualitative metrics often include stakeholder interviews with business owners and local residents, user intercept surveys, and activity scans, which involve taking notes on how people are using the space and how long they stay in the space. The user intercept

surveys typically ask users about their perception of safety and their opinions about the plaza.

New York City stands out from the other two cities by having done the most research into using business sales tax information to develop a strong economic case for street improvement projects. New York City uses sales tax data for a variety of projects, beyond plazas, including bike lane installations and parklets (New York City Department of Transportation 2013).

However, Robin Abad, planner and urban designer for the San Francisco Planning Department, noted that their department has room to improve their relationship with businesses. He described that it can be hard to connect with businesses in a longitudinal capacity, since the person conducting the interview ideally would speak with the same employee at the business each time and this can be hard to coordinate. He explained that while the assumption is that improvements in the pedestrian realm are going to support neighboring businesses, trying to obtain the information to support this is challenging.

Data is typically collected by a variety of staff, trained volunteers from local universities or other organizations, and staff from the community partner organization. The level of involvement from the community partner organization in the evaluation process overall varies from city to city. The Fulton Area Business Association in New York City worked with the city to evaluate Fowler Square and Putnam Triangle Plazas, but Aaron at the North Hollywood Business Improvement District in Los Angeles and Reuel at the Yerba Buena Community

Benefit District in San Francisco reported that the city takes the lead on those evaluations with the city's own pre-determined evaluation methods. The bibliography contains links to the case study city documents, which provide further details about the evaluation processes used by the cities.

## **2. Catalyst for Community Building**

Interviewees described observing increased pedestrian user rates of the spaces, which included more "lingering" behavior. This means that people were, on average, staying and enjoying the space more than they had before. When describing the impact from the Fowler Square Plaza in Brooklyn, Phillip Kellogg explained that people used to just walk through the area without stopping, but since the installation of the plaza, people stop and rest, sit and socialize, saying "It's really brought a life to that area that did not exist before."

Robin Abad echoed this increased sense of community life, saying "These projects can be such a catalyst for community building in the truest, most authentic sense of the word. Folks getting galvanized around an idea to create open space, to be connected with their neighbors, to create a venue for them to gather with their children. I think that's the biggest and most difficult outcome to describe and measure, but it's at the very core and heart of this practice." He feels that the social fabric of neighborhoods is fortified by going through the process of a plaza creation project.

### **3. Shared Barriers**

Barriers identified by the community partners often include issues of increased traffic congestion. There is often a community-perceived fear of increased traffic congestion preceding a potential plaza installation. Phillip Kellogg and Reuel Daniels both experienced this kind of response from the community prior to plaza installations. Phillip described how car owners were concerned about losing parking and traffic jams. Reuel explained how nearby congestion caused by the construction of a museum, which was taking place simultaneously to the pedestrian plaza was a large contributing factor for the eventual decision to remove the Annie Alley Plaza.

Barriers identified by city planners include challenges around incorporating equity into the distribution and placement of plazas. The role of the community partner is so important to the success of a plaza, so it is necessary to have a strong partner with the staffing and resources to maintain a plaza, publicize the programming and so on. However, this can also lead to the strongest plaza applications coming out of higher income neighborhoods, which are not necessarily the same areas that are in the greatest need for open space. The cities I spoke with are now working hard to keep equity at the forefront of their application process after learning from previous experiences.

Finally, a shared frustration focused around the amount of person-hours required to collect, input, and analyze all of the data that the city wants to

process. There is a focus now on trying to go digital with data collection and use more electronic devices to help save time.

### **What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas?**

This section attempts to explain the best practices that interviewees suggested other cities pay attention to when considering starting their own pedestrian plaza programs. First, the importance of where plazas are located is discussed, with an emphasis on equity, surrounding land uses, and cleanliness. Cities must also understand the importance of local ownership and stewardship to the success of plazas. Finally, cities should not try to start their programs from scratch. Reading this thesis is a very good starting place for understanding the basic features of these programs and will hopefully provide aspiring cities with resources to continue their research. Reaching out to cities that have established pedestrian plaza programs and learning from them will be immensely helpful. Cities should also take steps to minimize the amount of bureaucratic red tape involved with applying for and conducting programming at pedestrian plazas.

