Public Life: Case Study from Charlotte, NC

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From Seattle to Boise and Memphis to Boston, city agencies, civic institutions, and community residents are collaborating with neighbors to reinvent their public spaces. In many cities, shrinking budgets and outdated policies make public space investments challenging. In areas where there is little funding for formal parks and squares, which require large capital budgets and costly maintenance, local residents and stakeholders are focusing on small spaces that have been overlooked or forgotten: the abandoned lot in the neighborhood, the patch of green next to the formal park, or the bus stop.

These kinds of public space design interventions happen in many different ways. Activating the public realm in neighborhoods that have experienced decades of neglect requires new approaches to build trust with neighbors and focus on their potential rather than the barriers. Could public, shared, and everyday spaces help bridge that rift between neighbors?

This paper will discuss a public space project in a rapidly changing and historically underserved neighborhood in Charlotte, NC. A private urban design practice founded in 2000, Gehl (http://gehlpeople.com/), was invited by a local foundation to study the potential role public spaces could play in enhancing social inclusion. Once the study was completed, a public space pilot project was identified to test the findings. Gehl conceived of the pilot project and provided technical assistance to the community groupundertaking the project. Gehl Institute (https://gehlinstitute.org/), a research and advocacy nonprofit 501c3 founded by Gehl in 2015, was paid to evaluate the social impact of the pilot project.

Though the project in Charlotte obviously involved outside organizations initially spearheading the effort, what was interesting for the project participants and stakeholders is that the final pilot project was the result of the local community leaders. Our discussion will show that many projects have the potential to build social cohesion and local leadership, so long as the process can be responsive to local leaders as desired outcomes shift.

Background

It is easy to overlook everyday public spaces all around us. The strip of green next to the highway ramp, our sidewalks and streets, or the vacant lot everyone passes by on the way to the bus stop, and the bus stop itself, are all considered everyday spaces. In fact, everyday spaces comprise more of any city's public spaces than parks. About 70 to 80 percent of an average U.S. city's public spaces are composed of streets, while 30 percent is relegated to parks. Even in cities that are struggling with revitalization, one could argue that more resources should be spent on everyday spaces than currently are being spent.

How space and resources are allocated has some basis in the work of Gehl. Gehl often works with local stakeholders, city staff, and foundations to collaborate with communities to create a public space intervention. Their work builds on research methods pioneered by Jan Gehl, a Danish urbanist who has devoted his career to articulating how people use spaces and how spaces shape people. Jan Gehl's book "Life Between Buildings" (2011), was a rebuke of the modernist trend of separating uses and creating spaces without people. Gehl's research methods consist of basic tools: counting the kinds of activities people like to do, the kinds of people that walk through a space, how much space is set aside for different uses. While this data analysis plays a big role in informing design, it is rarely or consistently collected by people who are designing spaces.

Since its founding, the Gehl methodology has continued to evolve the data collection and analysis for many different contexts. The process is oriented toward participatory approaches, with the intention of meeting people and communities where they are. The practice has worked in over 250 cities around the world on everything from the public space master plans for Moscow and the revitalization of plazas in Amman, Jordan. But perhaps more importantly, the approaches have been used to understand existing conditions on which spaces could be co-developed with community members, particularly marginalized groups that are often left out of the discussion.

The process has a built-in requirement of creating a baseline analysis, calling for regular, consistent data-collection efforts. Both are useful when persuasion and "evidence" are needed. For communities with a history of divestment, this could be particularly useful because of the expressed need to see a change in demand (or behavior) in order to attract additional funding. Few elected officials will fund the programming of a vacant lot. However, once they experience its potential and have the data to show its positive impacts, whether through the increase in numbers of people using the space, walking to the space, or meeting new people, these same officials may change their minds.

The Gehl Institute, based in New York City, was founded to deepen the knowledge base of research methods that are aimed at systemic change in the field of urban design. Funded in 2015 by the James S. and John L. Knight Foundation (Knight Foundation), Gehl and Gehl Institute collaborated on design interventions and evaluation in several Knight Foundation cities[1] to catalyze use of public spaces and study how such uses could promote social interactions in public space, particularly among people of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Knight cities are where the Knight brothers once published newspapers. Unfortunately, many of the

1. Knight Foundation cities are Akron OH; Charlotte, NC; Detroit; Macon, GA; Miami; Philadelphia; San Jose, CA; St. Paul, MN; Aberdeen, SD; Biloxi, MS; Boulder, CO; Bradenton, FL; Columbia, SC; Columbus, GA; Duluth, MN; Ft. Wayne, IN; Gary, IN; Milledgeville, GA; Myrtle Beach, SC; Palm Beach County, FL; State College, PA; Tallahassee, FL; and Wichita, KS.

