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Research article

# The designed and the ad hoc: dynamic remakings of street space in New York City

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## Abstract

Most people in the United States began to alter their decisions and actions beginning in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, when the closures and 'pause' on most work were established. Studying the transforming urban conditions in New York City specifically presents a lens through which to understand how we quickly adapted to new spatial conditions as measures were put in place for keeping people healthy and encouraging businesses to stay open and approachable. Immediately, the need for social distancing asked us to consider how to navigate exposure as we moved beyond the home. Necessities for businesses to survive became a priority for the city and coalesced with people's desire for seeking ways to do things outdoors. A focus on using city streets as urban public spaces resulted. Policies such as Open Restaurants and Open Streets were developed by the Department of Transportation to mitigate pandemic circumstances and to stir dynamic and optimistic possibilities for street use. Open Restaurants called for food/drink establishments to quickly reimagine

their adjacent pavement or available street space. Open Streets initiated new ways for creating pedestrian zones in previously trafficked areas. This article highlights fieldwork documentation comparing a Cluster and Line of food/drink establishments with a newly pedestrian Avenue, in connected Brooklyn neighbourhoods. Diagrams, photographs and maps document the ingenious street constructions and the observed and felt psychological or phenomenal transformations taking place. An urban interiorism grew out of the imposed formalisation of rules for movement patterns and compact constructions, while the ad hoc or serendipitous conditions allowed for other intimate conditions. Notions of 'village cafés' or 'urban beaches' evolved through myriad forms and materials inviting unusual seating configurations and interactions. Speculations on what these internal/external spatial experiences, changing identities and continued urban freedoms are teaching us are also explored through a multidisciplinary set of voices.

**Keywords:** Open Streets; Open Restaurants; 'constructed' street space; urban interiorism; 'great pause'; ad hoc'ism

## Introduction and thematic contexts

The Covid-19 pandemic sparked a rethinking of our urban behaviours and interests in streets as spaces that can be re-experienced and utilised as novel places. As the pandemic health-based requirements ebb and flow, questions about the condition and character of streets as public, multi-use environments have intensified. A conscious shift towards rethinking how individuals and groups co-exist outdoors while taking precautions for spatial distancing has yielded a myriad of inventive urban designs motivated by challenges and new ideals.<sup>1</sup> Alongside parked or moving cars or bicycles, new initiatives are enabling people to choose where and when to do ordinary things like walking, talking, exercising, relaxing or taking personal quiet moments, as well as interacting, in exciting ways. Reframing how we understand streets as public places, and how people re-create themselves while passing through the city, continues to become more evident, as people reflect on their own changes, making profound realisations.<sup>2</sup>

Morphological change is part of what keeps urban life and cities alive. Large or small incremental transformations are due not only to the evolution of an era's cultural or financial needs, but also instigated by industrial or demographic developments and human-induced or natural calamities. Today, the amplification of issues and needs are exacerbated by the pandemic.

Most cities and communities in the world experienced some sort of lockdown starting in January 2020. Bruno Maçães, a Portuguese politician, think-tank consultant and author, wrote in June 2020 in *Foreign Policy* that:

Pandemics are a recurrent phenomenon in human history. The 'great pause' is new. In assessing the historical significance of the pandemic, the way we chose to respond may be more revealing than the natural event itself. Paradoxically, modern societies governed by continuous movement responded to the crisis by stopping a large part of social and economic activity. As a public policy choice, it may have been inevitable. As an experiment, it was unprecedented.<sup>3</sup>

A professor of anthropology, Shannon Mattern, writes provocatively about 'experiential nothingness' and a pursuit of 'somethingness', in this period. In her *Places* article from March 2021, 'How to Map Nothing', she introduces the ideas of artist and writer Jenny Odell who published *How to Do Nothing* before the pandemic began, in 2019. Odell, Mattern states, made the case for 'retreat or refusal' as an act of resistance to capitalist productivity and commodified attention. She laid out a plan for holding 'open a contemplative space against the pressures of habit, familiarity, and distraction that constantly threaten to close it'.<sup>4</sup> With different motivations, these now prescient ideals have taken hold as more tangible absolutes.

The pause enabled a kind of breather – a slowing down that gave space for us all to become eyewitnesses to this era, pondering how to renavigate daily life, including assessing personal and

collective moralities that involve public freedom, fairness and access. Within this experiment, we are relearning the choice to adjust and mark our own paths. We realise that both very large and seemingly small modifications aggregate to create positive ripple effects, impacting the atmosphere of the city and our lives within them.

The pandemic unleashed a need for new codes and rules of public engagement that affect the personal and collective subconscious. As the author wrote in the journal *Interiority* in 2021, there are 'complex consequences for defining interiority as simultaneously public, and also decidedly private'.<sup>5</sup> The 'several scales of tangible and psychological interiority'<sup>6</sup> construct conditions of urban interiorism that are sensed through proximities of interactions, whether a result of carefully planned designs or a more ad hoc aggregated set of circumstances. Indeed, urbanist Richard Sennett argued in his lecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design that interiority is an urban public condition that brings together notions of acting neutral or cool in the presence of others, as though wearing a mask,<sup>7</sup> while actually being physically stimulated at the same time. Thus, people specifically *feel* what he calls 'urban subjectivity', which is a condition based on reflection.<sup>8</sup>

In New York City specifically, schools and other institutions closed in the second week of March with what was also called 'New York State on Pause' (officially starting 22 March 2020).<sup>9</sup> Shortly afterwards, two programmes initiated in NYC transformed the city, seemingly overnight. In April the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) under Mayor de Blasio designated the creation of the Open Streets programme,<sup>10</sup> which allowed 83 miles of various types of partial to full closure (using different timeframes) to alter street traffic in favour of pedestrian usage. In June 2020 another emergency programme, Open Restaurants (with an easy-to-use website full of information and implementation procedures)<sup>11</sup> allowed proprietors to stay in business selling drinks and food (to passers-by or through telephone orders), while also suggesting methods for taking over adjacent pavements and/or parking spaces with small open shelters at no cost. This responded to the dire need to keep food business establishments open. Support from the city for Open Streets included providing signage and simple barriers, while nascent rules for Open Restaurants' size and safety were issued through design templates. The depiction in Figure 1, taken from the DOT website, emphasises among many things the maximum 8 foot depth on or off the pavement.<sup>12</sup> The physical boundaries for these reconfigured and newly constructed street environments mitigate indoor health challenges and crowded exterior social conditions, while inviting the partaking of fresh air.