#### **1. Pay attention to placement**

As described above, the cities stressed the importance of being intentional, careful, and selective about the placement of plazas. This is because both New York City and San Francisco experienced issues around unequitable plaza installation in the early years of their pedestrian plaza programs.

Plaza placement is also incredibly important from the standpoint of user appeal. Plazas will be more likely to thrive in areas with land uses that will support the plaza, such as places with existing businesses and restaurants. Plazas should be placed in areas where people will want to spend time even when an event or program is not taking place.

Lastly, placement should be taken into account when considering the cleanliness of the space. Annie Alley Plaza was not helped by the fact that it was located very close to a bar and suffered from unpleasant odors due to people urinating in the space.

## **2. Understand the Importance of Local Ownership and Stewardship**

Returning to the collaborative partnership model described earlier in this chapter, the importance of local ownership and local stewardship to the success of plazas was reinforced to me during several of my interviews.

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*"No project is going to succeed no matter how much political weight it might have from an elected official or how much money a department or nonprofit might have, if it's not supported at the grassroots level, there's very little chance of success for the project, because it's the local community that's going to sustain and steward this place over time. That's requisite for success."*

*—Robin Abad, San Francisco Planning Department.*

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As such, community engagement and outreach is critical to understand where the need, desire, and support exists for plazas. It was clear from speaking with planners and community partners that plazas will be much more likely to

succeed in neighborhoods that are open, and even excited, about the prospect of having a plaza installed.

The community partner is critical to this process. Ideally, they would only bring an application forward to the city once they have conducted outreach and engagement to understand how a pedestrian plaza would be received by the community they serve. In other cases, the community may have identified the desire for a plaza first and brought it to the community organization, in which case, the process of building community support is much easier.

When the community feels that their voice is heard and respected during these processes, they are more likely to feel ownership over the space and want to see it succeed as a community resource. This can lead to residents respecting the cleanliness of the space more and participating in more of the programming at the plaza.

### **3. Learn from Others**

The city planners I spoke to encouraged other cities who may be thinking about trying to create pedestrian plazas to look at other cities for examples. Brian Oh of Los Angeles suggests that cities who are wishing to create pedestrian plazas in their communities should look at other cities who have pedestrian plazas and understand what is working well for them. Aspiring cities should consider what pieces of other cities' programs they can implement into their own program. There is no need to reinvent the wheel since the case study cities I interviewed have well-established models that others can follow and modify to

suit the needs of their own city. Resources such as this thesis can hopefully be helpful to other cities as they begin to research pedestrian plaza programs.

#### **4. Streamline and Collaborate**

Cities who are starting their own programs should look for ways to streamline the application process for community partners as much as possible. Having a clearly written application which outlines the steps that are necessary for community partners to follow will help to answer many common questions. Reuel Daniels of the Yerba Buena Community Benefit District explained that even after the pedestrian plaza application was complete and the plaza was installed, additional permits were required from many different city departments in order to actually hold events at the plaza. This was because events which required amplified sound and other additional considerations had to go through event permitting with the city.

Cities should find ways to increase efficiency by working across city departments effectively to reduce the amount of bureaucratic red tape for community organizations who are trying to manage plaza programming. Robin Abad from the San Francisco Planning Department calls this being a “Guerilla Bureaucrat,” saying “[e]very time you work on a pilot project, you can learn a little bit more about how the city as an organism and as a system functions from a bureaucratic point of view and you can get more efficient at bringing the right questions to the right people at the right time, which is going to benefit future

pilot projects." Ways that some cities have worked on streamlining the permitting for plazas will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

### **Boston Context**

I interviewed Alice Brown who, until April 2017, was a Project Manager for Go Boston 2030. Go Boston 2030 is the City of Boston's newest transportation initiative that created a transportation master plan for the next five, ten, and 15 years. One event that was conducted as part of this process included a pop-up pedestrian plaza. This took place in the street adjacent to the sidewalk on Franklin Street in downtown Boston on the morning of August 2016. The purpose of this pop-up was to open up a new dialogue with Bostonians about how street space can be used. Go Boston 2030 partnered with the Downtown Business Improvement District to construct the temporary pedestrian plaza.

