



WHOSE ROAD NOW?

or

Tactical Urbanism Revisited:

How the pandemic forced cities to
rewrite the rules of the road,
and what that means for
citizen stewardship of the ROW

In 2020 Philadelphia wrote a temporary new rulebook for managing its streets. To help Philadelphia’s vibrant restaurant ecosystem survive, the City allowed restaurants to claim parking spaces, sidewalk space, or even whole blocks to create space for outdoor dining. The results were staggering: 15 blocks closed entirely to automobile traffic and over 750 parking spaces instantly became al fresco dining rooms directly in the right-of-way (ROW). The average Philadelphian might not celebrate the City’s swift changes, but these changes have had a huge impact on how public space projects in the ROW are developed and implemented.

Philadelphia was not alone in its efforts, either. Other cities joined Philadelphia to update how they reviewed designs for new projects, what standards these projects were held to, and how applications were managed and administered. Cities with more robust ROW public space programs, like New York and San Francisco, and Philadelphia’s peers cities, like Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, and Detroit, all wrestled with similar concerns.

We, as Philadelphians, can learn a lot from cities’ collective experience managing changing demand for the ROW. How cities reacted, and continue to react, to the pandemic can help inform and guide how Philadelphia manages these spaces long term, to unlock the potential of citizen stewardship of the ROW.



NATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

Philadelphia was not alone in experimenting with new ways to support creative reuse of the ROW. According to the Boston University Initiative on Cities, nearly half the cities surveyed in the [2020 Menino Survey of Mayors](#), “shut down some roads to through traffic and just under a third closed roads entirely to all traffic [...] Forty percent of mayors reported widening sidewalks and 38 percent created new bike lanes during the pandemic.” Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, Detroit, New York, San Francisco, and others all tried new solutions to our common problem. For instance, Detroit created restaurant curbside pickup zones in lieu of outdoor seating during cold winter months, an innovation later adopted by San Francisco despite a more temperate climate. Boston exempted specific interventions (flex posts, paint, etc) from Public Improvements Commission approval (which is required for any change in the public ROW) if they followed the Tactical Public Realm Guidelines.

Cities’ solutions often fell into two broad categories: closing down streets to automobile traffic, allowing for walking, biking, and socially-distant outdoor activities, or enabling restaurants to serve patrons outdoors. These solutions did not suddenly appear. Instead, both programs were built upon decades worth of programs and initiatives, from long-standing outdoor seating statutes, to more recent Open Streets interventions. All at once, both solutions had to be deployed at a scale and speed unimagined for City officials, restaurateurs, community members, and citizen stewards.

Nevertheless, American cities changed design review processes, design standards, and approval and permitting processes. They made these changes quickly in response to the pandemic to support these outdoor activities. Below are examples of how different cities responded:

REVIEW PROCESS:

Cities needed to update which agencies and officials needed to review applications for outdoor dining, and how those applications were processed. Nationally, many cities:

- drastically cut down on the review time associated with project approval.
- streamlined multiple specific programs into one or two broad programs.
- replaced up-front reviews (e.g. detailed design plans) with increased emphasis placed on back-end enforcement.

San Francisco went from a 12-month procedure (including a Department of Public Works check and architectural plan review) to 3-day review.

DESIGN STANDARDS:

Cities had to revise design standards to make it easier for restaurants and communities to implement these new public spaces. This meant:

- expanding what sort of structures could be allowed in the ROW and what sort of protections were required.
- creating new typologies of loading zones and pedestrian enhancements to the ROW.
- developing more detailed design guidance documents.

Chicago’s DOT re-imagined it’s public space program, creating “Chicago al Fresco.” They created a new set of design guidelines to support its activities.

APPROVAL, PERMITTING, AND MANAGEMENT:

Cities had to change how projects were approved and managed to facilitate the growth of public space within the ROW. For example:

- cities empowered and encouraged local DOT’s to approve projects, sometimes overruling or expediting review from local community boards or legislators in exchange for new reporting requirements.
- Cities moved more application processes online.

In Detroit, the Department of Public Works worked with Council to get blanket approval for DPW to approve outdoor dining. The Department submits monthly reports to the City Council.

PHILADELPHIA'S RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Like other cities, Philadelphia changed permitting processes and standards to expedite restaurateurs' ability to turn parking spaces and streets into outdoor seating. In doing so, the City dramatically increased pedestrian and commercial space throughout the City. Before the pandemic, Philadelphia had fewer than twenty locations across the city where community members and restaurants had transformed the ROW on behalf of pedestrians.

Philadelphia' dramatically increased access to pedestrian spaces:

- Streeteries, parklets, or pedestrian plazas reached far more neighborhoods than previously served by pedestrian enhancements. Pre-pandemic only four of 18 planning districts across Philadelphia featured at least one pedestrian enhancement. Some had as many as three. Post-pandemic, every planning district had pedestrian enhancements, ranging from 11 in the far North East to over 450 in Center City. The vast majority of these new pedestrian spaces are streeteries.
- Streeteries and Open Street development increased ADA-accessible spaces, offering more mobility to more people of all ages and abilities. Streets are now far more likely to have ramps than stores and, with more width, and are far less cluttered with street furniture.

