



ZOOM WEBINAR
Executive Summary | July 23, 2020

The Public Realm in the 21st century

The Public Realm in the 21st Century is the first of a series of webinars created by KC Global Design to provide insights from design professionals on developing short- and long-term design solutions that create safety and security in the public realm. The public realm includes the external places in our cities that are accessible to all, in which we live, work, and play. In these public places, we have the opportunity to gather, reflect, exercise, experience, and learn from one another. In an era of climate change, pandemic, economic downturn, and social unrest and protest, how cities learn from these global events and leverage the public realm in reopening strategies can have far-reaching economic and social impact.

The webinar featured a two-part discussion:

Part 1 – *History of Public Realm* presented by Elizabeth Rosin, *Citizen Satisfaction & The Issues* presented by Kate Bender, and *Preparing for a Resilient Future* presented by Ashley Z. Hand

Part 2 – *Case Study: Baltimore – Design for Distancing*, presented by Emily Breiter

The webinar session continued with a **panel discussion and Q&A**, with panelists Lynn Carlton, McClain Bryant Macklin, Elizabeth Rosin, Kate Bender, Emily Breiter, and Ashley Z. Hand.

Sheri Gonzales, VP of the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City and Director of KC Rising opened *The Public Realm in the 21st Century* webinar. Maria Maffry, Principal and Chief Business Development Officer at BNIM, and Dominique Davison, Managing Principal and Founder of DRAW Architecture + Urban Design, served as moderators of this discussion.

An executive summary of the discussion is included below:

HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC REALM:

- **Colonial Settlement Patterns:** The Public Realm has evolved over time in the U.S. In a review of historical colonial settlement patterns, we learn of four different settlement approaches by cultural groups:
 - New England: Settlement was focused on community where villages were created with a town center and green space surrounded by individual farms.
 - Tidewater South: Settlement came in the form of business venture where settlers received large land allotments that relied on enslaved and indentured workers. These plantation estates were located near local churches and small mercantile.

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- New France: Settlement focused on trade, most notably the fur trade, and consisted of small villages with larger, narrow land allotments.
- New Spain: Settlement was funded by the monarchy to exploit the area's natural resources. The settlement structure included a walled city with a central plaza lined with government buildings and churches, surrounded by farmland.
- **Industrialization:** The rise of industrialization brought with it the construction of mills and tenement apartments. There was an early awareness of both density and pollution in overly crowded cities.
- **Garden Cemeteries:** A reaction to industrialization, garden cemeteries were the first attempt at creating an oasis of green space away from cities. They were designed landscapes with rolling terrain, strategic plantings, ponds, and trees to commemorate the lost and create vistas.
- **Public Park Systems:** Public parks were established as a means to improve public health. Central Park in New York is widely considered the first in the modern era of public parks. It provided the average working person with an anecdote to the chaos of the city.
- **City Beautiful Movement:** This movement in the 1890s was a progressive effort to bring beauty, grandeur, and civic virtue to urban centers.
- **Building Stepbacks:** In response to buildings growing larger, New York passed the first zoning law in 1916 to reduce the footprint of the building as it increased in height.
- **Urban Plazas & Open Space:** In 1961, New York created a zoning system based on floor-area ratio, allowing developers to build taller buildings if public open space was included on site.
- **The Automobile:** The auto age made street and sidewalks imperative. By 1930, the presence of streetcars, cars and trucks made the road a more difficult obstacle to navigate.

CITIZEN SATISFACTION & THE ISSUES

- **What KCMO's Resident Survey Tells Us About Perceptions of the Public Realm:**
The KCMO Resident Survey is administered to a random sample of individuals divided across Council districts, and the results of this survey are considered representative of the demographics of the general population.
 - The content includes questions about satisfaction with quality of life, with city services, and with resident experiences.
- **Resident Priorities and the Public Realm:** This data provides information to understand relative level of priorities among KCMO residents.
Service areas that rank among the top four priorities include:
 - Infrastructure - streets and sidewalks
 - Neighborhood services
 - Stormwater runoff/management
- **Resident Satisfaction with Public Realm-related Services:** This data takes a step deeper into understanding resident satisfaction in the public realm, asking individuals their level of satisfaction with services as Satisfied/Very Satisfied, Neutral, or Dissatisfied/Very Dissatisfied
 - **Key takeaways:** A number of services, particularly park services and street lighting received above average satisfaction. Services such as public transportation and tree trimming received approximately a third of respondents as satisfied. Areas with much lower satisfaction include sidewalk conditions and efforts to clean up illegal dumping.