When I reached out to Alice, I was excited to learn about how the plaza had been received and if this meant Boston was considering pursuing more plazas throughout the city. While the pop-up plaza received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the people who stopped by that morning, the City has no plans to pursue a pedestrian plaza program.

However, Boston is conducting other types of programming related to repurposing street space and encouraging active transportation. Less than a month before the pop-up plaza, the city conducted its first Open Streets day on Newbury Street, on August 7, 2016, from 10am-6pm (Open Newbury Street

2016). This day was a great success for the thousands of pedestrians who came out and enjoyed unimpeded use of the entire street, and also businesses that benefitted from the extra sidewalk space for café seating and additional retail space.

Following the success of last year's Open Streets day, City officials announced plans to close Newbury Street to vehicular traffic on three separate days this summer, in July, August, and September (Annear 2017). Open Streets and pedestrian plazas do not share the exact same goals, but they do have much in common, namely turning over a certain amount of street space to non-motorized forms of transportation. Perhaps in future years, if these Open Streets days continue to go well, Boston will consider pursuing a pedestrian plaza program.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

There are many interesting ways to look at my results in the context of the literature at the beginning of this thesis. The literature showed that, historically, pedestrian plazas or malls were often located mostly around business or financial centers of city downtowns. These plazas usually did not do very well over past decades due to their lack of proximity to activity, such as restaurants and retail.

As we can see from the Results chapter, the interviewees did emphasize the importance of location for the success of pedestrian plazas. The thinking behind placement of plazas seems to have come quite a long ways since the plazas of the 1970s. Based on my interviews and other research, pedestrian plazas these days are mostly located in areas that already have a lot of pedestrian activity, in order to support the plaza. Plazas are also best located near land uses that will bring additional patronage to the plaza, such as areas with a concentration of restaurants, cafes, and retail. In return, the presence of the pedestrian plaza will hopefully also provide added draw to the area, boosting business for these nearby services as well.

In addition, the literature from William H. Whyte has many parallels to the results that I found. Whyte is an urban sociologist from the 1980s who wrote about the qualities he felt made for good public spaces. For example, Whyte pointed to the importance of spaces being mixed-use, multifunctional and near food vendors (1988). These are all aspects of pedestrian plazas that I found to be

highly valued in the programs I studied. Whyte also valued art pieces or performers in plazas, since they draw people into the space and provide opportunities to bring strangers together over shared experiences. This agrees with my findings from the programming that takes place in the pedestrian plazas I studied. Programming activates these spaces by creating opportunities for social interaction between community members. This also complements the idea of “third spaces” that Ray Oldenburg discussed. Third spaces are free, public spaces where people can gather for social interaction, outside of the home and workplace. Most of the programming that takes place in the plazas that I studied is free, so it certainly serves this function.

The literature discussed how pedestrian plazas have the potential to not only serve a social gathering spaces, but also to work towards environmental goals, improve the health of users, and lessen traffic congestion. All of these aims were mentioned in one or more of the interviews I conducted, as a goal of the pedestrian plaza program.

Radywyl (2013) saw the interaction of people, businesses, institutions, culture, and the built environment playing out on city streets. We can see this also play out in the collaborative interaction between community partner organizations, city departments, residents, neighborhood groups, business owners, etc, who should work together to integrate their various interests in order to implement a successful pedestrian plaza.

The literature discussed how placemaking improvements can lead to greater levels of social capital in the affected community. While the term “social capital” was not used in any of the interviews, this concept was suggested through discussions of increased levels of engagement that resulted from communities participating in conversations about these plazas.

Inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability were identified in the literature as important evaluation dimensions of public space. My research found that inclusiveness is a concept that planners and community partners are trying to incorporate into their pedestrian plazas. The way this presented itself was mostly seen through the desire to make the locations of the plazas as equitable as possible, by placing them in the neighborhoods that have the highest need for open space.

