



Urban Outdoors is the Newsletter of Neighborhood Open Space Coalition (NOSC). It is published periodically to keep New Yorkers informed of issues and information relating to their public space system. For more information about NOSC visit www.treebranch.net.

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Furnish the Streets

New York City pays less attention to the comfort of pedestrians and the appearance of its streets than most small town centers in New York State. This is not a problem that is endemic to all big cities. New York City sidewalks seem to have fewer street-side shade trees, benches, planters, and other pedestrian amenities than most other American cities. (A recent report by former DOT transportation commissioner Lee Sanders indicates that Federal transportation spending for pedestrian improvements are made more difficult by a governmental structure that funnels federal money into larger regional projects: <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/files/bikeped.pdf>)

Lower Manhattan, once America's financial capitol looks shabby, with broken sidewalks, mismatched security infrastructure, few tree pit or potted plantings, and fewer places to sit. The place might be more attractive to companies if it were a pleasant place to walk and shop. In midtown Manhattan, many building managers and merchants consider low maintenance a higher priority than the creature comforts of tenants, employees and shoppers. Out in the 'hoods the story gets even worse. NYC's two-tier public space system extends to our streets, with affluent neighborhoods having adequate tree cover but no other public streetscape amenities and lower income neighborhoods neglecting even that basic necessity of healthy cities.

BID's Provide a Bright Spot

Some of our City's Business Improvement Districts are showing that they know how to decorate our streets. Work done around Grand Central Station and around Herald Square is especially noteworthy. This year, a street was closed off in Downtown Brooklyn to provide an al fresco dining area for fast food eateries. Less well-funded BID's in the neighborhoods have added greenery to their streets. One way to fast-forward street improvements would be for City Council to establish a fund for partnerships between the pedestrian program at DOT and local BID's to be used for street furniture and plantings.

Personal Mobility and a Place to Sit

Many Urban Outdoors readers remember Ruth Lutz as the dedicated NOSC volunteer who managed the community gardening insurance program for about 10 years. At age 92, she still gets around and regularly comes to our offices at the Neighborhood Preservation Center to help with clerical work for a number of allied organizations that share the space. Walking is harder for her these days, but some physical activity is critical to her continued health, as it is for over 1 million NYC seniors that are using our streets. The number one impediment to her continued mobility is the lack of places to sit on city sidewalks.

Street benches are not just for seniors and people with disabilities. They are places to put down the shopping bags and take a rest when you have purchased a bit too much. They can be helpful when you need to get a pebble out of that shoe. They are reading places; conversation places, alfresco dining places and they put additional eyes on the street for conviviality and security. Even as New York attempts to change policy to encourage comprehensive streetscape improvements, a simple program that will put at least one shaded bench near every street corner in our city can make a big difference for many people.

A Tough Town to Shade.

In NYC, the cost of planting a tree is around \$1400. In most instances NYC Parks requires permission of the adjacent building owner before a tree can be planted on public property. A new tree pit must be “permitted” by NYC Parks and NYC DOT. Both agencies have to inspect the site. All trees planted in tree pits must have 2 ½ inch diameter trunks to insure a reasonable chance of survival.

Underground infrastructure is another impediment to a greener city. Our subway system is largely built close to the surface of the city, leaving little space for roots. Electric, gas and utility lines reduce the number of locations that trees can be planted. DOT even has regulations preventing trees from being planted at bus stops, where they are sorely needed, and near parking meters, street corners, and omnipresent traffic signs.

Absentee landlordism and the desire to keep costs down insure that many apartment buildings will not be shaded. An increase in the number of curb cuts for private driveways has further reduced the space available for planting. Some storeowners believe that signage visible to passing motorists is a higher priority than keeping pedestrians from frying on unshaded sidewalks. Some homeowners just don't want to clean up after trees.

In spite of all of the above, overhead photos reveal that NYC has a 22% tree cover. That puts it ahead of many other big cities on total tree cover, but not necessarily sidewalk trees. NYC Parks plans to increase tree cover to 30% over the next few years. This might be made easier and less costly with an “opt out” program rather than the present “opt in”. With the availability of modern electronic communications and the need for tree cover to mitigate pollution and global warming, landowners should be asked to join a “no tree” web register if they want a bald sidewalk. The cover page of that register should note that trees raise property values, improve public health and make life more livable than

barren streets. Perhaps a dedicated “tree tax” should be imposed on landlords who don’t want trees in front of their multiple dwellings.

DOT’s limited vocabulary

In one historic Brooklyn neighborhood a street reconstruction is under way that will eliminate Belgian block streets and brick edged sidewalks. DOT says that unless someone else is willing to pay for them and insure that they will be maintained, all sidewalks are concrete, all streets are asphalt. Contrasting crosswalks, decorative sidewalks, even color added to the concrete have been rejected by DOT, which will leave the streets less attractive than they were before the reconstruction.

