

DESIGN TRUST
FOR PUBLIC SPACE

STRATEGIC PLAN

2023

Mission Statement

The Design Trust for Public Space is a non-profit organization that unlocks the potential of New York's public spaces. Our unique model catalyzes design ideas into action for a more just and equitable city.

The Challenge

New York Today

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic rendered New York City, as it has been known, in a space of uncertainty, buffeted by economic turbulence, political instability, constant protest against racial inequality, and the rising threats of global conflict.

Today, New York faces both the perception of and reality of a city on the brink, caught in the early stages of an “urban doom loop”¹ as hybrid work taxes the city’s commercial real estate foundations. Tax revenue, driven largely by Manhattan’s real estate value, dropped significantly in the City’s Fiscal Year 2022. Projections of future revenue remain stagnant against the need for increasing expenses and the reduction in federal subsidies.²

At the same time, housing instability has reached historic highs, with rental rates increasing in 2022 precipitously after a pandemic dip, new multifamily housing starts dropping over that same period,³ and the expiration of the 421-a tax exemption. A warming planet is creating more urgent concerns for the health of every New Yorker, with extreme rain and heat events occurring with greater frequency.^{4&5} An enormous backlog of infrastructure needs, though buoyed by federal dollars, puts pressure on projects with incredibly complex tradeoffs.

The Public Space Solution

As leaders from across the spectrum have contributed ideas to this narrative, public space has emerged as a consistent, powerful, and accessible solution.⁶ Within the context of the Design Trust, public space is defined broadly, encompassing not only traditional definitions like parks, streets, and plazas, but extending into our transit systems, public buildings, and infrastructure.

New York’s standing as a global city in recent history has been defined by particular approaches towards public space: from the exercise in civic control and management in the post-financial crisis 80’s and 90’s, making spaces like Bryant Park possible and to the post 9/11 investment in signature projects like the High Line, which reestablished New York as a global city.⁷ This historical legacy trends both towards a public good—instances of civic rebirth after a crisis—and towards the exclusion of justice and dignity—characterized by the over-policing of black and brown residents.

1 Van Nieuwerburgh, S. (2023). The remote work revolution: Impact on real estate values and the urban environment: 2023 AREUEA Presidential Address. *Real Estate Economics*, 51(1), 7-48.

2 Citizens’ Budget Commission (2022). *NYC Fiscal Year 2023 Adopted Budget and Outlook*. <https://cbcny.org/topics/city-budget>

3 The Real Estate Board of New York (2023). *The Multifamily Foundation Plan Application Report*.

4 DeGaetano, A. T., & Castellano, C. M. (2017). Future projections of extreme precipitation intensity-duration-frequency curves for climate adaptation planning in New York State. *Climate Services*, 5, 23-35.

5 United States Environmental Protection Agency. *New York City Adapts to Deal with Projected Increase of Heat Waves*. <https://www.epa.gov/arc-x/new-york-city-adapts-deal-projected-increase-heat-waves>

6 “New” New York Panel (2022). *Making New York Work for Everyone Action Plan*. <https://newnypanel.com/>

7 Dyja, T. (2022). *New York, New York: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation*. United States: Simon & Schuster. pg. 418.

The city is testing bold new ideas for public space, including the “Open” programs (Open Restaurants, Open Streets, Open Culture, Open Storefronts, etc) that emerged as pandemic-fueled experiments. While challenged as long-term solutions, these were dramatic innovations for a city that often over-regulates and protects its turf. Open Restaurants in particular will serve as an important beachhead in the process to reimagine how streets—which represent 40% of our land area and whose parking spots take up eight Central Parks—can serve many other diverse interests for the city.

The City is also creating new structures to manage public space holistically, including a new Chief Public Realm Officer.⁸ New collective management structures are being tested across the city, including the expansion of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), new forms of management such as merchant associations and mutual aid societies, in addition to novel ideas like Community Land Trust (CLTs).

Central to this moment is a recognition that public space will be a common glue to hold together new visions for land use. Midtown and Downtown Manhattan face enormous pressures to fill commercial vacancies and convert existing stock to residential use; some outer borough business districts are thriving, but face pressures of gentrification, while others are facing increasing disinvestment.⁹ Public space will help tie together new mixed-use districts across the city, in forms we haven’t expected.

