Contextual Street Revitalization in a Changing Environment

Abstract

Incorporating contextual design practice while addressing the needs of local residents during a planning process is an enormously challenging responsibility for planners. Current street revitalization projects are one example where this dynamic exists, demonstrating the ongoing shift towards prioritizing the complex needs of communities and suggesting a different hierarchy for street elements in the public realm.

The main case study for this paper is the reconstruction plan for Myrtle Avenue in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. The analysis addresses the larger context of the neighborhood and the change that the area is undergoing, which itself is a microcosm of New York City's economic and demographic transformation.

Street redesign projects involve government, communities, property owners, and other stakeholders collectively reimagining and reinventing existing streets to reflect the needs of a local community. In this case, the public sector together with a community based organization is responsible for achieving the goals of lively, safe, sustainable and healthy urban streets.

Community engagement is crucial to the success of street revitalization projects, and should be ongoing throughout the process. At the same time, street redesign should redefine the boundaries between private and public spaces, while encouraging flexibility and multi-purpose uses. Innovative design and community needs are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be created simultaneously with a strong vision and ambitious leadership.

Based on a Thesis work for a Master of Science in City and Regional Planning, Pratt Institute
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Introduction

“A good urban street is always good in a context.”
(Arch Dolf Schnebli)

Contemporary street design projects reflect changes in the theory of urban design and carry out a fairly new methodology of “placemaking.” The interplay of human activity with the physical place creates the context of a street and consequently these two components are inseparable.

Contextual street design and placemaking are related to the concept of “cities for people” defined by Gehl (2010). The cities for people approach is based on a vision of a lively, safe, sustainable and healthy city that incorporates increasing concern for pedestrians, cyclists and city life in general.

Contextual street design acknowledges that every street has its own narrative, contingent on general historical factors, yet is unique to its time and place; in other words, “streets are mutable as life itself and are subject to constant alterations through design or use that foil the historian’s desire to give them categorical finitude.”

For decades, the human dimension has been overlooked in street design, while other issues like car traffic and parking were higher priorities for planners. The traditional function of the city space as meeting place and social forum has declined. In order to develop the public realm in the spirit of “cities for people,” special attention to the human dimension and to inviting people to spend more time in a place is needed.

Another aspect of contextual design is the political context and the local government agenda towards investment in the public space. This project was developed during the period of the Bloomberg administration in NYC, which was committed to the transformation of public space and initiated the Plaza Program based on placemaking principles.

The discussion around the need for and importance of street revitalization projects is especially critical under the current Mayoral administration, which differs from the Bloomberg administration in its dedication to a different set of issues. The De Blasio administration is focused on housing and neighborhood change, namely, combatting inequality. While this is a noble and necessary goal, there is a need to simultaneously address the implementation of public space projects.

Figure 1- Myrtle Avenue Reconstruction Plan
Source: DDC 2011
Methodology

To explore the street revitalization process, I used a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, data analysis and design evaluation. In addition, I explored formal documents—presentations and reports about the Myrtle Avenue Reconstruction Plan to complete a comprehensive view on the design process. Based on the information I gathered I was able to lay out the timeline of the plan and identify delays in the process. I point out the critical moments in the decision-making process (such as not choosing an interim strategy and committing to a capital reconstruction project,) and explain the ramifications of these decisions.

Case Study Analysis

The main case study for this study is the reconstruction plan for Myrtle Avenue between Hall Street and Emerson Place in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. (Figure 1) This case study was chosen because it represents the challenge of planning in a site that is rapidly changing, both in its physical condition, with new developments, and community members due to “hyper-gentrification”.

The analysis addresses the larger context of the neighborhood (Figure 2) and the change that the area is undergoing, which itself is a microcosm of New York City's economic and demographic transformation.

The analysis also includes a timeline of the project with emphasis on crucial intersections in the decision-making process.

Figure 2- Study Area boundary and Reconstruction Plan Site
**Demographic Changes**

In the last two decades, the demographics that characterize the study area have changed rapidly. Between 1990 and 2010 the total population decreased from 32,582 to 24,754, a drop of 24 percent. This could indicate displacement of the low-income populations and families.

