



growing up!

Reshaping neighborhoods for NYC youth

mission

Growing Up: Reshaping Neighborhoods for NYC Youth offers neighborhood-based planning and design approaches that increase access and opportunities for play, discovery, social interaction, belonging, overall health and well-being for NYC youth.

Growing Up: Reshaping Neighborhoods for NYC Youth builds upon the work and engagement carried out in Phase I of the Free To Grow Forefront Fellowship, which focused on outdoor space for public schools, working alongside New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) and the Department of Health and Mental hygiene (DOHMH). As a Phase II capstone project of this fellowship, our team builds upon Phase 1 by applying a neighborhood lens to many of the same issues and questions: how to increase equitable access to nurturing outdoor space for youth to grow up physically healthy, mentally strong, in connected, sustainable, safe communities, and with autonomy and freedom.

This is an ongoing project that we collectively hope to expand on, which presents an opportunity for you as our audience to share ideas that we have not yet included in this work.

Please let us know what partnerships, interventions or stakeholders we are missing. Contact us at growingupforefront@gmail.com



Scan this QR code for more information



about the team



**Eduarda Aun | Program Manager
Global Designing Cities Initiative (GDCI)**

Eduarda is an urban designer from Brazil, currently working at the Global Designing Cities Initiative. Her work is centered on supporting cities globally to implement better streets for kids and their caregivers. Prior to GDCI, Eduarda worked at the NYC DOT and co-founded a non-profit advocating for public spaces in her hometown, Brasilia.



**Niyanta Muku | Associate Architect
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Niyanta graduated as an urban designer from School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi in 2014. Presently she is working with NYCSCA as an Associate Architect on Capital Improvement Projects. She has worked on international urban development projects while in India where she was overseeing the design development and project management.



**James Francisco | NYC Urban Design and Masterplanning Leader
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James is an urban designer passionate about transformative public spaces that encourage social connectivity, foster inclusivity, and meaningful interaction. He has had the honor of shaping NYC's urban environment; most notably creating a pedestrian-priority 'Vision for Broadway' in Manhattan and 'Reimagining the Brooklyn Bridge'.



**Rujuta Naringrekar | Landscape Designer
Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects**

Rujuta is a landscape designer at Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects. With a background in architecture and concern about the changing future, Rujuta believes that landscape architecture has the power to regenerate and transform the environment, bringing about positive change. Through her research and work, she aims to enhance the urban experience by building unique connections between communities and their context.



Stephany Lin | Vice President, U3 Advisors

Stephany is an urban planner focused on the roles of anchor institutions in communities. At U3 Advisors, Stephany works with universities, foundations, and nonprofits to advance mission-aligned real estate and community investments. With a background in education, she has helped form neighborhood- and school-based partnerships serving young people in our cities.



**Nasra Nimaga AIA, NOMA | Senior Associate & Architect
Perkins Eastman**

Born in Hong Kong, raised in Nairobi, Nasra is a K-12 design architect interested in the intersections of architecture, advocacy, and policy. These interests are shaped by her experiences as a third-culture transplant and the unwavering belief that architecture can and should improve the lives of people and all work should be approached with an openness to being self-critical and an awareness of its potential impacts.



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introduction

Why neighborhoods?

New York City's children and youth deserve spaces and opportunities to flourish. NYC, with all of its dynamism, creativity, and resources, should be unmatched as an enriching and nurturing place for children to grow up. Instead, young families with children are leaving the city at increasingly faster rates, driven by the daunting challenges of raising children here.¹ Facing population loss and fiscal pressures, the mayoral administration has proposed budget cuts to schools, libraries, and youth programs.

Instead, this is precisely the time to invest more in our children's well-being, in all facets of their experiences in the city and in their daily lives – from school, to home, to all the spaces in between. This is a call to center children and youth in our city by centering them at the scale that matters most: the neighborhood.

NYC Neighborhoods for Children & Youth

Through neighborhoods, children and youth grow up and experience the city. Neighborhoods are the setting for spaces where our kids learn, play, and interact with others: everywhere from schools to libraries, parks, streets, transit stations, stores, and businesses. As a child waits outside their school building to be picked-up by their caregiver, or as a pre-teen goes to the neighborhood grocery store on their own for the first time, or as teenage friends hang out at the local bodega after school, neighborhood spaces are the first places to shape how young people understand their selves in the wider world.

When they offer safe and accessible spaces for children and youth to play, hang out, and get around, neighborhoods encourage autonomy, physical activity, and social interaction. However, the city's neighborhoods and spaces are often deeply hostile to families and young people: from subway infrastructure that forces caregivers to haul strollers up long flights of stairs, to roads with speeding cars and traffic, to the no-loitering signs pervasive across businesses and building entryways. Neighborhood spaces also often exclude many types of young people: parks may offer playgrounds only for young children, for example, or lack social spaces for teenagers who do not gravitate towards sports. New York City neighborhoods also continue to suffer from massive inequitable disparities in the quality and health of their environments, from street tree plantings to neighborhood parks to school facility conditions. Without quality spaces and accessibility for all, especially our most vulnerable, neighborhoods can alienate their own children and youth.

This report offers neighborhood planning and design approaches that place children and youth at the center. **We recognize the power and agency of their own observations, experiences, and desires, and seek pathways to bring their visions to life.**



1. A June 2024 study found that households with young children make up 14% of NYC's population but 30% of those leaving. Source: <https://gothamist.com/news/young-families-are-fleeing-nyc-rising-child-care-and-housing-costs-are-to-blame>



Envisioning Neighborhood Spaces: Starting at the School

We apply a physical design lens to envision the system of neighborhood spaces themselves and the untapped opportunities between them. “Unlocking” these spaces must center youth voices, foster strong ties between key stakeholders, amplify existing successful programs and spaces, and deepen relationships within neighborhoods.

Our proposals stem from the school as a starting point for action. Within neighborhoods, schools serve as central hubs for children, youth, and community life. They mark the start and end points of students’ daily journeys through the city, whether they live in the same neighborhood as their school or go to school far away from home, as is the case for many of New York’s middle and high schoolers.

Moreover, as the largest portfolio of city-owned buildings dedicated to children, schools are the foremost sites for the City to impact its youth. Their scale, presence, and accessibility make them vital anchors for large-scale transformations in the community.

From the school, we extend out into the other spaces that comprise the neighborhood: the streets and sidewalks around the school, followed by the range of possible public and private neighborhood spaces. We also examine the streets and infrastructure facilitating movement across all these spaces. At each scale, we highlight and build on existing best practices, to underscore what the city should aspire for all neighborhoods, within each neighborhood’s unique contexts, communities, and history.

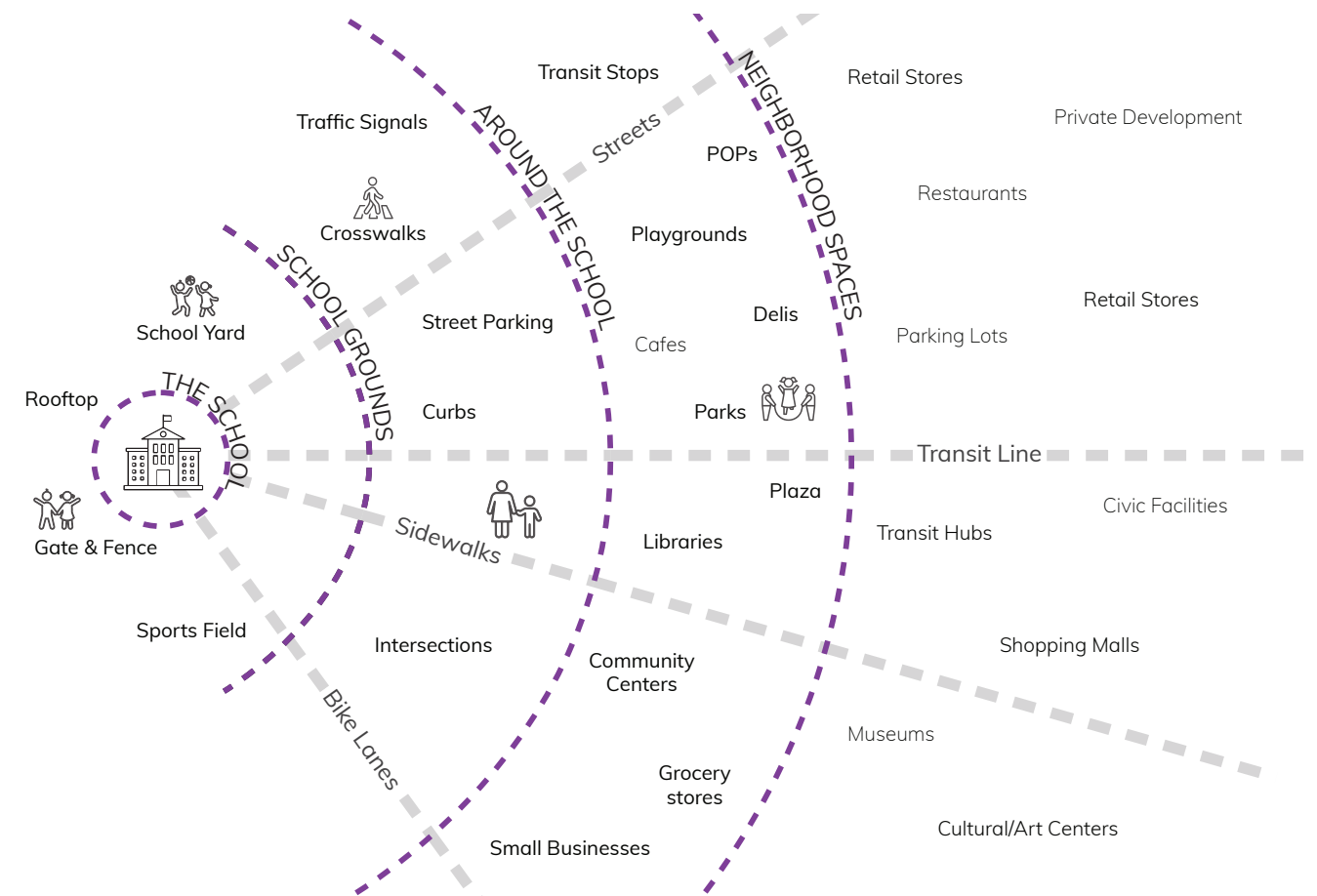


School Grounds

The school grounds are made up of internal spaces within the school building and external spaces for outdoor play and learning, such as rooftops, schoolyards and parking lots. This is often owned and operated by NYCPS, and constructed by NYCSCA.