Knight cities have also experienced recent population loss due to major shifts in their economic base activities and have experienced growing inequities. Most are once-thriving cities currently without flexible funding for public space investment. Studies and temporary pilot projects are a useful tool to convince elected officials and budget officers that public spaces are a worthwhile investment.

For the "socioeconomic mixing" project in Knight cities, Gehl and Gehl Institute developed additional survey questions and analytical approaches in addition to those typically used by the Gehl practice to evaluate several design interventions. The background research is discussed in the Public Life Diversity Toolkit 1.0 and 2.0. (Gehl Institute, n.d.)

Places are often not designed to foster a sense of belonging from the start. Municipal government priorities such as return on investment and the cost-benefit may overtake the goal of strengthening social connections. Yet social determinants of community, such as knowing neighbors, the density of social interactions, and the innate ability of communities to self-organize, attest to community resiliency when there is no immediate crisis at hand, as studies now show. From Eric Klinenberg's seminal study about the preponderance of single, socially-isolated individuals who were victims of the Chicago heat wave (Klinenberg 2002) to the recent paradigm developed by 100 Resilient Cities (Rockerfeller Foundation, n.d.), both research and practice show that community resiliency is as much about social relationships as it is about hard infrastructure. Social cohesion may be particularly important in neighborhoods that have been historically disenfranchised.

About the Site: Five Points, Charlotte, North Carolina

As one of the Knight cities that is experiencing a renaissance and increasing wealth, Charlotte was an easy choice for the foundation and the project team. Local stakeholders were keen on the assessment of its public spaces. Multiple civic institutions, such as Center City Partners, a downtown development civic organization; the Charlotte local Knight Foundation program office; and an emerging local advocacy scene, communicated the potential for change.

Charlotte is a thriving mid-size, low-density city. As a historic regional trade center, it experienced decline with deindustrialization and subsequent population loss, but was buffered from effects of the loss of manufacturing because it served more as a financial center rather than a manufacturing core. Additionally, universities and corporate headquarters provided economic anchors for jobs. Today, it is a city to which professionals and young families flock.

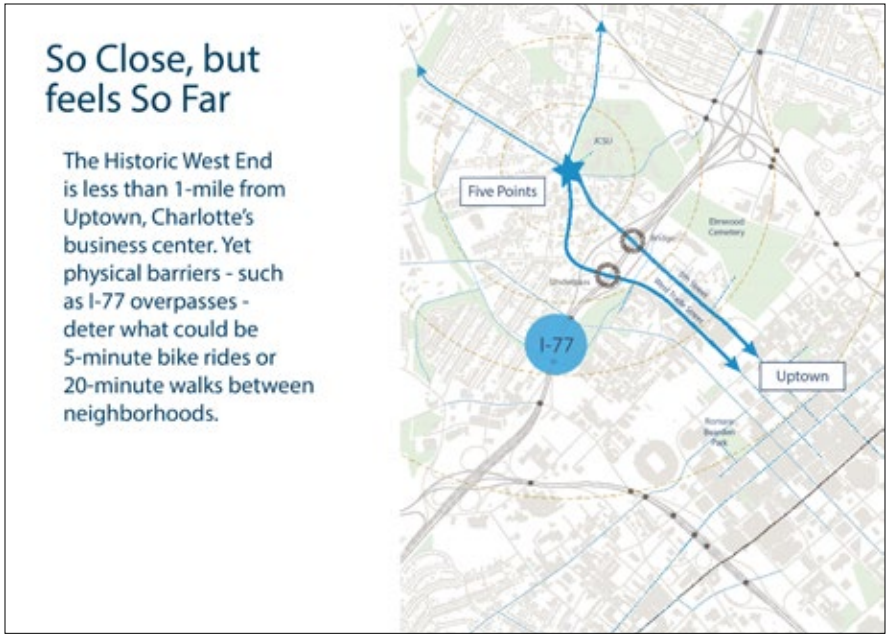

Figure 1: Map of Charlotte showing the Historic West End neighborhood and Five Points project in relationship to Uptown, the central business district.
Image from Gehl, used with permission.