The two programmes were developed with safety, and also built-in flexibility, as a goal. They were meant to be temporary and malleable, with assessment taking place incrementally as the pandemic progressed. Surprising allowances were made for seizing available pavement zones, parking spaces and even parts of parklets that fall adjacent to a proprietor's business location. Various open-air restaurant constructions and many diverse Open Streets configurations began to immediately pop up all over the city – and, they continue to be experienced, tested and debated.<sup>13</sup>

All of these initiatives assisted the making of space for people to be able to approach each other carefully within the density of urban streets – a strikingly different strategy from what was possible for a myriad of cultural institutions, schools and offices that could not do so readily indoors.<sup>14</sup> Community groups, local Business Improvement Districts (BID), neighbourhood associations, designers and contractors became engaged to figure out what was best, or at least attainable. Many began 'pivoting' towards alternative methods of sale or engaging with the public, urging new realisations about urban life on the streets.<sup>15</sup>

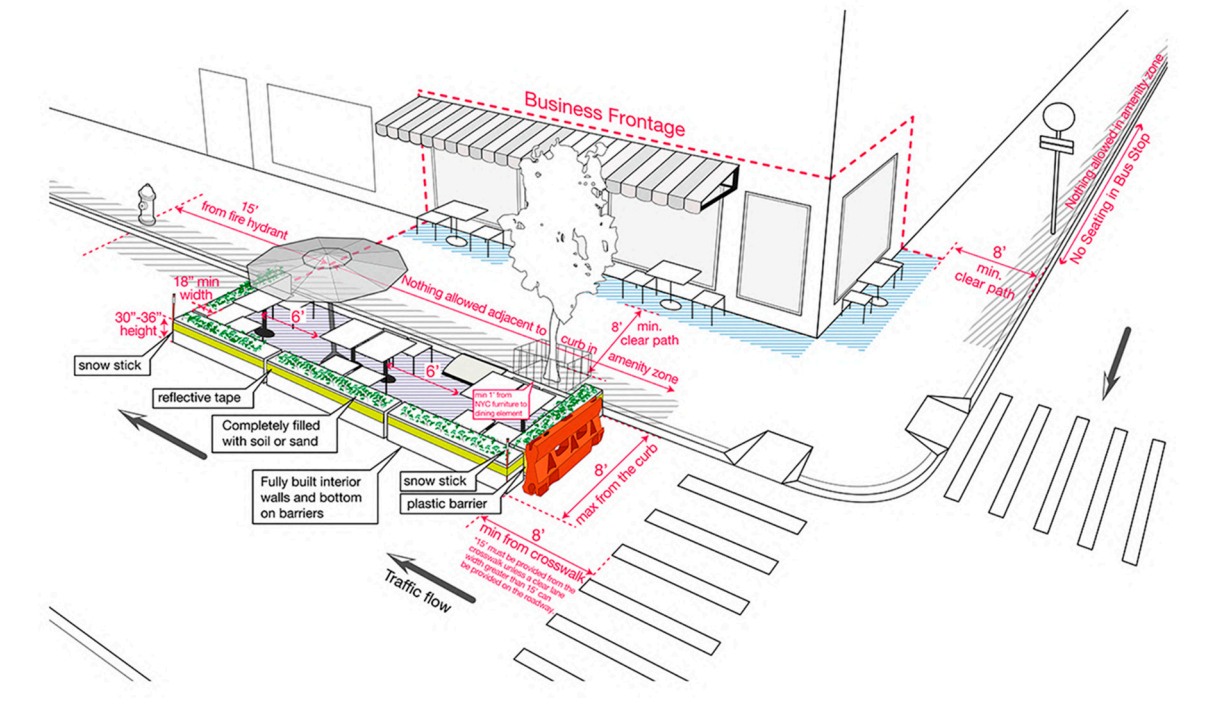
To provide context for the urban dynamism taking place today, three physical-based and phenomenological themes are focused on to consider the present and future of streets in NYC. They also serve as universals for studying other urban locations: (1) identifying temporal changes by comparing and contrasting the designed and ad hoc street conditions found in proximate locations; (2) redefining and considering how individual and group identity relates to the public freedoms formed within the public space of streets; (3) locating the understanding and meaning of interiorism and interiority within external urban environments.

To expand on these topics and arguments, the work of urbanists, sociologists, philosophers and journalists, as well as architects, designers and professors, is integrated here to illustrate how an inter- and multidisciplinary set of voices can, in combination, aid in the exploration and analysis of different attitudes and implications of the developments produced by NYC agencies and individual proprietors.

Finally, research gathered through a fieldwork-based case study resulted in a slice-of-time documentation of the Open Restaurants and Open Streets programmes in action. Three neighbourhood zones were studied in Brooklyn, NYC, identified here as the *Cluster*, *Line* and *Avenue*. Illustrated maps

and other visuals contribute to building the narrative of what has been, and still is, transpiring on the streets.<sup>16</sup> Experiencing, listening, observing and speaking with local not-for-profit organisations, owners/proprietors and other street informants round out opinions and speculations on these current and future urbanistic developments.

**Figure 1. This DOT depiction shows the basic rules for street constructions (Source: NYC DOT)**



## Characterising the remaking of street space through urban freedom and choice

As everyone in the United States began to alter their decisions and actions in March 2020, studying the changing urban conditions in New York City specifically is a lens through which to ask: how is urbanism directly affecting us? How might we characterise our role in its transformation?

Working through notions of urban freedoms, the social geographer David Harvey argues 'To claim the right to the city ... is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamental and radical way.'<sup>17</sup> Richard Sennett writes in *Building and Dwelling* about the city and associated urban behaviours. He notes the French used to distinguish between the physical place of the city and how people felt or had a consciousness about it: 'ville referred to the overall city, whereas cité designated a particular place. Sometime in the sixteenth century the cité came to mean the character of life in a neighbourhood, the feelings people harboured about neighbours and strangers and attachments to place.'<sup>18</sup> Not acknowledging the embedded meanings of the city diminishes a realisation of its varied composition.

Both Harvey and Sennett point to possibilities and distinct awarenesses that are relevant today as people are extremely cognisant of their minute actions – what they can and cannot do; and/or, have been held back from doing, during the pandemic. We watch ourselves (consciously and subconsciously) daily, hourly or minute by minute as we exit our buildings to pass through the city, seeking to be in flowing air with or without a mask; moving nearer to and further from people; deciding when or what to avoid, where to walk or rest. The physicality of moving through the spaces of the city alone or as part of the collective is also about resituating ourselves inside a transforming city and world. Choice, in these times, takes on heightened importance.

Central to these studies is the declaration that streets are not only arteries but also places that offer different scales and rhythms of opportunities for use and engagement. Particular street zones or discrete pieces can be composed as spatial environments that are bounded subtly or distinctly. Thus, because of the pandemic, the reconfigured streetscape requires several kinds of increasingly particular experiences.