Around the School

Around the school features streets, curbs and sidewalks that are directly adjacent to the school grounds. These spaces are often owned and operated by NYC DOT.



Neighborhood Spaces

The neighborhood spaces encompass forms of public spaces (parks, playgrounds, recreational centers, community gardens) and private spaces (businesses, restaurants, cafes, retail, malls, faith-based spaces) where youth spend their time.

Connecting Network

The connecting network are made up of transitional spaces which youth travel, such as streets, plazas and public transit. These spaces are owned and operated by a number of private entities and public agencies such as NYC DOT, NYCT, and MTA.

Towards Neighborhood Planning for NYC

Comprehensive planning and implementation of effective and sustainable interventions requires robust neighborhood planning systems. And yet, New York’s tools for consistent neighborhood planning are extremely limited. Moreover, not only do city agencies face limited capacity and resources across the large scale of NYC’s five boroughs, but the existing structures to work cross-sector across multiple agencies are limited and inconsistent. Community organizers, community-based organizations, and everyday neighborhood residents across New York also step in to advocate and provide for child and youth spaces, but here too they are strapped for resources, support, and capacity.

City agencies and community partners need new pathways to neighborhood planning and collaboration, in order to provide for intentional, well-connected spaces in neighborhoods that serve the full spectrum of child and youth needs. We propose three main citywide governance and policy priorities that foreground these collaborations, to amplify impact across agency silos, each with their own visions and tactical strategies:

- Systemize neighborhood planning for children and youth
- Create organizational infrastructure for NYCPS to proactively coordinate neighborhood-based initiatives
- Provide proactive, reliable funding streams for capital *and* maintenance

A Call To Action!

Our aim is to provide a blueprint for city leaders, agencies, designers, planners, community organizers, and anyone else who shapes the built environment to actively center children and youth in the long-term design and planning of our neighborhoods. **With the proposals that follow, we seek to inspire collective creativity, imagination, stewardship, and problem-solving.** To get started, we conclude with an invitation to launch a citywide, neighborhood-based NYC Day of Play, a day designated for everyone in the neighborhood to commit all-in to programming spaces for our kids.

We ask all New Yorkers to envision an NYC of neighborhoods that encourage youth to move and explore freely, through an ecosystem of spaces in their neighborhoods that support and consciously include them. Of course, the built environment alone will not solve the systemic challenges facing children and families in New York, not the least of which are the affordability crises in both housing and childcare. But we believe in the powerful impact of physical spaces to shape joyful, nurturing neighborhoods, that then shape the well-being of our city’s children.

We invite you to imagine with us: what could this NYC look like?



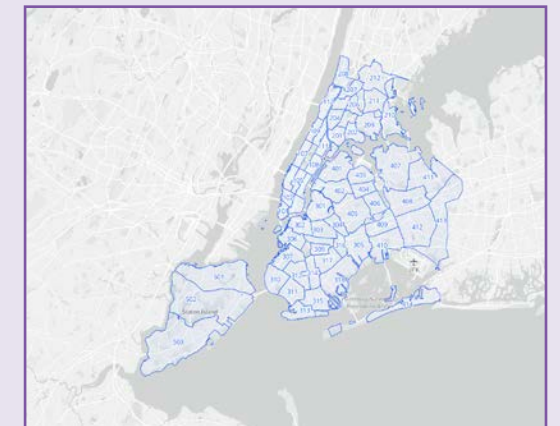
Definitions

Children & Youth

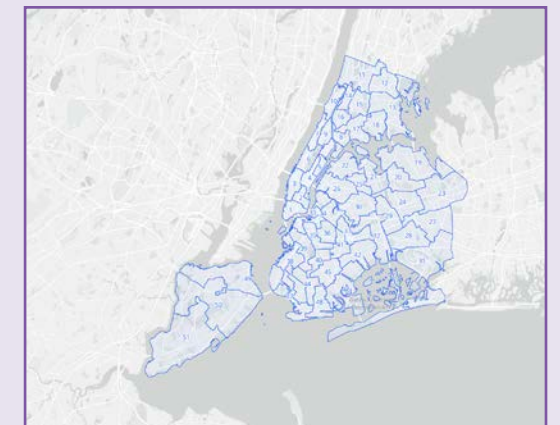
Generally speaking, “children” describes the age range between 5 and 14 years old, while “youth” describes the ages between 15 and 18 (or even up to 24). For the purpose of this project, we focus on children and youth defined as people under the age of 18, due to our focus on the experiences of students attending early childhood and K-12 schools in the city.

Neighborhoods & Administrative Districts

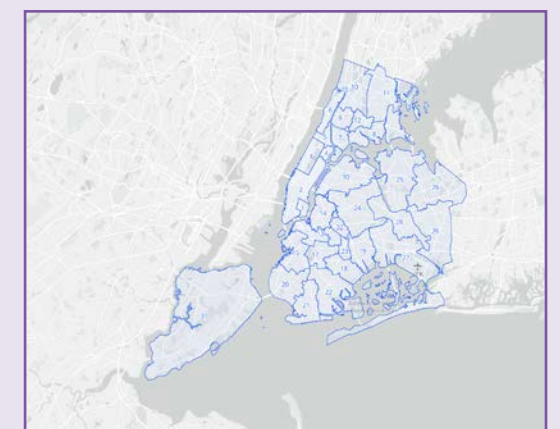
The concept of the “neighborhood” captures both the geography of the place itself and the people and community that relate together. Communities grow in neighborhoods while simultaneously defining – or redefining – them. In New York City, the City government does not publish an official city map of neighborhood borders, recognizing that neighborhood definitions are constantly evolving. Instead, the City maintains administrative district boundaries that may sometimes overlap with, or more often, encompass multiple community-defined neighborhoods. These administrative boundaries include the 59 Community Districts and 51 City Council districts. New York City Public Schools also operates 32 geographic school districts for PreK-8 schools.



Community Districts



City Council Districts



School Districts



guiding questions

- What defines quality, comprehensive youth spaces?
- How can we center children in shaping our built environments and address their needs?
- How do young people envision freedom and belonging in their neighborhoods?
- Who should be responsible for tracking and championing quality and comprehensiveness across our neighborhoods?
- What are the main city agencies responsible for key opportunity areas?
- How can neighborhood thinking leverage – or shift – agency resources and optimize their collective power?
- How can or should city agencies mitigate risks or inequities of a neighborhood approach?
- What opportunities emerge from neighborhood coordination?



Understanding NYC Neighborhoods



start by listening!

Our Engagement Process

Our project was guided by the insights gained from conversations and workshops with various city agency representatives, community-based organizations, and youth themselves.

Community-based organizations

Community-based organizations in neighborhoods across NYC play an essential role for youth by offering youth programming and activating spaces – in schools, after school and during school breaks, in nonprofit spaces, and in private spaces within neighborhoods. Community-based organizations are thus critical to the neighborhood ecosystem, and their insights and input were crucial. To understand the breadth and variety of their programming, their observations of children and youth, and their perspectives on impact at the neighborhood scale, we spoke with the following youth and community-based organizations:



Kinship Climbing Collective, a volunteer-run after-school climbing program



Equity Design Inc, an organization focused on promoting physical activity in underserved communities

The 34th Avenue Open Streets Coalition (Jackson Heights, Queens) was formed to organize and program around the 34th Avenue NYC DOT's Open Streets Program.

PowerPlay (citywide) focuses on female empowerment through sports. They offer programming focused on teaching girls fundamental skills through sports.

School Without Walls (citywide) is an NYCPS high school centered on project-based, real-world learning, incorporating in-person, remote, and independent learning

Teens for Food Justice (multiple neighborhoods) leads school-based, youth-led hydroponic farming programs, providing local, sustainably-grown produce to food desert communities and building health, education and opportunity equity.

NYC Bike Bus (multiple neighborhoods) is a volunteer-led effort organizing safe ways for children and families to get to and from school following set "bike bus" routes and timetables.

WhedCO (South Bronx) is a community development organization that creates and bridges access to resources, including high-quality early education and after-school programming, and other programming around healthy food, culture, and economic opportunity.

YES Loitering! by Chat Travieso (South Bronx) is a public space and safety youth initiative developed in collaboration with a team of Bronx teens, investigating the exclusion and targeting of youth in public spaces and developing ideas on how to create more youth-powered spaces.

The Resilience, Education, Training and Innovation Center (RETI) (Red Hook, Brooklyn) educates, trains, and collaborates with local youth, schools, and community members to reimagine the city and restore the environment.

Edible School Yards (multiple neighborhoods) partners with public schools to provide students with first-hand experience in gardening and food education.



Workshop with community-based organizations



key takeaways

QUESTIONS WE ASKED-CBO's

- 1 What neighborhood spaces have the potential to become youth-friendly? What are some untapped opportunities in our neighborhoods?
- 2 For these spaces and neighborhoods, what are some of the challenges and opportunities to making them more youth-friendly?
- 3 Who can make change happen? Who is missing from this discussion?

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND CONCERNS



Better collaboration between school and CBO's



Limited access to public spaces



Build unique relationships with students/youth



CBO's are overburdened and under-resourced

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



Inequitable access to space/transit/safety



Neighborhood spaces to be welcoming



Overstructured/formalized schedules - no free time

School partnerships & space

Many schools rely on community partners for after-school, summer, and co-curricular programs that expand opportunities for students and can activate school spaces in unique ways. Edible School Yards, for example, has partnered with schools in Brooklyn and Harlem to build and maintain verdant school gardens, tied to a robust food education program, that transform former asphalt lots. Or the Community League of The Heights (CLOTH), as a partner community organization to a neighborhood middle/high school, operates the school's Open Streets programming during school hours. However, information on spaces accessible to community organizations is not easily available.

Relationship-building with children & youth

These organizations develop deep knowledge of their communities and the children and youth they serve. Because they typically work with children and youth in less rigid settings than the classroom, community organizations offer programming that allow kids to explore differently than they might during the typical school day. Additionally, staff at these youth organizations build unique relationships with their children and youth, from engaging with them in those transitional environments between the school and the neighborhood.

Lack of capacity & resources

Community-based organizations and initiatives, often volunteer-led and -run, are overburdened and under-resourced. For example, for many activities involving children and youth, organizations need insurance and oversight to manage liability risks, but the costs can be daunting, especially when efforts are led by small organizations without support from city agencies and / or others.

