

NYC PLAZA PROGRAM: OPENING DOORS FOR OPEN SPACE

s make up the majority of public space in New York and a new innovative
m turns them into plazas for the enjoyment of all.

In the last five years, New York City has created more than 400 acres of new parkland. Yet because of its incredible population density, the city still has fewer acres of open space per person than almost any other major American city. To tackle this problem head on, the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) created the Plaza Program as part of PlaNYC, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's sustainability agenda. The program is a key component of the City's plan to ensure that all New Yorkers live within a five-minute walk of quality open space.

In New York City, streets make up the lion's share – 80 percent – of the City's public space. The public right of way comprises a staggering 1,500 miles of land – enough space to fit 150 Central Parks. With the NYC Plaza Program, we can re-imagine these spaces and think about the use for public streets more creatively – all while alleviating the pressures of overcrowding. Importantly, it's the very concrete and asphalt of our streets, which are the raw materials – for sculpting the urban landscape for New York City that will be enjoyed for generations to come.

The NYC Plaza Program builds on the agency's long mission to reinvent the public realm by creating world-class public spaces. To do that the Plaza Program leverages local resources and community knowledge. The program is a community-initiative and one of the most innovative public space programs in the country. It enables nonprofits to enter into a competitive selection

process where they can propose underused streets in their own neighborhoods for transformation into pedestrian plazas, in some cases without much impact to parking or traffic. Sites are selected based on open space; community initiative; site context; organizational and maintenance capacity; and income eligibility. The best sites are located along active retail corridors with access to transit and high volumes of pedestrians.

While improving access to quality public space is central to the mission of the NYC Plaza Program, the program also acts as a staging ground for local nonprofits to become more active in their respective communities. As partners, the nonprofits take on the daily operation and programming of the plazas to make sure that they are clean, in good repair, and active with markets, events, and other neighborhood events. The nonprofits play the vital role of managing these spaces once they are complete. In this sense, the NYC Plaza Program is planting seeds to improve quality of life in New York City on a much broader socio-economic level. By engaging local nonprofits and allowing them to be stewards, the program creates a platform that helps build these organizations' core competencies as current and future community leaders.

It takes a village

The transformation of one-dimensional streets into multi-use public spaces takes teamwork. After a site is selected, DOT, City partners and

landscape designers coordinate "visioning" workshops with the selected nonprofit and the public to develop a conceptual design for the plaza that is appropriate to the context and individuality of the neighborhood.

DOT funds the design and construction of all Plaza Program spaces. Each design strives to create environmentally friendly plazas with such public amenities as tables and a variety of seating options, trees and plants, lighting, public art and drinking fountains. For their part, nonprofit-partner organizations play a vital role in guaranteeing the success of these spaces by being involved at every stage of the process, including:

Outreach: The partners are responsible for public outreach to provide active participation in public workshops, which may include promotion, surveying, and coordination of participants during visioning workshops.

Design: A team of professional designers contracted by DOT is responsible for the design process. Nonprofit partners are expected to participate in regular design meetings with DOT and designers so that the designs are appropriate to the neighborhood context; to meet local needs, and to ensure that they are designed with acceptable materials and amenities.

Funding Plan: Nonprofit partners develop a funding plan outlining how the organization will fund and manage the plazas for the long term. Progress reports are submitted to DOT.

Maintenance: Before construction is complete, the nonprofit organizations enter into an agree-

plaza before and after enhancements planned as part of the NYC Plaza Program. The difference in urban quality is striking.

with DOT for the upkeep of the plaza so the sites are kept clean and in a state of repair. The specific maintenance services provided are outlined in the agreement, which may include daily sweeping and bagging of trash, watering of plants, removal of stickers and graffiti from street furniture and property, shoveling snow from pathways. Through an innovative public/private partnership, this is the first of its kind in the nation, which may also pursue an option to generate revenue from concessions, limited sponsorship and special events. The resulting revenue from these operations is used to manage, maintain and operate the plazas.

Programming & Events: To make the plazas vibrant centers of activity and neighborhood destinations, the nonprofit partners are responsible for programming activities and events at the plazas, which may include holiday events, food or farmers' markets, temporary public art installations, exhibits, and music and dancing.

Marcy Plaza: Welcoming

This is just beginning on the NYC Plaza Program's very first plaza, located on Marcy Avenue between Fulton and MacDonough streets. The current condition of the location captures the harshness of an urban landscape – an expanse of concrete and asphalt with no trees, completely devoid of seating. Nevertheless, the location is just off of the bustling commercial corridor of Fulton Street where thousands of people live and conduct business every day, making it ideally situated to become the crown jewel of public space for this neighborhood.

As part of NYC Plaza Program's first round of applications, the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, one of the nation's oldest community development corporations, submitted an application to create an expansive plaza out of the barren road space on Marcy Avenue.



The proposal was linked to a larger project to redesign the Fulton Street streetscape. DOT provided additional funds to the project in order to maximize the public space by reclaiming underutilized roadway. As a result, the new plaza will provide more than 8,000 square feet of public space that includes trees, bike parking, a drinking fountain, artwork, and social seating. The project is scheduled to be complete before the end of the year. Central to the plaza's design is a sweeping public art installation – a colorful mosaic quilt, "Mathematical Star," made up of patterns taken from nearby landmarks by New York artist Ellen Harvey. With this new public space, Marcy Plaza is positioned to take on a more important role in the neighborhood's future.

The future is now

Over the past three years, DOT has introduced new plazas across the city, from the Bronx Hub to Times Square and Downtown Brooklyn, with

even more communities and local nonprofits looking to get involved.

Currently, 14 different NYC Plaza Program sites from Zion Triangle in East New York to Brooklyn to Del Valle Square in the Bronx, are in some phase of planning, design or construction. All of these sites will create new public space, increase pedestrian safety, and enable New Yorkers to enjoy their public spaces as never before.

DOT will continue to expand its programs and complete construction on seven plazas that are part of the NYC Plaza Program by 2013. In early April 2011, DOT launched the fourth round of the program with an application deadline set for June 2011.

The transformation of former traffic lanes into welcoming public plazas offers a new way for New Yorkers and visitors alike to experience New York City. These inviting, attractive places – complete with seating, public art, and greenery – are destinations in and of themselves that express the City vividly as a sustainable place for all to live, work, and play.