The Barriers and Opportunities

Over the past year and a half (2022-2023), the Design Trust has engaged its staff, partners, peers, board, and friends to understand the challenges we face in realizing this public space-centered future. What will hold us back from taking full advantage of the incredible spirit of New York City? We have identified four groups of challenges, explained by the organization’s name, that outline historical and entrenched challenges to building the next generation of our cities and others around the world

The first acknowledges the power of **design** as a problem solver and its incredible representation in New York’s many sectors: architects,

⁸ Hu, W. (2023). Why New York is Getting a Public Realm Officer. *New York Times*. February 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/nyregion/public-realm-officer-nyc.html>

⁹ Lee, G., Internicola, S., and Yao, K. (2022). *The State of Storefronts: Alarming Vacancy Rates and Rising Rents during the Pandemic*. Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development. <https://anhd.org/report/state-of-storefronts>

technologists, designers, artists, and marketers. This has been a source of intellectual and reputational wealth for the city. However, the abundance of design in New York City is not equitably reaching all of our streets, plazas, parks, corridors, trails, buildings, and waterfronts. What's more, historically underrepresented groups have challenging pathways to becoming part of these fields and applying their expertise towards the future.

At the same time—in a city with many networks of networks—a lack of **trust** and collaboration across sectors, expertise, power, and interests has limited our ability to tackle big problems like climate change or social resilience, or even small ones at the neighborhood level. The new public realm role is one example of this, as the many departments that oversee our streets and plazas have immense challenges in working on shared visions. Partnerships will be required, creative and nimble ones, capable of lifting up creative and cohesive solutions.

The shared and **public** resources of a city, our “commonplace civilization,” needs renewal on many fronts. On the one hand, certain problems or challenges in the city never receive attention because they are systemically difficult or because they haven't been fully understood. At the same time, public space is often exclusionary and not inclusive; it doesn't fully welcome the full and diverse needs of New York. Open and equal access to resources is an essential right for all.

In a city of 8,000,000, growing daily, access to and preservation of **space** remains a premium concern. In New York, the quality of public space—defined by areas that are designed well for community, maintained with persistent care, and are fully activated by a range of generous activity—is lacking and inequitably distributed. We believe that the world and environment around us should be universally excellent.

To the Design Trust for Public Space, this context establishes the challenge for our organization over the next five years. In order to contribute meaningfully to overcoming these parochial and more general concerns, the Design Trust is focused on unlocking the potential of New York's public spaces.

Goals

If the Design Trust is able to set an ambitious new agenda for New York City, based on public space, then we will need to meet the following goals. These four strategies will form the foundation of the organization's work:

1 **Definitions of public space are broadened, redefined, and reimaged to encompass and include the needs of all New Yorkers.**

New Yorkers think expansively about what is a “public” asset and how such public goods can better our livelihoods. This means that spaces like streets, transit systems, and public buildings are considered equally important public spaces.

2 **Urgently needed solutions for climate change, social justice, and economic opportunity are introduced into systems that can help them achieve scale.**

The important work of reimagining a just environment for New York City is done in a way that respects and combines the unique ingenuity happening in communities with the potential to achieve great change through legislation, funding, and new programs.

3 **New partnerships and coalitions, that wouldn't ordinarily exist, have the space to do so, and are acting on important public space opportunities for New York.**

Groups and individuals, from City agencies to community-based organizations, are brought together to work on the future of public space. The collaborations become new models for how the city can share resources and expertise.

4 **Agency is seeded to new forms of leadership across the city, especially young people, persons of color, and others who have been excluded from city-making conversations.**

These historically marginalized individuals are supported and empowered, and over time, become the new leaders of our public and community-based sectors.

How

A.

By leading the most important projects for New York’s public space, characterized by an outcomes-based-approach, collaborative processes, and a long-term vision. This means that:

Outcome

Task

A.1 The organization continues to lead critical public space projects that define the future of New York’s built environment.

A.1.1 Fifteen projects are kicked off by the year 2032 by the Design Trust for Public Space, including a mixture of core projects and fee-for-service advisory projects.

A.2 The pathways to accepting new projects ensure that they are representative of the diverse needs of New York City residents.

A.2.1 Renew the Request for Proposal process for the organization, including new language for the RFP, a redesigned selection process, and small seed funding available to project winners to conceptually develop their projects.

A.2.2 Create a clear project selection tool that informs the RFP jury, allows us to identify discretionary fee-for-service work, and evaluate other, less traditional opportunities.

A.2.3 Formalize a methodology of integrating non-RFP driven work into the organization, with a special focus on projects that emerge from strategic partners, and fee-for-service opportunities that leverage our goals and skillsets.

A.3 Design Trust projects are managed with the flexibility, accountability, and creativity necessary to achieve positive impacts.

A.3.1 The Design Trust adopts and continuously refines a standardized project model, one that allows for maximum flexibility for the diversity of projects, but that ensures accountability and consistency across the portfolio.

A.3.2 Create a clear methodology to assess projects' impact on New York City and its residents, one that allows for comparisons across projects but that respects the uniqueness of each as well.

A.3.3 Create a program-wide Gantt chart and cloud-based project tracking tool to help plan and execute projects.

B.

