

Public Spaces Weren't Designed for Pandemics. N.Y.C. Is Trying to Adapt.

New rules and design will try to keep New Yorkers safe in the usually crowded plazas, parks and streets.



By Winnie Hu and Matthew Haag

June 29, 2020

A sweeping red-glass staircase in the heart of Times Square that is a magnet for selfie-snapping tourists has been barricaded off.

There are calls for one-way sidewalks on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where the concrete is too narrow to keep people six feet apart.

Tables for two and potted trees may soon replace cars along Arthur Avenue, the heart of Little Italy in the Bronx, where restaurants are turning to curbside dining so customers can spread out.

The rigorous social distancing that has beaten back the coronavirus is being put to its biggest test yet as New York City eases restrictions after a three-month shutdown. Though still far from normal, empty streets and sidewalks are starting to fill with commuters, plazas are getting visitors, and playgrounds are bustling with children.

The pandemic, which has taken away so much already, has created new challenges for public places that are, by design, meant to be shared by everyone, and are central to cities like New York, where limited space forces people together.

New York City has vastly expanded its network of public spaces over the past two decades — including new showcase parks and pedestrian plazas carved from streets — that serve as the backyard for countless New Yorkers who live in small apartments.

While these spaces have made the city more vibrant, they also draw crowds that now make them a public health threat.

Some states that have reopened faster than New York, including Florida, Texas and Arizona, have seen a surge in coronavirus cases as people have headed back to beaches, shopping malls and other public places.

“Everyone is desperate to encourage public activity, but how to do it safely with a less than perfect understanding of how risky is risky?” said Tom Wright, the president of the Regional Plan Association, an influential planning group.



Thousands of restaurants are seeking permission to provide outdoor seating. September Dawn Bottoms/The New York Times

Even before New York City, which became an epicenter of the pandemic, officially began reopening on June 8, the streets were filled with demonstrators protesting the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Latest Updates: Global Coronavirus Outbreak Updated 11h ago

- The U.S. reports more than 75,600 new cases, shattering its daily record.
- India hits a million cases in a surge that has forced a return to lockdowns.
- China is offering unproven vaccine candidates to workers at state-owned companies and the armed forces.

[See more updates](#)

More live coverage:

And as virus fatigue set in, people increasingly flouted social distancing rules: going maskless in public, crowding around bars and cutting chains on playgrounds before they were officially reopened.

City and state officials face additional hurdles as offices start reopening, bringing out thousands more workers, and as outdoor service begins at hard-hit restaurants that are often squeezed into tight spaces.

An outdoor dining plan announced by Mayor Bill de Blasio allows restaurants to expand seating outdoors on sidewalks and in parking lanes and plazas. Restaurants will soon be able to use streets that have already been closed to traffic.

And outdoor dining may take on greater significance after the mayor and Governor Andrew M. Cuomo on Monday suggested that indoor dining, which was supposed to resume as early as July 6, could be delayed.

In response to the pandemic, the city closed 44 miles of its 6,000 miles of streets to traffic, allowing for walking, biking and social distancing, under pressure from residents and transportation advocates. The mayor announced last week that an additional 23 miles of streets would be closed.

Polly Trottenberg, the city's transportation commissioner, said the pandemic had given people a chance to take ownership of their streets and have more say in how they should be used. "It has brought forward a desire to see city streets used in more open and creative ways," she said.

But with little official guidance from the city on public spaces beyond streets and outdoor dining, many business and community groups have been left to figure out how to keep people safe.



Some streets have been closed off to make more room for bicyclists and pedestrians. September Dawn Bottoms/The New York Times

Some Upper East Side residents have called for one-way sidewalks. "The stressful part of going anywhere is getting there, because the sidewalks are so narrow," said City Councilman Ben Kallos, who represents parts of the neighborhood and Roosevelt Island. "There's no room for distancing, especially when people are walking toward you."

City transportation officials said that while they appreciated the creative proposal, it was not practical and could require people to cross additional streets to get where they were going.

Some businesses, anticipating that checkpoints to screen workers for the virus would create lines that spill onto sidewalks, are considering staggering work hours; asking employees to take stairs instead of waiting for elevators; and installing cameras that automatically flag people with high temperatures, said Margaret Newman, a principal at Arup, a design and consulting firm.

Some of the city's most popular plazas and parks have already taken steps to prevent crowding, including removing chairs and tables. Along Broadway in the garment district in Manhattan, only about one-third of the chairs have been put out. Sidewalk stickers placed six feet apart outside stores and restaurants show people where to stand.