While it is a historically wealthy city, Charlotte does not have a wealth of public spaces. It falls below the median among low-density cities for the amount of parkland within city boundaries, at 6.4 percent compared to 7.4 percent among its peer cities (Trust for Public Land 2016). Its modern investments primarily centered on big infrastructure projects. The emphasis on a few formal, large-scale physical projects, such as a highway that encircled the downtown and dividing neighborhoods, landscaped parks, or outer-city residential buildings, meant that everyday public spaces were neglected. Like most other cities across the country, Charlotte took advantage of the federal transportation program, the largest infrastructure program in postwar United States, to build roads and highways. Highways were viewed as strategies to modernize the city and considered a sign of progress.

Over decades, these infrastructure decisions and practices contributed to the emptying out the city center because they encouraged development outside of the downtown. Many who did not have the option of picking up and moving out of the cities endured the remaking of neighborhoods and in some cases, overall decline. They are often of lower-income, minority populations. Development occurred along social and racial lines, sowing division. Neighborhoods literally became more segregated over time and experienced varying levels of amenities, investment, and thus benefits.

West End Historic Neighborhood is one of those neighborhoods. A thriving, black neighborhood, it was victim to infrastructure decisions in the mid-century. It is only 1 mile from uptown, the business center of Charlotte (Figure 1). Yet, the neighborhood is cut off by highway ramps and overpasses, making a 20-minute walk or 5-minute bike ride an option of last resort.

Five Points intersection in the Historic West End was selected because of its geography (Figure 2). It is a neighborhood gateway on the main street and is directly connected to the long-term transit plans for the neighborhood. But perhaps more importantly, it had strong community leaders who were interested in galvanizing the engagement side of the process.

The empty lot in Charlotte that became known as Five Points Plaza was just that, an empty lot. It is located in the Historic West End, a historic African American neighborhood just outside of the ring highway (Interstate 77-Route 16) that encircled the downtown core, where many potential open spaces were neglected from lack of investment. As young professionals moved into the neighborhood and the transit agency planned an extension of the Lynx light rail line to the neighborhood, long-time residents leaned into opportunities to engage their new neighbors rather than shunning them. J'Tanya Adams, a community organizer and business leader, said, "We're not going to be trying to restore anything, because we aren't going to lose anything. We are going to build on what we have. We plan to transition in a thoughtful way."

Before a single piece of wood was placed to demarcate the new public spaces, Adams held numerous community meetings to gather input about what should happen in their public space. Community meetings led to the desire for a public space the community could call its own, a space they could program and manage on its own, and this process led to Five Points Plaza.

In a break from conventional designer relationships, the design team was relegated to technical assistance while Adams led the community engagement process, at her insistence. Historic West End residents had experienced numerous broken promises with urban planning initiatives, where ideas were excitedly discussed by city officials but implementation never materialized. Even in cases when city officials solicit feedback, residents often felt that proposals did not reflect the desires and wishes of the residents. It was imperative to the community leaders and institutional stakeholders that the process designing Five Points Plaza did not end with the same lack of results.

As a result, the plaza consisted less of formal design than of basic amenities that the community requested. The design team did not design an installation that they may have originally envisioned. Instead, they bought picnic tables, chairs, paint, and other basic materials to demarcate the space and make it comfortable for visitors. A local business man volunteered to install