Dramatic changes to the design/review process reduced the administrative burden of ROW stewardship. Pre-pandemic, citizen-stewards of the ROW could wait 6 months or more for a pedestrian-enhancement permit and design approval. Prior to the pandemic, citizen-stewards had to engage and manage a cross-disciplinary design team to get project design approval. Before COVID-19, most citizen-stewards were large, well-funded nonprofit organizations, not ordinary Philadelphians or small businesses.. The devastating pandemic showed us that a different way was not only possible, but also desirable and achievable.

The City's pandemic response up-ended these long-standing process and design norms. The Streeterie application is a single page, reduced from 25. This application consolidation accompanied a review consolidation by uniting site and design review and reducing site map requirements. Also reduced: review management. No longer did applications require the Chief Engineer's direct input, a 3-day turnaround on reviews was made standard, and integration with License and Inspections (L&I) was achieved. Philadelphia's pandemic response enabled hundreds of small businesses to become stewards of public spaces within the ROW, and supported ROW reuse in more communities than ever before.

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These businesses rushed outside out of a profound panic created by the pandemic. In focus groups and surveys of Streeteries Permit Holders in Philadelphia, StreetBoxPHL heard that without streeteries and changes to outdoor dining “we could not have survived,” and that streeteries “were the reason we could survive”.

The traumas experienced by the restaurant industry are real. Restaurateurs’ avowed adaptation to Streeteries speaks not just to their sincere belief that these were the only tools available to them in an uncertain public health environment, but also to their discovery of new ways to engage with communities via Philadelphia’s streets. These restaurateurs noted that Streeteries helped make for “great social interaction,” increased “community connection” and helped put “more life on the streets.” A [Philadelphia Inquirer article](#) chronicled restaurateurs who used streeteries as an opportunity to create spaces that differentiated their restaurants on crowded corridors. The Streeteries, in certain cases, reminded some restaurateurs of their home, far and away, perhaps below the Mason-Dixon line or even across oceans.

This new normal is not all planters, puppies, or the reification of Metropolis Magazine renderings. With this change comes some major concern: officials suggest that the 750+ permitted streeteries on Philly’s streets represent just 10% of the actual pop-ups across the city. It’s also not clear if the level of maintenance and amenity provided by these new public spaces is worth the trade-off in the privatization of the public sphere (e.g. a sidewalk that’s now a de facto extension of a restaurant). Furthermore, these installations often complicate the already-precarious balancing act of accommodating for multiple modes in a single narrow cartway.

Nonetheless, community groups, reflecting on the value of the parklets, plazas, Streeteries, and open streets in their neighborhoods, responded in a recent focus group that these projects “promote joy and safety.” ROW-stewardship activities are critical to these community groups because “the ROW is the only available public space in many neighborhoods.” For these communities, ROW stewardship not only increases access to public space and improves quality of life, but also simply the act of doing so promotes community cohesion, connection, and collaboration.

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WHY CHANGE NOW?

The COVID-19 pandemic forced citizens, City officials, business owners and community development organizations alike to reimagine how Philadelphia's streets serve our city. Clear themes emerged for street-based placemaking in the last year-and-a-half. In 2021 and beyond, It's critical to revisit how the City manages its streets. We must learn from the successes of new street uses and see how those lessons can open up more opportunities for community stewardship of our streets.

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY REMAINS A PRIORITY

Like other major American cities, the Inquirer has reported that **Philadelphia's roads became more dangerous during the pandemic, with Philadelphians driving faster and crashing more often.** As commuting patterns continue to evolve, and public health concerns fluctuate, it's ever more important to support active transportation options, like walking, biking and scootering.

ONGOING NEED FOR ROW INTERVENTIONS

As the virus continues to mutate and affect public safety statuses, cities need to maintain the appropriate tools in their built-environment-toolbelt to support outdoor public spaces. Close to 90% of retailers surveyed by StreetBoxPHL were interested in continuing their expanded activation of the ROW. These tools are critical to and in demand by restaurants and retail shops struggling to rebuild their businesses.

COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP PROMOTES CRITICAL COMMUNITY BUILDING

Philadelphia's community of nonprofits and civic groups look to ROW stewardship as a crucial focus of their community-building activities. The work not only increases access to public space in underserved neighborhoods, but it promotes community ownership and opportunities for leadership, and supports community cohesion, connection, and collaboration.

The pandemic, and both citizen and official responses to it, proved that there is not only an incredible appetite to engage in the ROW across all neighborhoods, but that cities can facilitate that engagement. The changes to outdoor seating and curbside management that were made to support restaurant and retail operations are the types of changes needed to unlock more non-profit stewardship of public spaces in the ROW.

Emerging stronger from the long tail of this pandemic requires building better tools to support community stewardship of the ROW. Doing so not only serves our public health and supports the city's restaurant industry, it also helps Philadelphia's diverse communities engage in those activities that help them thrive.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was made possible with the support and collaboration of Hinge Collective, and Sam Schwartz Engineering, and the ROW Reform Coalition: Asociación de Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM), the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, the Community Design Collaborative, the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (Philadelphia Chapter) the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, and the Philadelphia BID Alliance.

StreetBoxPHL helps communities transform their streets by removing technical barriers to citizen stewardship of the ROW.

StreetBoxPHL is a fiscally sponsored program of the Culture Trust of Greater Philadelphia