# Walking Wins

Pedestrian streets are in style again.

By Linda Baker

A half a year after it opened, San Francisco's Castro Commons is getting rave reviews as part of the

What goes around comes around. Reversing a long pattern of reopening pedestrian malls to traffic, New York City officials in February decided to do the opposite. They announced that they would permanently close sections of Broadway to cars, capping an eight-month experiment that turned Times Square and Herald Square into pedestrian plazas. Bolstered by photos of giddy pedestrian hordes, the "Green Light for Midtown" project captured the public imagination around the country.

"This is a 21st century idea. The 20th century idea was three lanes of noisy, annoying traffic," said Daniel Biederman at a press conference announcing the closing. Biederman is president of a local business improvement district, the 34th Street Partnership.

The car ban is part of a larger, two-pronged effort in New York City to reclaim street space for pedestrians. Over the past two years, the department of transportation has temporarily created nine pedestrian plazas in four of the city's five boroughs, in many cases simply marking the street with paint and orange cones and adding movable chairs and tables. Now the city aims to refashion the spaces with more permanent materials.

A more formal, city-sponsored capital program, the NYC Plaza Program, reviews proposals for pedestrian plazas from local community organizations. Nine proposals were accepted in the first round, and those projects are currently going through the design and planning process. Another round of proposals was to be reviewed this spring.

### The idea is catching on

San Francisco launched a similar "Pavement to Parks" program last year that has so far carved three makeshift pedestrian spaces out of existing streets. Ten more are planned for 2010. Yet another initiative is unfolding in Seattle, where the city aims to reclaim downtown alleys for pedestrians. And other municipalities are looking on with interest.

Collectively, these initiatives point to a new generation of car-free spaces—a movement that emphasizes simple, flexible, and inexpensively designed spaces, managed by local organizations and integrated seamlessly into the surrounding neighborhood. Intended to alleviate environmental, health, and congestion problems caused by the automobile, the projects also reimagine streets as places to build community.

"We believe the plazas are streets and that streets should be managed as public

# Out

San Francisco Planning Department

vement to Parks program.

spaces," says Andrew Wiley-Schwartz, an assistant commissioner at the New York City DOT. "Eighty-five percent of all publicly owned land in the city (and 25 percent of all the land) is street," he adds. "We want people to see these spaces as a dynamic asset."

Efforts to create car-free streets in downtown areas have a troubled history in the U.S. During the 1970s, cities across the country installed about 200 "pedestrian malls"—a design that featured fixed seating and landscaping and separation from the surrounding streetscape. Many of these malls benefited from federal funding channeled through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

By the 1990s, many—but not all—planners considered the pedestrian mall a failed paradigm. Lacking a clear purpose and a

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### Give Pedestrian Malls a Second Look

Among the gifts local governments received from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1970s were grants-in-aid to build pedestrian malls in retail centers. It seemed like a great idea at a time when cities and towns were desperate for virtually any financial aid—just the trick to save the dying downtown department stores and small shops.

By the time the federal money was exhausted, pedestrian malls had become a feature of hundreds of communities. The problem was that they were envisioned principally as a structural solution. Little attention was paid to the underlying problem: the lack of a market.

It soon became clear that the malls would not fix what was wrong with America's downtowns. Anchor department stores continued to go under, and vacant storefronts multiplied. With fewer pedestrians, the malls looked lonelier—and scarier. Malls got the blame for killing downtowns even when they weren't at fault, as was the case in Newark, New Jersey, which had no mall but still lost three department stores within a few years.