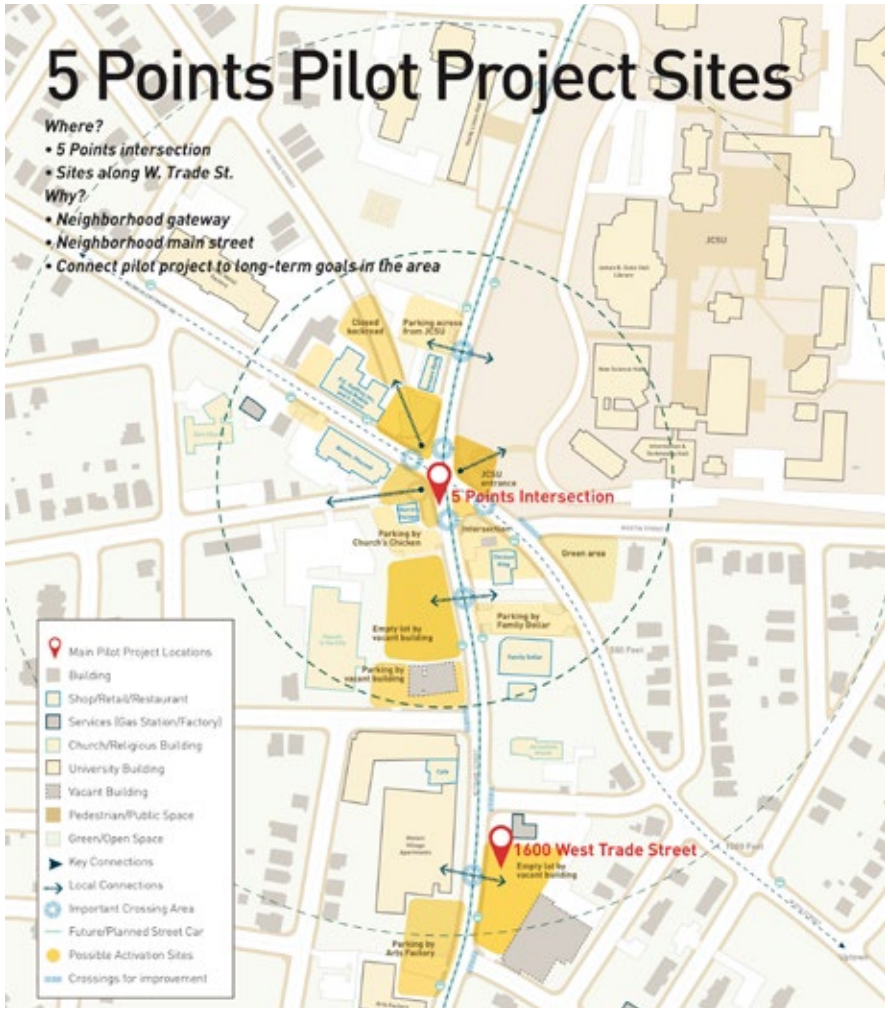

Figure 2: Five Points intersection in the Historic West End was selected because of its geography. It is a neighborhood gateway on the main street and is directly connected to the long-term transit plans for the neighborhood. But perhaps more importantly, it had strong community leaders who were interested in galvanizing the engagement side of the process.

Image from Gehl, pilot project Historic West End (Charlotte, NC) design brief, 2016.

the perimeter fence that the city required for permitting. Other neighbors contributed to painting the mural and setting up the space. Historic West End organized the calendar of events and programming for the space.

Research Methods

In Charlotte, the pilot project for a new public space was conceived by analyzing observational data about how people walked through the neighborhood and how they used space, data from interviewing neighbors, and intercept surveys.

The public spaces were not chosen by chance. The Gehl team used a study methodology called the Public Space, Public Life (PSPL) survey designed to better understand people and their use of public space, thus positioning people and their needs at the center of design practice. Additional research approaches were added because of the special nature of this project, all of which are documented in the Public Life Diversity Toolkit 1.0 and 2.0 (Gehl Institute, n.d.).

New survey questions were added in the PSPL in the first phase of project development and co-developed with local partners. These questions were necessary because of the lack of pedestrian activity. Whereas people using space in high-density areas often revealed patterns of use, low-density cities had the challenge of having very few people in public space. Thus, additional questions are necessary to fully understand the needs and desires of the neighbors.

- What do you like about your city?
- Why do you visit or stay in a particular place?
- What would you like to do more of in your neighborhood?

The data were collected at popular destinations to gauge what people like to do; this is typical practice in low-density cities. (In high-density cities with high pedestrian volumes, observational data may make these questions less necessary.) Researchers were careful to temper it with the awareness that such data are limited and cannot be viewed as representative. In sum, qualitative data should be examined relative to each other and considered against the larger context, and not on its own (Figure 3).

To better understand the role public spaces play in a neighborhood or city, it is important to understand the historic, social, economic, and community context for the space. The research framework employed in this case study considered interactions and dynamics that occur from individual

Figure 3: Five Points Plaza was a pilot project in the Historic West End of Charlotte, NC.
Photo by Cherie Jzar, used with permission.

interpersonal interactions all the way to the regional system level. The team considered means of assessing the social impacts and performance of public spaces against each of those geographic scales. Figure 4 illustrates the interdependencies between the spaces people take up and peoples' ability to form different levels of social structures, whether it is close relationships, knowing the neighbors, or even being able to get to a job and participate in the regional labor market.