The change in racial demographic is also indicative of changes in the overall community. In 1990, 62 percent of the residents were black, and only 17 percent were white. By 2010 the black population decreased to 42 percent and the white population grew to 28 percent of the total population.

**Development of the Built Environment**

The gentrification process is well seen in the built environment. Comparison of images from 1999 and 2016 clearly indicated both the changes that had already accrued and the many more that were about to happen in the project area. In addition to the construction work on the plaza, there are more than five private development sites under construction.

A completed project on the south-east corner of Myrtle Avenue and Hall Street that represents the trend of new development on the strip is a luxury apartment building with retail on the ground floor that is occupied by TD bank and Key Food. Previously, the site incorporated a series of single story retail buildings. (Figure 2) This new development raises the question of how a private building could contribute to the public realm, for example, by adding green infrastructure to the façade or a colonnaded area on the ground floor.
More construction sites are located on the north side of Myrtle Avenue. The projects include new residential units with retail on the ground floor. (Figure 3) Although from a programmatic perspective, the new development resembles some of the existing context, the architectural style is very different in terms of the materials and façade design.

Analysis of the pictures indicates that many businesses have changed over the years. (Figure 4) Yet, based on Myrtle Avenue Business Improvement District (BID), there is still balance between local businesses and chains stores. Preserving local businesses is very important for maintaining the characteristics of the area and has a positive impact on the sense of ownership and relations in the local community.
From 2014 to 2017, the staging site for the construction of the Plaza has been in place and has had a negative influence on the street: it separates the two sides of the street and creates safety hazards and harms businesses. (Figure 5) The pedestrian experience of walking between two fences is unpleasant and has a negative influence on the perception of safety.
**Timeline of the Reconstruction Plan**

The following is a timeline of main episodes in the development of the Myrtle Avenue Reconstruction Plan. (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late 90s</td>
<td>Taskforce for Myrtle Avenue Reconstruction Plan (MARP) was formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>MARP was incorporated</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002-2005</td>
<td>The Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn BID was formed</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>The Partnership (MARP+BID) started community engagement process— with Pratt Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>The Partnership collaborated with Project for Public Space (PPS)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>The Partnership collaborated with Street Design Incubator at Pratt to develop sitting area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>Funding resources were secured:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1.5M- Brooklyn Borough President in combination with Councilmember Letitia James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$2M- Federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~$2.5M- NYC DOT Plaza Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The design consultant- AECOM was appointed by DDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>The construction firm- CAC was appointed by DDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2017</td>
<td>Construction Stage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the different stages of the project, from initiation up to the final design and construction, important decisions were made. The following section identifies decisions that had a significant impact on the progress of the project.
Forming a civic organization

The decision to form a civic organization that would manage the effort to revitalize Myrtle Avenue was a critical point in the creation of the plaza and the reconstruction plan. This decision was one of the major recommendations of the taskforce during the early stages of the process. Looking at it from a perspective of more than 15 years, the Partnership played and is still playing a significant role in bringing the idea of quality civil space to Myrtle Avenue. Without the Partnership, the reconstruction plan would have been a top-down safety improvement project that lacked the component of a local partner. The capacity of the partnership to take a leading role in the project was critical for the funding provided through the NYC DOT Plaza Program. The program, in its early stages, was looking for established non-profit organizations to partner with that could program and maintain public space.

Choosing a ‘Compromise Approach’

I identify the decision to leave the service road between Hall Street and Grand Avenue and to create a plaza only between Grand Avenue and Emerson Place on the south side as a critical point in the project. By 2007 this alternative, which was given the name “Mix Concept”, was agreed upon as the concept for moving forward. Blaise Backer, former director of Myrtle Avenue BID described this decision as a “compromise approach” that would achieve consensus among the different stakeholders.

Some stakeholder groups were more conservative, and pressured to retain parking spaces and thus keep the design changes minimal. For example, older African-American residents who rely on driving and parking resisted these changes for not only practical reasons, but also because they conflate pedestrian and bike oriented designs with gentrification. Other stakeholders, such as Pratt’s students and younger newcomers were supportive of the greater transformation and experimental design. At that time, it was also challenging to convince property owners that the plan could increase their revenues and property value.

