

Pandemic Appropriations of Urban Space: Implications for Future Practice

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic radically interrupted access to, and use of, the social, cultural, economic, and recreational venues that Americans relied upon for interaction and engagement. With the shuttering of many indoor Third Places, new, outdoor sites for gathering emerged to fill this role. These adaptations showcase the creative and utilitarian uses of public space during the pandemic, and may have lessons to offer for post-COVID public space. This paper compares two different types of space appropriation in two American cities in the summer of 2021, using systematic observational study and the Gehl Public Life Tools to gather data about age, gender, activity, and urban quality criteria. Data analysis offers insights for future public space design and planning interventions, particularly when those spaces are intended to be accessible and welcoming for diverse populations. Thematic discussion of the findings, including practical implications for program flexibility, inclusive signage, and design for affordability, safety and comfort, provide a starting point for post-pandemic urban design and planning work.

Introduction

The global pandemic initiated radical shifts to human behavior, shifting the longstanding social, cultural, economic, and recreational practices that had once anchored and animated urban space in North American cities. But such changes also brought improvisation: mandatory closures prompted new types of behaviors in public outdoor spaces, as municipalities, organizations, businesses, and individuals moved long-established practices outside, and also reimagined the types of activities and events that might be adapted to outdoor sites. Many of these adaptations sought to alleviate the isolation brought about by the shutdown by bringing people together in outdoor spaces where they were able to maintain responsible distances. These improvisations highlight the adaptive capacity of individuals to seek and sustain social belonging, even during a pandemic (McCunn 2020).

In an effort to better understand the evolving role of urban spaces and their contribution to human health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, a parallel study of two distinctive public spaces was initiated in the summer of 2021. The research team identified two separate sites, one a paved urban reservoir and the other a public street that was cordoned off for commercial use, both with significant shifts in usage during the 2020-2021 pandemic timeframe. Both sites featured social distancing adaptations, both are privately-operated but occupy semi-public space, and both reveal adjustments to human behavior and spatial design. A series of observations were conducted employing the protocols of the Gehl Public Life Tools and data were collected to provide a “snapshot” of activity in the two survey areas. By analyzing the populations using these appropriated sites during the pandemic and the activities they engaged in, we can begin to understand more about the importance of informal public gathering spaces during the pandemic, and consider implications for post-pandemic public life.

Background

Urban planners and sociologists have identified many types of social spaces in cities; one useful frame is offered by the idea of “third places,” defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) as sites

of social interaction outside of the home or workplace. Third places may be indoors or outdoors, and when they are publicly accessible, they can provide essential communal vitality, social capital and sense of belonging, all of which may contribute to better quality of life (Jeffres et al. 2009). Moreover, third places enable different types of people to interact and share space (Low 2020), producing social mixing that may not be possible at the home or in a workplace.

Beyond offering some utility for social distancing, outdoor urban spaces provide an array of other benefits. Scholars have long cited research supporting the “social, psychological, and economic benefits of urban open space” (Francis 1987, 72). Exterior third places can serve as critical areas of refuge and restoration, as “preserving public access to parks and natural areas in cities can allow people to maintain, at a safe and responsible distance, a sense of community threatened by the loss of other indoor social hubs, such as coffee shops and pubs, and to cope more easily with what is being asked of them with respect to physical restrictions” (McCunn 2020, 1).

While indoor third places were forced to close due to the isolation guidelines issued by various states during the 2019-2022 global pandemic, new and existing outdoor third places grew in popularity and use (Ross 2021). During this time, outdoor spaces became seized by individuals and by planners for new uses, demonstrating a shared public desire to engage with others outdoors, and to reimagine spatial uses in cities (Cutrara 2020, Low 2020). As these sites are evaluated for future, post-pandemic use, initially ad-hoc spatial appropriations may give design and planning practitioners insight into what people want in outdoor third places, and how these desires might ground more permanent spatial shifts (Doctoroff 2021).

Methodology

This paper employs systematic observational methods to understand shifts in public space usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Observational methods have been used to study human behavior in public space as these methods are easy to implement in real-world settings and the data collected comprise physical, social, and intangible qualities of public space (see, for example, Whyte 1980). The Gehl Public Life Tools (“How to Use the Public Life Tools,” n.d.) were used for this study to conduct field-based analyses of the two sites and their surrounding contexts during the summer of 2021. Two primary tools were selected to survey the adapted spaces and the public life taking place in them during the pandemic: the Age and Gender Tally Tool and the Stationary Activity Mapping Tool.