Building upon how to redefine city dynamics and calls to action, Luca Bertolini, a professor of urban planning, writes eloquently about the tensions and challenges of urban street life and design experimentation. He refers to the words of the influential Danish urbanist Jan Gehl, made famous for his decades of work in progressive Copenhagen: 'streets are for people not for traffic'.<sup>19</sup> This has become a well-known maxim espousing co-existence, yet, as Bertolini goes on to urge, 'experiments where *the street itself* is the object of the experimentation and not where the street just provides a backdrop'.<sup>20</sup> He presses for what Lydon and Garcia's 2015 book, *Tactical Urbanism*, advocates for – that is, looking for innovative ways of understanding how the many permutations of 'open streets' around the world deliberately reclaim roads and their adjacent spaces for many activities. Tactical urbanism considers the spaces generally used for parking or walking to be underutilised and cites opportunities for intermixing less usual activities (whether pop-up, temporary or permanent) to motivate new planning. Bertolini believes, as does this author, that we must strategically move to integrate ordinary needs while encouraging opportunity for open dynamic behaviours to create lasting social capital based in heterogeneous conditions.

New York City, thought of as being progressive and at the vanguard of many cultural and urban trends in the United States (think theatre, art, fashion, food), has been playing catch-up in putting walking/running/biking pedestrians first. Several European and other US cities are way ahead.<sup>21</sup> Janette Sadik-Khan, the NYC DOT Commissioner during the Bloomberg administration between 2007 and 2013, is responsible for changing the quality of the city with the insertion of hundreds of miles of bike lanes and scores of parklet plazas; and, these initiatives continue today. Her book, *Streetfight*, remains pertinent as NYC took a national lead in urging and providing different possibilities for extensively inhabiting streets during the pandemic. The DOT initiatives/policies (currently transforming) continue to garner local, national and international news coverage.

## Characterising the remaking of street space through the physical and the phenomenal

While studying the city, its physical layout and people's awareness within it, many conditions and associated actions can be referred to as 'urban interiorism'.<sup>22</sup> If an interior is defined by different kinds of boundaries no matter what the scale, these limits or demarcations can be discerned by both tangible and less tangible psychological or phenomenological-induced realisations and behaviours. Interiorism, then, and its interiority are made more perceptible as we consider our personal urban experiences of passing through the city.

The words of planners/architects/academics allow us to ponder urban interiorism and identity further. Architecture professor Ben Jacks asks 'How do we know and position ourselves within cities? How do we lay claim to belonging in complex urban landscapes?'<sup>23</sup> Stavros Stavrides, another professor of architecture, mixes the phenomenological with questions of identity to consider how 'actual spatiotemporal thresholds would be the places where identities may be revealed in acts of negotiating encounters with otherness'.<sup>24</sup> And again, Sennett's spoken ideas on interiority reinforce Jacks' and Stavrides' ideas, especially with regard to today's individual, who is more and more outdoors and on the street. He espoused there is freedom to 'observe without interacting', while something called 'observant cruising' also enables time to reflect on where one is, and how one feels in the public world around us.<sup>25</sup>

Positioning one's identity within a city is a personal and philosophical engagement that relies on documenting physical as well as felt experiences. Mattern notes how some geographers go beyond the abstract interpretation of their data – they also 'consider *emotional* aspects of urban experience'. She cites, for example, in relation to our pandemic predicament, 'the work of feminist geographers, who have learned how to trace informal networks of exchange and care, [and] how to consider embodied and emotional aspects of urban experience' in new ways.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, we can also investigate methods for physical and immersive urban surveying by trying out the 1958 sensing methods set forth by philosopher Guy Debord, as part of the Situationist notion of the *dérive*. We can actively choose to take part in ascertaining the 'psychogeographical articulations of a modern city'.<sup>27</sup> We become aware of 'unities

of ambience, their main components and their spatial localization, [as] one comes to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses ... [thus recognising a] changing architecture and urbanism'.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, another set of ideas, suggesting urban interiorism is inclusive of physical, behavioural and phenomenological boundaries, can be found in the words of urban expert David Sim (an associate of Gehl Architects) who writes in his book, *Soft City*, about embracing density with diversity as a means to promote a thriving human environment. He uses descriptors such as anti-fragile, pliable, participatory, sensory, gentle and open.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the factors described by Jacks, Stavrides, Mattern, Debord and Sim can combine to suggest that urban inhabitants are in need of multiple kinds of physical and emotional tactility. All of these considerations are necessary to define the time-based, transforming characteristics and identities that are still emerging in NYC.

## A case study: the Cluster, Line and Avenue

Further redefining our identities and the freedoms associated with inhabiting and travelling through the city can be expressed through philosopher and social critic Walter Benjamin's contemplations: 'a dialectic of flâneurie: on the one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man.'<sup>30</sup> In this time of the pandemic, and as a self-proclaimed *flâneuse* (a female *flâneur*), the author observed an interesting set of sites and conditions calling out for a comparison of the physical and psychological perceptions related to the increased formal and informal pedestrianisation. This led to documenting the dynamic street use in various ways.

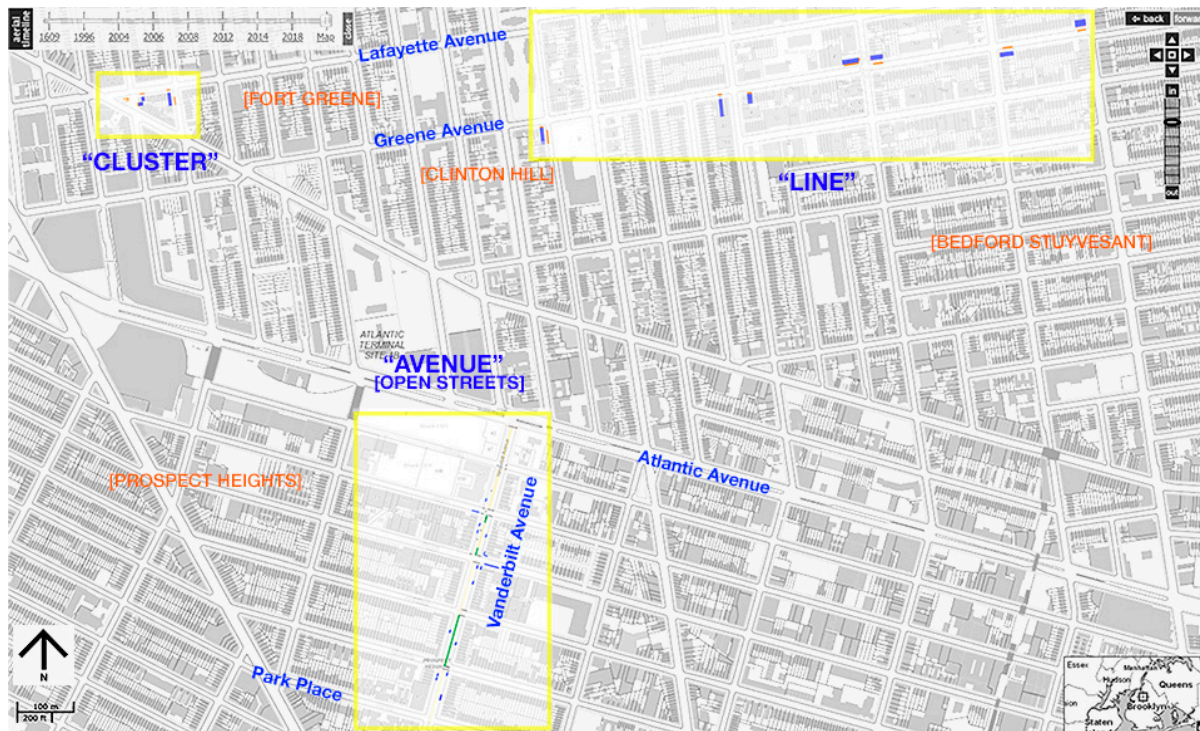
The dialectic of being both the observer and the observed begins to describe the city as a stage for urban theatre showcasing the story of urban re-formation. Noticing how we or others interact within the order or disorder all constitutes aspects of urban drama. In June 2021, New York City architect David Rockwell and designer, educator/thinker Bruce Mau gave a lecture announcing their new book, *Drama*, which discusses these dynamic issues. Rockwell said, 'an audience is not just about a one-on-one relationship with someone and content, which a user can be, but it's a kind of collective experience that resonates by being with other people.'<sup>31</sup> Regarding what is happening in New York City, and around the world, Mau said, 'every business, every institution every organization right now is trying to figure out what is our story, in this new world'.<sup>32</sup>

