

PLANNING PUBLIC SPACES

Lessons learned from Vancouver's Downtown Public Space Strategy

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ABSTRACT

High quality and equitably distributed public spaces have numerous benefits for city residents. However, strategies for managing and planning public space remain a challenge for city planners, due in part to their wide scope and context-specificity. The City of Vancouver's Places for People: Downtown Public Space Strategy (DPSS) was approved in the summer of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic gave new relevance and urgency to public space planning.

This case in point is in collaboration with the Downtown Public Space Strategy project co-leads: Thomas Daley (Urban Planning), and Danielle Wiley (Engineering Services). The research explores the process of developing the DPSS, focusing on lessons learned from adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic, managing interdepartmental collaboration, and the wide scope of public space planning.

1.0 / INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are vital to inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities (United Nations, 2015). A target for goal #11 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals is: "by 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities" (United Nations, 2015).



FIGURE 1 | Public space in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

High quality public spaces support positive outcomes for residents such as good health, social cohesion, and wellbeing, and can contribute to wider society challenges such as climate change adaptation, economic development, and transportation (Duivenvoorden et al., 2020, p.1).

Yet effective strategies for public spaces remain a city planning challenge. The wide scope of the benefits of public spaces point to the complex and interdisciplinary nature of planning for them. According to Duivenvoorden et al. (2020), effective strategies to align the "fragmented departments responsible for the management and maintenance of public space" (p.1) are much needed, and remain an area of planning which has been relatively under discussed in the planning literature.

In June 2020, the City of Vancouver's Downtown Public Space Strategy (DPSS) was approved by city council. The strategy aims to, "serve as the basis to guide cohesive and connected, people centred urban design around Vancouver's Downtown peninsula" (City of Vancouver, 2019, p.2). While public engagement and development for the strategy began in 2017, the strategy was ultimately completed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. These unforeseen circumstances gave new relevance and

urgency to planning public spaces, particularly in Vancouver's dense downtown. According to cell phone data released by Google, people in British Columbia were using park space 125% more than usual in May 2020 - likely due to restrictions related to the pandemic (Google, 2020). This new urban dynamic, whether a temporary or long term shift, reveals the "important role planners can play in expediting more sustainable forms of urban development" (Azzalie et al., 2021, p.72). This case in point seeks to explore how the DPSS addresses public spaces, how the strategy has adapted to the changing circumstances of COVID-19, and what planners can learn from the City's planning process.



FIGURE 2 | Residents using street furniture.

2.0 / BACKGROUND

Downtown Vancouver makes up only 6% of the city's land, but is home to 16% of the city's residents (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.18). Over the next 20 years, the downtown population is expected to gain 30,000 people and 75,000 new jobs (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.18).

This forecasted population growth would bring Downtown Vancouver to a density of 24,088 people/km² - which is nearly the current density of Manhattan, NYC (City of Vancouver and Gehl, 2019, p.18). The quality, accessibility and distribution of public spaces becomes an important issue for the city as an increasing proportion of the population dwells in smaller living spaces often without private backyards.

Policies for public space are an important planning initiative for the City of Vancouver as it balances population growth while aiming to maintain a high quality of life for its downtown residents.

In addition to being vital to a high quality of life, the City of Vancouver positions public space as playing an important supporting role in meeting other key City objectives. Such objectives include those related to equity and accessibility, reconciliation, housing affordability, climate action and resiliency, and local economy (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.8).

The DPSS also addresses what had been a policy gap in the City's downtown plans - there was previously no plan for the public realm, nor was there an existing inventory of public spaces.

The City discusses the public realm using two interconnected concepts: public space and public life. Public space refers to places that are free and accessible for public use. Public life refers to the shared experience of intermingling in public spaces: "it is the everyday life that unfolds in streets, plazas, parks, and spaces between buildings" (City of Vancouver and Gehl, 2018, p.13).

The DPSS provides guidance for the designing and developing of cohesive, connected, and people-oriented public spaces (City of Vancouver, 2019, p.2). It provides a framework to (Vancouver, 2020b, p.8):

1. Deliver a holistic public realm;
2. Inform future public space related policies;
3. Engage communities in public space planning and stewardship; and
4. Leverage public space initiatives to fulfill City priorities such as the Climate Emergency Response and the Equity Framework.



