

# DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

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## “Untaped” Aims to Reform NYC’s Public Space Permitting Burdens

*Coalition of community organizations propose solutions to the Mamdani Administration; cut bureaucratic red-tape around public space activation and make it easier for New Yorkers to use their streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas.*

**New York, NY** – Today, the Design Trust for Public Space released a new publication of policy recommendations aimed at streamlining and simplifying public realm management. [\*Untaped: Removing Barriers for Public Space Programming\*](#) proposes eight tangible ideas to remove the permitting and administrative burdens that make hosting events and programming in public spaces, including streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas, challenging for so many organizations in New York City.

From block parties to park performances, community-based organizations, artists, cultural producers, small businesses, and neighborhood leaders enliven public spaces, boost economies, and make the five boroughs happier and healthier, however they are up against complex permitting systems, financial burden, and inconsistent rules across agencies. These challenges are most acute in historically underinvested neighborhoods, where improved public space programming can have the greatest impact.

Through a year-long research and engagement process, including workshops, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and cross-sector advisory sessions, *Untaped* brought together over 55 stakeholders across all five boroughs. This outreach spanned non-profit partners like the City Parks Foundation and Trust for Public Land, offering citywide and nationwide perspectives, key city agencies responsible for stewarding, programming, and activating public spaces across the city, such as the NYC Department of Transportation and NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, and organizations who work to bring creative events and programs to their neighborhoods, like Queensboro Dance Festival, Alice Austen House, The Point CDC, Uptown Grand Central, and Brownsville Community Justice Center.

Untaped offers a roadmap for a city where public space is truly public, open, accessible, and animated by the full diversity of its people. The eight core recommendations include reorganizing the Office of the Public Realm, specific guidelines and technology updates to streamline the permitting process into one central resource, and new regulatory standards.

“Public spaces are vital places where New Yorkers feel connected to their city and each other,” said **Executive Director of the Design Trust for Public Space Matthew Clarke**. “Community members deserve clarity and agency in deciding how they can leverage these

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spaces to benefit their neighborhoods. *Untaped* is a call to action to city leaders to dismantle the status quo and open up public spaces for all.”

“Building a stronger and healthier New York City means delivering world-class streets and public spaces across the five boroughs, and we look forward to reviewing these recommendations, and working with our sister agencies and partners to bring our streets to life with less red tape and more opportunities for activation.” said **New York City Department of Transportation Commissioner Mike Flynn**. “When we reimagine street space for people instead of cars, New Yorkers come together, business booms, and communities thrive.

“Vibrant public spaces are essential to our city, and the events held there make those spaces truly come alive, connecting New Yorkers with their communities and helping them make lasting memories,” said **NYC Parks Commissioner Tricia Shimamura**. “NYC Parks collaborates with New Yorkers to issue permits for more than 20,000 events annually, and we’re proud to have improved the user experience by streamlining the permitting process and enhancing our special events website, making it easier to activate our green and open spaces for joyful use.”

"This report addresses the critical need for infrastructure reform so that our city's investment in public spaces are truly optimized for public benefit," said Karesia Batan, **Founding Executive Director of Queensboro Dance Festival**. “We continue to experience challenges that are an unnecessary burden to our operations toward providing free cultural programming to our communities, and we've seen that burden is too often enough to deter programs to activate public spaces. Streamlining city processes will improve the experience on both the city and programmer sides; we just need our city leaders to prioritize this value.”

"For organizations such as ours that create programming year-round in a variety of public spaces– from plazas to streets, parks and more – the recommendations in the Untaped report hit home,” said **Carey King, Director of Uptown Grand Central**. “Aligning requirements across agencies and individuals, as well as taking into account the impact of fees and insurance costs on nonprofit partners, are imperative in order to encourage more permitted programming across our neighborhoods. The Untaped plan removes the variability and hit-or-miss nature of current permitting procedures, and transforms the process into a stable platform that will make great things possible in our City's public realm.”

"Events and public programs in open spaces bring communities together and create vibrant neighborhoods, and many of these activities are planned and operated by grassroots organizations that rely on local volunteers for their success," said **Heather Lubov, Executive Director of City Parks Foundation, which co-manages Partnerships for Parks with NYC Parks**. "There are currently so many barriers to success– multiple permits needed from different sources, some of which cannot be handled online; confusing, limited or no instructions to follow; high levels of insurance and many other hoops to jump through; and so much more. Volunteers shouldn't need to have the background in or the time for all of this red tape. The Design Trust's report jumpstarts the dialog around how to make our city work better for the benefit of all New Yorkers.”

“Public space is one of the city’s most powerful and most unevenly distributed civic resources,” said **Pedro Cruz Cruz, Untaped Public Space Management Fellow**. “How it is permitted shapes who gets to use the city, how, and for whose benefit. When permitting is difficult, opaque, or costly, access is effectively privatized, disadvantaging small nonprofits, immigrant groups,

informal organizers, and artists, especially in communities with limited access to private venues, cultural institutions, or capital."

"One of the most powerful recommendations in *Untaped* is the call for a tiered, performance-based qualification rubric for public space activations," said **Nur Asri, AICP, Untaped Public Space Management Fellow**. "This approach recognizes a simple truth: not all events carry the same level of risk, cost, or administrative burden, and our permitting systems should reflect that reality. By aligning fees, insurance requirements, and approvals with the actual scale and impact of an activation, the City can remove unnecessary red tape for small, community-driven events while ensuring larger activations contribute appropriate revenue. Most importantly, this rubric would unlock a new generation of organizers—neighborhood groups, artists, and first-time producers—by making it dramatically easier to choose low-cost, low-risk formats that avoid the most expensive parts of the permitting process. That's how we expand access to public space at real scale."

"New York's vibrancy is shaped in its public spaces," said **UX Design Fellow Jack Shugrue**. "It's exciting that we are meeting the moment, extending the conversation of how investment in design and development of our government's digital experiences, along with strong advocacy and policy can cut through red tape, making it easier for New Yorkers to bring that vibrancy to life, supporting the events, gatherings, and cultural moments that make New York unmistakably New York."

*Untaped* contributors are available for further comment on the state of public space management. **Please contact Alexa Mauzy-Lewis** (amauzy@designtrust.org) to coordinate.

Download the report and read the recommendations [here](#).

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### **About the Design Trust for Public Space**

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. Founded in 1995 by Andrea Woodner on the tenet that New York City's cultural and democratic life depends on viable public space, today, the Design Trust is a nationally recognized incubator and thought leader that transforms New York City's shared civic spaces—streets, plazas, parks, public buildings, transportation, and housing developments—to create a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable city. In our 28-year history, we've taken on over 40 projects across all five boroughs with project partners including city agencies, community groups, and private sector experts, inspiring replicable models for urban issues and advancing the role of public space as a driver of long-term equity and social justice globally.