Lawn Chairs in Times Square: An Analysis of the Pilot Streets Program and the Provisional Project Approach for New York City's Green Light in Midtown Project

By

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in City Planning at the MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In 2009 the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) initiated a Pilot Streets Program that called for the temporary closure of Broadway between 47th and 42nd Streets to all vehicular traffic. With Times Square and the Green Light for Midtown project as a central case study, this thesis explores the methods behind the temporary project approach. How does this approach differ from more conventional planning methods? What performance indicators are used to evaluate project results and impacts? What quantitative and qualitative factors influence the decision to make the provisional project permanent? Can this strategy serve as an alternative approach to the more conventional and longer duration implementation methods practiced widely across the US? Can it build public support for such initiatives?

The Green Light in Midtown project was implemented in a very short time period, at low cost, based on an explicit commitment of government to assess the performance of the project over an eight-month period in relation to a set of measurable criteria. Measurements showed that diverted traffic moved more quickly, injuries to motorists and pedestrians declined, and pedestrian activity increased, while more qualitative assessments were difficult to achieve. This innovative project approach shows signs of success in making large-scale policies and programs tangible to residents, workers, stakeholders and visitors.

Thesis Supervisor: John de Monchaux
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Fig 1 FIGHTING FOR SPACE
An aerial view of Times Square, where Broadway and Seventh Avenue meet. The west side sidewalk has been expanded by placing bollards in the street, effectively claiming one lane for pedestrians spilling out of the subway on their way to the square. 365,000 pedestrians come through Times Square daily. That’s 4.5 times as many pedestrians as motor vehicles. Times Square Alliance Annual Report, 2008
Fig 2 CHAIRS IN THE STREET?
Looking north up Broadway from 43d Street with people using the green beach chairs distributed by the Times Square BID. Wikimedia Commons, June 2009

Fig 3 WHAT'S THE STORY?
Can reducing space for moving cars, taxis, buses, and delivery trucks actually improve vehicular flow and pedestrian experience in a heavily-travelled urban open space? That's what the Pilot Streets Project for Times Square set out to demonstrate. Valerio Bruscanelli, Gothamist.
Chapter 1: MAPPING
A Short History of Times Square

1.1 Times Square as Infrastructure
Times Square is a place known around the world and immediately recognizable for the role it plays in popular social and media culture. It has for the last century stood as a national and international symbol of American modernity, progress and daring largess. Less tangible though equally present in the public imagination, Times Square is also the intersection of multiple urban, ecological, and human infrastructures. From a public works perspective, though, Times Square’s infrastructure is dramatically outdated and in need of extensive repair.

Consistently ranked among New York City’s most dangerous intersections, the Times Square ‘bow tie’ refers to the two triangles formed by the intersection of Seventh Avenue, which runs from north to south, and Broadway, which takes a diagonal path from southeast to northwest across the formal grid of Manhattan. For decades, Times Square’s peculiar traffic pattern not only increased congestion but also contributed to higher crash rates (accidents between vehicles or between vehicles and pedestrians reported to the police) in this location compared to other Manhattan avenue intersections.

1.2 Streets and Spectacles
Times Square’s peculiar traffic pattern dates back to the year 1811, when the Commissioners of New York established Manhattan’s current street pattern by overwriting the island’s topography with a superimposed regular street system. Avenues running north-south and numbered cross streets running east-west created Manhattan’s current grid. As Sam Roberts of the

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Times Square's bow tie defines the space between 48th and 41st Streets, where Seventh Avenue and Broadway, New York's longest street, cross. Before the Broadway Pilot program 89% of the public right-of-way was consumed by a confusing network of lanes, arrows, and signs, creating a bottleneck for vehicles and pedestrians alike.
New York Times recently wrote on the occasion of its 200th anniversary:

Two hundred years ago, the city’s street commissioners certified the no-frills street matrix that heralded New York’s transformation into the City of Angles — the rigid 90-degrees grid that spurred unprecedented development, gave birth to vehicular gridlock and defiant jaywalking, and spawned a new breed of entrepreneurs who would exponentially raise the value of Manhattan’s real estate.²

At the time of establishing this rigid street system, the commissioners conceded to allowing one street to cut diagonally across the grid – the oldest and soon to be the most famous of the island’s thoroughfares, Broadway. The result of Broadway’s landmark crossings at each of the major avenues led to the creation of a series of “bow tie” squares. There was Madison Square at 23rd and 5th Avenue, Herald Square at 34th and 6th Avenue, and Longacre Square at 42nd and 7th Avenue. Longacre was renamed Times Square at the start of 20th century when the New York Times newspaper commissioned a new building for its headquarters and newsroom to be located there.

As Manhattan’s real estate development surged northward, the succession of squares each cultivated a distinct character, all situated to become their own significant landmarks in the expanding Manhattan landscape. Madison Square came first, named for the then-President of the United States. Its stately town homes provided relief from the congested and crowded quarters of Lower Manhattan. The open green of Madison Square provided a much-needed recreational amenity for the city’s early ball clubs. Herald Square developed as a center for New York’s publishing houses. Longacre Square followed, and soon became a place of spectacle.

According to cultural critic Marshall Berman,

The invention of the light bulb in 1879 helped create Times Square. In Europe it was adapted very quickly for industry, especially in Germany, but in the United States the main people who used electricity were theater and circus owners: it was used for spectacle. In the 1880s the theater district was located between Union Square and Chelsea, and then the Metropolitan Opera opened at 39th and Broadway. When the Casino Theatre opened right opposite it, it became the first big theater to generate electronic spectacle. Twenty theaters opened up within a few years. People who owned the old theaters realized that they could do so much better with new electric theaters. 3

Recognized around the world for its spectacular signs and flashy advertisements, Broadway’s path through Times Square became known as “The Great White Way” for its abundance of ‘bright lights’ from theater marquees. In 1904 Times Square saw the advent of three long-lasting innovations: the use of neon light, the arrival of the city’s first subway line, and the first New Year’s Eve celebration. The Square also quickly earned distinction as a place of transgression, taking on another hue as the city’s red light district. Though among its illicit activities what ultimately hurt Times Square’s reputation was the marked rise in crime during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Always a place of excess, Times Square became emblematic of the most dangerous district in an unsafe city.