FIGURE 4 | Volunteer for the Public Spaces Public Life study.

3.0

THE CASE

The DPSS was a key output of an extensive research and public engagement process. The process took place from 2017 to 2020, and included four phases (City of Vancouver, 2020b, p.6):

- Phase 1 - Vision, Values and Favourite Places (July-August 2017)
- Phase 2 - Public Space and Public Life Study (September 2017 – June 2018)
- Phase 3 - Testing Ideas and Directions (July 2018)
- Phase 4 - Confirming Directions (September 2019)

In June of 2020, city council approved the plan, and the implementation phase began.



FIGURE 3 | Jonathan Rodgers Park, Vancouver.

Public Space Public Life study

Gehl, the urban design and research consultancy, assisted the City of Vancouver with Public Space and Public Life (PSPL) study. Gehl has worked on PSPL studies in other cities around the world. Their process involves surveying physical and social elements, using observation, and developing inventories to serve as evidence for the areas and types of improvements needed to the existing stock of public spaces (City of Vancouver and Gehl, 2018, p.9). According to Thomas Daly, project co-lead for the DPSS, the involvement of the Gehl team was highly valuable to managing and analysing the large volume of data collected through the PSPL study.



FIGURE 5 | Intercept survey questions for the Public Life Public Space study.

The Public Spaces Public Life study was oriented around two guiding questions:

1. How can Downtown Vancouver better support vibrant and dynamic Public Life with everyday experiences, events and activities that serve all people?
2. What is the character and quality of Public Space in Downtown today? How can we expand the Public Space network and make better use of existing spaces? (City of Vancouver and Gehl, 2018, p.22)

To help answer these questions, the PSPL study team conducted surveys in 115 downtown locations over four days - two in summer, two in winter, each one weekday and one weekend day (City of Vancouver and Gehl, 2018). Both intercept and observational surveys were conducted. The intercept surveys had 878 respondents in the summer, and 630 respondents in the winter. The observational surveys studied people's behaviour in the public spaces - people staying in place versus moving through the spaces; observations about their specific behaviour in doing these activities; and basic observable demographic information about the person, such as age group.

Initial Insights

One output of the PSPL study was a mapped inventory of all existing public spaces, and areas for improvement, in Downtown. This inventory included a gap analysis, analysing the availability of four main public spaces functions that all communities should have access to: social, play, respite, and commercial public spaces (City of Vancouver, 2019, p.4). The PSPL study also culminated in eight overall findings about the use, design and distribution of public spaces downtown (City of Vancouver and Gehl, 2018, p.88):

1. While all downtown residents are in walking distance of a public space, not all were in walking distance of all four times of key public space functions.
2. There is opportunity to better celebrate and leverage the unique contextual, historical, and cultural identities of individual public spaces.
3. There is opportunity to attract more people to spend time in public spaces during varying hours of the day and seasons of the year.
4. Due to unwelcoming designs, some spaces are perceived of as private, even if they are in fact public.
5. Civic institutions have the opportunity to develop more inviting public spaces on their property.
6. Public spaces near transportation destinations, such as stations and bridge landings, are good opportunities for public space improvements.
7. In some cases, better connections between neighbourhoods and amenities could be established.
8. A need was identified for more public seating.



FIGURE 6 | Public engagement for the Downtown Public Space Strategy.

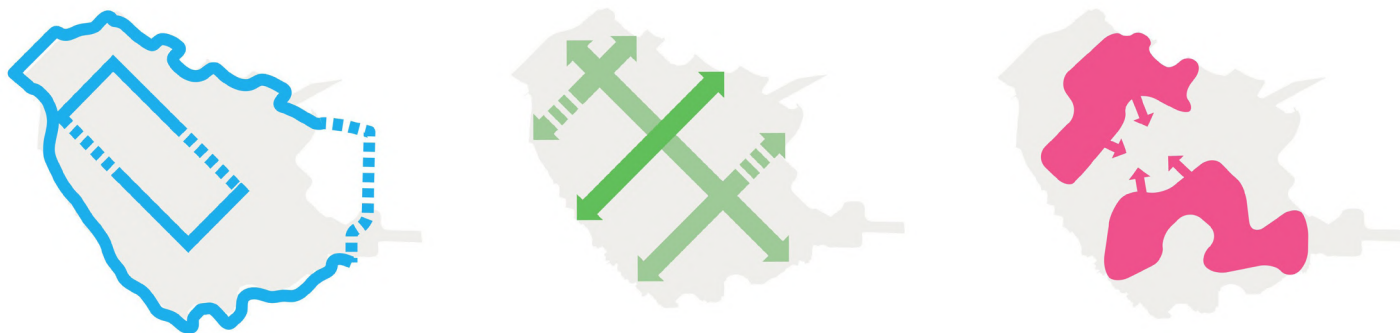


FIGURE 8 | Key moves guiding the implementation of the DPSS, from left to right: “complete the loops,” “connect shore to shore,” and “fill in the gaps.”