Safety was also brought up in several interviews. Interviewees expressed a desire for the plazas to feel inviting and safe to all users. This was measured in some cases by crash counts in the surrounding area, as well as by comparing the numbers of male and female users pre- and post- plaza installation, with higher female counts serving as a proxy for safety. I would most closely compare the ideas of comfort and pleasurability from the literature to the ideas of multifunctionality from my research. The results of my thesis show that these spaces are often designed with a combination of movable and fixed seating and tables, in order to accommodate a wide variety of uses.

In regards to program evaluation, my results confirm Mehta's literature which said that a combination of observational data collection, surveys, and interviews would yield the strongest evaluation results of public spaces. Additionally, I found that my case study cities were conducting systematic pre- and post-plaza installation evaluations, which allowed them to compare changes in data over time and line up these changes against previously established goals for their programs. This is very much in line with my readings about program evaluation best practices.

Moving on to the tactical urbanism aspect of pedestrian plazas, New York City follows a very intentional phased approach to their pedestrian plazas. They usually begin as either Pilot or Interim Phase Plazas, meant to withstand use for several months to a few years, with the eventual goal of full reconstruction in the street to make the plazas a permanent part of the road. San Francisco and Los Angeles' programs take a more varied approach to phasing. Some plazas may advance to the full construction phase, some may be doing well in their interim phase but have no plans to advance to permanent phase in the foreseeable future. I am curious to what extent climate plays a role in these processes. In the northeast, snow, salt, and plowing can wreak havoc on roadway infrastructure. These effects can be accelerated even more when the materials are not meant to hold up for more than a couple of years.

## **Recommendations & Areas for Further Research**

Due to the fact that the oldest pedestrian plaza program in my list of case studies was only started in 2008, these programs have come an incredibly long way in a relatively short amount of time. However, based on some of the recurring feedback I heard during my interviews, I have identified a few recommendations for these and other programs like it to consider for the future.

The first recommendation is to create city ordinances that simplify the community partner application and event planning process for the plazas. The desire to streamline the application process as well as the permitting process which allows partners to conduct events in these spaces was heard from almost everyone I spoke to.

This work is already underway in New York City and San Francisco. NYC recently passed Pedestrian Plaza Legislation Intro 1109, which gives the Department of Transportation “the authority to write and implement rules for pedestrian plazas throughout New York City” (Pedestrian Plaza Legislation 2016). This is intended to allow the city to better and more easily permit certain activities in the plazas and not to restrict or ban other activities. It should also streamline the event permitting process.

Robin Abad of San Francisco has been working for the past year and a half on creating a city ordinance for Pavement to Parks that synthesizes the best practices, thinking, and considerable experience the city has amassed to this point, in order to create a more efficient program. This is the kind of work that

so often falls to the bottom of the priority list for years, but can make a considerable change in the ability of a program to function smoothly. Cities should consider creating their own ordinances once they have their pedestrian plaza program up and running. If done well, it can streamline the permitting process and lessen some of the burden on community partner organizations.

Another recommendation which came out of my interview with Robin Abad was the creation of a standardized public life data packaging format, which would use data sets from cities all over the country to increase research possibilities. For those who really want access to public life data, which includes all of the collected data discussed in the Results chapter, this would be an incredibly valuable resource. Making one centralized database available online with this information would enable municipalities to potentially hire consultant companies to analyze data from multiple cities across the country. This would provide insight into the impacts and promote further research on this topic.

The third recommendation is that cities which are creating pedestrian plaza program guidelines, goals, and applications should focus on integrating equity into every aspect of the program from the outset. Many cities approach equity as something to check off in a list on their planning documents, rather than incorporating it as one of the foundational elements of the program or plan from the beginning.

The cities I spoke with realized the placement of plazas throughout the city was not equitable, only after they had been operating their programs for a few

years. This is certainly an area for future research, but cities should be diligent to avoid these issues as much as possible from the beginning.

The final recommendation is in regards to data collection. Many interviewees commented on the amount of person-hours required for data collection in the field, usually taken manually by pen and paper, which then must be taken back to the office and input into databases and spreadsheets by volunteers or staff. If greater strides can be taken to automate the data collection and inputting process, it would free up a lot of staff time to focus on improving programming and other aspects of the plazas. Further research would be necessary to determine the appropriate technology to achieve this, whether it's using iPads or other tablets in the field, or something else entirely.