More collaboration could help increase support and resources. Youth-serving organizations do not often have the opportunity to work together,

especially across sectors (such as STEM-based vs. sports-based organizations). More collaboration could amplify a youth-centered agenda and advocacy for resources.

Based on the organizations' experience with children and youth, they observed opportunities and challenges including:

- The youth they work with have highly structured schedules. Between school, programs and formalized activities, jobs, and homework, youth have little free time, including free time to just be together.
- For many of NYC's youth with packed schedules, their only time outdoors is spent on their journeys to and from school, in transitory experiences.
- Transportation equity, including street and neighborhood safety, is still critically lagging - and necessary to address spatial equity for children and youth.
- Neighborhood spaces have immense potential to be more welcoming to youth, everywhere from stores and malls, to delis and restaurants, to community gardens and parks, to the subway and buses.

Youth Engagement

Most importantly, we leaned on the observations and insights from children and youth directly. Throughout the 9 months of the Forefront Fellowship, children and youth shared their thoughts, experiences, and ideas through hands-on workshops and discussions. We spoke to kids of different ages, ranging from 6-year-old children to 17-year-old teenagers, and from different NYC neighborhoods. We thank the youth organizations that hosted us for workshops: the Police Athletic League Wynn Center (Brooklyn), PowerPlay! (Manhattan), Kinship Climbing Collective (Queens), WHEDCo (Bronx) and School without Walls (Manhattan).

We recognize this is not an exhaustive representation of all children and youth in New York, like younger children or those from the most vulnerable and sensitive groups. We also were not able to engage families, caregivers, and educators in a robust way, due to the timeframe of this project. More engagement is always needed, even more so at a specific neighborhood level.

Moreover, neighborhood-based work should go beyond engagement to recognize youth's agency to shape their neighborhoods. Visioning workshops like these are only a start; young people are energized, engaged, and deeply creative if given the opportunity to speak and design for themselves and for others.

Of course, children and youth are not all the same! Not all young people are the same, and they do not necessarily want the same thing. They all experience their neighborhoods differently, between the range of neighborhoods across New York and their individual relationships to their neighborhoods. And of course, toddlers need different spaces from pre-teens, who need different spaces from teens, alongside the different experiences and needs between genders and backgrounds. Nevertheless, we draw some common themes from across the youth we heard from.



Workshop with high-school students at School without Walls, Manhattan



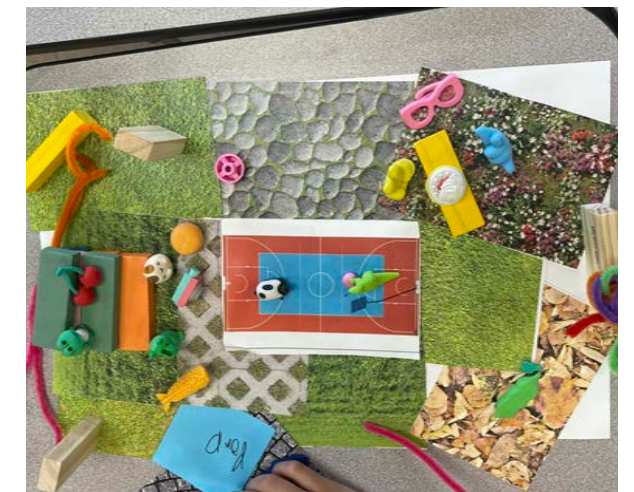
Workshop at PAL Wynn Center, Brooklyn



Envisioning public spaces with girls at PowerPlay!, Manhattan



Student's reflection about his neighborhood at WHEDCo, Bronx



Ideas for public spaces with middle-school students at WHEDCo, Bronx, with places for sports and picnics



Public spaces envisioned for teenagers from School without Walls high-school students, where they can play and "just be kids again", as one of the students said.



A collage of an exclusive space or "a teen island" (as the high schoolers named it) which would have photo booths, waterbodies, rides, playgrounds.

key takeaways

QUESTIONS WE ASKED-Youth

- 1 Draw/Describe the different outdoor spaces you go to every-day. What do you like/dislike about these spaces?
- 2 Imagine & build a place that would be fun for you to be outside, that makes you feel happy and safe
- 3 How can outdoor play spaces like parks/playgrounds be designed to be more friendly and accessible?

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND CONCERNS



OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



Space to hang out

Youth, and teens in particular, described enjoying spending time with friends walking and hanging out after school in neighborhood spaces immediately around the school, like cafes, bodegas, plazas and parks, where it is cheap or free to hang out. Especially during high school, many of New York's students tend to live far from the school they attend, and so the neighborhood around the school becomes the only place they have to spend free time with schoolmates and form friendships outside of rigid schedules during school. These teens want spaces that are intentionally designed for them to hang out with their friends and peers.

PLAY! & physical activity at all ages

In our workshops, children and youth all sought more play in their daily lives and spaces. (Many of them also complained about the amount of time their friends spend inside on screens) While playgrounds in neighborhood parks typically serve younger children, older children, youth, and teens all still want to play in some form and be active - whether through playgrounds and play structures designed for older kids, or sports and games on a park field. For example, one high schooler lamented that even when she can get a friend to come to the local park with her, all there is to do is walk loops of the park, when instead she wants to be able to play on the playground

like kids again (which is too crowded from actual young kids), or drop in on sports games or use sports gear that the park would have available for them.

Surveillance & safety

Places like cafes and bodegas are often the only option for youth and teens seeking somewhere to go. However, among our teenage participants in particular, they expressed a frequent sense of feeling unwanted and surveilled by adults, tourists, and the police, which heightens the feeling that they do not belong and are not supposed to be there. Additionally, girls we spoke to described occasions where they have felt unsafe outside, along with pressures from family or peers about safety that limits their freedom to move around the neighborhood and city independently.

Nature, beauty, and well-being

When visualizing the types of spaces they want in their lives, the youth in our workshops had clear visions for colorful, joyful spaces, surrounded by greenery, plants and flowers, and water. They were highly aware of issues around air pollution, trash, and the environment in their neighborhoods, and envisioned these youth-centered spaces as respites.

Neighborhood care and concerns

Youth growing up in NYC neighborhoods are highly aware of neighborhood-wide issues that affect all: affordability, gentrification, safety, and environmental justice. Several shared concerns about gentrification and displacement in their neighborhoods, or about affording lunch or subway fares, recognizing the systemic inequities pervasive across the city.



City Agencies

To understand opportunities and challenges, our team met with representatives from a range of NYC agencies overseeing the types of spaces raised in discussion with youth and youth organizations. Our discussions focused on the current role of neighborhood-based thinking and missing opportunities to centralize assessment and coordination of neighborhood youth spaces. Agencies included:

- NYC Public Schools (NYCPS)
- NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH)
- NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks)
- NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS)
- NYC Department of Transportation (DOT)

Additionally, multiple members of this team have direct experience with the School Construction Authority (SCA), both working within and for the SCA.

We recognize other important and relevant agencies and government entities that we did not interview during the timing of this project include:

- Department of City Planning (DCP)
- Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD)
- Department of Sanitation (DSNY)
- Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA)
- Mayor's office (including the newly-appointed Chief Public Realm Officer)
- Community board representatives
- City Council representatives



Photo: Urban Design Forum

key takeaways

Lack of cross-agency, neighborhood-based planning

New York City does not conduct regular, consistent neighborhood planning; generally, the City conducts neighborhood plans in advance of a targeted rezoning. Instead, each agency tends to develop their own plans and priorities, resulting in agency-specific assessments of particular neighborhoods to prioritize for capital projects, such as the Parks Department's analysis of neighborhoods with less open space and higher socioeconomic needs, or DOT's analysis for Priority Investment Areas based on neighborhood need and lack of prior investment. These are important and laudable programs, and consistently we heard that the agencies are prioritizing more vulnerable neighborhoods who have historically received less investment. However, comprehensive, coordinated neighborhood investments are lacking.

Existing cross-agency initiatives

Where cross-agency, youth-related initiatives exist, they are often centered around a single space or area (such as a single park design, a single Schools and Parks joint-operated park, or a single play street) rather than neighborhood-wide assessment of needs and joint opportunities. Even understanding which agencies own, operate, maintain, or approve which spaces can be frustratingly difficult, between NYCPS, SCA, Parks, DOT, DSNY, etc.

Capacity and scale challenges

These initiatives also operate with limited scale and resources, with sometimes burdensome application and coordination requirements.

NYC Public Schools role and challenges

Current examples of these challenges are clearest in relation to schools. With 1,300 highly unique school buildings (some housing multiple schools) across NYC, developing systems and capacity across multiple agencies to improve spaces around the schools is an extraordinary challenge. Despite operating those 1,300 buildings – the largest portfolio of city buildings focused on children – NYC Public Schools does not yet have robust organizational infrastructures to proactively lead on what the spaces around the schools should look like.

This hampers a department-wide vision and priorities for how schools should engage with their neighborhood environments.

For example, DOT maintains a School Safety Unit team that advances planning for streets around schools, but it lacks a counterpart dedicated team at NYC Public Schools to direct portfolio-wide priorities or to help align with individual school principals. Instead, individual principals and school staff take on the initiative to, for example, submit for a DOT review of the streets around their schools, much like a typical neighborhood resident would.

As another example, schools must find outdoor play space to meet recess and physical education requirements, resulting in solutions unique to each school building, depending on whether they have their own outdoor space on school property or, alternatively, maintain an operating agreement with Parks spaces nearby. Some school principals are not even aware of access they may have to these Jointly Operated Playgrounds (JOP). Because of the case-by-case nature of these arrangements, much of the burden for these efforts fall on the school principal, who does not have the capacity or expertise to manage across agencies. School principals also have to directly manage operations and budgets to open their schoolyards publicly to the community outside of school hours – a common reason why some principals are hesitant to participate in Schoolyards to Playgrounds or other similar programs that expand schoolyard access to the public.

Without cross-agency infrastructure and neighborhood planning, schools are ill-equipped to engage – and help their students engage – with the neighborhood spaces and systems outside of their school building's walls. And, most importantly, youth voices become even more shut out from planning and decision-making, without a platform to share their experiences and needs in the neighborhoods they grow and learn in.