When the Partnership and the design consultant conducted workshops later on in the design process they focused only on this option. Other alternatives, such as creating a linear public plaza on the whole area of the service road or narrowing the road, were no longer on the table.

Deciding not to implement interim stage plaza

Myrtle Avenue was very high on the list of the first round of the NYC Plaza Program, a program that aims to transform underused streets into lively and social public plazas. The program calls for non-profit organizations to partner with the Department of Transportation (DOT) to develop and maintain the plazas. Myrtle Avenue Plaza already had a strong partner and coherent conceptual design that came out of a community engagement process. The Department of design and construction (DDC) presented a timeline to the DOT with a 2012 completion date. Based on this assumption the Public Space Unit at DOT decided not to implement an interim stage for Myrtle Avenue plaza. The interim stage usually includes removable furniture, epoxy gravel, planters and granite blocks that are temporary and can be implemented very quickly.

The previous director of the public space unit, Andy Wiley-Schwartz, has said that this is one of the sites for which he regrets not creating an interim phase. An interim stage plaza could have
really helped the partnership to ease into the maintenance, build routes, and establish programming and partnerships. People would have been more invested in the space so that when construction began they would have felt that it was improving, verses having the construction arrive suddenly and seem like a burden.

Findings

Based on the analysis of the project, important lessons can be learned about how best to execute and implement future street redesign projects. Although every project has its own characteristics and specific challenges, the following section suggests approaches that may be considered.

Implementing Interim Stage

During the process of reconstructing Myrtle Avenue, the DOT had made the decision not to develop an interim stage plaza. The decision was not challenged at the time by the Myrtle Avenue Partnership, based on the belief that there was not enough density of activities to support the plaza.

In retrospect, there could have been by now a public space for at least seven years. The irony and even absurd outcome of this decision is that now the completion of the public amenity will coincide with the completion of the luxury apartments and high-end retail shops, creating a sense that the public plaza is actually for these newcomers.

Myrtle Avenue Partnership is - and will continue to be - a dominant partner and stakeholder for the plaza. An interim stage plaza would have strengthened the capacity and the experience of the partnership with regards to programming the plaza and how best to maintain the space.

An interim stage plaza has another significant role, which is to influence and inform the capital design and reconstruction. Giving users an opportunity to experience the space and observing users’ interactions could have informed the designers about the needs of the space. For example, if users would bring their lunch and sit in the plaza, the design of the capital project could have addressed this need and provided a sitting area accordingly.

Another important aspect to this approach is the ability to create a sense of belonging and ownership among residents, business owners and visitors. When a space is transformed from serving cars to serving people and allows social interaction and leisure activity, then people start to feel some kind of connection to the public space. This development of sense of place among
users could lead to a positive attitude toward the construction of the capital project. People are more understanding and even patient when they can imagine the improvement to the street.

Choosing the most suitable design team for the scale of the project

The Myrtle Avenue reconstruction plan provides an example of the disproportionate relationship between a large international engineering firm and a local project. In other words, there was a mismatch with regards to the scale of the project and the characteristics of the design team. An international engineering company such as AECOM is not the best fit for a local project – in this case, four street blocks being redesigned. It is also a missed opportunity for a local design firm to lead the plan, possibly a team that has a connection to the site and would challenge conventional design and simple solutions.

In order to give local design firms a fair chance to be appointed, a change in the RFP process is needed. DDC, together with DOT, and the local partner should form a team for a custom RFP process to choose a consultant based on the content of the project. A consultant with previous connections to the site and the users and has been active in design efforts should get extra points in the evaluation process.

An example of suitable compatibility between the scale of a project and the characteristics of the designers is seen with Myrtle Avenue’s tree guards and tree benches project. The Myrtle Avenue Partnership collaborated with the Pratt Design Incubator to create and place tree guards and tree benches along the avenue. The benches and guards are based on the designs of local artists, designers, and even local K-12 students, made on individual laser-cut panels. The pieces reflect the neighborhood and leveraged local creative talent.