By centering community- and coalition-building as a critical tool in imagining the future of our public space. This means that:

Outcome

B.1 Our work is led with inclusive, community-based problem solving

Task

B.1.1 Standardize the understanding of project roles for the various stakeholders that play a role on a Design Trust project, ensuring that our approach can truly represent power-sharing, inclusive decision-making, and diverse perspectives.

B.1.2 Create a suite of standardized collaborative documents, including counsel-reviewed contracts and MOUs, payment structures, a roles and responsibilities matrix, and shared decision making rules.

B.1.3 More deeply connect our network of alumni Fellows with the ongoing work of the organization, especially our programmatic work.

B.2 External partnerships sustain the work over the long-term and open up new doors and opportunities.

B.2.1 Continue to grow the Design Trust (DT) Council such that provides flexible financial support and strong professional relationships, participating in an annual cycle of themed tours, and regularly gives to the Benefit for Public Space.

B.2.2 The Founder’s Circle is renewed as a way to attract significant partnerships and major gifts for the organization’s work.

C.

By elevating advocacy and public-facing leadership as a clear need for the future of New York City. This means that:

Outcome

Task

C.1 The organization nimbly advocates for the outcomes determined over the course of every project.

C.1.1 Update and add to the advocacy protocols to reflect a more comprehensive position of Design Trust’s advocacy work.

C.1.2 Create and regularly update an advocacy management framework, allowing us to evaluate and prioritize opportunities to advocate for our work.

C.1.3 Link the structures and innovations present in our assessment work, with those of our advocacy and outcomes.

C.2 A more consistent and tracked external affairs strategy guides the organization.

C.2.1 The organization has a cross-cutting way to track relationships to the organization, summarize ongoing touch points, and maximize their potential value to the work.

C.2.2 Elevate the reach of our communications, broadening the number and diversity of people who are learning about the work of the Design Trust.

C.2.3 Position Design Trust projects in an increasing number of high profile local, national, and international outlets.

C.3 Advocacy is supported with the necessary resources to become a true vertical.

C.3.1 Identify a staff person who can manage and sustain the advocacy tools and serve as a resource on advocacy related activities.

C.3.2 As part of our fundraising practices, we consider the direct and indirect costs to advocacy for every project or effort we undertake.

D.

By building the next generation of leaders in New York City’s public space movement. This means that:

Outcome

Task

D.1 The Equitable Public Space Fellowship serves as the foundation of our leadership development work.

D.1.1 Regular funding supports an annual and well-structured fellowship, with clear waypoints across that year.

D.1.2 Develop a well-designed curriculum to support an 18-month Fellowship, characterized by opportunities to connect with leaders, learn skill, participate in events, and advance projects.

D.2 The Fellows’ Forum is one of New York’s most important networks of design and planning leaders.

D.2.1 Create a long-term, post-project model of investment in our Fellows’ work as a way to expand the interests of the Design Trust.

D.2.2 Plan a year’s worth of events and opportunities that engages Fellows on public space issues across New York City, including linkages to DT Council and the creation of an Annual Open House.

D.3 Strong connections with institutions of higher education support our project work and expands our networks.

D.3.1 Create a young leaders internship program that reaches under-represented groups in the planning and design fields, potentially done in partnership with a mission-oriented higher-education organization.

D.3.2 Develop a long-term (or several more informal) partnerships with institutions of higher education to share resources, connect to young leaders, and advance projects.

E.

By complementing this core work with a well-running organization, committed to financial sustainability, strong management, and well-functioning systems. This means that:

Outcome

Task

E.1 A sustainable financial model allows the organization to remain nimble, mission focused, and able to plan for the long-term.

E.1.1 Move from scarcity to stability by maintaining a strong cash reserve and establishing the foundation of a long-term endowment.

E.1.2 Host the Benefit for Public Space—an elevated, important event that sets the conversation of the public space community—that provides a significant amount of flexible operating funds.

E.1.3 Create a flexible staffing model that allows for work responsibilities to be shared naturally, while still developing expertise in key areas.

E.2 Internal communications keep work moving quickly while emphasizing a collaborative and open style.

E.2.1 Find new tools that can simplify and improve internal communications and organizational planning.

E.3 The spaces and places that represent the organization accommodates the Design Trust’s unique needs.

E.3.1 Renovate and expand our physical office to allow for flexible work styles, more privacy, and better means to collaborate with our partners.

E.3.2 Create a new website that reflects our updated mission and goals and provides much more accessible information about our programs and projects.

E.3 A strong office culture makes the Design Trust a great place to work.

E.4.1 Update our office manual and set clearer HR standards so that our policies are comprehensive, clear, and compassionate.

E.4.2 Set progressive, annual goals for DEI training and culture-building for the team, integrating these tools into every part of our work.

E.4.3 Set benefits that allow for employees to take flexible time off and have the resources they need to thrive at work and with their family.

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