

Historical & Political Conditions Shaping The Public Realm 1960s - today

A Look Back In Time

Understanding historical and political conditions shaping today's public realm

The current state of the public realm pushes out the homeless, whether by design or oversight. How did we get here?

Taking a look at the last five decades, we wanted to understand the intersectional issues, policies, and events that shaped the public realm we see today.

Resources

Giuliani Time, Neil Smith

Building like Moses with Jacobs in Mind, Scott Larson

City of Disorder, Alex Vitale

1960s

Administration Hallmarks

John Lindsay, NYC Mayor 1966-1973

By easing up on code enforcement with squatters and especially artists "live/work" space, Lindsay ultimately encouraged the revival of the arts community in those neighborhoods.

External Influences

During 1970s fiscal crisis, Ford administration blames city problems on too many social services for the poor, and not enough services for wealthy and middle class. This, with reduced federal support, led to focus on the "transnational capital class."

What did it mean for the public realm?

More emphasis was placed on the creation of plazas, parks, and public amenities as a part of incentive zoning. This shifted some of the responsibilities of public space creation onto private developers.

Key actions, policies, and publications

1961 - Zoning Resolution divided NYC into residential, commercial, and manufacturing areas. It introduced incentive zoning, which allowed developers to build higher than the allowed FAR (floor to area ratio) in exchange for providing public amenities like plazas, atriums, etc. Plazas were required to be open to public at all times.

1970s

Administration Hallmarks

Abraham Beame, NYC Mayor 1974-1977

City came close to filing bankruptcy, but Beame was able to change the city budget from a \$1.5 billion deficit to a \$200 million surplus by slashing the city workforce, freezing salaries, and reconfiguring the budget

External Influences

Neoliberal reforms aimed at regulating markets, slashing public spending, and dismantling welfare states propelled pro-development policies forward. This corporatist approach to planning was granted even greater heft by local governments with needs for private funds.

What did it mean for the public realm?

There was a growing reliance on private sector to complete development projects. Whyte's guidelines encouraged design of public spaces to be amenable to public use. Other voices like community boards were given a platform through ULURP.

Key actions, policies, and publications

1975 - the NYC Board of Estimate eased height restrictions, resulting in FARs in the 20s. New bonuses were created for public spaces - but now required they not just be open, but also be amenable to public use. William "Holly" Whyte guidelines were adopted by BOE.

1975 - Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) was established to give community boards a seat at the table and to mandate additional layers of review for zoning and development process.

1980s

Administration Hallmarks

Ed Koch, NYC Mayor 1978-1989

Koch administration conducted a commission on the year 2000: “New York Ascendant” to outline a vision for a more global, business-friendly New York. In 1986, Koch claimed families were voluntarily going the “welfare hotel route” to get better housing

External Influences

Tax incentives are introduced to stimulate real estate development, and result in increased land prices. Housing costs increased as the availability of low-income housing decreased, resulting in a wave of gentrification.

The Reagan administration tightened eligibility requirements for government assistance and cut funding to government income maintenance programs.

1981- In Callahan v. New York City, courts rule that the city must provide shelter to any homeless person who "by reason of physical, mental or social dysfunction is in need of temporary housing.

What did it mean for the public realm?

Even with a ruling on the right to shelter, a decline in low-cost housing, as well as an increase in violence and threats of TB and AIDS, led more people to seek refuge in public spaces. Meanwhile, the introduction of cold weather polices, codes of conduct aimed at policing behavior, and sweeps of public spaces, challenged the “right” to public space.

Key actions, policies, and publications

1981-1989 - HUD budget for low-income housing was cut by almost 80%

1982- Business improvement districts (BIDs) were created

1984- Record numbers of people sought emergency shelter from cold, and were rounded up and taken to municipal hospitals... where the requirement of psychiatric diagnosis before unconsenting hospitalization was overridden

1985- Police workers were empowered to forcibly remove people from the streets and bring them to shelters and hospitals. This “cold weather policy” was extended into summer months in the years to come, and expanded to include the removal and policing of areas like parks/ subways

1984 - Coalition for Homeless estimated 35,000 homeless people in NYC

1986 - NYC reported 66% of its homeless were families with children, and that the overwhelming majority had no contact with a mental institution and showed no signs of mental illness

1986 - Incentive zoning bonuses for everything but parks and plazas were eliminated

1987 - Billy Boggs challenges government’s right to hospitalize and medicate homeless with help from New York Civil Liberties Union; city appeals

1988 - Tompkins Square Park riot took place when NYPD charged a group protesting park curfew hours, resulting in over 100 complaints of police brutality

1989 - City administration introduced “codes of conduct” aimed at the homeless; similarly, parks department announced plan to sweep homeless from parks

1990s

Administration Hallmarks

David Dinkins, NYC Mayor 1990-1993

Furthered the global city focus in his planning report (1993): “The City’s best prospect for expanding opportunity and combating poverty is to maintain position as global leader”

External Influences

1990-1992 Economic downturn led Department of City Planning to cut staff by 25%. This and opposition from real estate industry meant that revisions to zoning standards were buried.

What did it mean for the public realm?

The combination of the economic depression, and increased violence, led to an evaporation of public sympathy. There is an increase in cities adopting “vagrant policies” to repel and deport homeless

Key actions, policies, and publications

1991-1997 - Homeless sweeps began to remove homeless from encampments (known as shantytowns). NYPD contributed to obstruction of services by refusing to provide people’s information to Coalition for the Homeless

Encouraged continued reliance on corporate and finance-based development through zoning changes and corporate tax subsidies.