The Downtown Public Space Strategy

These eight findings and other insights gained through the PSPL study provided the foundations for the Downtown Public Life Strategy, the 30-year vision guiding the planning, design, programming, and stewardship of downtown public spaces (City of Vancouver, 2019, p.1). The process-oriented strategy approaches public space planning with values such as citizen-centered design, participatory public engagement, and data-driven decision-making (City of Vancouver, 2020d, p.9).



FIGURE 7 | Inventory of public spaces in Downtown Vancouver.

The body of the DPSS is mainly composed of six strategic directions (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.28-29):

1. **For All, by All:** To provide welcoming and safe spaces for all, and encourage a sense of collective use and stewardship of public spaces.
2. **The “Right” Supply:** To ensure the distribution of public spaces appropriately and equitably fit the demand.

3. **Design for People:** To provide spaces supporting a high quality of public life.
4. **Day-long, Year-long:** To ensure public spaces support uses all year round, during the day and night.
5. **Nature and Resilience:** To take the natural environment, climate and disaster resiliency into account when planning public spaces.
6. **Connecting Places:** To ensure the accessibility and navigability of the public space network for all kinds of mobility.

An additional set of three ‘key moves’ guide the implementation of the policies: “complete the loops” defined by existing public space network; “connect shore to shore” leveraging the existing waterfront space; and “fill in the gaps” to ensure that all public space functions are accessible in all neighbourhoods downtown (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.98-99).

The DPSS includes policies targeting both temporary and long term projects, and public realm improvements using both the built form and programming of spaces. Examples of policies include: reducing barriers in the City’s regulations and approval processes for temporary projects on streets and underutilized lots (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.43); updating the urban design guidelines for weather protection (p.74); and coordinating with

4.0 ANALYSIS

Challenge: Responding to the pandemic

The Downtown Public Space Strategy was ultimately completed and brought to city council in the summer of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Danielle Wiley, project co-lead, once the pandemic hit, there was worry among the team that public spaces would no longer be a priority item for the City. But, as the pandemic unfolded, it quickly became evident that the public space strategy had new importance.

In the council report for the DPSS, a prologue was included to acknowledge that the policy was developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It stated that the DPSS, “takes on new relevance and urgency in this period of crisis and the period of recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the importance of public space in our communities and to the function of our city” (Vancouver, 2020b, p.2).

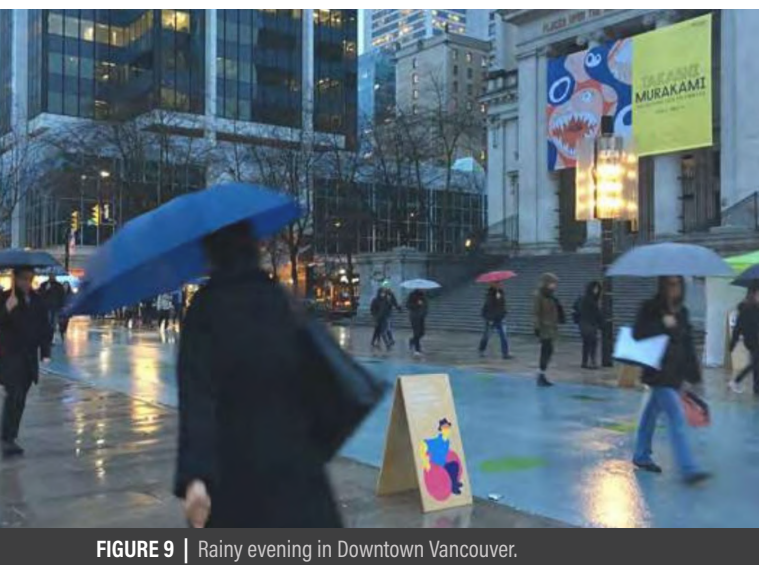


FIGURE 9 | Rainy evening in Downtown Vancouver.