Public space improvements linked to social cohesion ultimately come alive at the block or district (group of blocks) level. For example, research studies (Gehl 2010) have shown that people like to walk down streets with active facades, where the building wall shows a change in pattern at about every four seconds. That rhythm in the surroundings keeps a person moving down the street, engages the eye, and makes walking enjoyable for nearly all people, regardless of background or demographic. Another example is the observation of people lingering in public spaces. Usually people linger if they feel comfortable and safe.

Social interactions can take place in a variety of ways in public space (Gehl Institute). Policy outcomes tend to emphasize direct interactions, often measured through transactional metrics, such as total sales receipts or volume of sales. Yet observational analysis revealed that a wide range of social interactions may take place without direct interaction. People share space quite contentedly without speaking to a stranger or buying something (Figure 5).

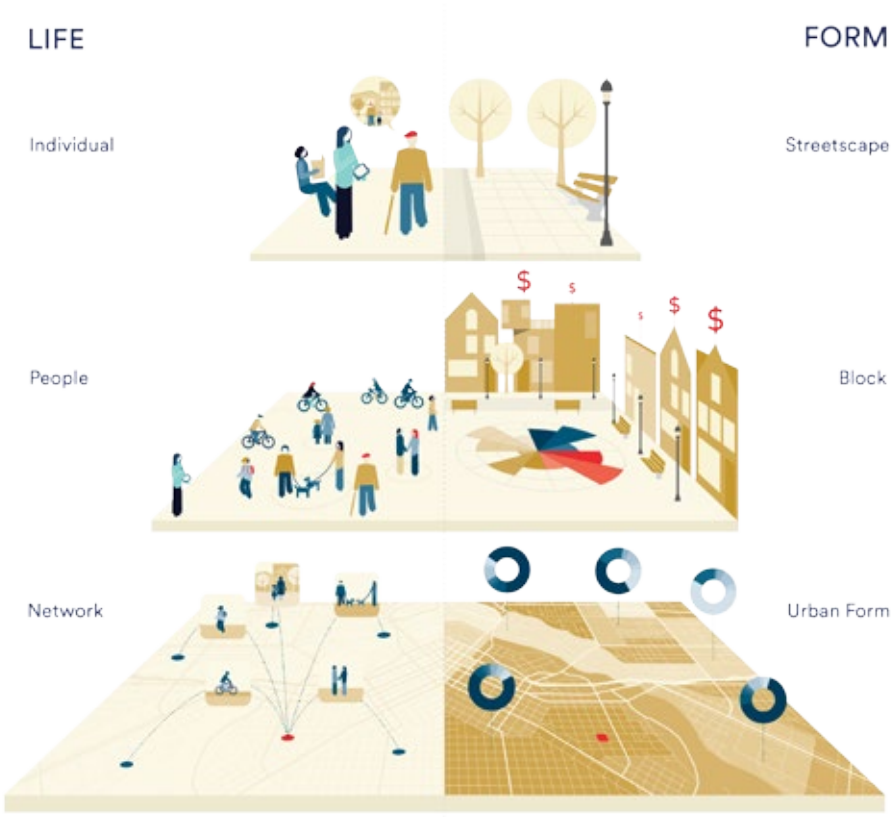

Figure 4: Life-Form Analysis: Social connections can be observed at the individual, block, or regional level.

Image from Gehl Institute, Public Life Diversity Toolkit 2.0, 2016.

Figure 5: SpectrumSocial Mixing: Observable social interactions in public spaces tend to fall along a spectrum of familiarity. A solo or single person may know no one there whereas strangers might share the space in passive contact. The strongest observable connection is among friends, where there is a high sense of familiarity.

Image from Gehl Institute, Public Life Diversity Toolkit 2.0, 2016.