Creating Incentives to meet the project schedule

The analysis of the project’s timeline indicated that the completion of the reconstruction was delayed for several reasons. One of the reasons was the discovery of the main water line from the 18th century that caused a delay of about a year in the progress of the project. This is a pretty common problem in street reconstruction projects throughout New York City and points to a need for better coordination between DOT, DDC, Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and the utility companies.

The initial estimate for completion of the reconstruction was 2012. The reconstruction is currently estimated to be completed by 2017. Unlike private projects, where the developer loses money for every day of delay, in public projects there is not a strong incentive to complete a project on time. In these cases, the people who suffer the greatest losses are the public, business owners, residents and visitors. These delays and the attendant inconvenience and economic cost to neighborhoods undermines public support for innovative projects overall. Building trust between the local government and communities is a complicated process. Investment in the public realm with high standards regarding respect to deadlines is crucial for this process and should be prioritized.

A lesson that could be learned is that there could be great efficacy in adding incentives to public projects in order to encourage completion within reasonable time frames. The city could expedite the review process, offer the consultants a bonus for completing tasks before the deadline and prioritize public space projects over private development.
Another lesson learned regarding the project’s progress is that there is a need for strong support, either from inside or outside the government, to help mitigate obstacles that all public space projects encounter. Other more complex projects, like the Highline, were started and completed in less time than Myrtle Plaza reconstruction plan. Delays and disruptions for the Myrtle Plaza reconstruction project are systemic. It is crucial to mitigate these delays because they undermine public support for transformative projects and initiatives.

**Recommendations for Street Revitalization projects**

The following recommendations are based on the analysis of the Myrtle Avenue reconstruction plan. Some of the recommendations are New York City site specific, and others are universal and could be incorporated into any urban environment seeking to transform the experience of public spaces.

→ Appoint Design Firm as head of the consulting team

Based on the existing DDC requirement contract, street reconstruction is considered to be an infrastructure project, and an engineering firm is appointed to lead the process. David Burney, former DDC Commissioner, explained that the result of appointing an engineering firm is that the consultant emphasizes the engineering aspects of the street such as the sewage and water systems or electricity and gas lines. The design and transportation concerns get secondary attention.

Every street redesign team should include diverse professionals, landscape architects, engineers and transportation planners. The project would benefit if architects and urban planners were to lead the design consulting team, and offer a holistic approach to the plan.

To achieve this recommendation, DDC would have to reassess the requirement contract, and address public space and street redesign as a public building project that requires the sensitivity of designers that are looking for more than technical solutions for the street.

→ Test the suggested plan before reconstruction

A core lesson learned from the Myrtle Avenue study is that an interim stage provides a very important opportunity for testing the suggested changes in the public realm. Implementing an interim stage is a quick process and it has many benefits. The public can experience the place in a new formation, imagine how it could function, and use the space according to their needs. This real-life experiment is stronger than any visioning session- because it involves firsthand experience.

While the interim stage is in place, the design team could get a better sense of the community’s needs and the ways people wish to engage with the space. Programing and one-day events are additional strategies that help to engage users with the new possibilities of the public space. Experiencing a place over time through programs allows planners to continually adjust places to better meet the needs of the community. Also, programming involves a much lower barrier to entry, meaning that a broader community of individuals can be involved with minimal investment.
→ Balance between Temporary Art and Permanent Art Installation

Based on the concept of the city as an assembly of public works of art that are never finished, produced by collaboration of different people over time, this recommendation questions the existing requirement for permanent public art in street redesign projects according to New York City's Percent for Art law. This program allocates a percent of the budget for City-funded construction projects to public artwork. While the intentions of this program are positive, the outcomes in different projects have been controversial. In terms of the artwork itself, the result has been weak and the process to achieve consensus regarding the art has caused delays in the timeline.

In the past, executing public art was a “top-down” process, a statue of a “man on a horse”, such as the General William Tecumseh Sherman Statue at Grand Army Plaza, was put in place without public discussion. Implementing public art in contemporary urban design projects aims to be a “bottom-up” process. Artists are asked to propose a piece that reflects community wishes, but in some cases this process contradicts their individual vision. Achieving consensus for permanent art is more complicated than implementing temporary art that could be changed based on feedback from the public.