As Boston pursues more Open Streets events and possibly other pedestrian-oriented spaces, the city could implement several ideas from these recommendations. If Boston chooses to institute a program to conduct more Open Streets events, the city could create an ordinance to streamline the process between the city, the neighborhood and the businesses who participate.

Boston should also decide at the beginning of their Open Streets events what kind of data they want to track and be intentional about the purpose of the data. Setting up standards for data collection and analysis from the outset of a program can help city officials understand how the events are changing over time and help them understand what adjustments to make to better achieve the goals of the program.

Finally, Boston should carefully consider where it wants to hold more Open Streets events in the future. While Newbury Street is certainly a popular location for pedestrians already, the city may want to consider diversifying its Open Streets locations to include other communities and neighborhoods.

### **Conclusion**

There is still much that we do not know about pedestrian plazas and their impacts. I went into this thesis hoping to learn about more concrete impacts from the interviews with planners and community partners. When discussing the impacts with interviewees, I was surprised that the interviewees overall seemed to focus more on the qualitative changes that they perceived, rather than quantitative changes driven by data collection efforts. I expected to hear about percentage changes in user rates or surrounding business activity, but interviewees made much more general statements about trends. Whether the interviewees simply didn't have specific numbers in front of them during their interview or whether they wanted to talk more about the community building aspects of the program because that's what they find to be more important or interesting, I do not know.

Were I to do this thesis over, I would have my questions almost exclusively focus on the impact aspect of the plazas, since that is what I was hoping to learn more about through this research. I think that my list of questions was trying to touch on too many parts of the program, from the application process, to management of the plazas, to data collection and metrics, to impact, and lessons

learned and best practices. Essentially, the results that I got from the interviews were diluted because there wasn't enough time to go into very deep detail on any one of those topics. I think that my results would be stronger if I had been more selective with the focus of my research questions.

Hopefully, as the practice of converted pedestrian plazas continues to spread around the country, and more cities experiment with starting their own programs, we will continue to learn more about how these spaces are impacting our communities.

## Appendix A: Subject Recruitment Details

Appendix Table 1 below shows the list of planners that was used as a starting point for recruitment.

**Appendix Table 1: Initial Recruitment List**

City	Organization	Name of Contact	Title of Contact	Email
New York City	NYC Department Of Transportation	Emily Weidenhof	Director of Public Space	eweidenhof@dot.nyc.gov
Philadelphia	Mayor's Office of Transportation and Utilities	Aaron Ritz	Planner / Analyst	
Philadelphia	Office of the Deputy Managing Director for Transportation & Infrastructure, Plaza Program	Cara Ferrentino	Transportation Systems Policy Manager	cara.ferrentino@phila.gov
Los Angeles	People St	Brian Oh	Project Manager	
Los Angeles	Active Transportation Division, People St Program	Valerie Watson	Transportation Planning Associate II	valerie.watson@lacity.org
San Francisco	Pavement to Parks and Public Life Programs	Robin Abad Ocuillo		robin.abad@sfgov.org
Chicago	Chicago Department of Transportation, Make Way for People	Vanessa Irizarry	Coordinating Planner	vanessa.irizarry@cityofchicago.org

The template for the initial recruitment email is below:

***Email Template***

*“Dear (Participant Name),*

*My name is Elizabeth Gohringer and I am a graduate student at Tufts University in the Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning program. I am conducting a research study as part of my thesis regarding implementation and evaluation practices around pedestrian plaza programs, such as your own (Program Name). I am emailing to ask if you would be interested in participating in a phone interview for this research project.*

*Attached you will find some more information that ensures that you are fully informed before you consent to participate.*

*If you are interested or have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [elizabeth.gohringer@tufts.edu](mailto:elizabeth.gohringer@tufts.edu) or 585-752-2744.*

*Thank you for your time.*

*Elizabeth Gohringer  
MA Candidate, Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning  
Tufts University*

[elizabeth.gohringer@tufts.edu](mailto:elizabeth.gohringer@tufts.edu)”