1.3 Times Square Turnaround

Beginning in the mid-80s and continuing through the 90s, a massive multi-phased public-private redevelopment effort began Times Square’s turnaround. The city offered major tax incentives both to restore and renovate existing theatres and to attract new development in what would become a much-heralded example of successful revitalization through public-private partnership. 4

Realizing that the value of their investment in the built realm would be tied to a reasonable expectation of

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4 There is extensive literature on Times Square’s redevelopment. For a complete account of the complex process and politics that dominated the years of the Times Square retrofit see Lynne Sagalyn’s “Times Square Roulette: Remaking a City’s Icon” (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
safety on the streets, developers and business owners elected to levy taxes to pay for additional security patrols and street cleaning beyond what the city could provide with their police and sanitation services. The Times Square Alliance, the name given to the Times Square business improvement district, was established in 1992 to transform the district around 42nd Street to “a clean, safe and friendly area of office development, hotels, and tourist attractions.” Yet with so many resources being directed toward the development and renovation of buildings, economic and aesthetic attention was directed to the vertical dimension and the mandated profusion of enormous electrified signs, leaving the horizontal plane (and the subway) unimproved.

While multiple public and private efforts converged to affect Times Square’s turnaround, the adoption of the BID brought a noticeable and measurable improvement to the experience on the streets of Times Square. Police officers from two precincts in the area were supplemented by 45 BID public safety officers (patrolling from 9:30am till midnight) and two BID vehicles. Together the NYPD and BID security personnel worked to reduce crime in the area 60.6% from 1993-1998, even as the number of people coming to Times Square kept increasing. But the physical experience of the streets and the use of the public realm were to remain virtually unchanged for another decade.

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5 Times Square Alliance, "About Us" http://www.timessquarenyc.org/about_us.html
6 see fig. 1.7 and fig 1.8 on page 12
Fig 7 TRACKING CRIME & PEDESTRIAN ACTIVITY
More than a decade of pedestrian counts, assembled for the Times Square Alliance, shows the dramatic growth of pedestrian activity in Times Square. This corresponds to a major reduction in crime, both violent and non-violent. The red line also shows a tremendous jump in pedestrian activities on Saturday after the conversion of the five blocks of Broadway to pedestrian only uses. Times Square Alliance FY2010 Annual Report
Chapter 2: GROUNDWORK
The Crisis of Congestion

2.1 Escalation of Pedestrian Congestion
Following the long-awaited revitalization of Times Square and its renewed popular appeal, the district faced a new kind of threat: a lack of space to accommodate its many daily visitors. In the words of Tim Tompkins, Director of the Times Square Alliance. “Over the last decade, as Times Square has become more successful and tourism has come back, there is more recognition that we have some problems as a result of our success.”

The Square’s sidewalks were not broad enough to accommodate the flow around the district and in and out of busy subway stops. Because of the high number of pedestrians, especially at peak travel times (late afternoon, early evenings, post-theatre, and all weekend thousands of people were forced to walk in the street to avoid crowded and cluttered sidewalks. Even while the number of pedestrians in Times Square saw a steady growth over this time period, the amount of sidewalk space dedicated to pedestrian use did not keep pace with these changes. Between 1999 and 2006, pedestrian counts show a 28% increase in pedestrian volume, while total amount of sidewalk space in the district during this same time period remained constant. As an interim measure, NYDOT added curb extensions at area intersections in 2006 thereby augmenting existing sidewalk space by 15% (though still not commensurate with growth trends in overall pedestrian volumes).

Not only was the supply of pedestrian space in Times Square pedestrian insufficient to handle pedestrian demand, but future trends based on annual pedestrian counts projected a further 58% increase in pedestrian volume between 2004-

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2030. This internationally renowned symbol of planned and spontaneous human interaction was not efficiently meeting the demands of its users.

The problem in Times Square was not the capacity of movement of vehicles; it was the fact that pedestrians claim space that traffic engineers have assigned to cars, trucks, taxis, motorcycles, and even bicycles. Even though pedestrians greatly outnumber cars, 89% of the right-of-way in Times Square is taken up by busy through streets dedicated to a single purpose of moving motor vehicles along to other parts of the city. The remaining 11% of the right-of-way, the sidewalk, is used to accommodate not only pedestrian movement but also news stands, street lights, and vendors and all the activities occurring in the public realm. As tourists would want to stop and take photos, pedestrian passers by would step off the curb and take over a lane of traffic in order to circumnavigate the delay.

The attitude during the Giuliani administration was that the source of the pedestrian-automobile conflict was non-compliance (jaywalkers and cars that ‘blocked the box’). While never explicitly stated, the de facto pedestrian policy during his tenure was to discourage pedestrians from disrupting traffic flow by (a) handing out $100 tickets as a fine for jaywalking and (b) installing metal barriers in high pedestrian volume corridors, such as along Fifth Avenue by Rockefeller Center. A 1997 New York Times article quoted the executive officer James McShane of the Police Department’s Traffic Control Division at the time, saying of the barriers: “We call them separators,” he noted. “‘Pedestrian facilitators’ is even better.” After that “Inspector McShane acknowledged that the police had not bothered to

examine how much time pedestrians lose zigzagging their way now along the barricaded streets."10 While Giuliani fiercely defended the pedestrian barriers, the Mayor's approach was much reviled and ridiculed by New Yorkers who considered this to be a pro-automobile policy and one that benefitted those who commuted from outside the city.11 Many shared the opinion that it struck at the heart of what it means to be a New Yorker, living in one of the few truly pedestrian cities in the Nation.