The author's fieldwork-based research focuses on being immersed in the urban theatre. Two types of street developments seen in three Brooklyn neighbourhood zones document and assess how people act within street spaces and how they feel about them today. The three areas of Brooklyn, located in Figure 2, are spaced approximately half a mile from one another. They provide a window through which to view a sample of NYC's transforming street space culture. The case study consists of documenting an Open Restaurants *Cluster* of three restaurant/bar establishments that sit at the edge of Fort Greene; and seven varied restaurant/bars that form the *Line* stretching from Clinton Hill into Bedford Stuyvesant. A vibrant Open Streets *Avenue* case study offers a counterpoint to the uses and auras presented by the Cluster and Line studies. It runs from Atlantic Avenue to Park Place along Vanderbilt Avenue in Prospect Heights.

Urban street observation took place during different seasons starting in June 2020 (including some comparison to street environments in Manhattan), while more detailed Cluster, Line and Avenue documentation commenced in February 2021 and was largely completed in June 2021 (including specific interviews and surveys). Follow-up periodic observation and limited survey work continued in winter 2021–22 and ended in May 2022.



Figure 2. Case study: Cluster, Line and Avenue neighbourhood map (Source: author)



## Early realisations: ad hoc'ism and spatial types

One of the first things noticed in this study of pandemic-inspired urban processes was how unstable it all looked and felt – the streets became more littered with clutter and by happenstance, disorder. Moveable metal gates and fences, random new signage, strung lights, new potted trees, mystery recycling bags, wires, solar panels, speakers, interrupted street signs, safety cones, plastic water weights, large sand-filled barriers, safety tapes, surrounded Citi Bikes docks, rubbish containers, makeshift furniture arrangements and other street paraphernalia combined to characterise the ad hoc nature of NYC streets' new landscape, as shown in Figure 3.

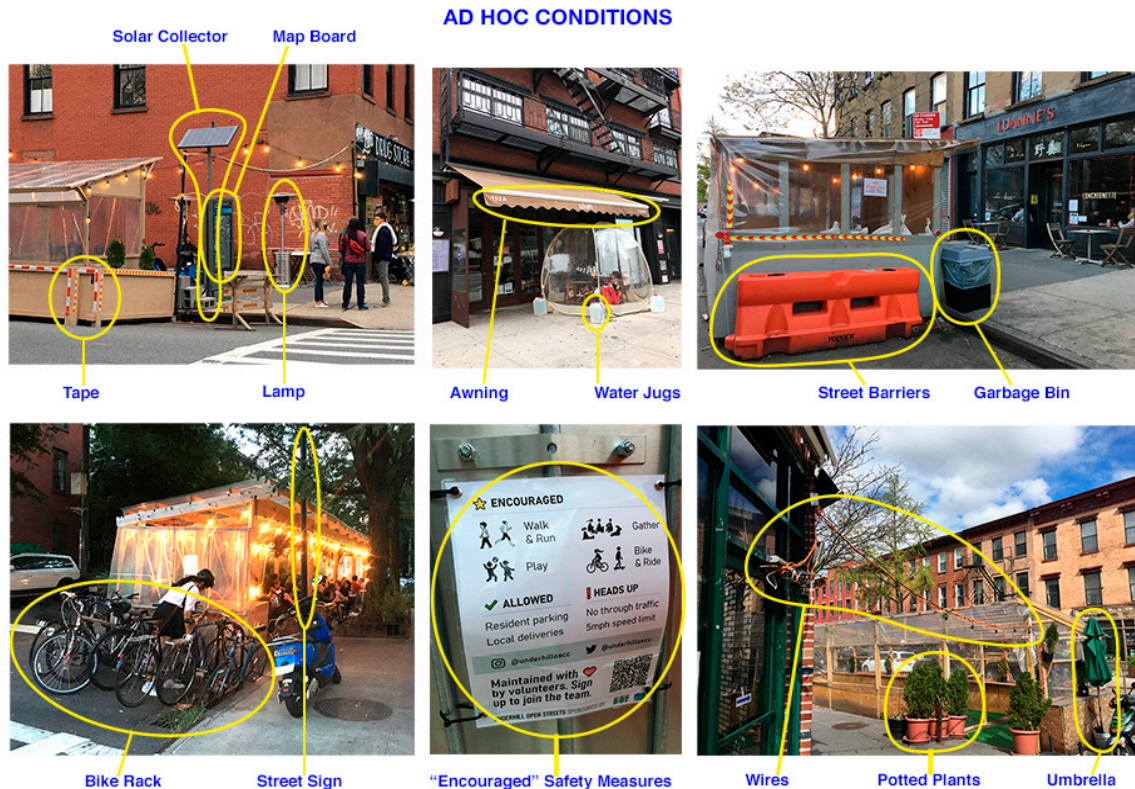
Observed and published comments in local newspapers and websites described these conditions as ugly, frustrating or dangerous, yet, upon closer look and consideration, these ad hoc environments were, to the author and other locals, simultaneously informal and inviting – the more spontaneous was giving credence to a need for enjoying serendipity. The new streetscape offered fresh perspectives for activities that counteracted the typical and relied on patience. Showing potential for quick adaptability, the notion of ad hoc exhibited a work in progress, offering a bit of adventure – as the transmutable environment figured itself out.