Times Square, one of the most famous gathering spots in the world, draws up to 450,000 people daily. The cascade of 27 ruby-red glass steps, which seats hundreds at a time, has been closed indefinitely. Dozens of theater-inspired signs remind visitors of social-distancing rules, including one that says, “Phantom of the Opera: popularizing masks since 1986.”

In Bryant Park, another crowded space in the heart of Manhattan, there is a limit of three people in each bathroom. Drinking water fountains have been converted into hand-washing sinks. Chess players are encouraged to sit at separate tables with separate chessboards and call out moves to each other. And when the carousel reopens, children will be seated on every other horse.



Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan is limiting bathroom use and directing foot traffic, among other measures, to try to maintain social distancing. September Dawn Bottoms/The New York Times

In Central Park, police officers will restrict entry into the lush, 15-acre lawn known as Sheep Meadow when it becomes crowded. In Brooklyn Bridge Park, fitness classes and basketball and volleyball games have been suspended. Nearby in Domino Park, the lawn has been divided into 30 white circles, each eight feet in diameter and spaced six feet apart. A park worker reminds people to stay inside their own circle.

The Coronavirus Outbreak >

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated July 16, 2020

Is the coronavirus airborne?

The coronavirus can stay aloft for hours in tiny droplets in stagnant air, infecting people as they inhale, mounting scientific evidence suggests. This risk is highest in crowded indoor spaces with poor ventilation, and may help explain super-spreading events reported in meatpacking plants, churches and restaurants. It's unclear how often the virus is spread via these tiny droplets, or aerosols, compared with larger droplets that are expelled when a sick person coughs or sneezes, or transmitted through contact with contaminated surfaces, said Linsey Marr, an aerosol expert at Virginia Tech. Aerosols are released even when a person without symptoms exhales, talks or sings, according to Dr. Marr and

“We found it was the lowest common denominator, it was the simplest solution to separate people,” said Michael Lampariello, the park’s director, who fields inquiries about replicating the circles in other cities.

Still, many people overseeing public spaces say there is only so much they can do to maintain social distancing.

“We want the city to offer up guidelines and some degree of enforcement to help us manage these public spaces,” said Tim Tompkins, the president of the Times Square Alliance, which manages Times Square.

City planning officials, who regulate hundreds of privately owned public spaces in some of New York’s busiest neighborhoods, said they would soon release a plan to make social distancing possible.

Jerold S. Kayden, a professor of urban planning and design at Harvard University, said that in many cities, public spaces were created largely piecemeal rather than through a master plan, and are overseen by a patchwork of government agencies and private property owners. “We need to think of public spaces in total,” he said. “They’re all part of the solution and we need to think about them in the same way.”

Leaders of business improvement districts lobbied city officials to expedite the authorization process for outdoor dining. By Sunday, more than 6,000 restaurants had applied, including 3,000 in Manhattan.

“Outdoor seating is a lifeline,” said Michael McNamee, an owner of PMac’s Hospitality Group, which has several Manhattan restaurants, including Dutch Fred’s and Tanner Smith’s in Midtown. “We need customers to feel happy and confident in our ability to have a secure and virus-free environment.”

Moving dining tables outside would not offset the losses from reducing indoor capacity, Mr. McNamee said, but it would allow his restaurants to bring back up to 50 percent of their employees.



In some pedestrian plazas, chairs and tables have not been set out in an effort to discourage people from gathering. September Dawn Bottoms/The New York Times

In the Belmont neighborhood of the Bronx, known as the borough's Little Italy, the business improvement district is planning to transform a stretch of Arthur Avenue into an Italian piazza in the evenings with tables on the sidewalk and part of the street, while still allowing room for emergency vehicles.

"Getting people back working is our first priority, but with that comes the reattachment of the limbs here that make us whole," said Peter Madonia, the chairman of the Belmont Business Improvement District and a third-generation owner of Madonia Bakery on Arthur Avenue. "This is deeply personal for me as well as professionally."

Regina Myer, the president of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, recently took Ms. Trottenberg, the transportation commissioner, on a neighborhood tour, pointing out where tables and seats could be brought outdoors, including one spot outside Junior's Restaurant, which is famous for its cheesecake.

"Having Junior's reopen," Ms. Myer said, "would be a huge symbol for the borough."

In Queens, some property owners in Long Island City are considering helping their tenants by using spaces in private parking lots for outdoor restaurant seating.

"You get a foot here, and you get a foot there," said Elizabeth Lusskin, the president of the Long Island City Partnership. "And hopefully, it adds up to something usable."

Mr. Kayden, the professor, said some of the new ideas and measures could outlast the pandemic and fundamentally change the way that public spaces are designed.

"Everybody is rethinking their public spaces," he said. "A lot of people are using this crisis as an opportunity to say we want more and better public spaces."