2.2 The Culture of Congestion

New York's everyday life depends on the simple but complex practice of sharing space.12

Twentieth century urban theorists and provocateurs have pondered the question of the role that congestion plays in vital urban places. While Jan Gehl advocates a solution that prioritizes the ground plane to accommodate the movement and activities of the people who together create urban place, the planners and designers of the 1920's -- several of whom helped frame the First Regional Plan for greater New York --, were fascinated by multi-layer solutions that embraced verticality and continuous second-level arcades and bridges to accommodate the growth they saw as inevitable. In his seminal 1978 exploration Delirious New York, Rem Koolhaas describes the RPA plan as “celebrating congestion” with its arcades in the air, bridged at every corner, creating an archipelago of 2,028 blocks. Koolhaas uses the term “Culture of Congestion” to describe the “new discipline of metaphoric planning to deal with a metropolitan situation fundamentally beyond the quantifiable.”13

While Koolhaas explored Rockefeller Center and other iconic

10 Ibid., 2
11 see Clyde Haberman "Pedestrians Get Mayor as Autocrat" New York Times December 30, 1997
12 Marshall Berman, On the Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square, 224
architecture examples of New York, Marshall Berman turned a friendly eye on Times Square. In his 2006 *On the Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square*, Berman writes

In this book, I want to plunge into the Square’s culture of congestion: congestion not only in people, in buildings, in cars, in signs, but, most alluringly of all, congestion in meaning. It is a place where we can drown, or fight to stay afloat, in a superabundance of meanings.\(^{14}\)

“What made Times Square special for a century is, that to a remarkable extent, it really did belong to everybody. It enveloped the whole world in its spectacle of bright lights, it gave everybody a thrill, it was a trip where the whole world could cruise,” Berman continues.\(^ {15}\) He closes with an appeal on behalf of the meaning of public space:

As we close, there are two big ideas we need to sign. The first big idea, which goes back to the start of the Enlightenment, is that the right to the city is a basic human right. The second big idea, flowing from the first, is the right to be part of the city spectacle. This spectacle is as old, and as modern, as the city itself.\(^ {16}\)

\(^{14}\) Berman, xiii
\(^{15}\) Berman, 223
\(^{16}\) Berman, 224-225
Chapter 3: SHIFTING
The Limitations of Traffic-based Analytics

The fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence. Manhattan's problem is the opposite: it is a mountain range of evidence without manifesto.17

The design of streets, roads, alleys, and interstates has for decades been seen as a quantitative, evidence-driven exercise in creating capacity and reducing congestion. According to Elizabeth MacDonald, Associate Professor at Cal Berkeley and Principal of Cityworks, “since the advent of automobiles and their widespread private ownership by the 1930s, and with the corresponding ascendance of traffic engineers as the designers and keepers of public streets (taking over a role held by landscape architects during the late 1800s and early 1900s), there has been an accumulation of street design standards and professional norms that privilege the easy movement of motorized vehicles...”18

Vehicle congestion is measured by traffic engineers based on a level of service analysis using a scale from 'A' to 'F', 'A' representing maximum mobility (free movement with no delay) and 'F', maximum congestion characterized by repeated stoppages. Even as the means of analysis have become more sophisticated, the classification of roads at certain speeds and the level of service analyses only apply to how many cars are getting through, not to how well the space is used, and not to whether there is optimization or efficiency of the use of the public right-of-way.

John Fruin’s famed Pedestrian Planning and Design, 1971, set out to bring traffic engineering thinking to the sidewalk, cor-

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ridor, and other locations of pedestrian movement. Fruin’s approach measures pedestrian movement as pedestrian flow rate per minute per foot of width (p/min/ft), based on a combination of the number of people on the sidewalk and the amount of space available on the sidewalk. However, the statistics that are collected on pedestrians are often based on invalid or misleading assumptions, for example, that pedestrians behave in a similar manner as cars. These models generally account only for unilateral or bi-directional pedestrian flows, without capturing any of the dynamic interactions that actually occur among pedestrians on the sidewalk.

This in turn raised deeper questions about the function of pedestrian space and quality of the public realm which quantitative analysis did not fully address. Pedestrians share space but not necessarily purpose. Pedestrians use the outer sidewalk extensions as pedestrian express lanes, signaling a need for a sidewalk that supports multiple speeds. While vehicular rights-of-ways are designed to facilitate differentiation among

Fig 8 SIDEWALK CHALLENGES
Bollards placed along the west side of Times Square prior to the closing of Broadway create a degree of protection for pedestrians using the street lane but offer little sense of safety or welcome.

Fig 9 SIDEWALK CHANGES
Temporary sidewalk widenings can also provide greater pedestrian capacity but do not solve the problem of pedestrian congestions. Photos: Times Square Alliance, Second Century booklet
While most pedestrian analysis assumes a single speed for all pedestrians, the sidewalks of New York demonstrate that New Yorkers, for business and for pleasure, walk considerably faster than visitors to the city, creating 'collisions' and conflicts within the sidewalk dimension. Gothamist.com

Through his surveys and other experimental approaches, Jan Gehl, Danish urbanist and architect, has offered a fresh way of thinking about the use of public space for movement and for experience. This approach, and Gehl's influence on the Times Square provisional project as well as the broader streets strategy for New York City, is further described in the following chapter. His contribution to Commissioner Sadik-Khan's leadership is indelible. As Will Olemus writes in Slate,

In her four-year tenure, Sadik-Khan has transformed the position [of transportation commissioner]. She is transportation commissioner as real estate developer, urban beautifier, bicycle advocate, and environmentalist. In the process, Sadik-Khan - "JSK" to those who revere her - has begun to drag the city's transportation infrastructure into the new century.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) Will Olemus, "Janette Sadik-Khan, New York City Transportation Commissioner" Slate, August 8, 2011, http://www.slate.com/id/2300502/
Chapter 4: EX-TEMPORIZING

Times Square Temporary Open Space as an Innovative Approach to the Public Realm

4.1 Precursors to Action

On Earth Day April 22, 2007, Mayor Michael Bloomberg released PlaNYC, a far-reaching and ambitious initiative that established goals for creating a city with more open space, increased transportation choices, greater access to parkland, and improved air quality. PlaNYC presented a compelling action-oriented agenda embedded in a framework of standards and policies for implementing bold changes. Achieving the plan’s high aspirations would require substantial retooling of key government agencies -- among them, the City’s Department of Transportation, an agency which quickly emerged into a strong and innovative, highly visible and proactive role at the forefront of policy implementation.