Ad hoc'ism also feeds part of a debate around what permanent or temporary urbanism is about: maintaining an open framework for chance developments, which may involve freedom of expression and movement within the public domain of civil society. Indeed, by distinguishing our parsed activities within the now-different city streets, we can celebrate why the distinct or overlapped, and collaged or blurred spaces with these loose boundaries, edges or thresholds also suggest pieces of urban intimacy and drama. These elements of interiorism reframe 'our way of seeing and interacting in the spatially nuanced [multi-scaler] city', however paradoxical.<sup>33</sup>

The urban interior conditions, amid the ad hoc, also enhance the street space as a series of places that can be broken down into separate occurrences. The Cluster and Line Open Restaurants are defined by semi-sheltered constructions that can be organised into spatial typologies based on: pavement or street locations, length, materials/details/patterns, interior divisions, furniture layout and roof forms. Various described as gazebos, lean-tos, sheds, tents and see-through cabin or bubble set-ups, they

all invite multiple uses and create varying atmospheres. Observing the Avenue, the streetscape exhibits more temporary-use typologies formed by the visitors. Examples such as what the author calls periodic and joyful urban beach or city-campsite configurations might be composed of single people, smaller or larger groups arranging themselves as a line, rectangle, circle or pod, either being elevated above the street by low-level furniture or the kerb, or intentionally sitting or lying directly on the pavement or street (see Figures 4, 8 and 9).

**Figure 3. An assortment of ad hoc street paraphernalia representing loose or casual design**  
(Source: author)



## Interviews and surveys

To enrich and focus the on-site fieldwork observations, interviews with owners/managers of the seven out of the ten selected restaurants and bars, and a survey of twenty-seven participants who utilised the Open Street pedestrianised Vanderbilt Avenue (but not its restaurants or bars), were conducted in June 2021.<sup>34</sup> A follow-up interview with the president of the Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council (PHNDK) and some of the earlier respondents occurred in December 2021 and January 2022.

As shown in Figure 4, all Avenue informants were given a survey of multiple-choice questions to describe their opinions on street environment, use, urban change and atmosphere.<sup>35</sup> Questions also revolved around why they chose to gather on the street instead of at Prospect Park nearby, how often they came to Vanderbilt, why and where they selected to sit, lie, eat or walk, how they felt about the Open Streets policy, if Vanderbilt's new condition should be permanent, and general speculation about future street life. Owner and manager interviews had similar questions asked of them, which were more focused on why and how their open-air constructions came about and the goals surrounding these decisions. Responses from the interviews and surveys were not only deeply informative, but overwhelmingly positive, especially concerning the vitality associated with creating community through formal and informal street use.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 4. The varied array of people who filled out surveys responding to the present/future of Open Streets (Source: author)**

**Survey:  
“How Street Spaces Get Remade  
and How We Feel About Them”**

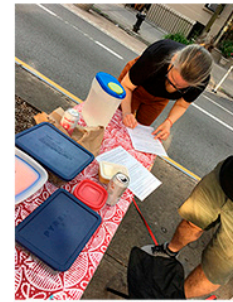
**Open Streets Surveys:**  
27 respondents ranging in age from 16 to 60s with a diverse mix of gender and ethnic backgrounds

**E.g. Nb. 8 describes the “environment and atmosphere” on the streets (select all you agree with)**

- a. urban gritty b. chill/calm c. like a beach  
d. like a park e. like a vacation f. chaotic g. safe  
h. inspiring i. annoying j. like a village  
k. lets me see people differently l. unsafe  
m. makes me see the city differently n. optimistic  
o. confusing p. changes my point of view  
q. other-> \_\_\_\_\_

**Responses are overwhelmingly Positive**

- 15-j-like a village  
15-n-optimistic  
10-h-inspiring  
9-m-makes me see the city differently  
9-b-chill/calm  
8-g-safe  
7-d-like a park  
7-k-lets me see people differently



## The Cluster

Mo’s and Baba Cool sit a block from each other at the end of Lafayette Avenue, while Peaches is just around the corner facing a parklet, also bounded by Flatbush Avenue. First interviews were conducted with Cluster owners/managers (Baba Cool declined to be interviewed). The paradox between creating an individually designed experience related to the original proprietor’s business viewpoints versus following the city’s parameters given for basic survival, was the crux of the first question asked: ‘Do you feel like you are creating your new presence on the street alone, or do you feel like you are part of a larger new movement?’ Both Peaches and Mo’s owners responded ‘yes’ to building new street constructions for survival, but immediately added how the pandemic was giving them a chance to really think about their personal mission and responsibility to make the streets better, with an eye towards increasing open community. They echoed heartfelt concern about how their establishments must present the public with options decidedly different to who and how they serve indoors. This is an idea that relates to wanting to develop an inclusivity that indoor dining usually restricts because patrons have to make decisions to enter places that may appear less inviting because of the physical barrier of the façade, price or clientele. In this regard, Peaches wanted to be known as an ‘efficient, open and responsible, clean village’. They created this by purchasing and arranging, on the parklet, a village of transparent cabins (sourced from Home Depot). For Mo’s, the owner was the designer and carpenter. He imagined two eye-catching elevated and vaulted ‘transport-like’ community hubs wrapping his corner; and he was so proud, he had them hand painted with a mural.<sup>37</sup> Visually, Baba Cool falls somewhere between the two attitudes with an easy-going decoratively painted intimate side-porch vibe. The inviting and less intimidating boundaries between street and entering must have aided clientele decisions, as all three succeeded in integrating their usual clientele with newer populations.<sup>38</sup> Figure 5 gives a view of the particular Cluster environments.