The Age and Gender Tally is a method for recording the different populations that use public space at specific times. When employing this tool, populations are sorted into five groups - Infants and Toddlers, Youth, Young Adults, Adults, and Seniors. By gathering this basic data, planning and design professionals can consider the needs of different groups, particularly those who are sometimes excluded (Cooper-Marcus and Francis 1998, Gehl and Svarre 2013). While age and gender were not validated for this study through self-reports, the tallies still provide valuable data about which populations are actively occupying public space. The Stationary Activity Mapping Tool collects data on the kinds of activities in which populations are engaged. This data is particularly valuable for determining whether the site infrastructures and amenities are meeting the needs of residents and contributing to communal life. Of particular interest is whether the diversity of activities contributes to social mixing (Gehl and Svarre 2013). In addition to these two tools, the researchers also captured tangible and intangible qualities of the spaces by evaluating the sites according to the Gehl Institute’s Twelve Quality Criteria Tool. This subjective analysis assesses

different features of a public space to determine whether they are protective, comfortable, and enjoyable for the people who spend time in that place. Together, these three data collection methods aim to capture both the physical and social elements at the scale of the two sites studied.

Research Questions

The criteria identified in the literature review defining third spaces framed the following research questions: 1) Given the improvised nature of pandemic public spaces, are they inclusive and accessible to a broad range of people? What kinds of activities do they support? And 2) Might these appropriated public spaces serve as new third places? Do they appear to be publicly accessible, promote regular, open and visible interaction, serve as social integrators/levelers, and contribute to communal life?



Figures 1 and 2. College Hill Reservoir Site Plan (left) and Strong Avenue Street Layout (right)

Introducing the College Hill Reservoir 607

The reservoir is a flat, paved, and gated 2.5 acre space located on the top of a hill in downtown Eugene, OR (Figure 3). While it is owned by the water utility (EWEB) it has been open to the public, as an urban park of sorts, since it was built in 1939. This informal public gathering space is known for its multifunctionality, with a focus on several specialized forms of recreation (notably roller skating, skateboarding, bike riding, and various group classes). It is distinguished from other types of more normative recreation attractions for hosting extemporaneous sports, particularly during the pandemic, for being widely accessible, for its clean, seamless pavement, and for having the appearance of a vast unprogrammed landscape (Warren 2021).

Introducing Strong Avenue

Strong Avenue in Northampton, MA provides a foil for the reservoir (Figure 4). This remodeled 0.7 mile-long public roadway was intentionally transformed for outdoor dining and live music during the pandemic, through a collaborative effort among five abutting business owners and with strong support from the mayor and city agencies. The stretch of street was barricaded off from vehicular traffic with concrete barriers, which were also set up to establish outdoor dining areas for each of the businesses. A central public walkway lined with potted plants ran between the separated dining areas and, at the midpoint of the street, a gazebo structure hosted live music. The business owners were able to take advantage of the state's special permit process that, during the pandemic, allowed restaurants to expand outdoor dining. The street makeover project was entirely privately funded by twenty businesses and organizations; in addition to the abutting business owners, the Downtown Northampton Association, the Northampton Arts Council, banks, insurance agencies

and anonymous donors contributed, with big box home improvement retailers providing support and materials.

Although these two locations feature significant physical and spatial differences, they were selected because they both underwent significant transformations in use during the pandemic, with associated increases in occupation and activity. Both sites reveal pandemic approaches to spatial appropriation with varying levels of stakeholder ownership, investment and communication. The intentional comparison of these two sites allows not only for a better understanding of these differences, but also the ways in which the themes of socialization, community building, recreation, restoration, and entertainment have persisted, even in radically different contexts.