But at the date of the announcement Mayor Bloomberg had a problem. DOT Commissioner Iris Weinshall, a veteran of the Giuliani administration who had stayed in office when Bloomberg became mayor, had announced earlier that year that she would be leaving DOT to become a vice chancellor at the City University of New York. The Department of Transportation was under interim leadership, and there was no clear decision as to who would be the next commissioner.

The ‘buzz on the streets’, (according to posts by the transportation enthusiasts at streetsblog.org) was that Bloomberg would look to private sector candidates to take on the job of DOT commissioner, someone who that would embrace a bold role in his PlaNYC action strategy. In a January 31, 2007 article, Crain’s Insider speculated that “two private sector candidates could be Janette Sadik-Khan of Parsons Brinckerhoff . . . and former MTA Chair Bob Kiley, who implemented congestion pricing in
Both had ample previous experience working in the public sector. Kiley was the experienced hand, having led regional transit agencies in Boston and New York, then departing to London to orchestrate the privatization of London Transport. Sadik-Khan had served as Director of the Mayor’s Office of Transportation in the Dinkins administration, where her focus was policy, not operations. After that, she moved to Washington for a high-ranking post in the Federal Transit Administration. At Parson Brinkerhoff, Sadik-Khan published in-depth reports on gridlock and the unsustainable trends of car use and congestion. What is unusual about Sadik-Khan’s resume is that she is not a traffic engineer. She holds a BA in Political Science from Occidental College and a law degree from Columbia University School of Law. After working for a corporate law firm for a few years her passion for policy compelled her in the direction of the major’s office.

Sadik-Khan was recognized for her drive and willingness to innovate. Mayor Bloomberg’s final selection of Sadik-Khan to lead the transportation department would prove pivotal in setting a new course for the use of the public realm of New York City’s streets as a centerpiece in the implementation of PlaNYC.

4.2 A New Commissioner for NYC DOT

Five days after the high-profile release of PlanNYC, the Mayor announced Sadik-Khan’s appointment as the new DOT commissioner. She started work on May 14 and immediately began shaping a new strategic business plan for DOT, emphasizing benchmarks set out in PlanNYC. Along with these performance-

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oriented goals, the new commissioner embraced the vision of PlaNYC and outlined the vision for a "Re-Imagined Public Realm" replete with greener streets and an increase in the number of public open spaces.

Among the major issues gaining her attention was evidence that the streets and sidewalks in New York have become overcrowded and are unable to deal with the current demands of people, let alone the demographics projected in PlaNYC: an addition of 1,000,000 residents by mid-21st century. "Sidewalks are teeming with people hastening towards their respective destinations," \(^22\) with the result that streets and sidewalks are seldom perceived of as anything other than 'narrow strips of concrete', utilitarian corridors serving the primary purpose of getting people from point A to point B. Up to this moment, NYC DOT had had no integrated or broad strategy for how to treat the public realm.

Recognizing the need to enhance the pedestrian experience, Sadik-Khan sought out Jan Gehl. A renowned Danish urbanist with extensive international experience, Jan Gehl is viewed as the pre-eminent authority on pedestrian-oriented planning. Over two decades ago, Gehl had come to New York City as a consultant to conduct public life surveys around the city, to assess the state of New York City's sidewalks and streets and make recommendations for improvements. Gehl Architects' "Public Space/Public Life" survey is one of several trademarked methods developed by Gehl to combine empirical and analytical methods to measure the quality of the streetscape and improvements.\(^23\) Along with pedestrian counts carried out on select streets for 10 minutes of every hour, Gehl's method includes the mapping of 'stationary activities'; where people choose to sit, stay and socialize. It is his contention that the sheer number of people in a public space is not necessar-

ily a measure of its quality. The method has been developed and refined by Gehl architects and used in previous studies in Melbourne, London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Perth. His studies usually consist of three parts – a quality evaluation of the public spaces, a recording of public life in the spaces and, building on these, recommendations for improvements. His analysis was released in the report World Class Streets: Remaking New York City’s Public Realm.

Jan Gehl’s work became directly relevant in shaping public realm the strategies adopted by NYDOT. As such, Gehl’s voice is explicitly rendered throughout the NYC DOT’s sustainable streets initiative (2009) and streets design manual (2010). Implicitly his influence can be felt across a broad range of NYC DOTs bold efforts to redefine the scope of their projects to include the whole public realm of New York City’s streets. What was lacking before the arrival of Commissioner Sadik-Khan was the commitment to the principle that streets can serve more than vehicles. The strong voice of Gehl paired with a mandate from the Mayor allowed Sadik-Khan to implement projects that put people first rather than simply shifting cars and trucks from one route, from one lane, to another.

One of the most important lessons Jan Gehl shared from his experience in Copenhagen was that “we never talked about taking away things from people. We only talked about what they were going to get.”

4.3 Influences from abroad
Sadik-Khan often cites the influence of Gehl’s work in Copenhagen, where he facilitating over the course of 20 years, a transformation from a car-oriented city to a people oriented city.

She had picked his brain the previous winter in an interview for the New York Transportation Journal, a publication affiliated with New York University. What follows are two of the interview questions she directed to Gehl:

JSK: Your book, *Life between Buildings*, traces a 40-year transition in Copenhagen. Short of a 40-year transition, are there small steps that we can take to lay the foundation for more pedestrian or bike-oriented development? What can we do now to start the process of change?

JG: In London, we talk about three levels, three strategies. The first level is the city-wide level which introduces universal pedestrian safety and quality standards, such as making all pedestrian crossings accessible to the handicapped and elderly. The second level focuses on particular destinations where certain neighborhoods are very eager for us to do work. For example, in London they selected 100 spots city-wide that they want transformed into fantastic public spaces, like in Barcelona, that would mostly be gardens and squares for recreation, public parks or whatever. And the third level focuses on improving a multitude of smaller spaces such as corners, medians and the like that serve as mini public squares.

JSK: If you were Mayor of the City of New York today, what would be your top two or three priorities?