**Figure 5. The Cluster: Peaches, Baba Cool and Mo's invite a range of community expressions: orange denotes street constructions, blue denotes indoor parcel (Source: author)**



## The Line

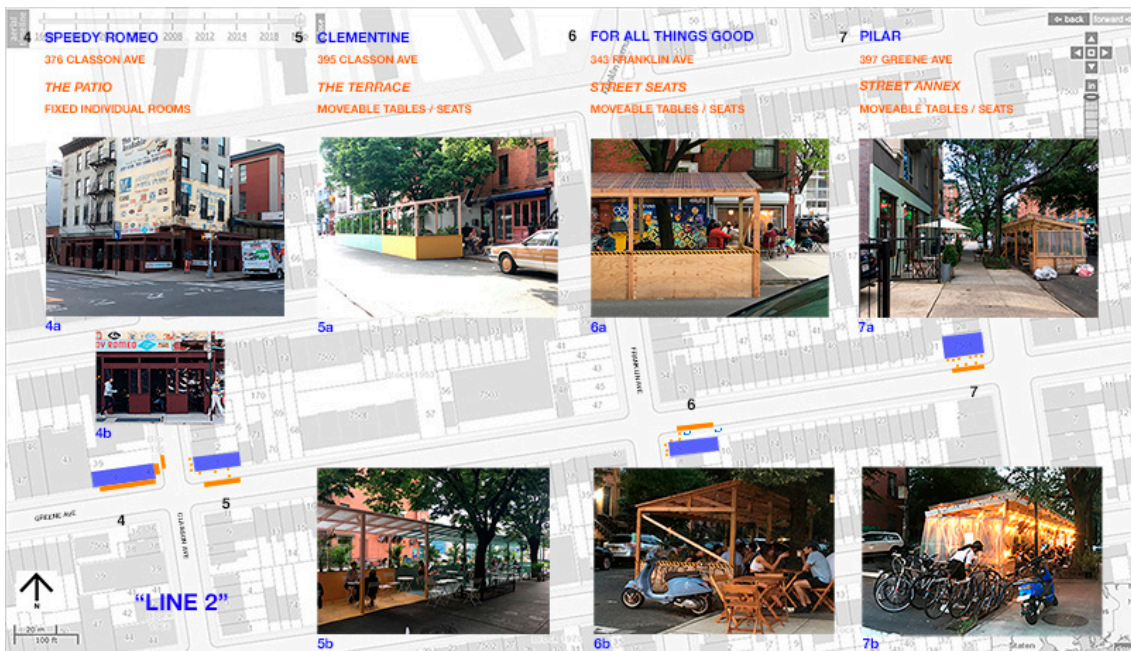
The seven restaurant/bars forming the Line along Greene Avenue were chosen because, as a linear ensemble stretching over a number of streets, they create a new kind of street vernacular filled with an array of individual expressions and personalities, shown in Figures 6 and 7. Key interview questions used for the Cluster and Line were: 'How did you come up with your particular design? Is there a story associated with it?'<sup>39</sup> Each owner and manager enthusiastically explained the brief history of their business and openly described their process for personally rethinking their mission and personal vision. Aita's owner took advantage of his corner property by designing an attached 'front porch' facing the street and a long street 'gazebo' facing the pavement. He explained both are a mix of separate American diner-like booths wrapped by his memory of a northern Italian chalet. Thus, they are painted green with neatly patterned windows and ambient lighting. Izzy Rose's 'pink house' sits inside a parking space, but the seating easily flows over onto the pavement. The layout is transformable and the intimate, quirky bar personality is extended by strung lighting over the pavement to the bar façade and a tree-surrounded wooden seat. Tarachi's new structure forms a compact 'shelter' extending its façade with a room filled with the saturated colours of its Mexican interior (owner declined interview). Speedy Romeo's attention to detail also takes the attached façade approach to both sides of its corner location and complements it with a series of divided booth rooms, forming an 'industrial-themed patio' that builds off of the artisan craft of the lofty interior. Clementine's long 'terrace' sits in the street parking spaces offering a breezy two-part concept for the café/bakery/provisions/ice-cream store. It playfully uses pastel paint colours, plants and different furniture arrangements to subtly distinguish between uses. For All Things Good presents a casual shed construction of 'street seats'. The simple approach corresponds to its minimal menu of hand-crafted gourmet Mexican cuisine. Pilar's 'annex' is a chicly screened and lit open space with rearrangeable seating constructed in its street space (owner declined interview).



Figure 6. Western half of the Line: Aita, Izzy Rose and Tarachi present inventive street choices: orange denotes street constructions, blue denotes indoor parcel (Source: author)



Figure 7. Eastern half of the Line: Speedy Romeo, Clementine, For All Things Good and Pilar present inventive street personalities: orange denotes street constructions, blue denotes indoor parcel (Source: author)



Walking frequently through the Line, the City's 8-foot depth limitation produced a variety of street and pavement personalities and atmospheres inviting the public to partake of, or to pass through, an upbeat, thriving neighbourhood attitude.<sup>40</sup>

## The Avenue

Entering Vanderbilt Avenue when it has transitioned to its Open Streets formation on Friday evenings, Saturdays and Sundays has proven to be a constantly varying delight, full of serendipitous possibilities. Stretching from Atlantic Avenue to Prospect Place (a few blocks from Grand Army Plaza and Prospect Park), it became clear that anything/anyone is accepted. Instead of the typical condition found in other parts of the city where BIDs make the decisions, Vanderbilt is managed by the PHNDC. President Gib Veconi explained that the outpouring of interest in making Vanderbilt a success is based on a group of volunteers who provide a wealth of innovative thinking about the spatial ramifications of changeable street activities.<sup>41</sup> Eating establishments, alternating biking lanes and occasional programming are carefully managed through different barrier arrangements to make sure the full Avenue and its several types of spaces can be used equally, freely and safely.<sup>42</sup>

Witnessing innumerable kinds of activities taking place surrounding the restaurant/bar activity and biking, the author became interested in how Vanderbilt Avenue seemed to call for individual and small group expression. Meetings, birthday parties, sleeping, playing games, reading, drinking, visiting, eating and more materialised on a regular basis, as exemplified in Figure 8. Some occasional programmed activities like school trips, a DJ or a fund-raising fair also existed.

Observing and speaking first informally with several visitors and hired workers, the author eventually interviewed survey participants enjoying the weekly transformed atmosphere. Many were regular attendees and lived or worked on or near the Avenue. Of the several survey questions, a curious answer emerged as to why people chose the street versus nearby Prospect Park: people liked the ad hoc informal urban condition of the street better because the spaces between possible activities made their ideas of community accessible. Many are self-starters – meaning, they liked to bring their own chairs, tables and settings with drinks, ready for a picnic or local takeaway food. They told stories of inviting friends and family from other parts of the city to partake of their Avenue activities. People felt safe at night, liked people watching, met new people and felt free. Everyone responded that Vanderbilt should remain a part of this new city system.

The remarkable variation of repeated use describes how Open Streets have become a new place for urban identities to be revealed. Have you ever seen someone spread a small textile and just lie down in the centre of a street? How often do people literally camp out on the street, or regularly drag a table out of their apartment to set it atop yellow traffic lines, defying the missing cars?

The street has become the urban square or European piazza welcoming the neighbourhood in. The feeling is like a new kind of beach meets gritty asphalt camp-out. The New York spirit appears to translate into a celebratory condition that surprisingly provides new realisations for urban habitation, as evidenced in Figure 9. The openness must be a positive symptom of what the pandemic has brought out of us, and that could be here to stay.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 8. A surprisingly varied set of experiences exist along Vanderbilt Avenue (Source: author)





Figure 9. Inhabiting street space in unusual and casual ways (Source: author)

**OPEN STREETS VANDERBILT AVENUE**



## Critics and responses

A sampling of some of the most visible and relevant pandemic-inspired writings on NYC street conditions and activities are found in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, whose readership is both local and global. In the following the author examines a few highlights published since the start of the pandemic.