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- In addition to having varied priorities among residents, there are also varied levels of satisfaction.
- **Resident Experiences in the Public Realm:** This portion of the survey consider services that residents have utilized in the KCMO area.
 - 86% of respondents have regular access to the internet at home, 77% have visited parks in KCMO, 59% flew out of KCI, 42% used the KC Streetcar, 31% visited a KCMO community center.
 - **Key takeaways:** All of these survey questions demonstrated positive or negative correlation with income. Residents from different income backgrounds can have different experiences with the city or with the public realm.
- **Resident Satisfaction with Physical Appearance of my Neighborhood:**
 - Citywide satisfaction is 56%. This percentage differs both demographically and geographically, with Black residents indicating 40% satisfaction with physical appearance of neighborhood, Hispanic residents indicated 50% satisfaction, and White residents indicated 63% satisfaction.
 - Income levels and higher satisfaction levels of physical appearance of neighborhood demonstrated positive correlation.
 - Areas to the west and north of the city indicated greater satisfaction in response to physical experience of neighborhood.
- **Resident Satisfaction with Safety in my Neighborhood:**
 - This data indicates similar results as those demonstrated in ‘Resident Satisfaction with Physical Appearance of my Neighborhood’ both geographically and demographically, in terms of racial disparities and income disparities.
 - **Key Takeaways:** Safety is a core element of the public realm. If people can’t experience safety in their neighborhood or in public, then it does not even make it possible to experience other aspects of the public realm. This data is available, and we have the opportunity to measure both change and progress. Disparities are present in this data and show up consistently throughout, and it is crucial to keep in mind for this conversation.

PREPARING FOR A RESILIENT FUTURE

Challenges pre-COVID:

- **Equity:** The digital divide is still a significant issue in our community. 42 M Americans without access to fixed or wireless broadband.
- **Economy:** As jobs are being automated, the workforce itself must adapt. 44% of jobs could be automated in the future.
- **Environment:** We are facing the realities of climate change, and the public realm is a space that can mitigate some of these impacts. 10 + \$1B weather and climate disaster events five years in a row. -3% value output decline for every degree above the average temperature.
- **Innovation:** While we are innovative as a collective society, homelessness is still a crucial problem in the U.S. The U.S. ranks 9th as an innovative economy.
- **Happiness & Well-Being:** The U.S. ranks 18th for happiness, which is low in terms of developed countries.

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Challenges post-COVID:

- **Global Impact of COVID-19:** coordinated, real-time response is required, socio-economic inequity exacerbated, supply chain disrupted, and there is considerable uncertainty.
- **Urban impact:** Cash-strapped businesses and workers, lost productivity, mobility and transit services disrupted, and government shortfalls, and uncertainty
- **Organizational impact:** These impacts can be in the public sector, private sector, academic sector, and non-profit sector. Impacts include lost productivity, government shortfalls, workforce strained, and uncertainty.
- When we think about how we mitigate these issues, we should think about the Compound Effect which emphasizes how multiple results can occur at the same time: response + recovery, natural disasters, man-made disasters, major events, and political cycles.
- This adds complexity to our work but challenges us in design on how to problem solve.
- **Key Takeaway:** Change is inevitable, and we must consider the public realm as a platform to change the way we work as a society.

Future-proof:

- In order to better align the public realm with desired social outcomes, we need to consider the following:
- **Change management:** This recognizes that change happens, and it can be good if it is balanced with strong vision and guide it with values.
 - Air space, ground space, and the in-between spaces between buildings, neighborhoods, and communities all contribute to improved environment, economy, and equity.
 - Organizational changes are also important to attain these goals.
- **Goods movement:** There has been a large change in consumer behaviors and e-commerce during COVID-19. June 2020 online sales increased 76% from 2019. In terms of the public realm, this will impact what our cities and communities feel like.
- **People movement:** We have considerable potential to rethink how we move in our cities. There are 8 parking spots per vehicle in the U.S., yet parking demand is down 90% over the course of the pandemic.
 - We see this changing from a need for parking spaces to curbside pick-up spaces. Is there a way to readjust revenue for cities as it applies to curbside spaces?
 - 2x the number of first-time scooter users likely to ride again as people look for more active ways for transportation.
 - We must re-evaluate street safety to protect our most vulnerable road users.
- **Public Space:** Social distancing has become extremely important for public health which may change our behavior beyond the pandemic. How do we create flexible spaces that allow us to adapt over time?
 - Our current infrastructure is falling short because it is designed around the automobile. In some cities, there is not enough sidewalk width to allow for social distancing.
- **Regenerative Cities:** We need to pivot from how we currently use public infrastructure and think about how we shape our behaviors.
 - There is opportunity to rebalance distribution of space. What is the difference between public versus private use?
 - We must consider the types of spaces we need to bring in – nature, play space, safe space - and understand the needs of all users of these public environments.