JG: I just saw some predictions which showed that because of all the new construction going on, there are more and more pedestrians on the street and there are more and more cars on the streets. Especially in Times Square, it was quite obvious that it was already beyond the brink and density of two competing modes, and surely they could not accommodate what they are trying, so something has to be done. We could take all the pedestrians out of Times Square or we could take some or most of the traffic out, whatever. I think that should be the strategy for reducing the vehicular traffic in this dense city.²⁶

Gehl points out that while Times Square has benefitted from a major turnaround over the last 30 years, with its new additions to the midtown skyline and drastic reductions in crime, the physical streetscape has remained almost entirely unchanged

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from how it was in the 70s and 80s. He refers to New York City as “a skyline city; one in which the human-scale details are often overlooked.”

Times Square stood as a stark example of this. According to a 2003 Times Square Alliance report:

> While Times Square is gorgeous from the neck up, it needs a makeover from the neck down. More people than ever walk its streets, and the demands on this singular space have grown enormously. Times Square is New York’s manic version of a town square. It is alternately (and often simultaneously) the world’s most condensed theater district, a booming commercial and corporate center, a broadcast studio, and an event venue. And while it is spectacular on the vertical plane, its ground plane - the streetscape - is ordinary at best and ugly at worst.  

However, as long as rents and occupancies remained high and the streets remained safe, the pedestrian situation in Times Square never seemed to constitute a ‘crisis’. Instead, the quality of life in the district continued to deteriorate as pedestrian crowding worsened.

### 4.4 Changes in Priorities: New Patterns for Times Square

Many people were taken by the idea that the closure of blocks along Broadway as it passed through Times Square “happened overnight”, but in fact it was the result of concentrated initial planning, analysis and consultation in the weeks leading up to that Memorial day weekend when Broadway was quickly closed to traffic. Prior to the official press release in February 2009, Sadik-Khan arranged meetings with influential community and business stakeholders to explain the plan and garner their support. In March, DOT formally presented the project at two community board meeting: Community Board 5 (Manhattan Midtown Board) on March 16, and Community Board 4 (Chelsea and Clinton) on March 18. Two public Open Houses were also held, on March 11 and 12 to give businesses, stakeholders, residents and other interested parties the opportunity

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27 Times Square Pedestrian Brochure, “These Streets Were Made for Walking” (New York, Times Square Alliance, 2006)
to discuss the project in detail with DOT staff.

We developed a long list of stakeholders and worked hard to address their concerns while keeping the major principles of the project intact. The list of interested parties we’ve met with goes well beyond residents and elected officials—it includes tour bus operators, parking garage owners, Broadway theater groups, hotel years, landlords and property managers, billboard & leasing agents, taxi and livery drivers, truck drivers public sanitation and private Carter’s, police and fire departments, street vendors, retailers, and event producers. Even a street performer like Times Square’s famous naked cowboy had is say (he likes the plan). 28

In flyers, brochures, and press materials, the proposed diversion of traffic away from Broadway was categorized primarily in terms of a traffic and safety improvement plan. “Pilot targeted to Reduce Congestion in Midtown” was the headline. The Mayor officially introduced the project at a February 26, 2009 press conference by saying

Time and again, we’ve worked to find innovative, practical solutions to our most pressing challenges—whether that’s to improve the city’s environment, combat illegal guns, reduce congestion. By making targeted adjustments at Broadway’s two main pinch points, we believe we can ease congestion throughout the Midtown grid. 29

Before handing the stage over to DOT Commissioner Sadik-Khan to explain the balance of the project’s goals, the Mayor offered this reassurance: “we are going to closely monitor the results to determine if this pilot works and should be extended beyond its trial period.” 30 Sadik-Khan proceeded to outline the details of the traffic changes. “The pilot program will discontinue vehicular traffic on Broadway from 47th Street to 42nd Street and from 35th Street to 33rd Street, connecting Seventh Avenue through Times Square where it is currently bisected by Broadway,” she stated. She characterized this as “going to the heart

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30 Ibid.
of the matter,” aimed at a result that provide “simplified traffic patterns, longer green lights, and reduced travel times throughout midtown Manhattan.” She called it “piloting a simple solution to a complex problem.”\(^{31}\)

Derived as a method to ease congestion, the subtraction of four moving vehicle lanes signaled an unconventional strategy among traffic engineers. Yet the pilot project was based on an initial feasibility analysis using a micro-simulation model that indicated these closures would simultaneously improve traffic flow on 6th and 7th Avenue by simplifying the multi-legged intersections and adjusting signal-timing. Reinforcing the claim of enhancing mobility, the project was named and hereafter referred to as the “Greenlight for Midtown” pilot program.

The DOT Commissioner was followed by Tim Tompkins, president of the Times Square Alliance:

> We have a problem with traffic and crowding, and this may be the solution. Whether details to be worked out, the suit experiment is a thoughtful and creative approach to our persistent problems—good luck, headlock and thousands of people walking dangerously in the street for lack of space. We may not know yet whether this idea will work, but we support the mayor’s willingness to search for creative solutions to traffic and pedestrian congestion in Times Square.\(^{32}\)

This pilot project was set to begin on Memorial Day weekend, when Broadway between 47th and 42nd St. would be provisionally closed to traffic. The closed vehicular lanes of Broadway would become temporary pedestrian plazas using minimal intervention street furnishings that could be removed at the close of the trial period.

A belief in evidence as the basis for decision-making was an important ingredient is the Mayor’s approach to public lead-

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32 Ibid, 2.
ership. Bloomberg’s quantitative analysis extended to post-project delivery evaluation. As policy changes were implemented, he pushed for greater accountability by collecting performance-driven indicators that would measure impacts and progress. Through his Citywide Performance Reporting (CPR), he expanded the range and frequency of data indicators on city services and programs. In keeping with his pronouncement for government accountability, the performance statistics were made available online and updated monthly by the agencies responsible for program implementation.

In the case of the Times Square project, it had relatively clearly defined predicted impacts which had been forecast and quantified during an appraisal process. Consistent with Bloomberg Administration’s predilection for data-driven decision-making, data was assembled and collected before project implementation to create a baseline and provide a meaningful basis for evaluation once the project is implemented. Here is a DOT excerpt memo listing key data and dates on which it was collected:

Along with the before-and-after snapshot, pilot projects gain validity from time series data distinguishing trends that are attributable to an intervention versus the “no intervention” scenario. Trends observed could be matched with extensive data on pre-existing conditions collected over a number of years by the Times Square Alliance. Since 1999, The Times Square Alliance BID has contracted pedestrian and vehicle counts to be conducted semi-annually at multiple locations throughout Times Square. The counts took place on a Wednesday and a Saturday during peak summer and winter months to illustrate the weekday/weekend and seasonal patterns of traffic volumes in the Times Square area.

