

Beyond Street Festivals: Creating Successful Temporary Pedestrian Spaces in the Midst of North American Car Culture – the Vancouver Experiment

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Qualification of the presenter:

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Proposal:

There are inherent challenges to every project in which temporary pedestrian spaces are created in modern urban settings, but the communities attempting this in younger auto-centric North American centres face unique obstacles not as prevalent in older cities whose foundations were laid before the rise of the automobile. Over the course of Vancouver's 2009 Summer Spaces Car Free Days Pilot, several recurring pedestrian plazas were created in different neighbourhoods with different interplay between a host of variables at each site; frequency, scale, choices in on-street activities, neighbourhood demographics, public transit impacts, and the concerns of business merchants all became intertwined with varied but equally valuable results.

The intent of the Summer Spaces trial was to build upon the success and popularity of Vancouver's block parties and annual one-day community street festivals by expanding the City's repertoire of on-street pedestrian experiences. The summertime trial utilized the 'Public Space' car free model, which aims to draw residents from the local neighbourhood to make use of new temporary public space. The most salient outcome related to this model, in addition to increased public space is increased community interaction. The community organizations selected for the 2009 trial, in partnership with the City of Vancouver, implemented a series of four very different recurring street closures. When combined, the four series produced a total of 24 instances of temporary community public space across four neighbourhoods, primarily along commercial streets, spread over July, August and September 2009. As part of the trial, the City implemented a robust monitoring and evaluation program which consisted of pedestrian and cycling counts, vehicle counts, participant intercept surveys, resident surveys, and a retail-commercial impact study. The results of the evaluation revealed that stemming primarily from the recurring nature of the street closures and the general unfamiliarity of the Public Space model within the Vancouver context, three major opportunities for improvement surfaced over the course of the trial; they relate to business impacts, transportation impacts, and difference between public expectations and the on-street experience. The evaluation has shown that there is an at-large community appetite for street experiences of this kind. As well, the experience of the four areas has proven that no single 'one size fits all' approach will assure success when implementing the Public Space model. Instead, the evaluation points consistently to three linked variables for consideration simultaneously and adjusted depending on the specific neighbourhood and street in which the recurring public space is situated. The linked variables are: scale, frequency, and on-street activities.