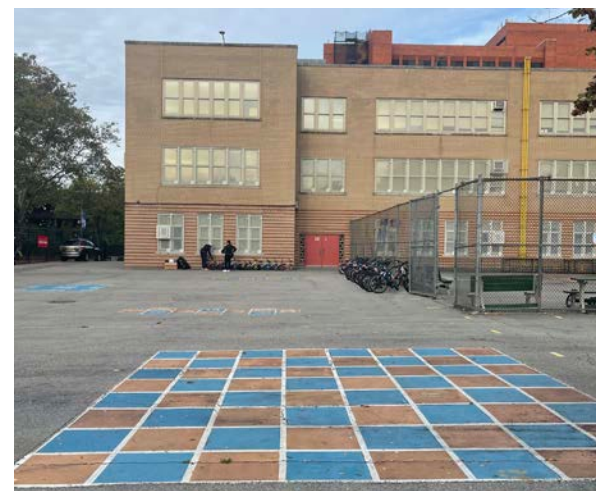
Challenges of Growing Up in NYC neighborhoods

As we heard from stakeholders and youth themselves, major cross-cutting themes emerged on the challenges facing children and youth in the city's built environment. Distilled from what we heard and learned, the three challenges below guide this project's vision for changing the future of neighborhood planning and design.



Youth-friendliness of neighborhoods is inequitable.

Access to nurturing spaces to grow, learn, play, and thrive is inequitable. The quality of neighborhood spaces from parks to shaded green streets, or the investments made to individual schools through private dollars and PTA funding, are increasingly tied to socioeconomic status, disproportionately impacting the health and well-being of underserved children and youth. Moreover, treatment of children and youth themselves is inequitable; children's voices are rarely centered in discussions that shape the spaces they inhabit.



The City is hostile to young people.

At all ages, children and youth face hostile environments across the city. For young children, their caregivers must navigate challenging infrastructure and limited space, not to mention overwhelming costs. Youth and teens, on the other end, are too loud for public spaces, too rowdy for private businesses, and too old for children's playgrounds. Teenage girls have few spaces available where they feel they can socialize safely, whereas teenagers of all genders face distinct risks of surveillance, harassment, and threats to their safety.



Photo: Yes Loitering



Youth lack time and space to just be kids

Increasingly in NYC and beyond, children and youth's day-to-day experiences have been reduced to home, school, and packed after-school schedules, for those with access and resources. Our kids' lives have become overscheduled and over-structured. Combined with perceptions of safety issues and mistrust of youth, communities over-program kids in spaces deemed safe, through activities that are supervised and considered productive.

The issue therefore becomes not only a lack of space that is accessible and affordable for children and youth to belong, but also a lack of time to do so. Where can kids today be curious, be creative, be present? Where can they experience boredom that turns into exploration, attention, and creativity? Where can they do all of this with friends, in community?



Neighborhoods are the scale to start tackling how we provide and design environments that nurture children and youth. At the neighborhood level, we can foster a culture of child- and youth-friendliness for all ages, as well as a physical standard for design and maintenance. Across neighborhood streets and neighborhood spaces, we can also shape those transitory experiences in between youth's programmed activities, to intervene and provide space for them to exist and explore freely. And within every neighborhood, schools anchor children's and youth's daily experiences and their broader communities as community assets.



Strategies & Interventions



To tackle these broad issues, we offer a two-pronged approach to envisioning neighborhood change for children and youth:

- A set of physical design interventions to spark reimagining the system of neighborhood spaces and the untapped opportunities within them
- Implementation pathways that align and strengthen collaboration across city agencies and other neighborhood stakeholders.

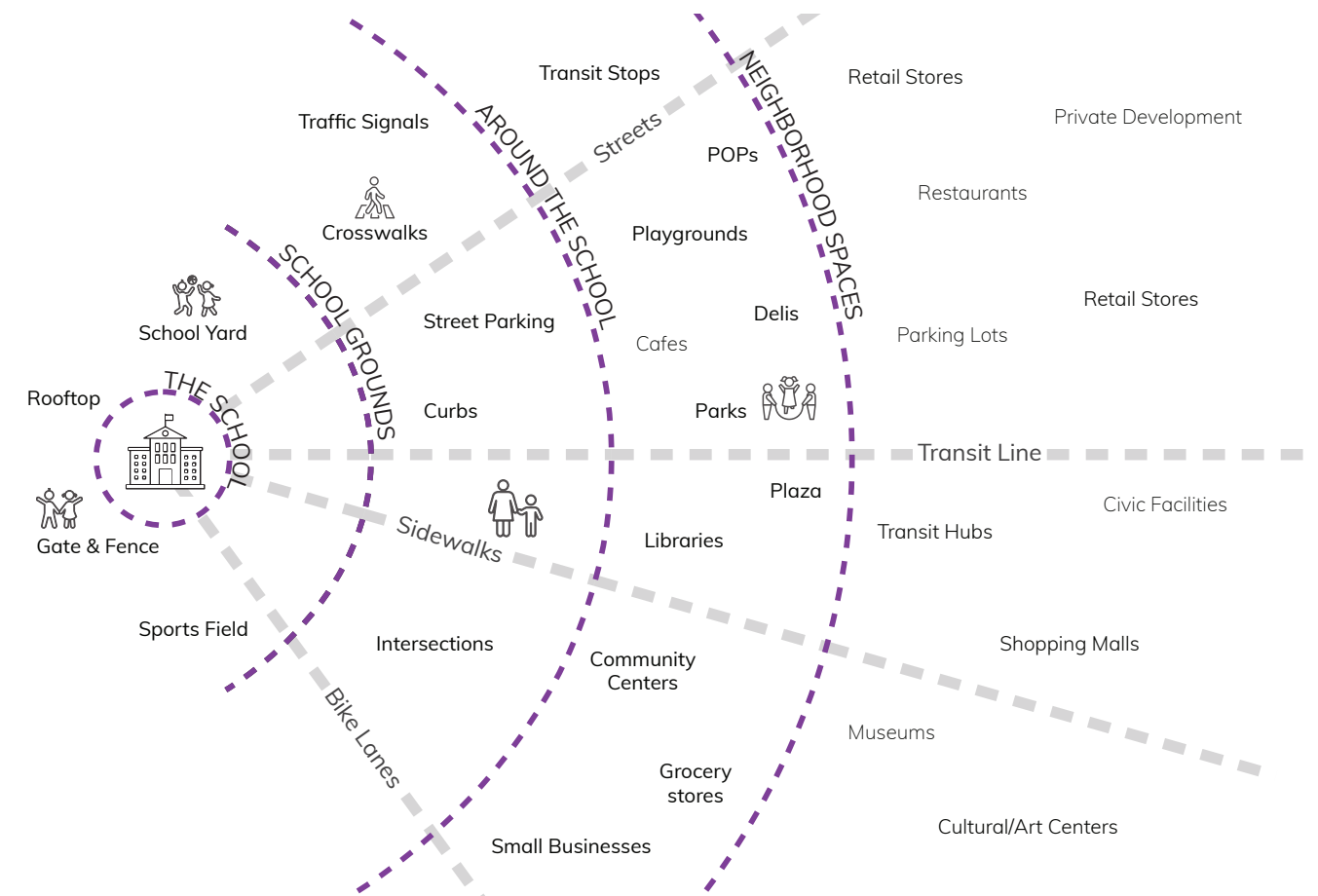
Ultimately, we seek *systems changes* that can enable and advance the design of neighborhood spaces that shape kids' everyday lives. Currently, the creation and maintenance of spaces for youth to thrive disproportionately leans on the investments and efforts of already overburdened persons - teachers, school administrators, parents, community organizers, and neighborhood volunteers. Changes at the systems level, both physically designed systems of spaces as well as systems of governance, policy, and funding, help shift the city from one-off initiatives towards high-quality standards and resources that reach all neighborhoods.

design interventions

The following design interventions can serve as a starting point for city agencies and representatives to anchor collaborative efforts, as well as for neighborhood champions – students and student clubs, school leaders, neighborhood youth organizations – to identify the untapped opportunity spaces in their neighborhoods.

These interventions include both new or nascent proposals as well as existing City programs that could be expanded into larger capital planning and design systems. They are by no means comprehensive, especially for as large and diverse a city as ours. They do, however, present collaborative processes, interdisciplinary perspectives, and pathways for systems-level changes, that together spark collective imagination on impact across a neighborhood.

Our proposal addresses four types of spaces children and youth experience that comprise the neighborhood, starting from the school: (1) the School Grounds (2) Around the School (3) Neighborhood Spaces, and lastly interventions to (4) the Connecting Network.



School Grounds

Schools serve as our starting point for action. Within neighborhoods, schools serve as central hubs for children, youth, and community life. They mark the start and end points of students' daily journeys through the city, whether they live in the same neighborhood as their school or go to school far away from home. Here, we look at interventions within the parcel of land operated by the school administration, focused on the potential for spaces beyond the school building's walls to expand outdoor recreation and learning, as well as to provide a welcoming "front door" to the neighborhood. We focus on three types of underutilized spaces in particular: *school rooftops, school yards, and parking lot conversions*. The key partners for these, in addition to the school administration and community, are NYC Public Schools (NYCPS), NYC School Construction Authority (SCA), and the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks).

Around the School

From the school grounds, the immediate, adjacent surrounding blocks signal the transition between the neighborhood and the school. These key streets, curbs, and sidewalks should signal child-friendliness and safety, as safe streets for play and gathering beyond road safety to promote a welcoming public realm. Design changes include enhancements to the vehicular right-of-way, curb management and regulations, sidewalks and amenities, and intersectional signals and crossings. In addition to school administration and community, the key partners for these interventions are NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Parks Department.

Neighborhood Spaces for Youth & Children

Between the school and home, children and youth grow up through formative experiences in public and private spaces in between. We focus on *parks, retail & small businesses, and private development incentives*, leveraging public spaces and services from DOT and Parks, as well as agencies that incentivize and nudge the private sector, the NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and NYC Department of City Planning (DCP).

The Connecting Network

Lastly, broader transportation interventions connect the broad web of children and youth infrastructure. These proposals encompass a multi-modal approach to travel with children, youth, and families in order to support equitable access, safe travel journeys, and foster child-autonomy. In addition to the school administration and community, key partners are DOT and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA).