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- We must not dehumanize our environments in the digital age. Designers play an important role in human scale and human design elements.
- In virtual public domain, infrastructure systems will be really important and need intentional placement in design.
- **Key takeaway:** This is about reimagining our shared space and to think differently about the role of what this public realm is in our daily lives. As designers, we have the opportunity to reshape how it serves our community and reflects our values in public health and safety, resiliency and sustainability, or innovation public health, safety

CASE STUDY: BALTIMORE – DESIGN FOR DISTANCING

- Design for Distancing Initiative is led with the Baltimore Development Corporation and the Neighborhood Design Center and was launched mid-May 2020.
- The City of Baltimore invested \$1.5M from their COVID-19 small business assistance initiative towards this program.
- The purpose of the program was to create temporary design that supports small businesses while enabling individuals to safely connect outdoors.
- Baltimore Development Corporation chose 17 districts to work with, bringing them together in collective action. This encompassed arts and entertainment districts, main streets, and retail business licensing districts.
- Guidelines for this project can be found of the [Design for Distancing](#) web page.
- City officials, non-profit organizations, small business owners, and public health officials helped guide designers in this process.
- 162 submitted concepts were submitted and 10 submissions were selected

Bromo Arts District:

- Bromo Arts district is one of four arts and entertainment districts within Baltimore and is home to 500 working artists and 30 cultural organizations.
- Bromo Arts District worked with PI.KL on the development of this design.
- Largest intervention site for the project was at Stewart’s Lot
 - Centrally located within the district
 - Provides beautiful green space that had the greatest capacity for distancing
 - Near major transportation hubs and major residential buildings.

Stewart’s Lot:

- The team was inspired by tall grasses of Stewart’s Lot to form an urban meadow to serve as an oasis within the city that was also a functional space.
- The tall grasses and wildflowers will be mowed into different pathways to lead visitors and monitor social distancing.
- Low tech, big impact intervention through natural and organic strategies.
- Priorities of the program:
 - **Equity:** Site is centrally located to retail, residents, arts organizations, and transport. There was a focus on providing green space to everyone and focus on hiring local artists and vendors to help with interventions.
 - **Creative placemaking:** Focus on creating a stronger sense of community and making arts accessible to the community. The arts serve as a major connector and strong social network to draw residents & visitors to safely enjoy the space.
 - **Engaging with Community**

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Satellite connections:

- In order to support this space and the community that surrounds it, it was important to create a clear pathway leading to this space.
- Flags, markers, and ground details help to indicate businesses are open, provide guidelines for masks and safe distancing, and create pathways towards Stewards Lot.
- Intervention will immediately help retailers and small businesses in the area but will also function as a post-pandemic design
- **Key takeaways:** Though this is a temporary design, it has helped to lay the groundwork for future intervention and communication within districts.

PANEL DISCUSSION:

Panelists: Elizabeth Rosin, Kate Bender, Ashley Hand, Emily Breiter, Lynn Carlton, McClain Bryant Macklin

Lynn Carlton shared 'Global Pandemic Streetscape Initiative: Strategy & Implementation':

- How are you using the public realm? How do we adjust to our new normal?
- Ranging from temporary to long-term strategies – how do we take over vehicle space to create more social distance space to interact?
 - There is an opportunity to reallocate some of the on-street parking to retail businesses, restaurants, and multi-family, residential buildings to improve interaction and provide unused sidewalk space.
 - A second strategy includes converting to one-way traffic so there is still visibility while also reallocating space to other needs.
 - Examples include pop-up retail sites, outdoor dining spaces, food truck and mobile fresh produce access, and increased places to work and gather outdoors.
 - A third strategy is to take over an entire street for pedestrian use to minimize vehicular-pedestrian conflict for events such as peaceful protests, create opportunities for landscape and the environment, and to give local businesses more room.
- Implementation locations are being considered KCMO including Independence Avenue, Troost Corridor, Brookside, and Waldo. There are opportunities in our neighborhoods to continue to create revenue for local businesses.
- Rethinking the public realm in the long-term in ways of:
 - Culture and Commerce
 - Parks and Play
 - Fit and Active
- Are there opportunities to rethink alternative parking innovation opportunities for private parking? Possible flexible uses of parking lots might include opportunities for entertainment such as music and movies.