For the major indicators selected, measurable impacts could be
# Broadway Project Data

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### “Before” Data - 2009:

1. **ATRs [automated traffic recording]**  
   Source: Consultant (collected in March)

2. **Manual Classification Counts**  
   Source: Consultant (collected on March 10, 11, 18, and 19)

3. **Manual Turning Movement Counts**  
   Source: Consultant (collected on March 10, 11, 18, and 19)

4. **Travel Times**  
   Source: Consultant (collected on March 10, 11, 12, 18, 19 and 24)

5. **Pedestrian Crossings**  
   Source: Consultant (collected on April 16)

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### “After” Data - 2009:

1. **ATRs [automated traffic recording]**  
   Source: Consultant (collected in Sept/Oct)

2. **Manual Classification Counts**  
   Source: Consultant (collected on Oct 6, 7, and 8)

3. **Manual Turning Movement Counts**  
   Source: Consultant (collected on Oct 6, 7, and 8)

4. **Travel Times**  
   Source: Consultant and NYCDOT (collected on Sept 15, 16, 17, 30, Oct 1, 6, 7, 8 and 13)

5. **Pedestrian Crossings**  
   Source: Consultant (collected during Sept 30 - Oct 8)
realized almost instantaneously, and measures of change and trends could be compiled in the short to mid-term. Pending on-going analysis of traffic impacts, the final decision regarding the permanent closure of Broadway was set to occur at the end of the year. The seven months in between was intended as a period of careful measurement of impacts, allowing an analytical comparison of the performance of Times Square both before and after the closure of Broadway.

4.4 "Guerilla Pedestrian Tactics"

But if politics calls for movement and increments, it can also call for speed. Sadik-Khan moves fast, sometimes making changes literally overnight in guerrilla style operations conducted with little more than a can of paint and a few planters.33

The "temporary" open space project for Times Square got the reputation of occurring overnight, using 'guerrilla-style' pedes-

tarian tactics, because the first phase of the project - implementing the closure of Broadway - was carried out by a small crew of DOT workers, arriving on site just a little past midnight and waiting for a moment when Broadway's traffic thinned out. Two members of the crew were assigned the task of re-directing all Broadway's downtown traffic onto Seventh Avenue, while the rest of the crew proceeded to block-off the avenue using orange traffic cones and a buckets of plain white paint.

In fact, the change from busy roadway to pedestrian plaza came so quickly, that the intended amenities, such as street furniture, had been planned, but the arrival date for the order wasn't until August. Nonetheless, given the opportunity to enjoy a car-free Broadway, even without chairs, pedestrians who came upon the plaza would resort to sitting down on the asphalt right in the middle of the former roadway.

Janette Sadik-Khan would later use this as anecdotal evidence that "the demand for lively streets is there because when the bright orange cones mark off an area for the construction of a pedestrian plaza, people flock to it, even before the work is completed (and sometimes even begun!)"  

The New York Times humorously recounted how the first street furniture came to be in the plaza:

Six days after the unveiling of New York's biggest pedestrian project in years, Mr. Tompkins realized he had a problem: there was no place to sit... Months of thoughtful planning would be no match for hordes of tired tourists with nowhere to rest.  

The following Monday, the Times Square Alliance set out lawn-

chairs that were only to serve the purpose of a temporary stop-gap in a transitional landscape. In a last-minute attempt to provide some public seating amenity, Tim Tompkins, director of the Times Square alliance, purchased 376 rubber folding chairs in neon shades of green, pink and blue, at a cost of $10.74 each. As a New York Times columnists put it, “the chairs have quickly entered the Zeitgeist, earning criticism from the mayor and wonderment from pedestrians, who pronounced them both tacky and endearing.” While intended only as a stopgap measure, the chairs effectively made their way into the vital pop culture of the street. When the sturdier furniture arrived in August the well-worn lawn chairs were repurposed twice. First invited artists constructed a 9 foot tall temporary sculpture by piling on the chairs one on top of the other. Those chairs that survived in tact were then auctioned off as Times Square souvenirs. The temporary plan for Times Square had found its way into the public imagination.

4.5 Moving Ahead
Less than one year later, on February 10, 2010, the Mayor

announced the decision to make the temporary project a permanent one. The next stages of evolution will be carried out between 2011 and 2014, in tandem with major capital improvements to Broadway’s underground sewer, power, and water systems. NYC DOT has selected a powerhouse design team, including landscape architects, architects, civil engineers, lighting and installation specialists, sound engineers, and graphic media specialists. As preliminary designs are underway (and under wraps for now), it is interesting to speculate how these simultaneous improvements to infrastructure and streetscape could converge to make a greater statement about the future of urban infrastructure and performance-based design.

Fig 14 STREET SEATS
Given the opportunity to enjoy a car-free Broadway, even without chairs, pedestrians who came upon the plaza would sit down on the asphalt right in the middle of the former roadway. “The car free stretches tempted passers-by”. Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times
The amount and quality of space for pedestrians are dramatically transformed through the five-block conversion.

NYCDOT
The duration of the temporary improvement project was a remarkable six months. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation continues.
Chapter 5: MEASURING
Data, Reactions, and Response

5.1 A New Approach to Mayoral Leadership
From his first day in office, January 1, 2002, Michael Bloomberg, Mayor of the City of New York, signaled a clear intention to do things differently. With innovative businesses as a model, the Mayor sought to find fresh and cost-effective approaches to increasing the economic power of the city as well as the quality of life for its residents, workers, and guests. He was determined to take a leadership role in healing the city after the profound shock and loss of September 11, which was both traumatic in personal terms and devastating in its consequences for public funding and finance.