Design to welcome youth & incentivise youth programs

Pedestrianize some streets

Parking Lot Conversion

Intergenerational Parks of Belonging

Spaces & features for every age

Family Friendly Bike infrastructure

Design for Movement & Play

School Yards: for Play, Health, Resilience & Community Use

Reclaim spaces from cars for play & gathering

Connect to Youth

Incorporate trees & Green Infrastructure

Activate under utilized spaces

Make Transit Affordable & Fun + Invest in Bike Bus Routes

School Rooftops for play

Reclaim parking spots & activate front of schools

Program youth centered Plazas



School Grounds



In a city bursting at the seams, where many kids do not have access to outdoor play areas, maximizing school spaces for outdoor play and learning is essential for student growth – during, before, and after school hours. Moreover, school grounds can be valuable resources for the community at large after school and on weekends. However, like much of the city’s aging infrastructure, most school buildings were not designed to maximize outdoor access or provide quality open space for children and youth. We explore interventions for three main types of spaces:

- **School rooftops** offer a significant amount of potential space, but are rarely used for anything beyond mechanical equipment
- **School yards**, where available, are typically minimally designed with hard asphalt surfaces, which are easy to maintain but create harsh, exposed environments.
- **Parking lots**, where available, are the predominant use of non-permeable paved surfaces and also occupy significant areas that could be repurposed for student-oriented uses.

School Rooftops: Technical Strategies to Open Rooftops for Play



For new, ground-up schools, up-front planning and design of the school facility needs to structurally engineer rooftops to support 'live loads' to accommodate play activities, and 'dead loads' such as fencing, amenity, and greening that enhances play. Access to rooftops should go beyond Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance and provide equitable access to all students of all ages.

For renovations of existing school facilities, mechanical upgrades and creative solutions are needed to provide play space on roofs, such as relocating or spatially consolidating mechanical equipment.

Other design considerations include mitigating sound to neighbors through acoustic and visual barriers, and balancing rooftop real estate to accommodate substantial roof areas for solar panels.

School Yards: Maximize Design for Play, Health, and Sustainability



Schoolyard designs are prime opportunities for students to drive the design and engagement process. The design process should also engage school teachers and staff and seek advice from experts in neurodivergence and designing for disability.

The designs themselves should incorporate more softscape and creative playscapes, use different materials beyond tar hardscape, and create different zones for different types and ages of children and youth, such as nature play versus sports courts, or playground games versus quiet, shaded areas for respite.

Particularly given the large areas they occupy, the designs should mitigate neighborhood environmental hazards, such as by reducing impermeable surfaces, incorporating stormwater mitigation, creating passive cooling, and addressing noise pollution.

Existing pathways for schoolyard renovations include Parks' [Schoolyards to Playgrounds](#) program in partnership with NYCPS (described below), SCA renovation projects, and nonprofits like Trust for Public Lands and its [Community Schoolyards](#) transformation program.

School Yards: Increase Community Access

Parks works with NYCPS and individual schools participating in the [Schoolyards to Playgrounds](#) program to implement improvements, such as sports courts, play equipment, and seating, upon which schools open the yards to the public during non-school hours. This program, or similar programs run through SCA or with nonprofit partners, should be established as the goal for all schools with a schoolyard, to quickly expand access to outdoor space across neighborhoods.

While Schoolyard to Playground participating schools do receive additional operating funding, funding needs to be expanded to adequately relieve school principals and staff of the extra associated costs and labor, such as paying for maintenance staff after public hours.

Additionally, schools should build on partnerships with community based organizations to bolster programming of the outdoor spaces and allow year-round use of these spaces.



PS 71 – Juan Morel Campos Schoolyard

Support Long-Term Outdoor Space Maintenance

Operating and maintenance of more complex, greener schoolyards can be daunting, including costs, labor, and technical skills to keep them flourishing. Schools and agencies should work with landscape architects to identify local species of greenery that will flourish and require less maintenance. Support for greening existing hardscapes and adding stormwater mitigation could potentially come from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

Additional ideas for creative collaborations to support maintenance are addressed in the final section on neighborhood planning.

Parking Lots: Create New School Yards and Spaces

To create more school yards and other types of spaces, NYCPS should critically examine cases where schools have on-site surface parking lots. Converting lots to open, green space can transform the school and create a more vibrant, community-oriented space facing the neighborhood.

NYCPS should conduct parking studies to understand the accurate parking needed – often overestimated – to support the day-to-day function of the school. Once parking needs are accurately identified, NYCPS should promote incentives like transportation subsidies that help school staff take alternative modes of transportation, such as transit, carpools, or cycling. To accommodate parking needs, where possible, NYCPS could aim to work with other agencies like the Department of City Planning and Department of Transportation to identify if other nearby garages or lots have excess capacity, to arrange a parking agreement for a school or a set of schools within a neighborhood. Parking agreements should map out funding subsidies and ensure that teachers and staff will not be financially impacted. Lastly, staff should be included in discussions and strategies for transportation solutions, to build buy-in.



Converted parking lot into Edible Schoolyard, Brooklyn

POLICY & GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS:

- Overall, existing guidelines for new ground-up and renovated schools and schoolyards should be updated with the NYC School Construction Authority.
- These capital projects should also be tied to increased, sustained operating funding for the school to conduct ongoing maintenance of improved and accessible outdoor spaces.
- The City should also increase support for public access agreements involving school outdoor space, and set programs like Schoolyards to Playgrounds as the standard goal for all schools to achieve.



Photo: Street Lab

Around the school: streets for play and gathering



Streets around schools are dynamic spaces that experience an intense flow of young pedestrians, condensed into short periods, during the start and the end of the school day. The mix of people - including students, caregivers, school staff, school bus drivers, among others - and the activities and interactions that take place in these streets distinguish them from other streets in a neighborhood. If well-designed, these are spaces where kids, youth, families and the school community can play, rest, and connect. However, sidewalks are often narrow with little to no space or street furniture for them to pause, spend time, and hang out in these spaces.



Design beyond road safety: to movement and play

Protecting students from fast-moving cars is of the highest importance, but interventions should also go beyond traffic calming and preventing crashes. Making streets slower enables kids and families to safely move, play and gather outside of schools. To achieve this requires improving the public realm. The City should expand the [DOT School Safety](#) program beyond safety improvements to incorporate other design elements, such as seating and bike infrastructure, to create welcoming school environments for kids of all ages and abilities.

Reclaim space from cars for play and gathering



Street seats outside of Parsons School of Design, designed by students

At intersections that can be redesigned or other underutilized street spaces, DOT could also leverage [Plaza Program](#) to create and program plazas in partnership with the schools. Youth-centered street furniture would increase spaces available for community events, school recess and outdoor learning. These spaces could also be activated by agreements with community-based organizations, and street vendors to provide affordable lunch options for teenagers.

DOT can reclaim street parking spots near schools through its [Street Seats](#) program, but with a focus on youth and schools. This means seating could be designed with youth and for youth, incorporating fun elements for socializing, play and physical activity, free wifi, photo booth, among others.



Incorporate trees and green infrastructure

New York is becoming increasingly hot, and schools are not prepared for the heat, nor equipped for extreme weather events such as heat waves or flooding. In partnership with NYC Parks and DEP, streets around schools should be prioritized for new tree plantings to provide shade and improve microclimates. Parks and DEP's green infrastructure program could also work with schools to make school surroundings more absorbent of rainwater, while creating learning opportunities for youth.



Pedestrianize streets when possible

Some schools lack gyms or their own outdoor space, so streets may be their closest option for recess and physical education, if closed to cars. DOT's [Open Streets](#) program designates streets outside of participating schools as restricted to vehicles through school hours, targeted at pick-up, drop-off, recess, and outdoor learning. The program expanded as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic needs, but resources and capacities to sustain the program are strained at participating schools. Today, just 31 schools are listed as participating in this Open Streets program.



POLICY & GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS:

- Agencies including NYCPS, DOT, and Parks should systematically review the immediate streets and sidewalks surrounding school properties.
- DOT's review criteria should expand from pedestrian safety to also encompass principles of child and youth movement and play.



Intergenerational Parks of Belonging



Parks are the next major portfolio of neighborhood-based properties with a child and youth focus – where children and families meet others in the neighborhood, and where many children start independent explorations. Throughout our engagements, we heard repeatedly that children and youth – including teens – want opportunities for different types of play, but NYC parks rarely offer this full range. Standard playground layouts and designs serve only a young age group, without deliberate spaces for teens, young adults, or older caregivers.

Moreover, on a neighborhood and citywide level, park access is still unevenly and inequitably distributed across neighborhoods. The Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks) has been reducing park access disparities through initiatives like [Walk to a Park](#), planning park construction and improvement projects for neighborhoods with less open space or no parks within walking distance. Beyond park access alone, however, how do we expand access to park spaces designed for particular children and youth? If an older child or a teenager lives within walking distance of a park that serves only younger children, then their neighborhood is not providing open space for *them*.

Strengthening School & Parks Connections

Parks' Schoolyard to Playground program, described above, is one example of a Parks and NYCPS partnership to maximize access to open space. Other examples of Parks and NYCPS partnerships include Jointly Operated Playgrounds (JOPs): Parks properties that share operations with adjacent schools. Increasing agency capacity and resources to manage and improve these shared spaces directly helps expand the availability of open space in a neighborhood.



Actively Foreground Children & Youth in Park Process

Park design processes must engage the local community, and especially children, teens, and young adults, building on the neighborhood engagement and research that the Parks Department already conducts. This starts with community collaboration in evaluating existing parks for their usage, offerings, and relevance to the neighborhood demographics, and extends to involving community in the design and decision-making process.

Design Spaces and Features for All Ages

Play areas, recreation spaces, and equipment that support outdoor play and learning should be designed with consideration for all ages and genders. Designers must consider that different ages, for example, have different physical abilities; older kids will want play structures suitable for larger bodies. Different genders also trend to particular sports, and so a variety of sports areas are still needed. Adult caregivers also need comfortable spaces to relax, or adults passing by need a quick, quiet place to sit before continuing on through the neighborhood. Designing park "zones" as a series of multi-purpose "rooms" can offer distinct experiences for each type of visitor.

Track Age-Appropriate Spaces

The City should track the target age groups served across its parks, to evaluate not just the availability of a park in a neighborhood, but whether that neighborhood offers open space for toddlers versus open space for teenagers. A [2019 report from the Comptroller's Office](#) similarly recommended that the Parks Department classifies, tracks, and communicates the target age of its facilities, to then identify gaps in age-appropriate facilities. This classification and inventory system should include partnership spaces like Schoolyards to Playgrounds and even DOT Open Streets and plaza programs.