The prologue also detailed how public space initiatives were already being used to adapt to the circumstances brought on by the pandemic (Vancouver, 2020b, p.2):

- The City prioritized interventions supporting the most vulnerable members of society, especially those in the Downtown Eastside and essential workers on the front lines of the pandemic.
- The City directed temporary street reallocations of over 11% of existing road space for “people-friendly public spaces” such as patios and walking routes.
- The City partnered with businesses and neighborhoods to further prioritize public spaces during the pandemic.

The council report also proposed that the DPSS and its policies are well positioned to play a pivotal role during the recovery from the pandemic. This notion was echoed by Thomas, who suggested that one of the strengths of the DPSS is its adaptability and that the strategy was always intended to be responsive to changing conditions.

In the council motion approving the DPSS, multiple conditions were applied, two of which related to the pandemic. First, the conditions stated that the DPSS should be applied to COVID-19 pandemic recovery initiatives related to public life and local business. Second, it stated that City staff should focus on developing and implementing ideas that make public spaces welcoming particularly to people who are homeless.

Challenge: Collaboration between departments

A challenge inherent to planning public spaces is that they are inherently interdepartmental. The DPSS describes the many roles that the city has in its public spaces: “planning and design; implementation and construction; testing and tactical urbanism; maintenance and operations; programming, events and permitting; stewardship and partnerships; parks board” (City of Vancouver, 2020a, p.9). The DPSS was co-lead by the planning and engineering departments. Thomas and Danielle noted that setting up an interdepartmental strategy can be challenging. For example, engineering departments may focus more on implementation, and less on policy. Close collaboration was required to successfully co-develop the public space strategy.

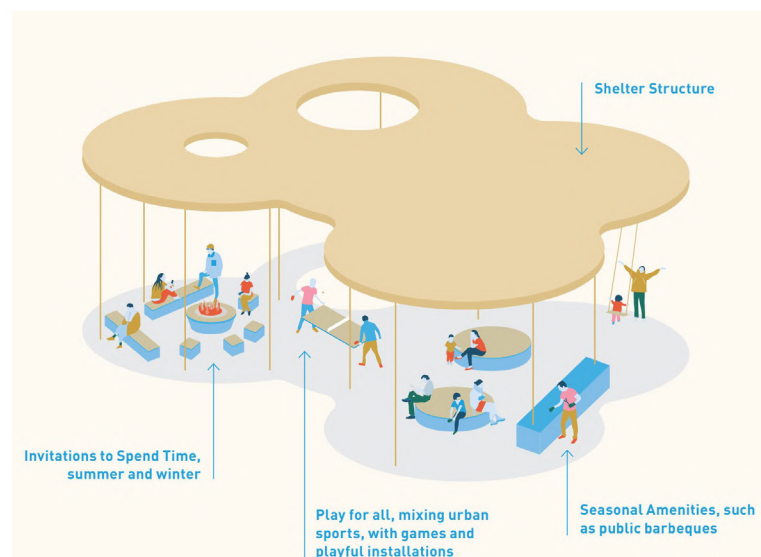


FIGURE 10 | All year design considerations in the DPSS.

Challenge: Narrowing the scope

Public space planning is context-specific in nature, and the large geography of the downtown peninsula was complex to research and address with a single strategy. The DPSS focuses on Downtown Vancouver, excluding the Downtown Eastside and False Creek areas. These neighbourhoods were originally supposed to be included, but according to Thomas, the planning team found the scope to be unmanageably wide.

LESSONS LEARNED

Lesson: Collaboration between departments

Thomas and Danielle described the collaboration between their departments as essential to the success of the DPSS. Danielle joined the project team midway through the planning process, as a co-lead on the project with Thomas. They posited that it was crucial to give equal voices to the planning and engineering departments, and establish early agreement about the objectives of the project. Getting buy-in from the highest level possible from all relevant departments from the offset also proved to be essential in getting the policy to council and ultimately approved. Were they to do the project again, Danielle and Thomas noted that they would like to more heavily involve the social planning department, which was involved later in the process.



FIGURE 11 | Sunny day in Downtown Vancouver.