As the Mayor’s second term began, four years later, it was time for strong vision. PlaNYC, issued in the spring of 2006, often seen as New York City’s statement of “going green,” was in fact a broad-scope directive intended to promote a sustainable and resilient future, bringing growth, jobs and opportunity to New Yorkers. The Bloomberg administration’s characteristic use of business-like focus, target-setting, and data-driven decision-making was making its mark on the City. But it was also necessary to translate broad objectives into more specific and measurable targets and outcomes; in the UK, this is a “scheme” that is instrumental to the implementation of a “program”.

The time was right to take a performance-based approach, as embodied in the Green Light for Midtown Program, to test an idea implemented at low cost, with little red tape, that might benefit a large number of New Yorkers and visitors (who are critically important to the New York City economy).
5.2 Measuring and Communicating Outcomes

Following the commitment of leadership to a performance-based approach to project implementation, an analysis of actual (versus projected) performance, in relationship to pre-established criteria, is the essential next ingredient of a temporary project. The commitment to use performance factors and real-time evaluation allows not only technical experts but also a broad range of shareholders to participate effectively in setting objectives and measuring results—sometimes expected and other times, unintended. In the case of the Times Square project, the goal was “to improve and maximize mobility and safety while providing additional benefits to the West Midtown Community.”

The Greenlight for Midtown pilot was billed from the start as an initiative to ease traffic congestion in midtown. While stakeholders identified a large number of issues and objectives, the improved pedestrian spaces could also be associated with a broad range of impacts and corollary benefits. NYC DOT limited the evaluation of outcomes to those impacts that could be measured and quantified in the short to mid-term. When it came time to present the data and findings from the evaluation period, the result were organized under these same three categories: (1) Mobility, (2) Safety, and (3) Additional Results.

Following is an excerpt from DOT’s published release of data:

Data was collected from GPS units in taxis to understand the impacts on this project for travel in and around midtown. Findings show that

- Travel speeds for northbound trips throughout West Midtown improved 17% from fall 2008-2009, compared with 8% in East Midtown.
- Travel speeds for southbound trips in West Midtown fell by 2% while East Midtown showed an increase of 3%.

37 New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT). Green Light for Midtown Report (New York: Transportation February 2010), 4.
38 Ibid, 1.
• The speed of eastbound trips increased by 5% and westbound trips by 9% over the same time period.
• Bus travel speeds increased by 13% on 6th Avenue and fell by 2% on 7th Avenue. Safety has also been vastly improved as a result of this project.
• Injuries to motorists and passengers in the project area are down 63%.
• Pedestrian injuries are down 35%.
• 80% fewer pedestrians are walking in the roadway in Times Square.

There is a notable consistency across all official communication qualifying the project as a program to maximize mobility and safety. Though these changes were applied for the benefit of a specific location, this was far from a localized approach, but rather a flagship project indicative of a broader strategic framework.

Separate from the traffic and safety analyses, the Times Square Alliance also conducted surveys of frequent visitors and theater patrons who would come to play a critical role in bolstering public support for the project. Involving stakeholders throughout the evaluation cycle helped to build commitment to the project and ensured that results are viewed as valid and useful. Beyond just gauging public opinion, the surveys sought feedback from a broad reach of user groups. It also helped to build support from advocates and community leaders who are typically quoted in the press.

The survey responses to the area were overwhelmingly positive; 74% of employees in the area were satisfied with Times Square as opposed to 43% before the projects. Additionally, the pedestrian volumes increased in the new plazas [up by 11% in Times Square] as well as in many of the blocks between them, and outdoor uses were more diverse.
5.3 Predictions versus Performance

There are a variety of evaluative methods planners rely on when assessing the merits of a future project. Feasibility studies or some form of cost-benefit analysis are common practice in the early appraisal stages. Other decision-making tools such as environmental impact reports attempt to measure cumulative impacts across a range of factors. These exhaustive pre-implementation appraisals have become standard procedure to such an extent that they have been adopted by the municipality as part of the regulatory planning process.

Like many other professions, planners often rely on simulations to show the eventual effects of alternative conditions and courses of action. Models and simulations can also be used to great effect when explaining urban conditions to those who may not otherwise understand the implications of decision-making. However, the reliance is on an analysis of projected alternative outcomes, not on the actual, if short-term, results.

In the case of the Times Square pilot project it had relatively clearly defined predicted impacts which had been forecast and quantified during an appraisal process. Monitoring during the pilot phase was intended to measure the extent to which those benefits were achieved. In this aspect, the project is open to criticism because its predicted benefits had been beyond what was actually achieved relative to improved traffic speeds and circulation. Anticipated traffic flow improvements, when realized, fell short of the City’s expectations.

5.4 Criticism from Voices of Opposition

Following the Mayor’s February 10, 2010 announcement that the plazas would become permanent, State Senator Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan), who represents Times Square, and Public Advocate Bill de Blasio both criticized the lack of transparency and public input behind the decision. De Blasio stated in a March 9, 2010 letter addressed to Commissioner Sadik-Khan
that he intended to review the DOT findings.\textsuperscript{39} He followed by citing specific components of the Green Light for Midtown report where he believed aspects of the data and subsequent findings were misrepresented.

\begin{quote}
...in at least one case the DOT presented an evaluation to the public that which ignored City data critical of the project. A study for Times Square and Herald Square Pedestrian Plazas entitled "Green Light for Midtown Evaluation Report" claimed the project had improved traffic flow, emphasizing GPS data from taxicabs. However, the DOT's study left out data collected by New York City Transit for the report which found that riders trying to get downtown through the Times Square area have experienced longer travel times on four out of five affected bus routes. Despite this revelation, the project remains permanently established in its current form.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

There were also some strong opinions expressed in the media. New York Post columnist Steve Cuozzo called for an end to the Times Square experiment, lending a voice to those who oppose the closing. Cuozzo argued the closings cater too much to tourists, who make up only one element of Times Square. If the corporations sense an overemphasis on tourism in the area and decide to move, Times Square could suffer, Cuozzo argued.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, Cuozzo questioned why the plan was allowed to be put in place without input from the City Council or City Planning Commission, an environmental impact assessment, or a review from the City's Design Commission.