POLICY & GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

- The City should commit greater support – including both capital and operating funding – for partnerships across agencies that expand public space access relatively quickly, such as the Schoolyard to Playground program
- NYC Parks should expand toolkits specific to ages, genders, and abilities, and make sure to collaborate with other public space-providing agencies to share these resources and best practices.



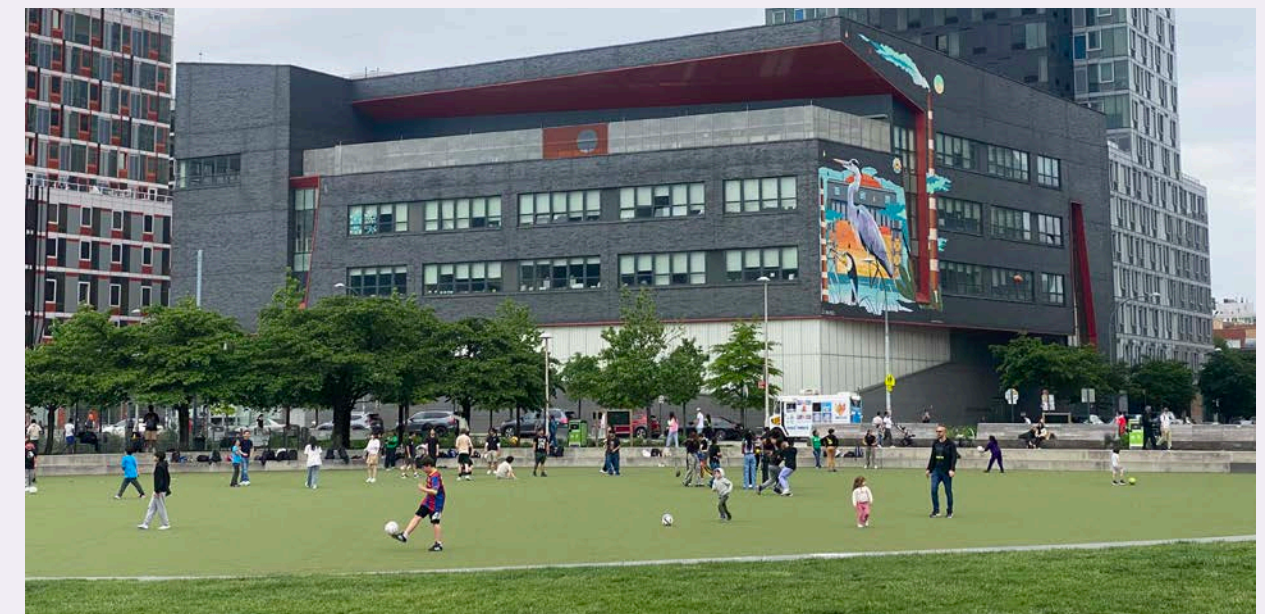
Photo: Street Lab



Lower East Side Coleman Skatepark, Manhattan



The RockyRollers Park, Manhattan



Gantry Plaza State Park, Queens



Photo: Bloomberg

Retail and Small Businesses



Local small businesses are necessary third spaces for youth and teens to hang out after school, especially in a city where most live in small apartments and where teens often live in different neighborhoods far from their schools. Yet businesses (including malls, most famously) often struggle or refuse to welcome teens. Many NYC businesses that work with the Department of Small Business Services (SBS), for example, complain about behavior issues, destroyed property, etc., and lack of support or resources to manage these issues. On the other hand, some businesses also say they welcome teens, along with the new customer bases and social media exposure that they can bring.

The Department of Small Business Services, in particular their [Neighborhoods department](#), serves as a key link between citywide initiatives, neighborhood business groups, and individual businesses. Through SBS's grantmaking and technical support, neighborhood-based Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other community-based organizations can promote child- and youth-friendly practices.

Design to Welcome Youth

SBS, working through its BID and community partners, could issue specific design guidance for businesses to welcome children and youth. For stores, cafes, and restaurants, clustered or differentiated seating arrangements (including smaller-sized seating for children) help encourage “zones” for different age groups. For smaller children, a child-sized “shopping” or kids’ area in a grocery store, for example, can engage young children and relieve caregivers. Bright lights and open windows increase transparency to the street.

BIDs can recognize and celebrate participating businesses through a sticker or poster program that businesses can display to mark their designation as a child- and youth-friendly establishment.



Incentivize Youth Programs

SBS could seek to create financial incentives for BIDs to create youth-specific programs, like pop-up events, beautification initiatives driven by youth, youth entrepreneurship programs, and youth summer internships. The SBS Neighborhoods program works with several BID grantees that already lead innovative youth programming, such as those in Flatbush and Brownsville. The City should promote and incentivize these practices in neighborhoods citywide.

BIDs should also encourage individual businesses to offer inventory and healthy food options that are affordably priced for teens. Particularly for food businesses, BIDs could promote deals for students during off-peak, after-school hours. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s (DHMH) healthy food programs could serve as an important partner.



Connect to Youth

Local BID representatives should proactively identify schools in the neighborhood, reach out to the schools to establish relationships, and help businesses attract youth, especially during off-peak hours. Relationships with school leaders and staff may help mitigate the behavior concerns that many businesses share.

Center Youth Leadership

Schools could encourage their students to form business and neighborhood outreach clubs, so that students actively study and engage with the immediate neighborhood and support small businesses that welcome them. Students can pitch and develop projects with the businesses, from social media campaigns to inventory or menu recommendations informed by research into youths’ spending demand, all while serving as ambassadors to the business community.



POLICY & GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

- SBS should establish child- and youth-friendliness as a guiding principle throughout its programs.
- SBS, with support from other child- and youth-focused agencies, should create and promote a toolkit that guides BIDs and other community groups to children and welcome youth, and track business interest and utilization of toolkit ideas.



Photo: Street Lab





Youth-Friendly Private Development Incentives



Private development plays an important role in the neighborhood spaces available to children, youth, and families. The City's primary tool to influence private development is through "incentive zoning," designed and administered through the Department of City Planning, that provides bonus development area to new private development in exchange for public amenities or affordable housing. Could the NYCDCP create a new 'incentive zoning' mechanism to secure spaces to support youth and families? Often amenities (rooftop garden, gyms and pools) only benefit the new residences. However, could this mechanism be used to provide more community

spaces such as child-care facilities, communal study areas, and spaces for recreation and play?

One form of incentivize zoning, Privately-Owned-Public Spaces (POPS), creates new public space within private property, such as high-rise commercial and residential developments, again in exchange for additional marketable floor area. However, POPS have almost entirely been concentrated within Midtown and Lower Manhattan, and very rarely utilized in residential neighborhoods, including those undergoing fast-paced redevelopment and threatened by gentrification.

Creating a Planning & Design Framework

Zoning regulations for new development offer a key intervention point for the City, incentivizing public amenities and affordable housing in exchange for financial incentives such as additional floor area bonus. Already, in many zoning districts, if developers include community facility use in their buildings, they may build to a higher density. These community facility uses include schools and child care centers, community centers, and health services. The Department of City Planning (DCP) should ensure that these incentives continue to appropriately target children and youth services in all neighborhoods, particularly during neighborhood rezonings.



Similarly, POPS incentives should be strengthened to expand the provision of public space across NYC's neighborhoods, especially where quality public space is lacking. We recognize there may be difficult trade-offs and negotiations between balancing, for example, affordable housing targets and public space provisions. However, a neighborhood-based approach could target where new development that offers public space is most needed.

Providing Program Maintenance

For this initiative to be successful, we should be mindful that property owners and developers that initiate the process with DCP are often not the ongoing building managers and operators. There should be a designated City department (such as DCP) to coordinate with the long-term building operators to ensure the requirements of the incentive programs are being met and the spaces are maintained.

Seeking Local Partnering & Funding

Incentivizing developers to build space for day-care, recreation, or other child-friendly amenities must be followed by city resources to ensure the tenant operators themselves have the resources to open and stay open. Daycares, for example, face immense funding challenges even after they find the physical space in which to operate. DCP, NYCPS, and other citywide early education offices should coordinate where they target incentives and funding to ensure that these services are available where they are needed. A [recent study of 3-K seats by zip code](#), for example, shows that in some neighborhoods, the number of 3-K applicants far outstrips the number of available seats in the same neighborhood.

POLICY & GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

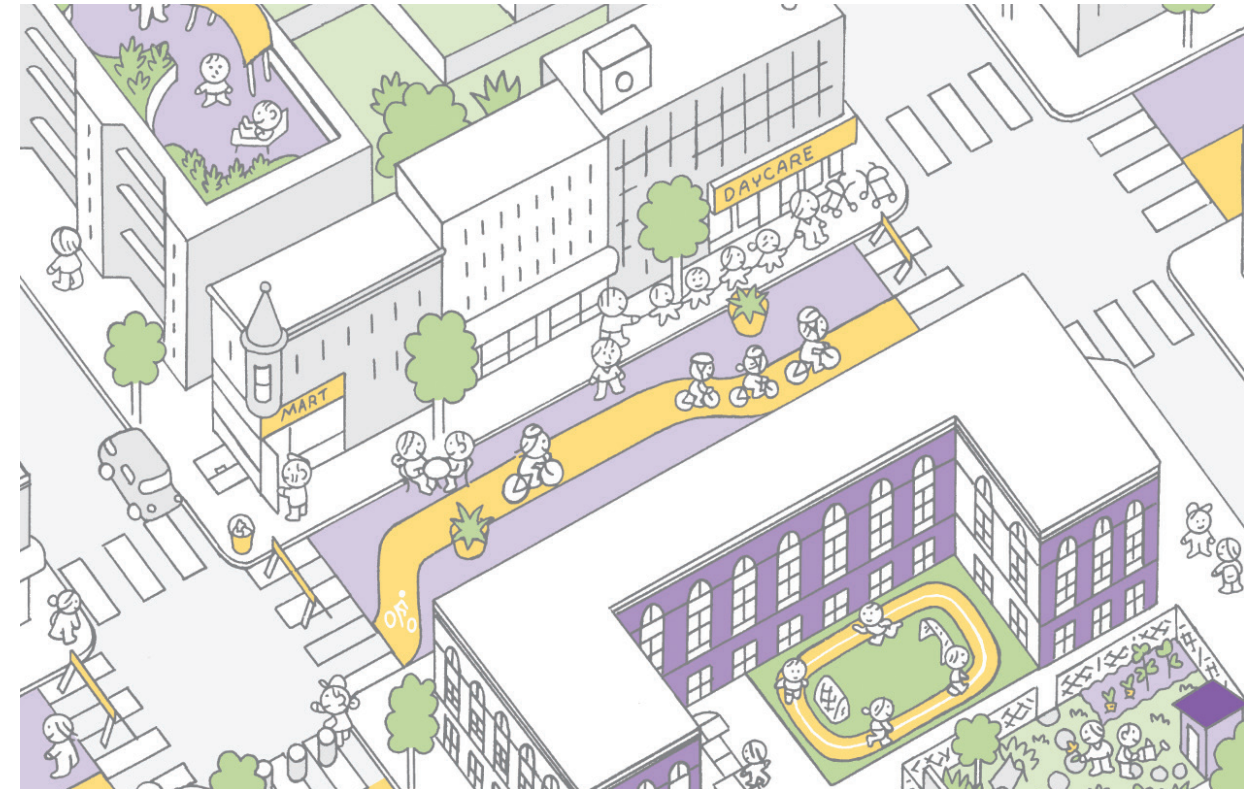
- DCP should align incentive zoning measures to support meeting child- and youth-focused space needs equitably, focusing on collaboration with NYCPS.
- DCP should revisit the POPS program to encourage private developers to provide child- and youth-friendly public spaces across more neighborhoods.