Lesson: Narrowing the scope

Thomas recommended keeping the scope of public space plans as narrow as possible. Research and engagement for the plan involved covering many topics. While the Public Space Public Life study had help from a third party, analysis of the data was still challenging and highly resource intensive. Narrowing the scope would have enabled more context-specific engagement strategies, such as producing the intercept surveys in different languages to cater to the specific needs of each neighbourhood. A smaller scope also would have made it easier to develop more policies focused on vulnerable populations, whose needs tend to be very specific. Similar projects would benefit from keeping their scope and geographic scale as focused as possible.

Lesson: Responding to the pandemic

The DPSS was essentially complete when the pandemic started to unfold. But the process-oriented design of the DPSS meant that it was able to adapt to the changing circumstances. Also, while the City of Vancouver established emergency actions to address pandemic challenges related to supporting residents and local businesses, these actions were supported by the policies already established by the Strategy. Nevertheless, Danielle noted that in light of the events of the past year, if they were to write the DPSS now, stronger emphasis would have been placed on policies addressing core needs, such as access to water fountains and public washrooms.

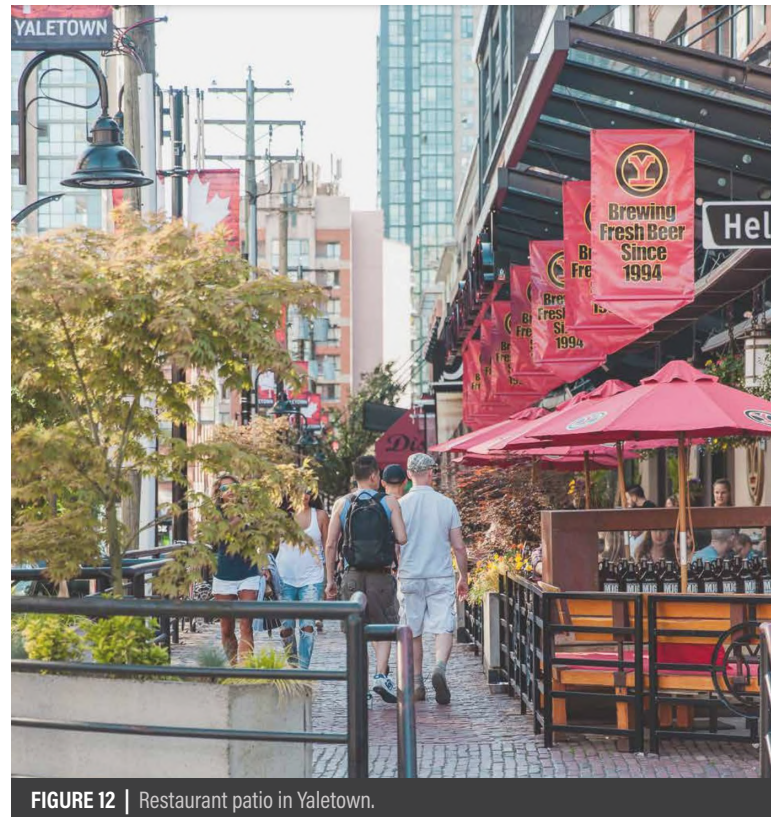


FIGURE 12 | Restaurant patio in Yaletown.

Lesson: Meeting the needs of vulnerable populations

Designing inclusive public spaces for all residents, including vulnerable populations, was emphasized in the DPSS from the offset. The DPSS project team worked with the social planning department on engagement with vulnerable populations, particularly with the homeless population. They recommended working with intermediary groups, such as non-profits and social enterprises who already have established relationships with these communities. Looking ahead to post-pandemic circumstances, the team is thinking about working with these groups in the future on 'magnet events', which can provide free services to the homeless community, while using the opportunity to engage with them about their community concerns.

CONCLUSION

The Downtown Public Space Strategy takes a holistic and process-oriented approach to public space planning and design. Its influence on policies will play an important role in maintaining a high quality of life for the city's residents as the downtown peninsula continues to increase in population density over the next 20 years.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of public space planning, the DPSS may serve as a valuable model for other Canadian cities seeking to improve their inventory of public spaces.



FIGURE 13 | Public life in Downtown Vancouver.

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Image Resources

Cover image: Illustration from the Downtown Public Space Strategy. Retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/downtown-public-space-strategy.pdf>.

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