As an agency charged with maintaining the city's critical infrastructure, NYDOTH is not subject to the same oversight (and protracted series of reviews) as the City's planning department when submitting a plan for approval. Furthermore, the introduction of the street closures on a trial basis did not trigger

\textsuperscript{39} Bill de Blasio "Findings of the Public Advocate for the City of New York" Letter to DOT Commissioner Sadik-Khan (New York: Office of the Public Advocate, 2010)

\textsuperscript{40} ibid, 2

\textsuperscript{41} Steve Cuozzo "End the 'petting zoo'; Mike's Times Square mess killing biz," New York Post December 21, 2009
the same need for approvals (for instance, use of capital funds) because it was designed to involve minimal intervention so that the decision could be reversed, if necessary. The temporary project inherently contains greater potential for continued experimentation and prototyping. It can be done at relatively lower cost, through scope and design as well as through shorter review requirements. It can be responsive to funding limitations and can also be used as a controlled test of innovative responses to regulation and maintenance procedures.

5.5 How to Account for Long Term Impacts

While the pilot program can offer compelling quantitative evidence based on data collection during its interim or provisional time period, it is less able to draw definitive causal relationships regarding long-term impacts. (The nature of any evaluation in the public urban realm is that the complicated dynamics preclude experimental design). Some real environmental benefits are difficult to measure because of the complex, competing and cumulative factors at play in environmental systems. A little more than a year after the project became permanent, a report was produced which showed reduced levels of carbon dioxide in the project area and overall improved air quality.\(^\text{42}\) While we assume these changes correlate with the closure of Broadway to car traffic this causal impact cannot be definitely proven. This is also the case with many corollary health benefits associated with an improved pedestrian environment that encourages walking. Along with the physical advantages of an active public realm, one might presume there are also psychological benefits, though these are even more difficult to measure. Still, there are anticipated impacts, based either on professional ‘best practices’ and accumulated knowledge.

\(^{42}\) New York City, Office of the Mayor. “Air in Times Square is Cleaner and Healthier since Pedestrian Plazas were Opened” Press Release, April 13, 2011.
5.6 Benefits of the Provisional Project Approach

Since its implementation, the Times Square provisional project approach has become a highly visible realization of a planning strategy in which the decision to make a temporary project permanent relies upon measures of performance during a trial period. With Times Square and the Green Light for Midtown project as a central case study, this thesis explores the methods behind the temporary project approach, by examining the quantitative and qualitative factors that influence the decision to make the provisional project permanent. Can this strategy serve as an alternative approach to the more conventional and longer duration implementation methods practiced widely across the US? Can it build public support for such initiatives?

The essential ingredients that combined to make this a successful pilot project were (1) leadership at the top, (2) clear and guiding vision that carried through to implementation, (3) commitment to measurement of performance, and (4) openness to input from stakeholders. The benefits are quick project delivery, and relatively low cost. At a time when the public is extremely skeptical of the feasibility and value of large projects, smaller projects may build confidence and support for infrastructure investment.
The amount and quality of space for pedestrians are dramatically transformed through the five-block conversion. NYCDOT
Chapter 6: CONCLUDING
The Temporary Project as a New Strategy for Urban Design

1.1 Relation between Temporary Projects and Larger Infrastructure Investment

The real, sustained effort to seek out new solutions and test them responsibly and radically is an example of the leadership and attitude that is necessary right now among our public institutions and bureaucracies. This strategic vision, coupled with the testing of opportunistic projects, is particularly beneficial in times of scarce resources for public investment. As this SFstreetsblog commentary explains,

the [New York] city DOT has published a strategic vision which articulates an overall philosophy of promoting cycling and walking but does not attempt to list every planned improvement. Instead DOT has been opportunistic about trying new designs and street reclamations in places it knows it has strong public support. This has allowed the DOT to move from success to success and avoid getting bogged down in seeking approval for a huge plan or spending too much time fighting over contentious projects.44

As infrastructure across the United States deteriorates – often invisibly and at great future cost to society – the public commitment to ongoing investment in essential physical systems and new initiatives is faltering. Deterioration is invisible, said New York City Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith at the Future of New York City Conference44; the cost of debt (to repair and revitalize infrastructural systems) is less than the cost of deterioration. We need to increase the public appetite for debt, Goldsmith suggests. A recommitment to the funding of our nation’s infrastructure is essential says MTA Chairman and CE

44 “Can the City Afford World Class Infrastructure?” The Future of New York City 2011 (conference convened by Crain’s Magazine and the Partnership for New York City, July 19, 2011)
Jay Walter. His mighty regional organization has started three transformative megaprojects in the last decade (the Second Avenue subway, East Side access, the extension of the #7 subway), but he is now forced to ponder whether they will be completed.

Infrastructure investment can be transformative, becoming a generator of jobs, creator of revenues, source of monetizable public assets, and a powerful catalyst for resilient and sustainable urban patterns that encourage walkability over drivability. As arguments swirl about funding and finance and tax credits, some public leaders are focusing prospectively on the role of design – design of place and design of process. In addition to supporting fundamental economic goals, infrastructure investment can also redefine the public realm in a way that supports emerging urban populations growing around a commitment to diversity, inclusiveness and well-being.

Through such a focus on design, one public leader, Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan of the Department of Transportation of the City of New York, has broken the mold. Her virtually unilateral policy of providing bikeways, street closures, and public space where asphalt recently lay has been met with acclaim and criticism. In Times Square, the comparison of “before” and “after” data, carefully assembled and shared by NYC DOT, has successfully served as a basis for measuring the performance of the provisional Green Light for Midtown project and for giving it permanence.

When questioned how NYCDOT had implemented so much in such short order, how they had cleared environmental review, DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan explained that the plaza program has really been largely done with paint, planters, and leftover blocks from some of our bridge projects. “I want to underscore that our capital program will eventually catch up with attractive durable materials which you see in the street design manual,” she stated. “But for now outlining the kind of
city that we want to see we think is extremely important. So we're actually able to take this place, reclaim it and repurpose it overnight."45

Fig 18 LOW COST, HIGH PERFORMANCE
Paint, curbs, bollards, lawn-chairs, and art are the elements that make the temporary project low-cost and high-permance. NYCDOT

Fig 19 THE ONCE AND FUTURE TIMES SQUARE
Although the final design remains "under wraps", the City of New York expects the makeshift landscape to take on a permanent design by 2014.
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