The Charlotte project tested methods of measuring the social connections and a sense of stewardship of public space. Because both spaces would be new and established in neighborhoods where there was little physical evidence of public stewardship of open space and social interactions, responses would provide clues to how community gathering places could bring people together and potentially foster larger feelings of belonging. Our questions in the evaluation of the social dimension of the projects include:

- Would this project bring more people to the area?
- Would it bring a greater diversity of people to this area?
- Would it encourage interactions?
- Would it foster a sense of pride and ownership?
- Would it increase time spent in public space?
- Would the project change the Department of Transportation's practices to facilitate such spaces?
- Would the pilot project change the city's perception about public spaces that could be funded in the long-term in Historic West End?

Multimethod research approaches were applied to understand the impact of the changes in public space. Observational data, interviews, intercept surveys, and additional surveys were distributed. The data-collection methods often were conducted in partnership with community members. The team organized observational analysis and intercept surveys on site after the installation of the public space project. There were two intercept survey efforts, one during the initial week of installation of Five Points Plaza and another a month later. We also used online surveys and Facebook comments, which can provide some insight but should not be perceived to be representative of the larger community. Questions about sense of pride and ownership and long-term impact would ideally have additional follow-up evaluation.

Findings

Our survey had a small number of respondents, and this is reflective of lack of public space and pedestrian activity in the neighborhood on a normal day. Given that community involvement in a public space is not typical of the

neighborhood, and even walking around the neighborhood was atypical, some of the findings were encouraging.

In terms of basic behavior, nearly 30 percent more people walked in the neighborhood after the launch of Five Points Plaza than before. More people walked to the plaza and to other destinations in the neighborhood. This is promising for the transit extension and future transit extension. Walkability is critical to any transit stop's success.

Surveys collected from visitors to Five Points Plaza reflected a greater number of and diversity in social interactions, far more than took place previously. Seventy-six percent of visitors to Five Points Plaza reported recognizing people they did not plan to meet and 90 percent interacted with someone that did not accompany them to the space. Furthermore, 50 percent of the interactions were with people that they did not know. In a strong showing of stewardship in a neighborhood, 63 percent of the respondents said that they would like to participate in maintaining the plaza after visiting Five Points Plaza.

As a result of the process for making the space, the staff of the Department of Transportation and Urban Design have created a guide to public plazas based on the success of Five Points Plaza. The process helped the city agency uncover legal barriers that were previously invisible to them and presented an opportunity to remove or update legal requirements so that more public space projects could take place through the entire city.

In terms of long-term impact, the Five Points Plaza pilot project maintained Historic West End's funding eligibility. The neighborhood had been slated to be eligible for funding from the City of Charlotte's Comprehensive Neighborhood Investment Plan, but had to demonstrate viability and community support of the project every 2 years to stay eligible. The success of the pilot project showed that there was demand, but the final determination for capital funding will not occur until 2018.

Conclusion

Everyday spaces have a tendency to be overlooked, hidden in plain sight. The Public Life Public Space survey helped reveal the potential of the Five Points intersection as hub for the Historic West End neighborhood. But more importantly, the leadership by a local community member in organizing engagement, soliciting feedback for the design of the space, and bridging the long-time residents and the short-term residents, cemented the public space's success with residents. Though the project did not come from the community itself, the community chose to view the presence of Gehl as invitation to participate and help strengthen relationships between the existing and new residents.

The evaluations demonstrate how public life can be made tangible and the results can be plugged into official processes and policies that advance broad city goals. Five Points Plaza served as a proof-of-concept on which the Charlotte Department of Transportation developed a public plaza guide to help other neighborhoods open public spaces. Monica Holmes in the City's urban design department said, "It's great because we can now use that project as something to hold up to say, 'Look! We've done it before. We don't have to reinvent the wheel'." Tellingly, the positive experience with Five Points Plaza inspired the city to integrate pilot projects into its Comprehensive Neighborhood Improvement Program, a more than $60 million capital construction program.

While this was not a community-led project, the engagement process, conducted in collaboration with local leaders and city officials, led by a local leader, resulted in an open-mindedness toward pilot projects. The Historic West End community is more willing to work with city agencies after the Five Points Plaza project.

The use of data on how people actually behave and how they would like to use space to inform the design of Five Points Plaza led to enthusiastic acceptance of physical improvements of an overlooked space. For the Historic West End, the experiment encouraged people to share space, even for a little while. Rather than a temporary space, perhaps more and permanent everyday public spaces are needed throughout the city's neighborhoods in order to foster public life that is welcoming to all, especially in places where relationships between stakeholders could stand to be strengthened after years of neglect.

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