Photo: NYC DOT

Safe, healthy and fun streets



Getting to and from school is a big part of the daily routine for kids and teens, but without the right infrastructure, it can pose risks to their safety, health, and even their ability to get an education, especially for those with disabilities. In New York City, most children rely on walking, and taking school buses and public transit to get to school. In their busy schedules, it is on their way to and from school where they often experience the city and learn from their surroundings. Many times, it is their only opportunity for freedom and autonomy.

Neighborhood streets and transitory spaces should be designed to allow for safer, healthier and more engaging commutes. This means activating main routes children take to walk or bike to school, or even bus stops, subway trains and stations. It also means providing affordable (or free!) options for kids and teenagers to ride the subway and access cultural and recreational spaces throughout the city outside of school hours.

Open Streets for walking and biking to school

NYC DOT should expand corridors for walking and biking safely to school through their Open Streets program, working closely with communities, particularly youth, to reimagine neighborhood streets and spaces along the way. Similarly to 34th Ave in Jackson Heights, DOT should identify streets that connect multiple schools to allow for safe routes to walk and cycle to school in low car volume streets.



Create multimodal streets

DOT should expand networks of integrated sidewalks, bike and bus lanes alongside low volume car traffic. Features like wide sidewalks, protected bike lanes, and easy access to public transit make it easier for families to navigate their neighborhoods. Well-designed, multimodal streets foster a sense of independence among youth, allowing them to travel safely and confidently within their communities.

Make bike infrastructure more family-friendly

Riding a bike in New York has become increasingly popular, with CitiBike ridership and infrastructure growing in the past years. However, cycling must be seen as safe and convenient before most parents and kids treat it as a preferred mode of transportation. In addition to slower, low-volume streets, bike lanes need to be wide and protected, and complemented by safer intersections and a complete network. Bike share stations should be conveniently located near key neighborhood spaces, and include bikes with children's seats and smaller bikes for kids and teens.



Families hacking Citi-bike to accommodate child seat

Make transit affordable and fun

The MTA and partners should activate bus stops and subway trains with opportunities to learn and play for kids waiting and commuting. For example, some ads could be replaced with youth messaging and games, or promotions for concerts and other activities for youth. Instead of penalizing youth jumping turnstiles, the MTA should provide free or discounted subway fares for youth to get around the city.

POLICY & GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

- DOT and the MTA should conduct reviews across its programs and spaces with a focus on child, youth, and family friendliness.
- Future capital projects should similarly require a design review for child, youth, and family friendliness.

Encourage & fund Bike Buses

Bike bus routes are great ways for children and youth to commute to school, but heavily rely on teachers and volunteers to run them. Similarly to school buses, the city should pay bike bus operators so this can become a viable option that doesn't overburden school staff. Additionally, schools should be equipped with ample bike parking to allow for kids to store their bikes afterwards.



Photo: Bike Bus NYC

Brownsville Bike Bus



City-Level Systems Change for Neighborhood Planning

To realize a truly youth-centered neighborhood and implement these types of cross-sector strategies, we need a comprehensive approach to planning, design, and policy of neighborhood spaces and infrastructure.

NYC does not have a regular, consistent, comprehensive neighborhood planning process led by city agencies. Neighborhood plans are sometimes launched through and led by the Department of City Planning, typically when a neighborhood is chosen for rezoning, but this excludes the vast majority of NYC neighborhoods from regular comprehensive planning. Community Boards offer the closest infrastructure to regular neighborhood planning, through the annual District Needs Assessment intended to help track community needs and inform capital needs and budgeting. Community Boards can also propose neighborhood plans for submission to DCP. However, these Boards are often under-resourced and under-staffed, and few Boards have launched neighborhood plan proposals in recent years. Depending on the composition of the Board members, the Boards may not always have expertise related to schools and youth, and some Boards also may not be representative of their current neighborhood demographics. We are also not aware of any Community Boards that have a formalized youth engagement or youth representatives structure.

At the agency level, NYCPS does not maintain a team solely dedicated to outdoor space and related cross-agency issues. Meanwhile, DOT, for example, hosts multiple school-related initiatives and a dedicated School Safety Unit team. This team often works directly with school principals, such as when principals raise requests directly to DOT for road safety improvements. The lack of its own focused team hinders NYCPS's ability to put forward a strong vision, a consistent set of priorities, or goals to be applied towards the entire portfolio of schools.

Without a robust, comprehensive, cross-agency neighborhood planning process, efforts to shift neighborhoods to meet youth needs will continue to be disjointed, composed of at best one-off interventions. Instead, the City must commit to a holistic youth-centered approach. We recognize the scale of this challenge – clearly, there are no easy solutions. We instead offer some scenarios to re-imagine about how city agencies and organizations could work:



Neighborhood Planning for Children and Youth

Aspirational Vision:

Every neighborhood undertakes a regular (every 2-4 years) comprehensive, youth-centered neighborhood planning and implementation tracking process. Youth representative leaders work alongside school leaders and technical professionals to engage youth for input and feedback, to inventory and evaluate youth-friendliness of neighborhood spaces using a common set of tools, and track public space projects and programming over time. This process informs multiple agencies' capital and operations planning.

Near-Term Action:

NYC already acknowledges the need for community-centered planning through its Community Board infrastructure, in place since 1975. While restructuring the overall responsibilities, powers, and resources of the Community Board are outside the scope of this project, we do encourage thinking of the Community Boards as a resource for neighborhood planning. The Community Boards' annual District Needs Assessment, for example, could be more strongly tailored to explicitly call out youth needs across the built environment, for the spectrum of age ranges from young children to teenagers, beyond requests for individual school funding. Community Boards could also serve as a proactive, cross-sector convener for city agencies and schools to coordinate across youth issues and spaces.

Proactive Coordination from NYCPS

Aspirational Vision:

Every NYC school has a neighborhood development and coordination lead on staff, responsible for proactively working with students to engage on youth issues and ideas for the neighborhood; coordinating with agencies to address improvements and programming involving spaces outside the school's four walls; coordinating with community groups to make school spaces available and program them outside of school hours; managing outdoor space maintenance; and liaising with neighborhood businesses and residents to advocate for the students. This role would then have two main functions: 1) to amplify student and family voices on neighborhood issues, and 2) to translate these voices into action with city agencies.

Near-Term Action:

While recruiting, hiring, and placing this type of lead at every school may be infeasible in the near term, NYCPS should start at the citywide agency level with a central office for outdoor space initiatives. This would send the message that NYCPS, as the owner of the largest portfolio of child-focused buildings, is taking a lead role on the experience of youth in neighborhoods overall. Over time, this office could scale to staff positions based at each of the 32 geographic school districts; these staff would serve as coordinators between school principals and other agencies at the neighborhood level, along with Community Board and City Council representatives, on outdoor space and infrastructure planning. Importantly, these positions should be fully staffed, and not simply responsibilities added on to existing full-time roles or structured as interim task forces.

Additionally, outside of direct school staff, many community-based youth organizations already serve as the link between schools they are partnered with and the neighborhoods they serve and represent. For example, through the NYCPS Community Schools program, over 400 participating schools partner with a lead Community-Based Organization (CBO) and host a full-time employee of the CBO as the Community Schools Director. City funding towards CBOs could encourage expansion of the Community Schools model and incentivize the CBOs to apply a neighborhood-based lens to supporting schools and students, beyond providing direct services. CBOs could lead annual space asset mapping, for example, to assess the types and quality of spaces surrounding the school that the students interface with every day. Community organizations could serve as conveners across multiple schools within a neighborhood, along with other neighborhood organizations and businesses, to collaborate on space planning and design. Finally, the organizations could serve as the convener for city agency representatives on behalf of the school(s), helping school principals directly engage with the agencies on neighborhood planning.

Funding for Capital AND Maintenance

Ultimately, to implement these changes at scale and sustain them long-term, the city needs to fund the agencies and organizations that serve our children. We recognize the city is enacting budget cuts to meet today's fiscal challenges, but this is precisely the time to invest more in our children's well-being. A key reason New Yorkers leave the city is because of the day-to-day challenges of raising children here. The city should be doing everything possible to show not only that families can raise their children here, but that children can flourish here in NYC, with all its dynamic energy and abundance of resources.

