



Change the streets, change the city

BY JOHN MASSENGALE

The protest marches on our city streets demand our attention. But with phase one of the economic reopening starting last week, we need to think about how to use those public spaces to survive the fallout of the pandemic.

Even before the reopening, there were twice as many people driving into Manhattan than we saw at the lowest point in April.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has put the responsibility for fixing that on New Yorkers. He said commuters will have to “improvise” how they get to work.

“I really want to push back on the notion that we can solve everything all the time,” de Blasio said.

That’s not good enough.

We can’t mire the recovery process in regulations and bureaucracy.

Here’s a multipronged plan that can help reopen and renew New York City.

We need to act quickly, before out-of-town drivers reclaim city streets for their cars.

Other American cities are already widening sidewalks and opening

WE NEED A NETWORK OF OPEN STREETS THAT PEOPLE CAN USE

streets to restaurants.

We need what tactical urbanists call lighter, quicker, cheaper strategies for opening our streets in new ways before a surge of drivers makes that impossible.

We need a network of open streets that people can use to hike and bike around the city, and we need that network to connect to streets with retail businesses, so that stores and restaurants can reopen successfully.

The open streets we have now are scattered here and there, in isolation, and they don’t support the needs of stores and restaurants.

Cities, including Portland, Ore. and Philadelphia, are already working on such a plan.

Helping store owners

If we allow restaurants to have widely spaced dining tables and stores to have display tables, social distancing will push pedestrians out into the streets, which

must be closed to car traffic. Any cars or delivery trucks on the street will have to share the space with people.

European experience shows, perhaps counterintuitively, that these shared-space streets are much safer for everyone than the standard New York street, where the center is reserved for moving cars as pedestrians are kicked to the side of the road.

Renew New York

If we don’t help them immediately, many businesses will not come back.

Restaurant and store owners and employees need to go back to work if they are going to survive.

Even before the lockdown order, many storefronts in the city and across the state were empty.

De Blasio and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer have proposed a tax on vacant storefronts to counter the problem.

Another solution would make use of those vacancies.

The city could help fill those shops by providing free space for three months.

To get the storefront for free, the tenant moving in signs a contract agreeing either to begin paying rent after three months or to move out.

They tried it in Australia, and many of the spaces have gone to makers and artists, who have successfully incubated new businesses.

Positive changes

Unless we act quickly, the most likely scenario for the future of New York is that cars will come back in higher numbers than before, local businesses will fail, storefronts will remain empty, and hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers will be unemployed.

We can do better.

For the health of New Yorkers and the planet, we don’t want to go back to the old status quo.

Americans are marching in the streets to improve the future. Changing how we use those streets in everyday life would change how we live.

Change the streets and change the city. ■

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Commercial real estate has another public health problem

Sharply reduced water flow is a recipe for bacterial amplification

BY CHRISTOPH LOHR AND TERENCE O'BRIEN

A unique and unintended health hazard lies in wait for tenants of shuttered commercial buildings poised to reopen in the coming weeks: potentially harmful microbes in stagnant water systems.

Because of stay-at-home orders, building water systems and the municipal supply lines that feed them have experienced dramatically reduced flow, even total stagnation, as

square feet of normally busy commercial space idle, creating the perfect breeding ground for waterborne microbes, the threat is exponentially worse. Building owners and managers must take the issue seriously.

Systemic failure

The science behind the phenomenon is well documented. City water systems were designed for increasing volumes based on projected population growth trends. Drinking-water disinfectants, such as chlorine, depend on system-design calculated flows, which include a short time to consumption in order to be effective. A near-over-night shutdown of water flow in large buildings has increased “water age,” allowing chlorine and chloramine disin-

fectant levels to dissipate, thus causing a systemic failure of a building’s entire water network.

Even if individual owners attempt to do the right thing by flushing systems, there is no guarantee they will return chloramine levels to where they need to be for safe operating. Because chlorine breaks down relatively quickly (think how often pH levels in a swimming pool must be checked), traditional drinking-water disinfection meth-

ods might contribute to a critical failure under these unique circumstances.

A study by a water systems expert, Dr. Victor Yu of the University of Pittsburgh, finds that *L. pneumophila* is already prevalent in complex building water systems. Approximately 70% of 3-story and taller buildings regularly test positive for the bacteria, for instance. Given the ready-made conditions for microbial infection, obsolete guidance and conventional standard practices simply are not enough to properly ensure tenant and visitor safety.

Water professionals including engineers, licensed master plumbers and contractors have a great opportunity to make a positive difference as New York City continues to reopen by improving the safety of critical water supply systems. Likewise, building owners can seize a rare moment to make important health and wellness updates, many for the first time in decades. The question is, will they? ■

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