



Planning for a New Public Realm

Reimagining Outdoor Gathering Spaces in Our Modern Reality



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Beautiful, accessible, and adequately scaled open-air spaces where people transact business, enjoy cultural events, recreate, and even protest, have been essential elements of the urban landscape for much of recorded history. COVID-19 had an initial crippling effect on some of the world’s great outdoor gathering spaces. As the public’s early fears of contagion forced strict stay-at-home and social distancing measures, Italy’s iconic piazzas and New York’s Central Park were suddenly empty.

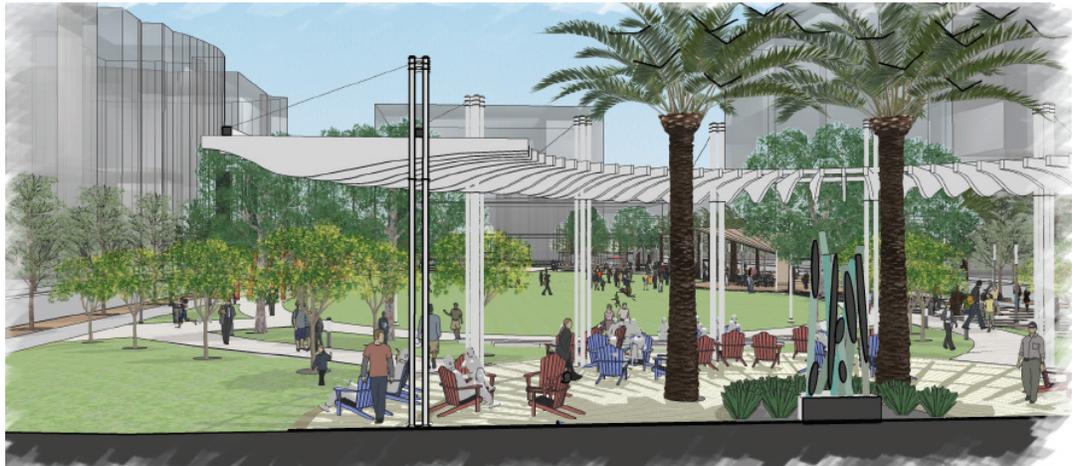
Following initial closures, “**Outdoor Rooms**” slowly opened back up as vital spaces of respite and even as avenues to public health. The coronavirus’s extended life is underlying the importance of the public gathering place in people’s lives and reveals new opportunities for designers and planners.

What will future public gathering spaces look like? How can we prioritize public safety and the significance of places like Rome’s Piazza Navona and New England’s Boston Common in people’s lives, while also providing value to businesses that skirt the parks, developers planning new communities, and cities looking for resiliency in their streets and neighborhoods? **This moment in time presents an opportunity to reimagine a modern Outdoor Room by considering four significant areas: design, planning, multimodal transportation, and public health.**

Design: Bringing the Inside Outdoors

What would a public park look like if planners and designers considered surrounding building facades as the Outdoor Room’s “interior elevations”? Neighboring buildings and peripheral streets and sidewalks are essential design elements of great outdoor rooms. As outdoor spaces continue to be reinterpreted and repositioned, the potential symbiotic relationship between the open space and its immediate surroundings is amplified. Each adds incremental value to the other. The outdoor room benefits from the exposure and activity fostered from adjacent buildings.

In Orlando, Florida, VHB landscape designers and urban planners worked with the master developer to design an urban park as the “living room” of the City’s bustling new Creative Village. Serving students at the University of Central Florida and Valencia College Downtown, thousands of residents and office workers at Creative Village, and the surrounding historic Black community of Parramore. Bordered by mid- to high-rise buildings with apartments, student housing, education space, retail, and offices, the Park’s northern zone will have a raised elevation for optimal, unobstructed views of the Orlando skyline across the multi-use great lawn. An intentional, place-making focal point of the urban village will be an 80-foot-wide trellis structure featuring colored LED lighting and flexible seating for pedestrians.



Creative Village’s park was planned for a diverse population. VHB’s landscape plan for the park includes a multi-use great lawn and a Palm Promenade. Its focal point is an iconic North Trellis community gathering place.

Streets bordering outdoor rooms are multi-dimensional and provide an opportunity to aid ailing businesses during COVID-19. Cities like Winter Park, Florida, limited vehicular access to its brick-paved Park Avenue. Restaurants spilled into the streets. Pedestrians and their pets were again able to greet each other (masked and leashed) on the popular, narrow thoroughfare that now serves as an extension of the abutting park and adjacent business. **Tactical or pop-up urbanism interventions** like these reveal the synergistic relationships between transportation and public spaces.

Planning: Prioritizing Outdoor Space as an Investment

We can no longer afford for open spaces to be afterthoughts. All too frequently, public open spaces are dismissed or situated on leftover, throw-away pieces of land. Planners, designers, and developers who prioritize these spaces in the early stages of the real estate development cycle create the greatest and most sustained benefits. A well-conceived, carefully executed, and properly managed Outdoor Room can catalyze additional investment in the surrounding area. **Greenville, South Carolina, is an excellent example of this phenomenon.** Nestled in the Appalachian Mountains foothills, today's Greenville is vastly different from the Greenville of the 1960s, dotted with vacant buildings and few people.