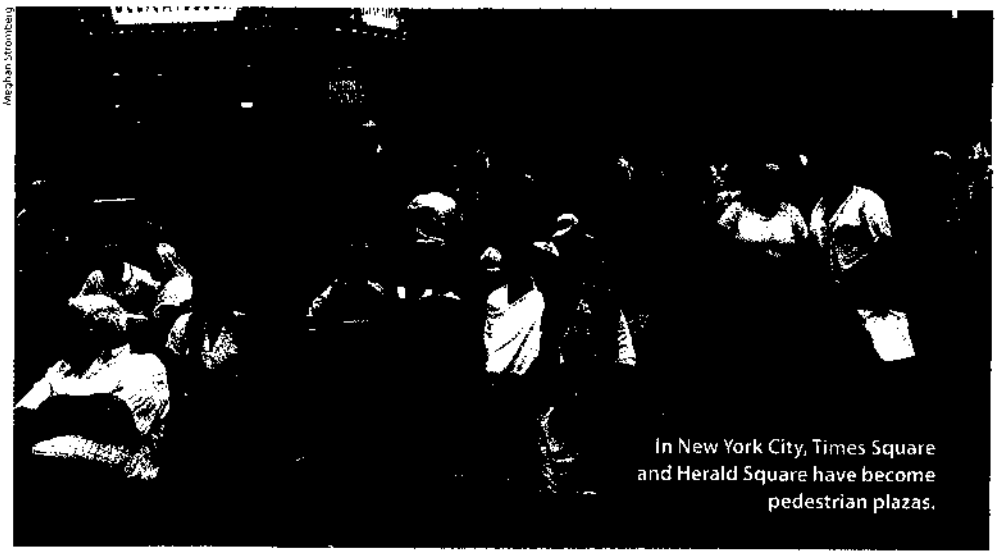
About this time, public space experts began advising local planners to remove their pedestrian malls as a step toward economic revitalization. More auto traffic was said to be the new route to prosperity. As a panacea, it was as bad as the pedestrian mall idea.

Despite all this, a surprising number of the old malls managed to survive and even to thrive. And now come some new and amazingly successful examples.

Wilmington, Delaware, is one of the cities that hung onto its mall. It did it by lopping off several semi-dormant blocks. It kept the blocks with the opera house and the shops that served nearby offices, and it dropped those that were deemed too expensive to clean. In so doing, the city missed a chance to create a walkway to several new office towers, the Amtrak station, and new riverfront development. In Philadelphia, an ambitious local developer bought the site of a derelict brewery and created hundreds of immediately popular apartments. He also turned three short blocks into a pedestrian street that is now devoted to specialty shopping and dining.

The Church Street Market in Burlington, Vermont, is celebrating a quarter-century of success, thanks in part to its healthy mix of chain stores and independent shops, and a year-round program of activities managed by a business improvement district.

Meghan Stromberg



In New York City, Times Square and Herald Square have become pedestrian plazas.

Miami Beach used the national interest in art deco design to spur renovation of the Lincoln Road Mall. Now the traffic-free street is so quiet in the evening one can hear the hundreds of chatting diners from blocks away. Boston, too, has maintained an attractive public open space around the Faneuil Hall Marketplace. And even in

winter, Denver's 16th Street Transit Mall is crowded with hardy souls who fill the tables at outdoor cafes.

Brooklyn's Fulton Street Mall is another example, thanks to a deal New York City worked out with the U.S. Department of Transportation. The DOT agreed to finance improvements to the buses and subways serving the mall if merchants would pool their resources to upgrade the area. Thus was born one of the nation's first BIDs.

And, of course, there is Manhattan, where Times Square and Herald Square have become, of all things, places to sit, sip, and stroll—in the middle of traffic-free Broadway.

### A bad rap

The very term "pedestrian mall" has such a poor reputation that planners may be reluctant to consider its use today. But an unbiased look at mall history shows that malls may not have been such a bad idea to begin with.

There is no doubt, however, that a mall must be well managed if it is to function as a dynamic marketplace. That means more than sweeping the sidewalks. One way to ensure good management is through a BID, which can add the private-sector perspective that local governments lack. The absence of this perspective is a significant reason for the continued decline of the nation's downtowns.