1990s, continued

Administration Hallmarks

Rudolph Giuliani, NYC Mayor 1994-2001

During first term, Giuliani appointed a task force to examine “police-community relations.” After winning a second term, he rejected the proposals made and proposed giving bonuses and increasingly dangerous guns to police officers. Hired William Bratton, known for “broken windows” -based policing tactics, to be commissioner of the NYPD

External Influences

1996 - RPA publishes “A Region at Risk” with a focus on improving quality of life and economic competitiveness. The outlined recommendations justified a decade of region shaping investments to build regional economies in landscape of global competition. Result: business friendly plan
As gentrification continues, landlords and state politicians attempt to end rent control laws.

What did it mean for the public realm?

Giuliani appropriated people’s fears round urban decay and safety, and encouraged people to seek revenge against the sources of disorder through Police Strategy No. 5. The city administration was more concerned with removing homeless from public view. Much of the rounding up was from interior spaces (Grand Central, Port Authority, Penn Station) and public spaces where visibility of homelessness was bringing increasing shame to the city.

Key actions, policies, and publications

1994 - Police Strategy No. 5: Reclaiming Public Space identified homeless people, squatters, panhandlers, etc. as the causes of disorder in the public spaces in the city, rather than the symptoms. It redefined homeless as “dangerous mentally ill street people.” Resulting “quality of life” campaign included crackdown on jaywalkers, speeding, panhandling, and street vendors, and the creation of a database for tracking homeless people
1995 - NYPD deployed armored vehicles to evict 31 squatters living in a foreclosed building on 13th St

1995-1998 - Shift from welfare to “workfare” with the Work Experience Program. 363,000 people were squeezed off of welfare as the rules for receiving support shifted to include having employment

1997 - City terminated contracts with Harlem Restoration Project and Housing Works

1998 - Giuliani announced intention to cut in half Department of Homeless Services with the goal of closing the agency and privatizing its activities

2000s

Administration Hallmarks

Michael Bloomberg, NYC Mayor 2002-2013

Continued focus on competing for tourism dollars and talented employees. Focus on development shifted to large scale projects and design of new spaces that could attract tourists (like signature sites by star-architects and waterfront) and high-income workers (i.e. office spaces). At the same time, the administration cut off homeless families from priority access to public housing and Section 8 vouchers, replacing them with short-term subsidies.

External Influences

2001- NYC 2012, a privately run organization to oversee Olympic effort, published a \$1.2B project that linked planning for 2012 bid to midtown business district development and expansion of the 7 train.

2001 - Group of 35 report warns long-term economic growth would be limited by lack of office space and advocated for breaking development impasse through condemnation and eminent domain, and tax breaks for developers.

What did it mean for the public realm?

Through projects like Atlantic Yards, the city leverages rezoning to adapt “underutilized” spaces for public reuse. Stop and frisk policing increases and is ruled unconstitutional. Focus was on street-level reinvention, with an emphasis on pedestrian plazas and bike-sharing lanes, and the creation of over 800 acres of outdoor space, largely along the waterfront.

Key actions, policies, and publications

2002- DCP was placed under the direction of Doctoroff. Under Doctoroff, “what started as a simple land use plan... evolved rapidly into a long-term growth plan that established economic development as fundamental goal.”

The Strategic Plan outlined 6 principles: compete in competitive global economy, grow in sustainable manner, city of neighborhood, signature sites to make great places, recapture waterfront and revitalize the street, design matters - architecture excellence is good economic development

2002 - “Acknowledging that without the form of government intervention, the working poor and increasingly, the middle class, would be priced out of New York, the mayor unveiled a 10 year, \$7.5B New Housing Marketplace Plan”

Rezoning reemerges as a tool for the Bloomberg administration to foster mixed use and density.

2004- City Planning Commission approves zoning changes to facilitate high density development. In 2009, rezoning was finalized, resulting in downzoning that effectively prevented higher density apartment buildings from being built, whereas upsizing occurred in areas with transit access, like Jamaica, Harlem, Williamsburg/ Greenpoint.

2000s- Eminent domain justified that underutilized spaces be rezoned for “adaptive” re-use. Through this, privatized public spaces became key components of wholesale reconstruction of civic identity, recast to signify affluence, attract investment, and tourism.

2000s- According to City data, the number of people residing each night in the municipal shelter system increased 61% during Bloomberg’s administration.

2000s

Administration Hallmarks

Bill de Blasio, NYC Mayor 2014-present

di Blasio promised to reform stop and frisk, and agreed to a monitor to oversee police reforms.

A hallmark of his administration is to redistribute funds to more low- and middle-income neighborhoods

External Influences

Airbnb popularity in NY has raised rents, removed housing from the rental market, and fueled gentrification.

The number of aging people in New York is rising. Reluctant to sell their homes, they are creating limited inventory and pushing home prices higher.

What did it mean for the public realm?

Community Parks initiative promised to reinvest resources to parks within boroughs outside of Manhattan. The program will rebuild 67 neighborhood parks with \$318 million of funding. The OneNYC Plaza Equity Program allocated \$1.4M from city budget to provide maintenance and management assistance to 30 plaza projects.

Key actions, policies, and publications

2014- Announced a three day retraining of 35,000 NYPD officers including de-escalation techniques.

2014- Gave homeless families priority for 750 NYCHA apartments

2014- New rent subsidy program for homeless families

2015- Began issuing IDNYC, a municipal identification card accepted by police and public institutions (i.e. libraries).

2017- Neighborhood Pillars deployed \$275M to purchase older rent-regulated building to keep them affordable and keep tenants in place in gentrifying areas.

2018- Published Turning the Tide on Homelessness, which outlined goals to build 90 new homeless shelters over 5 years, in order to end use of cluster sites, hotel rooms.