A critical component of Greenville's turnaround was the collaboration between the private and public sectors to improve the quality of the city's public realm. **By investing together in the revitalization of their downtown streets, engaging with critical community stakeholders and park users, they built a spectacular outdoor room in the heart of the city: Falls Park.** Since the park's completion in 2004, millions of dollars of additional investment have found their way to Downtown Greenville, including the first BMW production facility outside Germany.

Any capital investments into the creation of an Outdoor Room can easily be amortized over time. For this to occur, they must be well-promoted, accessible, flexible, safe, and considered at the onset of planning. Well-designed Outdoor Rooms can evolve into identifiable and memorable places with their own brand equity. People develop a strong affinity for the area, resulting in a sense of ownership and reduced residential turnover.

Multimodal Transportation: Creating Options and Access for All

People that have easy access to parks and open greens are using them now more than ever. Post-COVID-19, the nature of how they arrive and depart could change significantly. A nation-wide bicycle shortage is evidence of our basic need for exercise and outdoor enjoyment. **An increase in bike commuting could transform paths of mobility through parks.** Multimodal trails that accommodate autonomous vehicles, wheelchairs, bicycles, and other modes of transportation will accelerate.

Unfortunately, not everyone has equal access to quality Outdoor Rooms and must travel long distances by car or public transit to enjoy the benefits provided by these places.

Social and economic justice issues must remain top-of-mind when considering user access to the public realm.

Where streets define the perimeter of public outdoor spaces, they need to be multi-dimensional, properly scaled, and easily accessible for pedestrians, cyclists, subway riders, and others. Will a germ-conscious post-COVID-19 passenger be more inclined to arrive on foot or via rideshare? How can we redesign valuable curb space for both deliveries and pedestrians to access restaurants and small businesses when streets shut down during a pandemic?



In partnership with the Massachusetts DOT on the Ink Block Understory project, VHB helped to transform urban space.

Public Health: Fostering Community and Well Being

Post-COVID-19 populations will want to congregate, but not rub elbows, and by now are all too familiar with the six-feet-apart rule. Still, the Center for Disease Control recognizes the importance of visiting public parks to relieve stress and stay active even during pandemics in its own [COVID-19 guidelines](#). Communities are creatively adapting while considering public health.

At Merchants Square North Plaza in Williamsburg, Virginia, VHB created a plan to transform a parking lot nestled between the historic area of Colonial Williamsburg and the College of William and Mary into an expansive outdoor gathering space with a large central lawn and ample, shaded seating for al fresco dining and people watching, movie nights, and picnics. It is a flexible space created with young families and millennials in mind. To encourage movement, special attention was given to universal accessibility, access points and circulation routes for pedestrians and retail. The character of the surrounding building mirrors neighboring Colonial Revival buildings but there is no mistaking its modern thrust.



Strong pedestrian connectivity via strategically located perimeter portals encourages walking to and from Colonial Williamsburg, and stopping to play, dine, and relax in the green space and its surrounding shops. VHB worked with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation to give special attention to universal accessibility.

Planners and designers can also keep their finger on the pulse of national health and safety guidelines by forging relationships with federal, state, and local health officials. In dense urban places with few parks, **Outdoor Rooms can provide access to “pop-up” critical health services**, such as when an emergency field hospital was situated on Central Park’s lawn during the height of New York City’s public health response. A barber also set up shop in the Park to provide free haircuts to people who may not otherwise have access to basic hygienic services.

New approaches to social distancing will become the norm. “People parking spots” designated by spray-painting large hearts on park greens, like those incorporated in England’s Bristol Parks’ #BristolTogether campaign, urged neighbors to return to parks with safety enhancements in place.

Healthy communities create robust economies, so planners should connect trail systems to parks, include handwashing stations and self-sanitizing water fountains. **Collaboration with tech healthcare designers and manufacturers could see innovation in hospital-grade materials for park playground equipment that disinfects and sterilizes on touch.**

Beyond the playground, we will see new ways of occupying children—and adults—using community gardens where families can grow their own vegetables. **U.S. developers of more than 90 new, niche agrihoods were already focused on saving space for community gardens and small farms that engage families and neighbors in a suburban, back-to-the-land atmosphere.** Expect the value of agrihoods and their attractiveness to buyers to increase.



HOW VHB CAN HELP

Planners of great places to live, work, and play have long understood and embraced the benefits of prioritizing the public realm by mindfully creating space for outdoor gatherings. **Future-proofing existing outdoor urban spaces and planning for new ones means considering both technological advances and adaptations to current disruptions.** Are you faced with planning and design challenges associated with creating or reimagining Outdoor Rooms? VHB can help. Contact [Joe Barnes](#) today to start planning memorable, sustainable, and resilient public spaces for tomorrow.