



Garment District Alliance
209 West 38th Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10018
212.764.9600 T
212.764.9697 F

www.garmentdistrict.nyc
#garmentdistrict
Info@garmentdistrictnyc.com

GARMENT DISTRICT URBAN GARDEN ON BROADWAY

Garment District Alliance Public Space Award Submission

2018 IDA Downtown Achievement Awards

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OVERVIEW

New York's Garment District has a rich history and an enviable location. Centrally located in midtown Manhattan, in the middle of the "transportation triangle" of Penn Station, Port Authority and Grand Central Terminal, the Garment District is the most convenient neighborhood in New York. Built by and for the apparel industry early in the 1920s, the neighborhood offers classic lofts and an abundance of much-needed Class B & C office buildings.

However, despite these obvious advantages, the decline of apparel manufacturing, the neighborhood's complicated zoning history, and a dearth of public investment have restricted the Garment District's economic development. This has left the neighborhood lagging behind the rest of Midtown in several critical ways, most notably in the quality of the public realm.

In 2009, the New York City Department of Transportation closed one lane of traffic on Broadway from 36th to 41st, and designated the space for pedestrian use under its newly created NYC Plaza Program. These plazas, called the Garment District Plazas, added new public space to the district for the first time in nearly 40 years. The Garment District Alliance (GDA) became the maintenance partner, responsible for operating, maintaining and managing the spaces. Since then, the GDA has invested in excess of \$4MM in the Broadway pedestrian plazas.

This past year, the GDA once again partnered with NYCDOT. This time, the goal was to transform Broadway into a completely car-free civic space. The result was a first-of-its-kind in New York City seasonal placemaking program built around the temporary closing of Broadway to vehicular traffic from 36th to 37th Streets and 39th to 40th Streets. In all, the project, called the Garment District Urban Garden, included more than 26,000 square feet of public space, and ran from June 9th to September 1st, 2017.

DESIGN

The design concept for the space was developed internally by GDA staff. The vision was to create a curb-to-curb passive green space for the neighborhood's workers, residents, and visitors that served as a respite from the harsh built environment that defines midtown. In particular, the Urban Garden concept was intended to be an inversion of the two commercial squares that abut the Garment District to the north and south, which are known for their saturation of digital screens and crowds, Times Square and Herald Square.

To bring this concept to life, the increased public space featured an array of amenities that emulated a garden environment and allowed for passive use, including 100 planters, 19 twenty-foot-tall birch trees, 16 turf boxes, 2 permaculture parklets, 85 tables, 200 chairs, and a bike lane. The new space was also activated by custom programming, which included a 400-foot-long "road tattoo" art installation by Steed Taylor, the UrbanSpace Garment District Food Market, a free pop-up lemonade stand (called Broadway Squeeze), and weekly fitness classes (Broadway Sweat).

COMMUNITY RECEPTION

The inaugural Garment District Urban Garden was widely considered a success by neighborhood stakeholders, City agencies and community organizations. The project achieved three critical goals that led to its success: it met the community's need for more public space, it shifted the perception that streets have a singular, fixed use, and its design was temporary and flexible.

When NYCDOT closed one lane of traffic on Broadway in 2009, it was the first time in nearly 40 years that public space had been added to the Garment District. The Urban Garden project expanded the district's total public space by 80%. This increase in capacity is critical to meet the demand of the neighborhood. From 2006 to 2016, total private employment in the neighborhood grew from 94,000 to over 134,000, a 42% increase. These new employees, many of whom work at "innovation economy" firms in technology, advertising, media, and information, seek open space outside their offices to make calls, eat lunch or conduct informal meetings. Increasingly, outdoor public space is an amenity that leading companies are expecting in a neighborhood. The Urban Garden helps position the Garment District as a place where the best companies can make a home.

The Urban Garden project was also significant in its ability to shift perceptions in whom streets are for, how they should be used, and when. Before this project, the Department of Transportation's public space portfolio included pilot street closures (typically closed indefinitely), single-day street closures (e.g., NYC Summer Streets), and micro street closures (i.e., parklets). The Garment District Urban Garden was innovative in its approach as a *seasonal* street closure. In the summer months, when office workers, residents and visitors are more inclined to be outdoors in midtown, the demand for public space increases exponentially. The Urban Garden accommodates this demand and promotes the idea that streets can have a seasonal functionality to accommodate community needs.

Finally, the Urban Garden project relied upon a flexible design that could be iterated in real time. Throughout the process we learned what worked and what didn't. One of the first things we learned was that a "shared space" for pedestrians and cyclists was not effective. People on bikes and people walking travel at very different speeds; mixing the two, we found, endangered the pedestrians. We adapted the space by using planters to separate the cyclists, creating a makeshift protected bike lane. We also experimented with different horticultural tactics. We incorporated two custom-built permaculture parklets into the space that were designed in a modular form that could be taken apart and rearranged, and included a self-watering system using ollas (clay pots). What we learned, however, is that modular units filled with soil are hardly easy to move, and, while a self-irrigating system sounds good in theory, in practice, the plants need human attention daily to remove litter that accumulates in the beds. Our hope is that in the future, if the Broadway corridor is ever fully "pedestrianized," our design iterations and experiments will lead to a better designed permanent public space.

METRICS

To measure public perception of the project, the GDA retained the services of a market research firm to conduct intercept surveys along Broadway from July 10th to 13th. One thousand people were intercepted and asked about their opinions of the space. Some of the notable findings include:

- 84% of all respondents said they would like to see Broadway closed to vehicles either for the summer season only or all year long.
- 91% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed the UrbanSpace Food Market had a positive impact on the neighborhood.
- 80% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed the public art installation had a positive impact on the Broadway streetscape.

The GDA also measured changes in foot traffic by analyzing our Springboard pedestrian camera counters before and during the Urban Garden. Overall, 1.8 million more pedestrians were counted on the Urban Garden blocks in June and July, 2017, as compared to the same time in 2016, a 27% increase. This growth was extremely beneficial to our ground floor retailers. This finding was corroborated by our post-installation retail survey, in which merchants said the following:

- "Foot traffic increased...let's keep it this way!"
- "It has brought more customers to this location and provides them with a comfortable place to relax."
- "This has brought business to our neighborhood."
- "Make it permanent."

A full report of the study and its findings is available online at garmentdistrict.nyc.