Figure 3. Tai Chi Class at the College Hill Reservoir 607, Eugene, OR



Figure 4. Live Music at the Strong Avenue Pandemic Makeover, Northampton, MA

Results

College Hill Reservoir:

The reservoir hosted a wide variety of recreational activities during the observational period, with use represented in every age and gender category. However, the data shows that while uses were diverse and regular, they appeared in clusters that represented age and activity groups. For instance, older adults appeared to roller skate together in the evenings, groups of similar individuals met for classes at specific times, and bicycle riding was an activity favored by children on weekend days. (Figure 5) These concentrations of use reveal the social foundations that underpin many recreational activities, and demonstrate the ways in which the design language of the site helps to foster social connections, in addition to physical recreation interests.

TOTALS																						
Toddlers AM	Toddlers PM	ALL TODDLERS	Youth-M AM	Youth-M PM	Youth-F AM	Youth-F PM	ALL YOUTH	Young Adult-M AM	Young Adult-M PM	Young Adult-F AM	Young Adult-F PM	ALL YOUNG ADULT	Adult-M AM	Adult-M PM	Adult-F AM	Adult-F PM	ALL ADULT	Elders-M AM	Elders-M PM	Elders-F AM	Elders-F PM	ALL ELDER
1	16	17																				
			1	10																		
					0	15	26															
								0	19													
										1	30	50										
													8	26								
															17	41	92					
																		7	5			
																				5	9	26

Figure 5. Age and Gender Tallies for College Hill Reservoir

12 Urban Quality Criteria: Using the Gehl framework, the reservoir can be assessed as a space with moderate provision of protection, comfort and enjoyment. Each of these three categories could benefit from additional design and planning, and given the provisional nature of pandemic use at the site, this could help lead to more sustained and varied use. In the protection category, each of the factors has been satisfied except for protection against unpleasant sensory experience: the reservoir's lack of shelter from the elements limits year-round enjoyment. In the comfort category, the reservoir meets all criteria except for options for sitting, as the ground provides the only seating surface. In the enjoyment category, the limiting factor is opportunities to enjoy the positive aspects of the climate: while this may be true occasionally, the lack of any real design investment to date suggests that this could be improved.

Strong Avenue:

Strong Avenue provided an unreliable experience according to the criteria set forth for vibrant third places – users were primarily in the adult age population and they were principally engaged in commercial activity. As a private endeavour, the Strong Avenue makeover does not feature dedicated public seating or amenities of any kind. Combined with the relatively high cost of patronizing the collaborating businesses, this may limit the area's accessibility to a broad range of people, and thus its capacity to function as a third place. However, some aspects of the street makeover seemed to support pandemic social life. During morning observations at the coffee shop, many repeat customers were noted - these tended to be solo visitors who used the area to work. There were some unexpected encounters but many people came with others and interacted with their party. In the evenings with music events, many of the same people were observed, sometimes

occupying the same seats and locations, particularly in the public gathering areas. Visitors seemed to either know each other or have met each other by repeatedly occupying these seats. The non-customers who came to listen to the music, especially the visitors who came with their own seating, also seemed to know each other or have gotten to know each other through this series. The makeover's focus on commercial activity created economic barriers for broad participation; however, the evening music events were observed to be more inclusive and approachable. These events pulled in many non-customers and expanded opportunities for varied activities. The popularity of the events contributed greatly to the creation of Strong Avenue as a pandemic third place, and suggests that the design can be further developed to contribute to public life in the future. Clearly there is a demand for these types of activities, if the environment is more hospitable.

	Sunday AM	Sunday PM	Monday AM	Monday PM	Tuesday AM	Weds AM	Weds PM	Thurs AM	Thurs PM	Fri AM	Fri PM
Time	10:00 - 11:00	5:00 - 6:00	9:30 - 10:30	6:30 - 7:30	9:00 - 10:00	9:30 - 10:30	6:15 - 7:15	10:00 - 11:00	7:00 - 8:00	10:00 - 11:00	8:00 - 9:00
Weather	66 deg, cloudy	77 deg, about to drizzle, music	75 deg	75 deg	70 deg; hazy	72 deg; sunny	68 deg, clear, music	70 deg, sunny	72 deg, music	82 deg, sunny	81 deg, warm
Total Customers	67	71	46	33	43	50	142	39	163	42	77
Non-customers	0	7	0	11	0	0	76	0	35	0	0

Figure 6. Customers and non-customers counted at the Strong Avenue Pandemic Makeover