Like any town center, a mall must offer the mixture of commerce, culture, and entertainment that will draw people. Copycat planning can be ruinous; local opportunities should shape the outcome. Nearby mixed use districts filled with office workers and residents are vital factors in ensuring success.

Today's downtowns have many strong assets, including an unprecedented number of new residents and, in many cities, large numbers of college students. The desperation of the 1970s, when malls were seen as the enemy, should not drive today's planning decisions. Given the right conditions and the right leadership, malls can be convenient, useful commercial centers that boost local economic performance.

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strong management structure—not to mention a critical mass of users—malls in many cities fell into disrepair and became magnets for crime. In an effort to revitalize the areas, cities opened most of the pedestrian malls to car traffic. Today, only about 15 of the original installations remain.

### New look

The new generation of car-free streets has a very different look and feel. The original malls were perceived as antiurban, says Ethan Kent, vice president of Project for Public Spaces, a national nonprofit group based on the ideas of urbanist William H. Whyte. Planners tried to make them more parklike, "dissipating the energy you need to have an active shopping environment." In contrast, he says, the new plazas "are about loving the city and building on that."

Consider San Francisco's first Pavement to Parks plaza. It's a 7,500-square-foot space at 17th and Market streets in the busy Castro District. There was already a lot of foot traffic in this high-density urban environment, says Andres Power, a planner with the City Design Group, part of the San Francisco Planning Department. Thus, the objective was to increase pedestrian use of the space, not necessarily pedestrian volume. "The idea wasn't to change behavior but to leverage existing behavior," adds Power. And it worked. People who used to walk quickly through the space now stop and sit at the tables and chairs, he says. "There are people out there day and night."

Following the New York City model, San Francisco planners hope to make the plazas permanent after an initial trial period of about eight months. The Castro plaza is the first one to earn permanent status; the others are still in the pilot stage.

Installing simple temporary plazas makes sense in an economic downturn, says Power. The projects' provisional nature also helps to diffuse the inevitable opposition that arises when auto use is curtailed. It's a way to cut through the endless cycle of community discussions, he adds. "We can say, 'Let's just try this. Nothing we are doing permanently changes the infrastructure.'"

Power has identified several key characteristics of the 21st century pedestrian plaza: flexibility, respect for context, and shared management and maintenance—by the city and a community partner. In the Castro example, the partner is the Upper Market Community Benefit District, a local business improvement district that keeps its "eyes on the street," ensures that the plaza stays clean, and looks after the movable tables and chairs. The city also intends to grant the district permitting authority, which will allow it to authorize vendors and generate revenue to maintain the site.

Having a partner is key, says New Yorker Andy Wiley-Schwartz. Simply creating a plaza and turning it over to the city or the park district to manage is not a sustainable approach, he says. "We create these spaces with local partners," who are willing to take an active role that goes far beyond wiping down the tables and taking out the trash. "We want them to be creating spaces as an expression of community." Possible community uses include farmers markets, chess clubs, and revenue-generating opportunities such as retail shops or concessions.

To define the Castro space in a low cost way, landscape designers simply enclosed the area with pressure-treated cardboard planters and painted the asphalt. For seating, they recycled granite curb pieces from the city's stockpile of unused materials. For another plaza, at the intersection of San Jose and Guerrero streets, they used fallen logs culled from city parks to define the perimeter. Neighbors envision the space, which is located in a residential area, as a gathering area for families and are currently raising money for a play structure.

San Francisco planners also relied on recycled materials for another, larger plaza, an 11,000-square-foot space in the warehouse district adjacent to the California College of the Arts. There they installed planters fashioned from refurbished trash containers and benches made from terra-cotta drainpipes and large pieces of Italian granite. The community partners for this site, which serves primarily as a gathering place for students, are the college and the Axis Cafe, a business fronting the plaza.