Kyle Chakya wrote in *The New Yorker* in June 2020, 'So far, the pandemic's impact on urbanism has shown up in small changes that can be implemented faster than a new building or zoning plan.'<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Nick Paumgarten wrote in *The New Yorker* in February 2021 cautioning about Covid and codes issues, though he also supports the moves, as 'the outdoor-dining structures amounted to another kind of land grab (re: parking spots), of course, but at least it was perpetrated on behalf of the many, rather than the one or two'.<sup>45</sup> The 29 June 2021 *New York Times* article by Pete Wells drew a lot of attention because of his overwhelmingly positive response to the 'romance' of street dining. Wells also warns that 'making the city a more pleasant place to inhabit and visit ... [with] thoughtful regulations can ensure that the exuberant and life-affirming creativity of the past year will continue; overly strict ones could enforce a numbing sameness'.<sup>46</sup> Reader responses to the article were almost equally divided between the pro and con. Figure 10 shows a sample of the negative responses, listing 'noise', 'congestion', 'disorganization', 'rats', 'eyesore' and 'less parking spaces', while the positives included 'fantastic', 'pleasant village-like', 'European-like', 'removes cars', 'festive' and 'good for economy', among others. The author's response (upper left with orange box, under 'Ali S.:') takes into account the need for noise consideration and cleanliness but praises what proprietors and the Open Streets have done for urbanites.

It is important to acknowledge that many ideas for pedestrian streets were considered several decades earlier. Professor Stephen Schmidt published some of his research in *Bloomberg News* in early January 2022. As part of Cornell University's City and Regional Planning Department, he conducted research comparing the demography and geography of urban renewal during the 1960s and 1970s. He looked at 163 Open Streets programmes over this long period in 41 American cities and found the closing of streets to traffic in many large and small cities, called the 'pedestrian mall' in the past, impacted cities more equitably than they do today. Schmidt states there is little crossover between how locations for stemming the tide of the urban decline of 'main street'<sup>47</sup> were chosen in the past when compared to today's reasoning. He says the 'spatial distribution of pandemic-inspired Open Streets programs reflects the amenity preferences of particular [wealthier] neighborhoods'.<sup>48</sup> While the topic of equity is not the main focus of this article and study, the author acknowledges the necessity for collecting a diversity of research questions and resulting opinions that may not have been represented in the survey or interviews.<sup>49</sup>

Figure 10. Readers respond to Pete Wells' *New York Times* article, including the author (Source: *New York Times*)



## Conclusion, or ... what's next?

In this epochal moment, questions about the next steps seem obvious, for NYC has a long history of varied periods of growth, setbacks, rebirths and transformations. Undoubtedly, as former Deputy Mayor of NYC Daniel Doctoroff predicted, 'anything temporary becomes permanent'<sup>50</sup> might come true – but this is good. The Open Streets and Open Restaurants programmes appear to have provided places open to possibilities for the less typical or unusual within the varying urban landscape. The new spaces with newly designated boundaries and rules, providing safety, privacy and refuge, can be considered internal and external, and must still be accompanied by the critical notions of choice and chance. Enduring practical questions are: what will be allowed to remain on the streets as Open Restaurants continues, and for what goals, and for whom? Will the freedom and serendipity that the work in progress or state of becoming invite, or will sameness creep in? Can the simultaneous phenomenological repercussions of these provocative auras be embraced and understood as necessary aspects of urban interiorism?

As an active observer of these ad hoc and episodically re-envisioned constructed street spaces, the author is continually impressed by how the beauty of the diversity found on the streets reflects the most optimistic sides of our witnessing and participating in this particular era of pandemic-induced urban change. It is clear there is an exuberant call for streets being inclusive of a free and intimate culture of personal and collective co-existence. As Sim suggests, the potential for choosing dynamism and chance within and throughout the city should remain anti-fragile and pliable, at the same time.

The next urban design initiatives must prioritise different points of view and a willingness to listen to voices from educators, scholars and thinkers from all disciplines. We will see how the pandemic, as a catalyst for redeveloping public identity and rethinking new urban domains, will lead us towards the future.

## Dedication

The author dedicated the public presentation of this paper on 18 June 2021, and now dedicates this article on a piece of our new world and our new actions within it, to her teacher and mentor, Leslie J. Laskey, who was approaching 100 years old (2 July 1921–17 June 2021). He is the most singularly inspirational, long and deep thinker, observer, artist and motivator, that she has known.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Observation and research for this article began when spatial distancing (also known as social distancing) was being suggested and enforced both outside and inside, for commercial, educational, travel and food-based services. Since vaccination and boosters have been implemented, many of these enforcements have been lifted in the United States, yet the methods for separation are still followed in many circumstances, especially in New York City, and the practices still exist in the psyche of many.

<sup>2</sup>This article grew out of a paper presentation, given virtually, as part of the 'Cities in a Changing World'. AMPS, New York City College of Technology, CUNY, Brooklyn, NY, June 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Mações, 'The great pause'.

<sup>4</sup>Mattern, 'How to map nothing'.

<sup>5</sup>Snyder, 'Interior world'.

<sup>6</sup>Snyder, 'Interior world', 13.

<sup>7</sup>This now appears to be an oddly prescient wording – 'as though wearing a mask' – with the possible meanings associated with the here and now of today's pandemic era.

<sup>8</sup>Sennett, 'Interiors and interiority'.

<sup>9</sup>New York State, Office of Andrew Cuomo, 'Governor Cuomo'.

<sup>10</sup>See the Open Streets programme website that has extensive explanation and information for public awareness and application. The DOT also makes periodic inspections. City of New York, Department of Transportation, 'Pedestrians: Open Streets'. See also NYC Open Data, Open Streets. Note that the DOT programme websites were accessed numerous times during the research for this article, as information may have been altered according to updated policies or public need.

<sup>11</sup>See the Open Restaurants programme website that has extensive explanation and information for public awareness and application. City of New York, Department of Transportation, 'Pedestrians: Open

Restaurants'. Along with the DOT managing the programme, the NYC Department of Sanitation is also involved in maintaining clean streets and periodic inspections along with the NYC Department of Health.

<sup>12</sup>This current Open Restaurants brochure outlines the permanent programme timeline and typical layout rules/ideas that had previously been published for business use. City of New York, Department of Transportation, 'Open Restaurants Permanent Program design guidelines'.