Capital Projects Funding

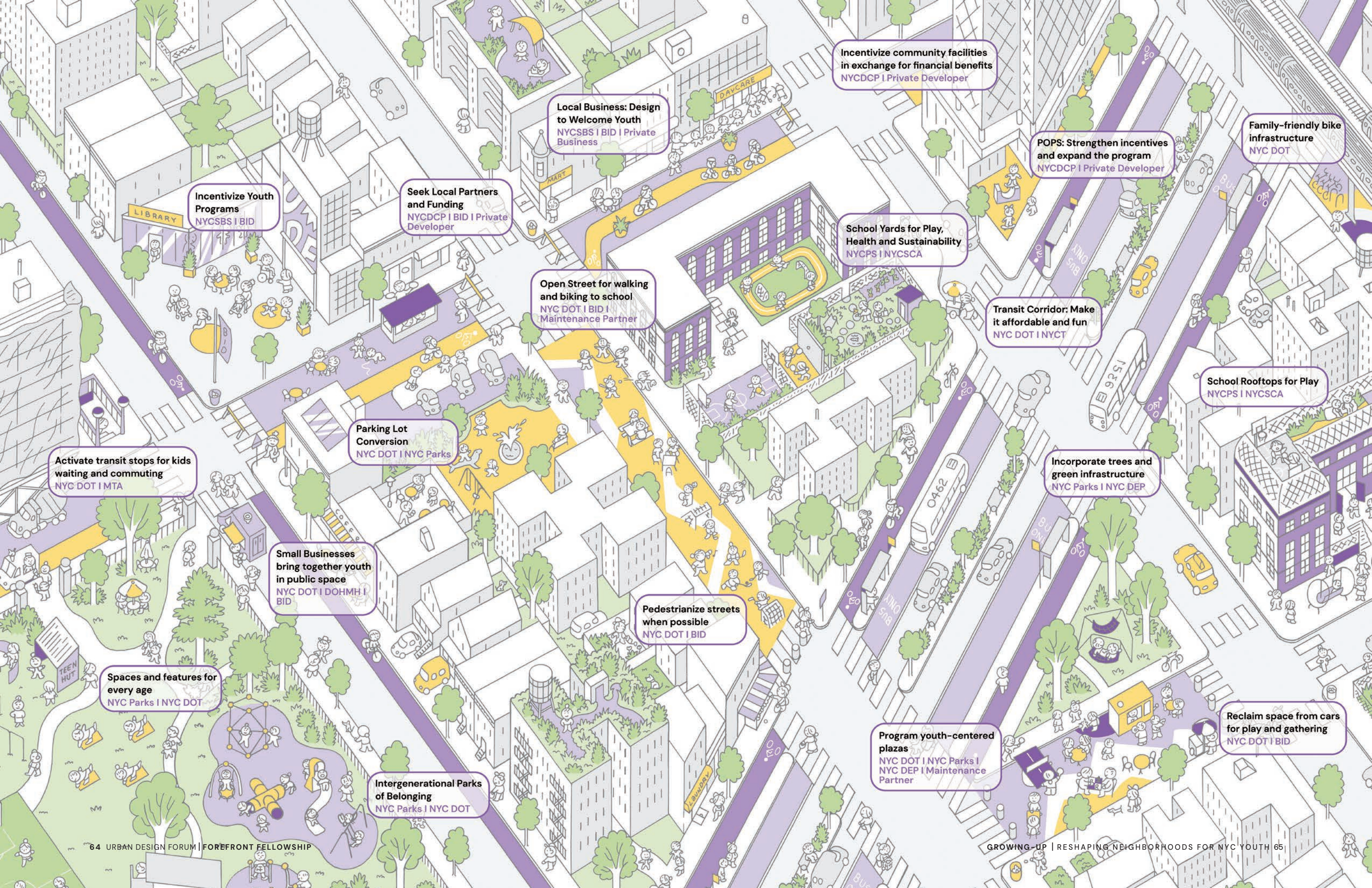
Increasing funding to expand accessibility of existing spaces can significantly unlock spaces for children and youth. As described by a Parks representative, for example, investing Parks funding to transform plain, asphalt schoolyards in return for public access is "low hanging fruit." Other cities have led the way on similar initiatives at a major scale. The City should re-commit to these existing programs with lessons learned since they were first introduced, so that we continue to improve these spaces to serve all of our children and youth.

Operating and Maintenance Funding

Perhaps the most significant gap in funding, the resources for operating and maintaining spaces after they are built are limited and scattershot. The City and its agencies need to take responsibility for funding quality maintenance long-term, to keep the spaces beautiful, open, and safe. Schools need operating support to maintain more engaging but higher-cost outdoor space, plus additional personnel to help manage the space when it opens to the public. DOT relies on partners to maintain more complex street and sidewalk interventions, whether the Sanitation Department or community partners (which DOT funds through an existing Public Space Equity Program.) Small businesses and BIDs must also manage their maintenance and upkeep for their beautification efforts.

We encourage city agencies and stakeholders to lean on each other to pool resources in creative ways. For example, could BIDs expand their cleaning crews or contribute funding towards other public space maintenance? Could NYCPS and Parks collaborate on neighborhood-based maintenance teams that span both parks and schoolyards? The Department of Sanitation (DSNY) produces a guide for "Clean and Green Schools" for NYCPS focused on waste; can this be expanded to outdoor space maintenance? When we see public spaces as systems within a neighborhood, we also begin to see maintenance of the spaces as a single system.





Incentivize community facilities in exchange for financial benefits
NYCDCP | Private Developer

Local Business: Design to Welcome Youth
NYCSBS | BID | Private Business

Family-friendly bike infrastructure
NYC DOT

POPS: Strengthen incentives and expand the program
NYCDCP | Private Developer

Incentivize Youth Programs
NYCSBS | BID

Seek Local Partners and Funding
NYCDCP | BID | Private Developer

School Yards for Play, Health and Sustainability
NYCPS | NYCSA

Open Street for walking and biking to school
NYC DOT | BID | Maintenance Partner

Transit Corridor: Make it affordable and fun
NYC DOT | NYCT

School Rooftops for Play
NYCPS | NYCSA

Parking Lot Conversion
NYC DOT | NYC Parks

Incorporate trees and green infrastructure
NYC Parks | NYC DEP

Activate transit stops for kids waiting and commuting
NYC DOT | MTA

Small Businesses bring together youth in public space
NYC DOT | DOHMH | BID

Pedestrianize streets when possible
NYC DOT | BID

Spaces and features for every age
NYC Parks | NYC DOT

Reclaim space from cars for play and gathering
NYC DOT | BID

Program youth-centered plazas
NYC DOT | NYC Parks | NYC DEP | Maintenance Partner

Intergenerational Parks of Belonging
NYC Parks | NYC DOT



Photo: NYC DOT

NYC Neighborhood Day of Play!

Where do we begin? What can we do tomorrow?

We propose an NYC Neighborhood Day of Play – a day designated for everyone in the neighborhood to commit all-in to programming spaces for our kids. With so many individual educators and community organizations – and youth themselves – already leading powerful work, this would be an opportunity to foreground it all together and show the collective impact of orienting an entire neighborhood around children and youth. Much like Park(ing) Day or NYC Summer Streets, this would be a chance to catalyze collective imagination around what is possible.



We envision:

- All outdoor school grounds are open, from elementary to high schools, programmed with the school and DYCD after-school partners who lead outdoor games and learning.
- DOT closes streets around all schools and major commercial strips, activating Play Streets throughout the neighborhood. Community groups run Open Streets programming, like games and learn-to-bike sessions. Teens conduct art and performance workshops for the public.
- NYC Urban Park Rangers and community group play workers lead explorations and activities in all the neighborhood parks, for all ages. Community organizations organize informal sports activities for children and youth to try new sports or meet others in the neighborhood through age-specific tournaments.

- Businesses sign up to highlight that they are youth-friendly, with fun, bright seating and special discounts for youth. BIDs turn vacant storefronts into galleries dedicated to artwork created by children, youth, and teens in the neighborhood.
- The day is organized by youth guiding the types of programming offered, creating promotional campaigns, and leading evaluation processes afterwards.

There are already global movements for a Day of Play, such as an International Day of Play and Association of Children's Museum Day of Play. NYC should be at the forefront, to show the world what a truly child- and youth-friendly city could look like.

We know it takes a village to raise a child. Together, let's go make it happen!

Appendix

NYC Government Agencies Referenced

DCP: Department of City Planning

Oversees land use planning for New York City, utilizing zoning regulations to promote strategic growth and sustainable communities throughout the five boroughs.

DEP: Department of Environmental Protection

Protects public health and the environment by supplying clean drinking water, collecting and treating wastewater, managing stormwater, and reducing air, noise, and hazardous substances pollution.

DOHMH: NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

Protects and promotes the health and mental well being of all New Yorkers. Among its many programs, responsibilities include regulation of day care centers, school health, environmental health, and neighborhood health.

DOT: NYC Department of Transportation

Provides for the safe and efficient movement of people and goods in New York City. Maintains bridges, tunnels, streets, sidewalks, and bike lanes, and operates the Staten Island Ferry.

DPR or “Parks”: NYC Department of Parks and Recreation

Oversees parks, athletic fields, playgrounds, public pools, golf courses, and beaches. Maintains over 650,000 street trees, and provides recreational and athletic facilities and programs.

DSNY: Department of Sanitation

Manages municipal and residential solid waste, both refuse and recyclables; clears snow & ice; cleans vacant lots, enforces sanitation laws, and removes abandoned vehicles from city streets.

DYCD: Department of Youth and Community Development

Provides high-quality youth and family programming. Administers available City, state, and federal funds to effective community-based organizations.

MTA: Metropolitan Transit Authority

Comprises New York City Transit, Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North Railroad, and Bridges and Tunnels. New York City Transit manages, maintains, and runs subway and bus service in New York City.

NYCPS: NYC Public Schools

Manages New York City’s public school system, the largest in the country, serving 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools. In addition to K-12 schools, NYCPS offers early childhood education programs and administers 3-K and Pre-K for All.

SBS: NYC Department of Small Business Services

Supports businesses to start, operate and grow by providing direct assistance to business owners, linking employers to a qualified workforce, and supporting neighborhood development.

SCA: NYC School Construction Authority

Responsible for school construction and major renovations for school interiors and exterior grounds, including capital planning, budgeting, design, and operations. Coordinates the development of NYCPS’s Five-Year Capital Plan, selects and acquires sites for new schools, leases buildings for schools, and supervises conversion of administrative space for classroom use.

Source: <https://www.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/agencies.page>

Office of the Mayor

The Mayor’s Office administers all city services, public property, and most public agencies, and enforces all city, state, and federal laws within the City.

City Council

New York City’s 51 City Council members introduce and vote on legislation, negotiate the City’s budget with the Mayor and approve its adoption, monitor City agencies, and review land use decisions.

Community Boards

The City’s 59 Community Districts are each composed of board members who are appointed by the Borough President and City Council members. Community Districts advise on land use and zoning matters, assess needs of their neighborhoods, and address other community concerns by working with City agencies and officials.

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