The Consent Information Sheet was attached to this initial email, including the requisite Institutional Review Board language:

***Consent Info Sheet - Email Attachment***

*“This study involves thesis research into the implementation and evaluation practices of cities’ pedestrian plazas. Since converted pedestrian plaza projects have yet to be researched thoroughly in the United States, this research aims to help fill part of the gap in the literature surrounding pedestrian plaza implementation, evaluation, and best practices.*

*Phone interviews should not take more than 30 minutes and it is preferred that they be recorded for accuracy and to promote better dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee. While recording of interviews is not necessary to participate, it is strongly preferred. After the recorded interview has been transcribed and the study is complete, interview recordings will be deleted. If a participant refuses to be recorded, written notes will be taken during the phone call instead. All interviews will be conducted over the phone unless a participant strongly prefers to use some sort of video call, such as Skype.*

*If a participant does not wish to have their name included in published materials, a pseudonym can be provided by the researcher. Participation is completely voluntary, refusal to participate will not involve in penalty, and participants may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.*

*There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. Study documents will be kept in Tufts Box, a Cloud storage system. Tufts University has confidentiality agreements in place with Box and data stored on Tufts Box is encrypted and behind the Tufts University firewall.*

*SBER IRB Administrator: Dr. Lara Sloboda, Office of the Institutional Review Board, 617-627-3417.”*

The phone script for the final follow up phone call is below:

***Phone Script Template***

*“Hello, my name is Elizabeth Gohringer. I am a graduate student at Tufts University in the Urban & Environmental Policy & Planning program. I am conducting a research study as part of my thesis regarding implementation and evaluation practices around pedestrian plaza*

*programs, such as your own (Program Name). I am calling to ask if you would be willing to let me interview you. It should take about 30 minutes to complete the interview.*

*(If speaking with potential participant):*

*If you would be interested in participating in this interview, we can set up a time now or you can let me know when a good time would be to schedule it.”*

*(If leaving a voicemail):*

*If you are interested or have questions, I can be reached at 585-752-2744 or [elizabeth.gohringer@tufts.edu](mailto:elizabeth.gohringer@tufts.edu).*

*Thank you.”*

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### City Planner Interview Questions

- 1) How do pedestrian plaza conversion projects come to be?
  - a. How did the idea for the program get started?
  - b. What were the goal(s) behind the pedestrian plaza program?
  - c. How long did it take to get the program off the ground?
  - d. How does funding for the program work? Who funds it?
  - e. If the plaza is determined to be successful, what is the process for making it permanent?
- 2) What are the impacts of pedestrian plazas on communities and how are communities gathering data and evaluating these impacts?
  - a. What evaluation metrics are the city using to evaluate success of the plaza program and how do these metrics line up with the previously mentioned goals?
  - b. Why were those metrics chosen?
  - c. What data collection techniques are being used?
  - d. Who is collecting the data?
  - e. What impacts have been identified so far?
  - f. Are community members involved in evaluation?
  - g. Where do you feel that data collection is lacking and what would ease the barriers to data collection?
  - h. What steps are being taken to ensure the continuation of the plaza goals?

- i. What resources are needed to better/more fully evaluate the plazas?
  - j. Do you think the evaluation results are accurate?
- 3) What are best practice methods that cities can implement to maximize the potential positive impact of pedestrian plazas?
- a. What lessons have you learned from going through this process?
  - b. What have you found to be key elements for success in your program?
  - c. What would be most important for a city planning department to know, if they want to start their own pedestrian plaza program?

**Community Partner Interview Questions**

- 1) How and with whom did you partner to make the pedestrian plaza happen?
- 2) What programming (if any) takes place at the plaza?
- 3) Do you have a hand in developing or supporting the programming?
- 4) Were you consulted to help determine metrics used for evaluation of the plaza? (ex: safety stats, usage rates, economic vitality, etc)
- 5) Have you noticed any changes in the community after the addition of the plaza?
- 6) What barriers have you experienced in applying for the plaza or to creating a successful plaza?
- 7) What resources do you think would help break down some of those barriers to creating a successful plaza?

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