12 Urban Quality Criteria: Using the Gehl framework, Strong Avenue can be assessed as a space with a reasonable degree of protection, and an uneven and varying degree of comfort and enjoyment. The street makeover provides good protection against traffic and accidents; furnishings and potted plants provide shelter from the sun and the renovation provides some accessibility upgrades compared to the typical condition. Buildings and stoops provide some options for lingering but the commercial nature of the street creates barriers to sitting, to playing, and to other activities for the general public. The makeover provides varying levels of enjoyment at different times and for different populations. When the street was fully furnished with the establishments' chairs, tables, and umbrellas, it was lively and textured. However, when the furnishings were removed after hours, it felt vacant. Moreover, the experience is variable in space, and in time. On some evenings, one end of the street was observed to be teeming with people enjoying live music, while the other end felt vacant and abandoned. However, as observations on some music nights demonstrate, there are some improvised options for providing public seating and activities that could expand and catalyze future adaptations to be more inclusive and supportive of urban quality.

Implications for Practice

The two sites studied in this paper demonstrate the value of socially distanced recreation (College Hill Reservoir) and commercial space (Strong Avenue), due to their popularity and active use during the pandemic. However, in considering how these shifts might extend beyond the pandemic period, new techniques for defining spatial territory and maintaining defensible space appear to offer some guidance. Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic, research from psychology as well as urban planning supported the development of clear design guidelines in support of promoting personal space bubbles, or territoriality (Evans and Wener 2007; McCunn 2013). Designers and planners might begin by acknowledging that these desires have been reinforced and even bolstered during the pandemic, and that there could be lasting value in considering new types of outdoor, distanced social and recreational space. Moreover, third places exhibiting social

distancing options, such as the two sites studied, might be better able to meet the social, psychological and economic needs of future populations.

The following thematic concepts provide a starting point for recommendations for post-pandemic urban design thinking:

- Flexibility in program: develop spaces that work for a variety of users, uses, climates and schedules. The Reservoir, as a large open space, allows for this flexibility, but still predominantly supports recreational activities. Additional programs or interests could be accommodated with minimal design and planning resources. At Strong Avenue, the fixed seating suggests that future demarcated areas for each establishment should be reconsidered. Providing some flexible areas with publicly owned furnishings for general public use would expand accessibility, enliven the street, and broaden the range of activities in which visitors participate. Some flexible public areas with shading, in particular, would likely increase visits by families. Moreover, regular space(s) for mobile units that could operate when the other establishments are closed would bolster the diversity of economic activity and stimulate parts of the street that are not always active.
- Signage: provide signage to invite people to participate. This enables people to feel more secure, and welcomed, without dictating specific types of use. At the Reservoir, limited signage may actually deter public participation, because it isn't clear that the space is available for public use. At Strong Avenue, signage specifically limits use, even when the businesses were closed. Providing welcoming public signage would increase inclusivity.
- Safety and Comfort: provide the types of furnishings and infrastructure that support human safety and comfort, such as wifi, shading devices, seating, lighting, bathrooms, etc. The Reservoir lacks even the most basic amenities and, if added, these amenities might attract additional participation. While Strong Avenue provided furnishings to customers, these were provided on a variable schedule based on each establishments' hours of operation. More public involvement and investment would mitigate this variability, and provide overflow for customers while providing conveniences for non-customers as well.
- Affordability and Accessibility: a central feature of accessibility is affordability; public third spaces should be designed so that everyone can participate. At the Reservoir, access is free and open to the public, even though it is a privately-owned space. This could be made more permanent, and operate under an umbrella of shared management, through an agreement with the City of Eugene. To provide a more affordable and accessible experience at Strong Avenue, more collaboration and support from municipal institutions will be essential for future installations. Public oversight would mitigate the variability created by the establishments' individual hours of operation and create a more stable and continuous experience of the public realm.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the need for further research that examines the outcomes of pandemic-related public space transformations to support future design and planning initiatives. Design and planning professionals had limited involvement in transforming the College Hill Reservoir and Strong Avenue sites. Nonetheless, both areas offer valuable insights for future public space interventions, particularly when those spaces are intended to serve as accessible and welcoming third places. These two sites stand out as improvisational, experimental, and perhaps even prototypical - all rich sources of learning for design and planning professionals.

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