Q&A SESSION:

Q1: What are we seeing in the policy side in the short-term and long-term in response to COVID-19?

A: McClain: In terms of public policy, we are seeing a lot of people whose living conditions are in multi-family or public housing which can create challenges to social distancing.

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- We are finding more people wanting to take advantage of public spaces. There are those that have the luxury to work from home right now and use public space as an outlet.
- The challenge is ensuring that these public spaces remain open and accessible to all, especially to those who need them most.
- There is economic interest in moving some business from indoors to outdoors.
- There is a need to remain sensitive to those who may not have elsewhere to go. Accessibility for all is top of mind for everyone in rethinking these public spaces.
- There is a tremendous opportunity to ensure public spaces are equipped with outlets and free broadband so that people are able to work.
- Opportunity to do some things right that had not previously been considered to make sure we are designing these spaces in a way that will create greater utilization across all users

Q2: What social and political infrastructure was in place that allowed you to move forward with the Design for Distancing program?

A: Emily: Baltimore City provided funding and allowed each district to participate at an equal level. There was a diverse group of voices from all different industries that have really helped in the process of moving initiatives forward. We were all coming at from the same perspective of really needing a major intervention in this area.

- Stakeholder meetings included many diverse voices to be able to have input from public health officials saying which designs they thought would be safe for public spaces and from small business owners about specific needs. Having all of these voices together was very helpful.
- On the district level, the process includes working with organizations on daily basis to reach these common goals.
- Increased communication on city, district, and community level
- Streamlined process through the city to move process along quickly

Q3: Do you see a challenge in terms of this kind of public interaction with the city during this time of COVID-19 and being able to hear input from community voices in areas with lower access to internet?

A: Kate: This has been front and center across many sectors, including schools and the civic community. The city is pursuing efforts in the area of digital equity to facilitate more individual access to broadband and other mechanisms.

- There is a very active conversation right now. It underscores the challenge that we have.
- The data we have that shows resident internet access shows a geographic gap, a racial gap, and an income gap, but the income gap is most significant and persistent.
- The digital infrastructure of resident outreach and engagement can facilitate greater participation than just in person.
- More engagement from residents than anticipated in this time of digital communication.
- Balancing new tools and always have an eye toward the access issues is important. There is a positive opportunity to engage a broader range of residents.

Q4: How has public space been central to our democracy and our country? How do we feel it is being recognized today in our planning patterns?

A: Elizabeth: Many early times of protest are activities that happened in the street, rather than in a specific space. The 1963 March on Washington with Martin Luther King Jr. and when people filled the mall in Washington is an example. It is intrinsic to our culture that we would build in these spaces for public discourse, but we don't really have them until recently. For example, the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York was

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in public access space, but it was privately owned. Public space is being used a forum for protests and for this type of conversation.

A: McClain Public spaces are necessary for this form of gathering. I was on the public city parks board at the time of Occupy Wall Street movement, and our board determined it was important to provide an accessible, open, and safe space for people day and night.

- Important to support the right to assembly and free speech through public spaces to ensure people are able to peacefully demonstrate and exercise democracy

Q5: Studies have shown increased pressure on working mothers during this time. How have you found time to carve out public space for families?

A: Lynn: We took the opportunity to use the city ordinance that allowed us to shut down the street to our house which allowed the neighborhood kids to be outside and active.

A: Ashley: Taking a user-centered approach to design is really important. A study in Vienna showed that the way that men, women, and children use parks is very different.

- There is need to take a careful look at how people perceive space and use space differently to adjust aspects such as paths, lighting, and amenities. These elements improve when you take a more user-centered approach.
- Thinking differently how we use our public space and streets is important.

A: McClain: I think it important that as we are reimagining these spaces as outlets and “new opportunities” for those who are working or educating their children from home for creative outlets ad getaways, and places to exercise and entertain ourselves and our children and gather with our friends, that we give considerable thought to how to blend these interests with the needs of the people who have traditionally utilized these spaces. Historically, it has been our low-income residents who have utilized these spaces, yet, parks and other public spaces in higher income areas receive the greatest capital investments. Everyone needs to feel welcome in these spaces, no matter where they are located. The variety of potential users need to be involved in their design. And new policies cannot forget those whose reliance on these spaces predated COVID-19 and will remain after the pandemic ends.