Enhancing walkability requires making places fun to walk in. Stimulating the senses by encouraging neighborhood individuality is an important component of a healthy city. DOT should be encouraged to use a variety of materials when it completely reconstructs a street. Wide sidewalks, decorative paving on sidewalk and crossings, new ornamental lower height lighting, benches, planters, elongated tree pits, are among the things that should be encouraged when a neighborhood street is being rebuilt. Those items should be part of the capital cost of any street reconstruction and neighborhood activists should not be told that they must raise money to pay for them and maintain them in perpetuity.

Don’t Walk! The Air is Dirty

On the hottest day of summer, NOSC was in East New York, working with the Urban Environmental Youth Corps on a project that would green one of Brooklyn’s most neglected parks. After a short slide presentation we were to walk through upper Highland Park and solicit recommendations for its improvement.

Before we left for our walk, a message flashed over the organization’s computer screens warning New Yorkers that air pollution levels were unhealthy and it was recommended that people, especially children, should stay indoors. My first reaction was a wry “There goes Urban Outdoors”.

Then the outrage set in. The air we breathe is unhealthy and the people who govern us can think of no more appropriate response than “stay indoors.” There were no announcements asking people not to drive, no odd-even controls on the number of cars allowed to drive in the city. There was not even a suggestion of a longer-term solution such as retrofitting NYC public and private fleet trucks with particulate filters.

Mayor Bloomberg Loses his Cool

In a response to legitimate complaints about the size, scale, and lack of public open space in the massive wall of buildings that a developer wishes to build over the Long Island Railroad tracks in Downtown Brooklyn, Mayor Bloomberg uncharacteristically took an accusatory tone. The gists of his comments were: “These aren’t environmentalists, they are just using environmentalism. They are NIMBYS”. Even Boro President Markowitz, no foe of development, asked that the buildings be downsized a bit.

The projects environmental impact statement indicated that a row of sky-rises higher than the Williamsburg Bank Building could be built without significantly increasing traffic. If construction begins, hopefully the buildings will be built one at a time, so that impacts can be measured against the promises before construction continues.

More from the Coalition:

URBAN OUTDOORS is the periodical newsletter of Neighborhood Open Space Coalition and Friends of Gateway. It reports on citywide public space issues and the work of hundreds of local civic groups that take an interest in the spaces. To be removed from the list “reply” with “remove” in the subject header. To join the URBAN OUTDOORS list: visit the subscription area: http://www.treebranch.net/urban_outdoors.htm.

Take a Walk, New York is NOSC’s Walk for Health Program, organized in cooperation with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. It takes New Yorkers for visits to interesting places in all five boroughs and rewards participants with a colorful passport stamp for Walk for Health passports, which we provide. For more information and to be added to the email list visit: www.walkny.org.

In addition to Urban Outdoors, NOSC hosts a number of **special interest listservs**, including Cyberpark, Cybergardens, and Jamaica Bay. These forums provide “meeting rooms” for the free exchange of relevant information between people who are doing the work of building a more humane city. For additional information and a complete list of listservs visit: <http://www.treebranch.net/listservs.htm>.

www.treebranch.net is the NOSC’s extensive web site. In addition to information about the work of the Coalition it includes an extensive list of links to many of the organizations that share the work of building a better urban environment.

The continuation of NOSC’s work depends on a strong membership and contributions from people who share our interests and appreciate our presence. Annual membership cost is \$35. Any contribution is appreciated. To join or contribute: http://partners.guidestar.org/controller/searchResults.gs?action_donateReport=1&partner=networkforgood&ein=13-3081501

Where the City Meets the Sea

A New Newsletter with an Old Name

“*Where the City Meets the Sea*” was last published in the 1990’s shortly after Friends of Gateway merged its board of directors with the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition. At that time, NOSC was developing its *Urban Outdoors* Newsletter, which grew to being an award-winning pioneer in the use of electronic media for communication of an environmental agenda for New York City. It was our intention to include Gateway news in *Urban Outdoors* on a regular basis.

Then stuff happened. NYC’s community gardens became threatened by a now-former Mayor who wanted to sell off city land. Efforts at privately funding parks hinted at a future that would create a two-tier park system and also overwhelm parks with

concessions instead of recreational opportunities that were open to everyone. Community groups formed to protect “their” parks were looking for information from around the city about what other groups were doing. The NOSC inspired NYC greenways system needed a voice in order to encourage city funding for its development. New high profile park development on “urban” waterfront locations became a focus of open space support groups. Our largest neighborhood open space, the sidewalks of New York, looked to some like the last opportunity to squeeze additional high-speed traffic into the city. Somehow Gateway got lost in the noise.

That was then. . . This is now. . .

Gateway’s 27,000 acres represent a last opportunity to develop a great new urban park in and near New York City. The National Park Service, which is the proud protector of Yosemite, Yellowstone and the other western national parks has never provided the money needed to develop our great urban national park. At the time that we published our last FoG newsletter, park management began a transition the Friends organization was less important than personnel changes. Now new management is in place that believes it is time for Gateway to meet its promise of being as much an example of urban land restoration as the Grand Canyon is of rural land preservation. Friends of Gateway will work with partners to meet this challenge. *Where the City Meets the Sea* will be a voice for that effort.

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