<sup>13</sup>By May 2022, the end of the research period for this article, the Open Streets and Open Restaurants programmes continued in NYC. Note that these policies, and their websites, have been updated since the start of the programme and newer rules/codes continue to be developed for implementation. These changes have and will undoubtedly continue to change how we see, use and feel about these street constructions and the development and use of streets and their spaces, especially if the codifications make designs more homogeneous or orderly.

<sup>14</sup>At the initial time of the author's primary research, in spring 2020, all places such as schools, libraries, theatres and museums, as well as restaurants and more, were largely closed. Phased reopenings in NYC began in different sectors as some, for example museums and galleries, limited entry, and vaccination increased. By January 2022, most to all institutions and workplaces were opened, even with the supposed predominance of the Covid-19 Omicron variant (among others). By the end of May 2022, the final period assessed for this article, many of the street constructions remain and appear to be happily utilised (see subsequent article endnotes for some brief updates and comparisons).

<sup>15</sup>The term 'pivoting' has been used in the food and other industries to describe alternative movements or decisions to transform a business to quickly accommodate a need or clientele during the pandemic.

<sup>16</sup>Thanks to Pratt Institute's School of Design Dean's Office for funding a graduate student assistant in summer 2021. Gratitude is given for Naomi Hoffman's mapping and drawing aid, along with her inquisitiveness.

<sup>17</sup>Harvey, 'The right to the city'.

<sup>18</sup>Sennett, *Building and Dwelling*, 1.

<sup>19</sup>Bertolini, 'From "streets for traffic"', 746; Bertolini is referring to Gehl, *Cities for People*.

<sup>20</sup>Bertolini, 'From "streets for traffic"', 735–6.

<sup>21</sup>NYC experimentation lags behind a number of European countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands. Also, remarkably, behind US cities, especially in the Pacific Northwest, such as in Portland, Oregon, well known for its early bike-friendly and forward-thinking light rail systems.

<sup>22</sup>The author, an architect, designer, researcher and professor teaches about 'urban interiorism' to suggest how to describe, locate, document, write about and/or film notions of the interior/interiority found in public spaces. Spatial typologies are distinguished through physical boundaries and their materiality, with their particular uses and simultaneous phenomenological experiences.

<sup>23</sup>Jacks, 'Walking the city', 68.

<sup>24</sup>Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, 15.

<sup>25</sup>Sennett, 'Interiors and interiority'.

<sup>26</sup>Mattern, 'How to map nothing'.

<sup>27</sup>Debord, 'Theory of the *dérive*', 66.

<sup>28</sup>Debord, 'Theory of the *dérive*', 66.

<sup>29</sup>Sim, *Soft City*.

<sup>30</sup>Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 420. Note that the term *flâneur* originates from the poet Charles Baudelaire.

<sup>31</sup>The quote by David Rockwell was taken from a virtual lecture conversation with him and Bruce Mau on 7 June 2021. They presented the main urban themes and answered questions related to their new book: *Drama*.

<sup>32</sup>The quote is from Bruce Mau in the same virtual lecture conversation with David Rockwell on 7 June 2021.

<sup>33</sup>Snyder, 'Interiorism'.

<sup>34</sup>Managers and owners interviewed had been in business from one year to over twenty-five and their ages ranged from the early 20s to the early 60s. Interviewees's ages ranged from 16 to 60 years old, and all who participated were eager to tell their stories.

<sup>35</sup>The author decided to conduct the survey with a hands-on and approachable method on site, giving participants paper and pencil for answering, instead of using a digital format. Surveys were distributed to street sitters and picnickers on 6 June 2021 and 11 June 2021. This was successful; people enjoyed the writing and the discussion it provoked.



<sup>36</sup>Informal interviews with anonymous recreating street visitors were carried out from 5 June 2021 to October 2021 and from April 2022 to May 2022. Sincere thanks are given to the many who willingly spoke to the author on the streets and took interest in this research.

<sup>37</sup>Ben and Greg (Peaches), interview by author, 10 June 2021. Calvin (Mo's), interview by author, 11 June 2021.

<sup>38</sup>Continuing observations by the author of the Cluster in winter through to May 2022 reveal that Baba Cool and Mo's continue to use their original structures, but Peaches closed in autumn 2022 and removed the village. The property reopened as a different restaurant and first purchased similar cabins to arrange, but today the parklet has been restored to open space with public-use tables and chairs.

<sup>39</sup>Matt (For All Things Good), interview by author, 10 June 2021; Tom (Izzy Rose), interview by author, 10 June 2021; Tiffany (Clementine), interview by author, 11 June 2021; Roberto (Aita), interview by author, 11 June 2021; Adam (Speedy Romeo), interview by author, 11 June 2021.

<sup>40</sup>Continuing observations by the author showed that all seven establishments maintained their constructions into the start of 2022, making repairs or improvements as needed. In late spring changes came about, as both Aita and Tarachi removed the structure attached to the façade and transitioned to pavement café seating. This move presumably brings light back into the small restaurant interiors, as diners now choose between the street, pavement or interior spaces along the Line.

<sup>41</sup>Gib Veconi, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, via telephone, 14 December 2021.

<sup>42</sup>They also found the means to fund the hiring of security and set-up crews. Refer to the Vanderbilt Avenue website for pertinent information: Vanderbilt Avenue. 'Open Streets, good vibes'. <https://vanderbiltavenue.org>.

<sup>43</sup>Continuing observations by the author revealed that before Vanderbilt Avenue concluded its Open Street season in early November 2021, local decorative street painting was carried out and metal café tables and chairs were provided by the PHND. As the season opened in April 2022, these decorations, along with more tables/chairs and barriers for safety have been added. Several visits have shown there may be fewer types of free-form and serendipitous activities, but the Avenue remains a destination. While these provisions are maintaining the come-as-you-are attitude meaning bring whatever mood and identity one feels to the street time will tell if a kind of homogeneity or heterogeneity becomes the mainstay.

<sup>44</sup>Chakya, 'Coronavirus'.

<sup>45</sup>Paumgarten, 'How restaurants survive'.

<sup>46</sup>Wells, 'New York loves outdoor dining'.

<sup>47</sup>This period of urban redevelopment was meant to keep the 'main streets' of small towns all over the United States alive and vital, while the development of suburbia had provided alternative economic reasoning for malls located outside of the centre of towns.

<sup>48</sup>Schmidt, 'The unequal geography'.

<sup>49</sup>Two urban planning master's theses published in 2021 by students at Columbia University, Hanzhang Yang, 'Outdoor dining during COVID?' and Sanjukta Hazarika, 'On reclaiming the streets for the people', provide other means for studying the street phenomena in different parts of New York City. They both questioned aspects of equity concerning the deployment of the Open Restaurants and Open Streets programmes.

<sup>50</sup>Doctoroff, 'Tear down the restaurant sheds'.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article

### Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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