What we can do:

- (1) Public/private partnerships with ISPs, foundations, and the area municipalities around broadband infrastructure in parks and other public spaces will benefit everyone.... The City is working on an RFQ aimed at infrastructure projects that will narrow the digital divide in KCMO, and there is an effort underway to secure MARC’s involvement in making this a regional effort.
- (2) Involve representatives of the various potential end users in the design/re-design of these public spaces – young, old, rich, poor, homeless, disabled, those with kids and those without.
- (3) Ensure that these public spaces promote better health outcomes – mental and physical – for users and involve public health professionals in the design phase for their perspective.

Q6: How regularly is this data used by City Council as they consider policies and expenditures?

A: Kate Bender: This data is integrated into the budget process as well as the Citywide Business Planning process, which is a four-year operational and financial plan.

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The following questions were in the chat function and answered in this summary only.

Q1: As racial justice issues and COVID converge, how does this effect the design of the public realm? Is there a way to create more effective spaces for encouraging peaceful protest?

A: We are at a moment in time where we must take immediate action to rectify the inequity and injustice of our current built environment. Designers can leverage a data-driven approach at City Hall per Kate Bender's presentation which can directly inform policy, programs and services to experiment with the "use" of the public realm. Curbside services, open streets and businesses, rebalancing of streets for improved connectivity and safety, and a commitment to quality, human-centered design can all be tools in the reimagining of our public realm. We must prioritize improvements that serve the Triple Bottom Line (equity, environment and economy) while serving the most vulnerable during COVID, addressing public safety and wellness, and improving the future for Kansas City. Question 2: We have SO much public realm to share here in Kansas City that I can imagine many new spaces for civic gatherings, protests (even socially distanced), and overall community engagement across our city. We have many public buildings, parks, boulevards, streets and intersections that would benefit from a prioritization for quick transformation. Taking quick action, as we saw in Emily Breiter's presentation on Baltimore's Design for Distancing, has really shaped the narrative in cities during COVID. Change is inevitable. Design is an opportunity to define a vision of a happy, healthy future for all so we can work better together and make it a reality.

Q2: As our infrastructure is oriented to car traffic, how do you address creating connections to these spaces and making the city more accessible on a human scale?

A: We presented the street in several configurations to improve the mobility of people and goods -- which can work both locally and regionally. Many of these configurations, as we saw in Elizabeth Rosin's presentation, have withstood the test of time. The street, a significant portion of our shared assets, can most definitely be improved for all types of movement and activity as I shared today. However, "transportation" cannot be considered without factoring in land use (why the trip must be made in the first place). Therefore, I would argue for more "complete" neighborhoods as well -- ensuring that everyone has local, affordable access to the services they need to live a high quality of life and maximize short trips by active transportation. According to the National Household Travel Survey, 35 percent of vehicle trips are under 2 miles (2018) -- we can help eliminate these trips by supporting a more holistic approach to addressing neighborhood needs.

Q3: What efforts are being made to include students, both community college level and university level, in the innovations in public policy? Perhaps I should also include high school students in that last question.

A: Yes, there has been direct engagement with students around a variety of public policy issues. UMKC Law School, for example, has partnered with the City of Kansas City, MO on a variety of subjects, including smart cities and technology. High school students are also engaged (local Black Lives Matter protests, for example, have been organized by high school student leaders). I believe all age students would be welcome to participate in the KCMO comprehensive plan update process (check kcmo.org for more information). Of course, youth involvement should definitely be welcomed in multiple policy areas. Given some of the dire outlook I presented, I would suggest this is an "all hands on deck" opportunity to shape the KC of the future.

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AGENDA

Welcoming Remarks:

- **Sheri Gonzales**, Vice President, Civic Council of Greater Kansas City/Director, KC Rising

Facilitators:

- **Maria Maffry**, Principal/Chief Business Development Officer, BNIM
- **Dominique Davison**, Managing Principal/Founder, DRAW Architecture + urban design

Panel:

- **Elizabeth Rosin**, President/CEO, Rosin Preservation
- **Kate Bender**, Deputy Performance Officer, DataKC
- **Ashley Z. Hand**, Founding Partner, Cityfi
- **Emily Breiter**, Executive Director, Bromo Arts District & Downtown Partnership of Baltimore
- **Lynn Carlton**, Principal/Regional Leader of Planning, HOK
- **McClain Bryant Macklin**, Director, Policy & Strategic Initiatives, Health Forward Foundation

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For more information about the session or to continue the discussion, contact Meryl Dillman, Project Manager, KC Rising, at mdillman@kcciviccouncil.org. Or, visit kcglobaldesign.com.

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