In some cases, temporary art programs could be preferable over permanent artwork. Temporary art may allow for more diversity. Also, the public space can grow and change with the art. Temporary art programs involve a more flexible review process that could prevent delays in the whole process. To support temporary art, the street redesign should be flexible, yet include infrastructure to accommodate different media and sizes of the art installations. A local partner should be involved in curating the art without restricting artistic expression.

→ Involve a local partner in all the planning and implementations stages

A community-based organization is an essential stakeholder for street redesign. The local partner takes an important role in coordinating the engagement process, protecting the users’ interests, and eventually programing and maintaining the new public space.

Without a local partner to take a leading role in the design process, the redesign would be a “top-down” plan that excludes an important local component. The local partner has the advantage of having an intimate familiarity with the stakeholders and the history of the place. A local partner can assist when conflicts arise and play the role of mediator.

A local partner with strong political backing would have capacity to overcome bureaucratic challenges that are inherent in public projects. Overall, the local partner may take a holistic approach and be involved in all the stages—from initiation, to design, construction and operation. This holistic approach encourages a “sense of ownership” over the public space.

→ Ensure Ongoing participatory efforts

Placemaking is a method that emphasizes the process of creating a sense of belonging to a place. Street redesign projects should actively employ placemaking strategies that create involvement and a platform for exchanging knowledge and voicing needs and different experiences in the community.

Capital reconstruction projects tend to be lengthy, yet this time could be used to create a sense of place by continuing with participatory efforts. Future users would be able to express their wishes
and needs, and be encouraged to feel like part of a group that shares a goal. The point of the ongoing participatory process is to widen the project’s potential impact. To that end, this approach should include techniques of temporary, event-based, and tactical initiatives celebrating community process, deliberative discussion, and collaboration, with a lesser focus on the production of space. There is a potential for the ongoing dialog to build connections between new and incumbent residents, and maybe even mitigate some of the social tensions of gentrification. A group of “Friends of the Plaza” could come together even before the plaza opens to educate community members about the story of the place, the history of the area, and plan for future events.

→ Promote innovation and groundbreaking design

Street redesign should push the boundaries between private and public spaces, while encouraging flexibility and multi-purpose uses of the space. Contemporary urban design projects based on participatory processes face the challenge of trying to satisfy many stakeholders often at the expense of innovation and ambitious design. On one hand, a placemaking approach and contextual design is about being responsive to community needs, in the present and the future, with respect to the past. On the other hand, experimental design can be controversial and lead to push back from stakeholders. In the Myrtle Avenue reconstruction plan, according to Blaise Baker, there was a fear of “over-design” that led to a reduction of the design making it simple with known elements. Innovative design and community needs are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be created simultaneously with a strong vision and ambitious leaders.

**Conclusion**

Street redesign projects reflect changes in the values in the field of planning and demonstrate the demand from communities for successful and vibrant public spaces. Urban streets are public places and have a larger community role to play than solely being conduits for traffic.

Street redesign projects involve government, communities, property owners, and other stakeholders collectively reimagining and reinventing existing streets to reflect the needs of their local community. Once again, the public sector is taking the responsibility for achieving the goal of lively, safe, sustainable and healthy urban streets.

Street revitalization must include collaborative processes through which the public realm can be shaped to create a more “livable” city. Successful streets provide space for activities that may include pedestrian, vehicular and public transit; cultural activities such as art and performances; eating, relaxing, socializing, strolling, and people-watching; as well as commercial activity such as retail vendors, restaurants and public markets.

Community engagement is crucial to the success of street revitalization progress, and should be ongoing throughout the process. Planners face the challenge of addressing the complex needs that communities encounter based on diverse age groups, races, class, incumbency, etc. When neighborhoods change and experience gentrification, the participation process is much more complex. Placemaking practice needs to address the clashes of values that are often surfaced in street redesign projects. Community engagement could create a dialog between newcomers and longtime residents and explain the potential implications of a suggested plan.
This study explores contextual street design, and the importance of acknowledging that every street has its own narrative and is constantly changing. The design needs to allow flexibility and multi-purpose uses and should be able to evolve with changes in the community.

**Keywords**

Placemaking, Contextual Design, Gentrification, Street Revitalization, Community Engagement

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