Contextual design also informs the New York City plazas. These spaces are not walled off from the surrounding neighborhood; instead, they are carved out of existing streets, leaving "open, accessible spaces you can see through and in," Wiley-Schwartz says. He notes that a combination of fixed and movable seating is also important. The former helps to establish the plaza as a place, while the latter accommodates

Miles of Bogota's streets are closed to traffic on Sundays and holidays for the ciclovia. The practice is catching on in the U.S., where 10 cities have staged their own events.

diverse programming. It also creates "that great William H. Whyte movable element we're looking for," he adds.

### Spread of an idea

Closing parts of streets for one purpose or another is an idea that is catching on. Last year, in Seattle, several businesses used street furniture and temporary art to create a lively community space in Nord Alley, part of the Pioneer Square neighborhood. The city is now looking at the Nord project as a model for other downtown alleys. And in February, San Francisco piloted yet another pedestrian-friendly initiative, replacing one or two parking spaces at various sites with temporary wooden platforms that jut into the street, becoming instant pocket parks.

The common denominator of such efforts, says San Francisco planner Andres Power, is a desire "to take back some of that excess or misallocated right of way."

A model is the *ciclovia*, a word that means bike path in Spanish but has come to refer to a temporary street closing like the weekly event in Bogota, Colombia. Every Sunday, as many as two million participants ride their bikes or walk through more than 70 miles of city streets that have been closed to car traffic, stopping along the way to take part in various family and community events.

The practice has spread to the U.S., where about 10 cities have staged their own ciclovias. Portland, Oregon, held its first event—called Sunday Parkways—in 2008, with several thousand people in attendance. Three more took place in 2009, and six are planned this year. Miami has held seven ciclovias—dubbed "Bike Miami"—in the last two years, with an average of about 4,000 participants. Like the pedestrian plazas, the U.S. ciclovias have antecedents in an earlier era. In the 1970s, the city of Seattle shut down a few miles of roadway along Lake Washington every Sunday during the summer.

The modern-day plaza and ciclovia movements share a community-based approach to reclaiming the streets. Stephen Villavaso, FAICP, a transportation engineer who is helping to plan the 7.5-mile route of Los Angeles's first ciclovia, sees the event as a chance to "reappropriate the road space" and allow residents to "get to know their city." The route will run through seven different neighborhoods, with the first event scheduled for Sunday, September 12.

Ciclovias also have a practical purpose. They encourage people to think about alternative modes of transportation, says Collin Worth, bicycle coordinator for the city of Miami. Even more important in an expensive city like Miami, they are free family events. Miami constructs children's entertainment zones along the route. Like most ciclovias, the Miami events have involved community partners. This year's are the Dutch Consulate and the Miami Children's Hospital.

Sometimes, taking back the street seems like an uphill battle. Memphis, Tennessee, has long struggled to revive the bedraggled Main Street Mall, an eight-block-long downtown pedestrian mall constructed in the 1970s. Today, 40 percent of the storefronts along the mall are vacant, many structures are in disrepair, and homeless people sleep on the steps of office buildings. Last year, the nonprofit Center City Commission conducted a study to identify the characteristics of successful pedestrian spaces in cities nationwide. The resulting report identified such elements as a dense urban core, a strong management structure, and an existing pedestrian population.

A local task force is now following up, beginning with a proposal to contract with a private firm to oversee maintenance and security for the Main Street Mall. The city is also offering incentives to developers to encourage residential development in the area. The process will not be easy, says Andy Kitsinger, vice president for planning and development for the Center City Commission.

Without higher density, achieving anything like New York's new plazas will be challenging, planners say. But as municipalities around the country step up efforts to get people out of their cars, such designs may become the wave of the future.

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**FROM APA**

Complete streets, which accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, transit, and cars, are the subject of a new APA report, *Complete Streets: Best Policy and Implementation Practices* (PAS Report No. 559) is available for $60 from APAPlanningBooks.com. The publication is the product of a joint APA and National Complete Streets Coalition research project on complete streets, and it includes model policies prepared by the National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity.