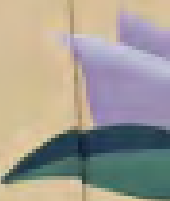




Retail Apocalypse

Plan for Reinvigorating Commerce in
Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen



Urban Planning Studio Final Report
Columbia GSAPP
Spring 2021

Spring 2021
Columbia University
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation

Professors: Anthony Borelli & Sybil Wa

Magda Maaoui, TA

Derek Brennan, Jianwen Du, Eryn Halvey, Hanbo Lei, Danqing Ma,
Sarah Mawdsley, Brady Meixell, Yixuan Ouyang, Eve Passman, Sebastian
Salas, Tiffany Vien, and Yue Wei

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Executive Summary

During the Spring of 2021, our team of 12 Masters of Urban Planning students at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation worked both in person and remotely to study the area between 9th and 10th Avenue and 30th and 42nd Street, in Manhattan, New York.

Our study area is very unique in the New York City context as it is home to Hudson Yards, the City's newest and most expensive development. This city within a city has faced a lot of criticism, mainly pertaining to the fact that these glass towers are not unique to New York, Hudson Yards could have been placed down anywhere in the world and would probably look exactly the same. This is the direct opposite of Hell's Kitchen, which makes up the other half of the neighborhood. Hell's Kitchen has been a historically working class neighborhood that once housed Paddy's Market, New York City's largest and most famous outdoor market. All that ended however in the 1930s when the Lincoln Tunnel was built. The ramp and tunnel infrastructure tore apart the neighborhood, turning the once active streetscape into one that discouraged pedestrian use.

Our client, Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance (HYHK) tasked our studio with examining the state of retail in the Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Business Improvement District (BID) and developing recommendations for the Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance to revive it. Our task was not to simply introduce high end retail like has done at the Shops at Hudson Yards, but offer affordable solutions that would enhance the character of the neighborhood. As a studio we wanted to propose ideas that would be vibrant, flexible, and dynamic, but also look at how we could better connect the two distinct neighborhoods of Hudson Yards and Hell's Kitchen.

Moreover, we came to see paths forward from the retail apocalypse in a restoration of the public realm more broadly. Together, we crafted a holistic plan with four unique proposals to revive retail by reinvigorating Hudson Yards and Hell's Kitchen with a dynamic social vitality and a sense of community.

1. Open Neighborhoods – Looks to repair the fractured streetscape itself to produce an engaging and attractive retail experience for pedestrians and restore rich public life to the now car dominated streets.
2. Agora 2021 – Pioneers a new model for large floor plate ground floor retail that, in contrast with the mall, invites the dynamism of public street life inside and hosts a revolving door of adaptively responsive short term retail tenants.
3. FLEX HYHK – Attempts to extend this adaptability to a turnkey short term leasing platform for the districts many vacant storefronts.
4. Civic Storefronts – Recognizes that not all of the neighborhood's needs can be met with market solutions, and instead outfit currently vacant storefronts to responsively meet needs for public communal space, food access, and homeless services

These proposals will not only rebound Hudson Yards and Hell's Kitchen from the retail apocalypse, but propel the district into cutting edge status among New York neighborhoods.



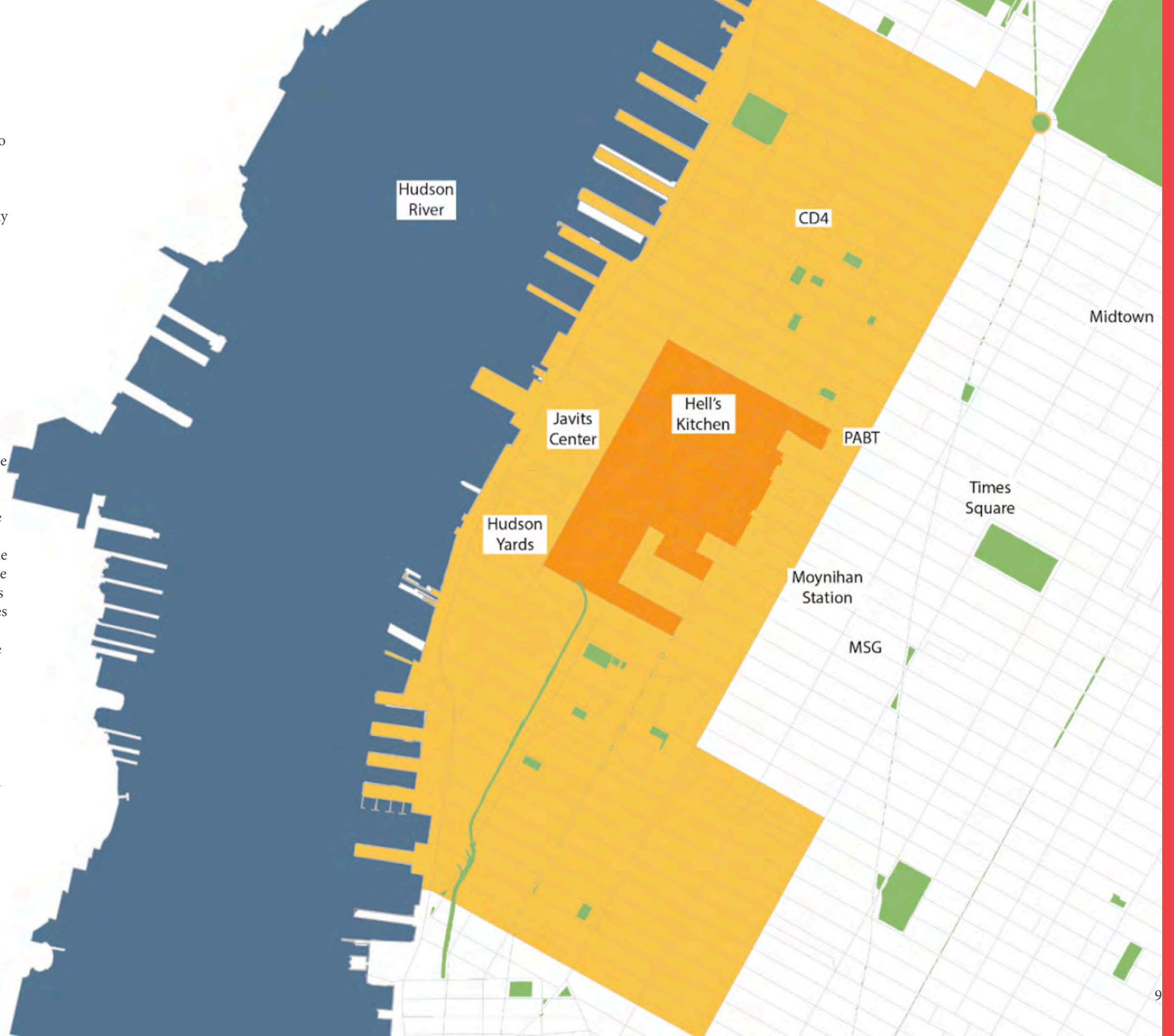
Introduction

The retail apocalypse is the collapse of the standalone viability of brick and mortar retail. Two reasons are often given for this sharp, two-decade spanning decline: the overextension of suburban malls and the rise of e-commerce. In tandem, the two forces are said to cause rippling effects into cities. As national chains lose their suburban strongholds to online sales, they shutter doors in urban centers as well. The results of this are deserted malls, chronically vacant urban storefronts, and abandoned city retail districts. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated and dramatized an ongoing decline.

In New York, evidence of the retail apocalypse is abundant. The city had been dealing with high storefront vacancy rates for years before the pandemic. High rents make retail spaces too risky for potential tenants, and long, inflexible leases make many shops too risky for landlords. In August 2020, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer conducted a study that showed a stunning 78% increase in storefront vacancies along Broadway since 2017.

The retail apocalypse may have been triggered by the rise of e-commerce, but the phenomenon is better understood as the aftershock of radical changes to the urban landscape that simultaneously gave birth to the shopping mall. In the 1960s and 70s, the middle class abandoned urban centers in droves to begin new lives far away from one another in the vast suburbs. They withdrew into their large homes, and they traded the busy and active urban streetscape for the shelter and comfort of the suburban mall

They retreated from the city, and with e-commerce they retreated further still, withdrawing into the comfort of the home where commercial activity could be completely severed from social and cultural environments. The COVID-19 crisis shined a light on this relationship between social isolation and e-commerce, only in the inverse: when social distancing was mandated, online sales boomed. Viewed from this angle, the retail apocalypse has much more to do with the degeneration of community than the advancement of technology.



From this discord, enter into Hudson Yards and Hell’s Kitchen: two clashing neighborhoods that crash together west of Midtown. Hudson Yards is a shiny, glamorous, and colossal brand new development for the ultra rich. Its glass towers collide with historically working class, low-rise Hell’s Kitchen and seem to open up the earth into canyons of car and bus ramps at the site of the Lincoln Tunnel. The district is fractured socially as well by extreme wealth disparity, as homelessness has become a crisis in Hell’s Kitchen since the onset of COVID-19. Meanwhile, The Shops at Hudson Yards have become a ghost town only two years since they opened to great fanfare, and storefronts on 9th Avenue have gone vacant – the district is ground zero of the retail apocalypse.

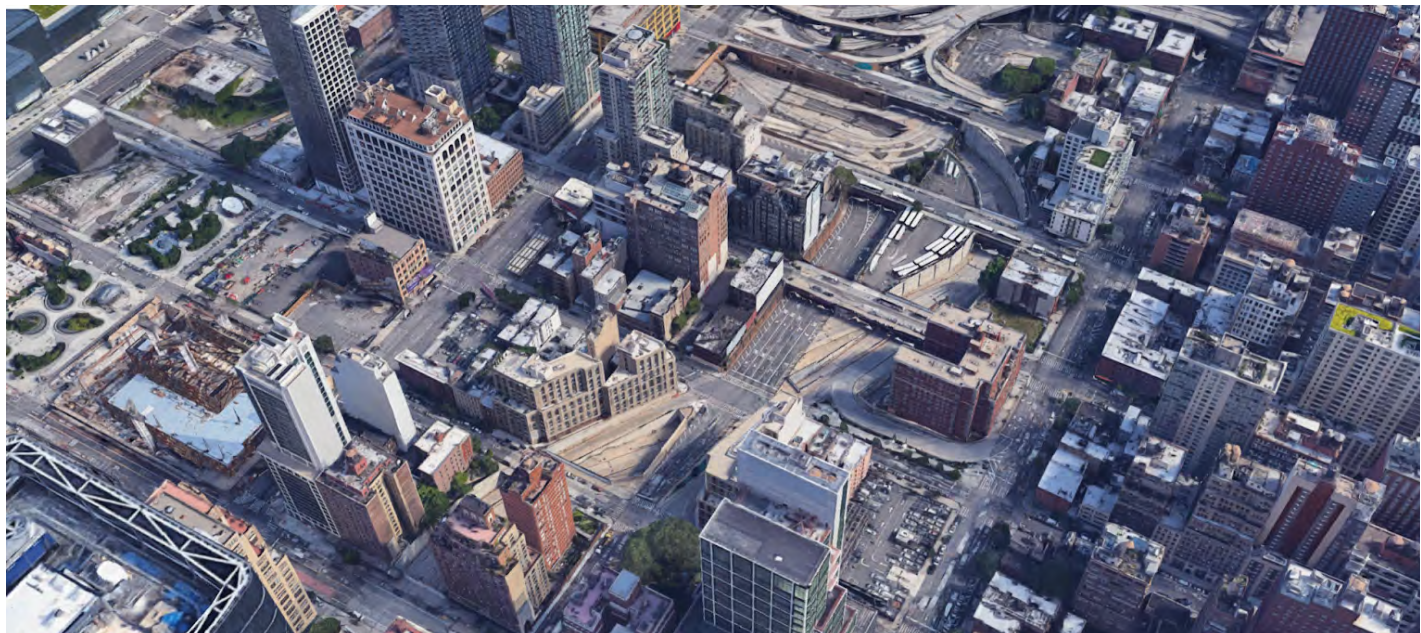
Is the apocalypse not the point of no return? How exactly does one recover from the end of the world? To date, attempts at remedying the state of retail only seem to dig a deeper hole. Malls desperately try to tie down customers with high-octane experiences. Stores attempt to triangulate more and more niche needs of smaller and smaller target demographics. None of this has anything to do with rehabilitating the fractured public realm that created the grounds for the retail apocalypse in the first place.

An adequate plan to tackle the retail apocalypse must entail restoring urban vibrancy, reintegrating the organic spontaneity of the streetscape with commercial environments, and nurturing community. Our mission is to plan a recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in Hudson Yards and Hell’s Kitchen that addresses the underlying issues plaguing American retail in the past two decades: to heal the fractured urban landscape, re-integrate commerce with a sense of community, and create a vibrant, flexible and dynamic retail environment for the future.

“Small businesses in the neighborhood are still in existence, but they’re hanging on by a hair... In the end we will lose somewhere between 25% and 33%.”

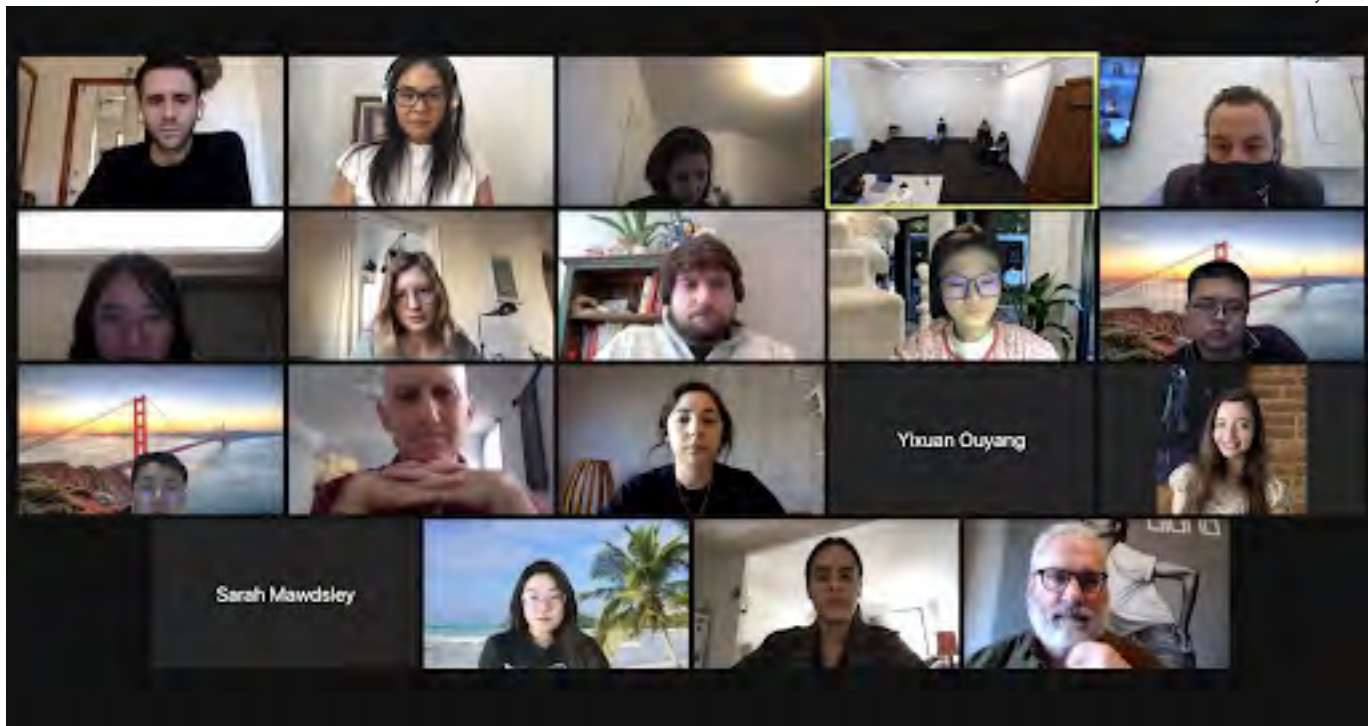
- Bob Benfatto, HYHK Alliance President

23% of storefronts surveyed between
9th and 10th Avenue, 33rd and 42nd Street
Were vacant in March 2021.





Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance (from the left: Daniel Scorse, Bob Benfatto, Patty Maltezos, Ulises Hernández, and Nikkole Mojica)



Retail Apocalypse Studio with the Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance on Zoom

Our mission is to plan a recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in Hudson Yards and Hell's Kitchen that addresses the underlying issues plaguing American retail in the past two decades: to heal the fractured urban landscape, re-integrate commerce with a sense of community, and create a vibrant, flexible and dynamic retail environment for the future.



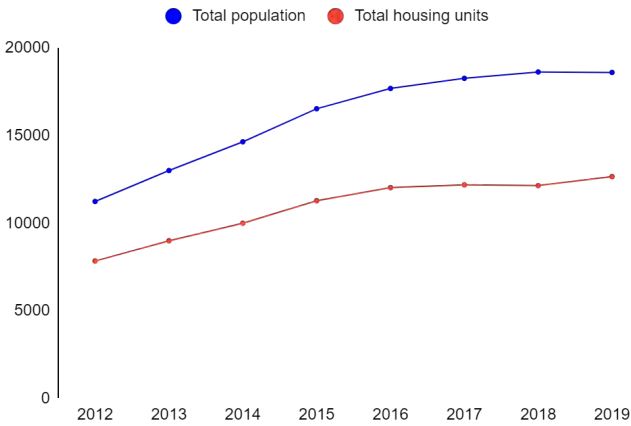
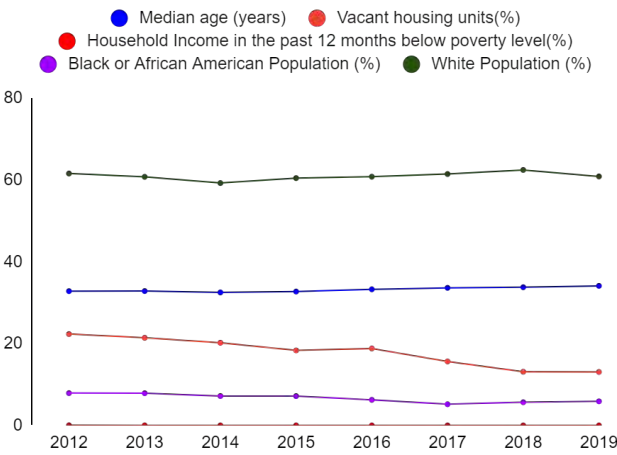
Approach

We studied the retail apocalypse and its fallout in Hudson Yards and Hell’s Kitchen between January and April 2021 and collaboratively created proposals for interventions to revive retail, community, and the public realm in the neighborhood.

Our study area encapsulates 30th to 42nd Streets and 9th to 11th Avenues, roughly corresponding to the HYHK Alliance Business Improvement District boundaries. For ease of reference, we will refer to our study area as HYHK in this report, whereas the discrete neighborhoods of Hudson Yards and Hell’s Kitchen will be referred to by name respectively.

Demographics

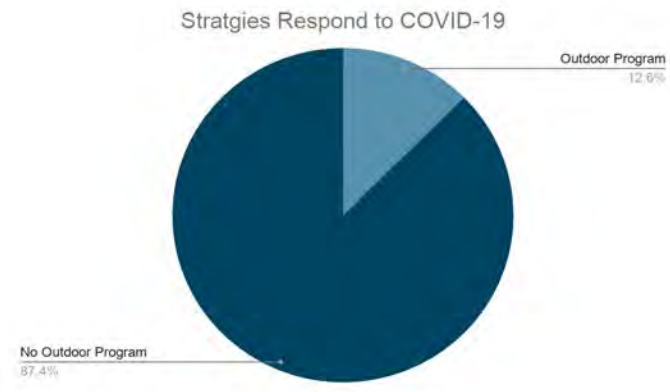
HYHK is located at the junction of four census tracts. Data gathered from the American Community Survey show notably stable demographic trends from 2012 to 2019, the last year data was available. During this time, the area was about 60% white and 10% African American. The median age was about thirty-three years. The household poverty rate remained below 5% and the housing vacancy rate declined significantly, from over 20% to below 15%. Two major events, the opening of phase one of Hudson Yards and the COVID-19 pandemic, have surely impacted demographic trends in the district since 2019, which will certainly be reflected in the most recent census data as it becomes public.



Our primary research took three forms. In March and April 2021, we orchestrated a census of HYHK storefronts, held interviews with key stakeholders, and conducted a community engagement survey.

Retail Vacancy Census

Our storefront census recorded the detailed statuses of 175 HYHK storefronts. We recorded whether the storefront housed an open business, a temporarily closed business, or if it was vacant. The research revealed a 23% retail vacancy rate along 9th Avenue in the study area. We also noted details about restaurants in the area and found that less than one-quarter of restaurants use the DOT Open Restaurants outdoor dining program, most have opted for take-out and delivery options only.



Stakeholder Interviews

We held eight interviews over Zoom with key stakeholders from major institutions and organizations in HYHK, as well as officials from various city agencies. The objective of these interviews was twofold: to more finely understand the challenges facing the district and to seek feedback as we developed our proposals to meet these challenges. Stakeholders frequently voiced the need for pedestrian-centered streetscape improvements and pointed to the great demand for better social services, particularly as the neighborhood has seen an upsurge in the rate of homelessness since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. City officials provided guidance in planning for the implementation of our proposals.

Community Survey

Our community engagement survey was created online using Google Forms and was distributed on the ground in HYHK with QR code fliers. After distributing about three hundred fliers we received twenty-six responses. The purpose of the survey mirrored that of the stakeholder interviews: we sought opinions about the greatest needs of the community and early feedback on our proposals. Like our interviewees, respondents identified pedestrian safety and homelessness as major concerns. They also tended to view the commercial environment as unengaging and uninviting. Overwhelmingly, they responded positively to early conceptions of the proposals presented here.

COLUMBIA
GSAPP
URBAN
PLANNING

We are making a *community plan* for Hell's Kitchen and Hudson Yards; take our community survey to *make your voice heard* on how to it can best address the neighborhood's needs



SCAN ME

<https://tinyurl.com/HYHKCU>

In addition to our primary research, we attempt to situate our proposals within the context of existing plans and programs that will impact HYHK. Namely, we have consulted the 2017 HYHK Alliance Streetscape Improvement Plan, the 2019 Hell’s Kitchen South Coalition Neighborhood Plan, the 2021 Port Authority Bus Terminal Renovation Final Scoping Report, and the 2021 Manhattan Borough President Future of Open Streets Report. Our report is meant to be viewed in conversation with these plans and studies.

Based on this research, we have created a holistic proposal to restore and ameliorate both the commercial and social fabric of HYHK and propel the neighborhood into the future and cutting edge of retail in New York City. We propose four unique interventions and models of retail which together create an integrated commercial and cultural environment and transform HYHK into a spirited social hub, a compassionate community, and a magnetic destination for all.

Open Neighborhoods is our plan to repair and reinvigorate the streetscape itself in order to activate ground level retail and restore historic outdoor marketplaces. Agora 2021 is a new dynamic model of retail that imagines an ever-engaging floor plate of markets. FLEX HYHK extends this concept to the district’s currently vacant retail spaces. Finally, Civic Storefronts builds much needed social resources and community assets by repurposing vacant space to adaptively meet the district’s needs. The result is a healthy, thriving, and bustling social and commercial center.

Recommendations

- Open Streets
- Agora 2021
- FLEX HYHK
- Civic Storefronts

Existing Conditions

- Green Space
- HYHK





Open Neighborhoods

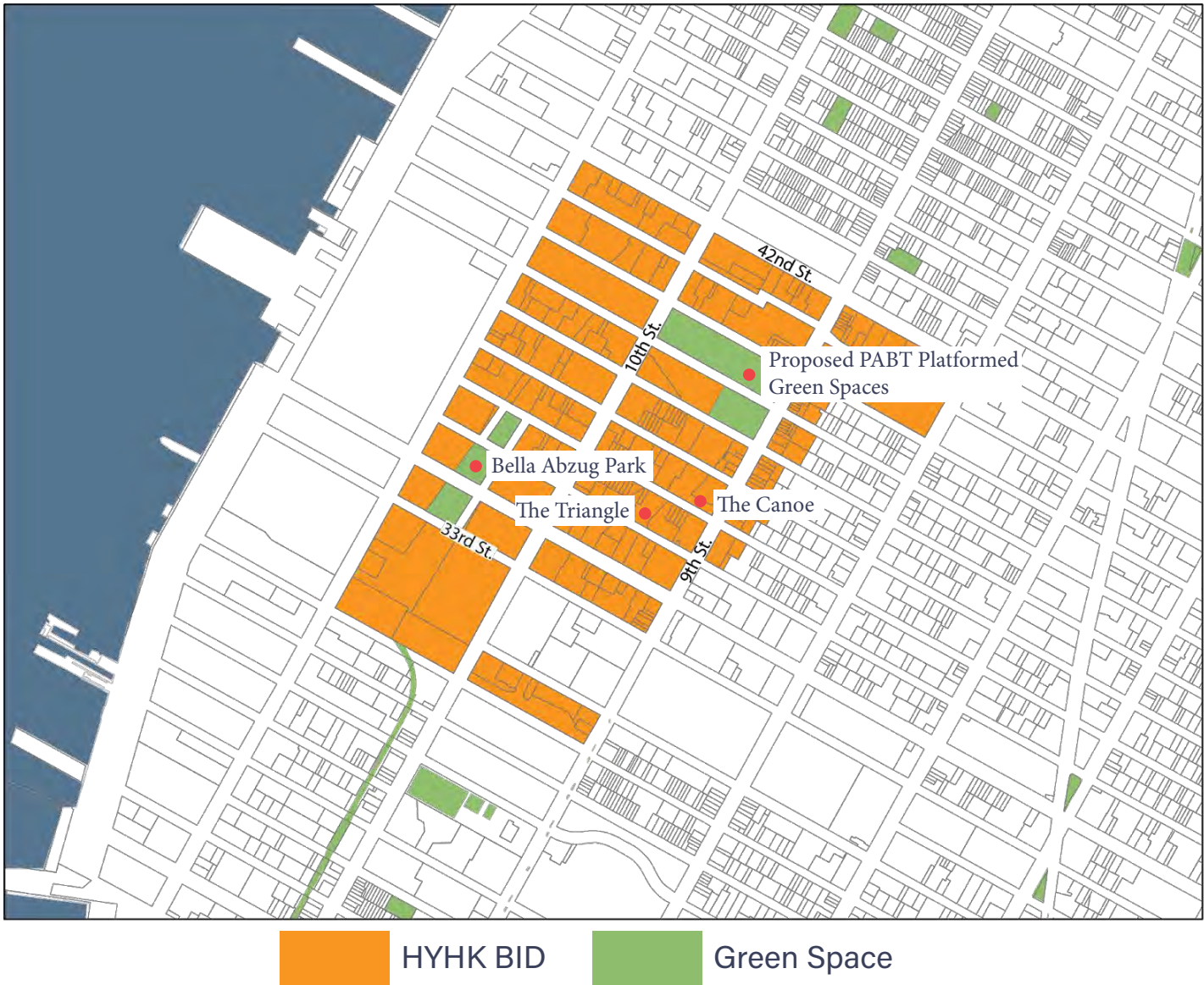
Transforming HYHK into a bustling cultural and commercial hub begins with restoring its streets to their former glory. Hell’s Kitchen was once home to vibrant public social life. In the early twentieth century, Paddy’s Market along 9th Avenue was New York’s busiest and most famous outdoor pushcart market. The market welcomed large and diverse daily crowds into Hell’s Kitchen by serving everyday grocery needs, offering cuisines from around the world, and selling novelty souvenirs among many other goods and services. For fifty years the market was both a magnetic attraction and a community asset for neighborhood residents.

However, the opening of the Lincoln Tunnel would end the storied run of Paddy’s Market and permanently fracture the neighborhood’s streetscape and public realm. Not only did the tunnel demand the destruction of entire blocks and hundreds of buildings, the cars that poured in and out of the tunnel each day demanded the street space enjoyed by market goers. Paddy’s Market was disbanded in the 1930s, and the construction of the Port Authority Bus Terminal in the ensuing decade would only further splinter the neighborhood’s vitality with auto-oriented infrastructure.

Today, HYHK is a maze of ramps and a stampede of traffic – hostile grounds for pedestrians and businesses alike. In an early literature review of the retail apocalypse we discovered that an engaging and safe streetscape can increase foot traffic for a store regardless of what they sell. On 9th Avenue in particular, the street is designed for the car, but people do not drive to HYHK, they drive through it, therefore local businesses rely on foot traffic to keep their businesses going. The result is a compounding detriment to neighborhood retail that requires intervention.



Open Neighborhoods consists of a network of pedestrian-centered streets and outdoor marketplaces that weave together to create a cohesive plan for Hudson Yards Hell’s Kitchen that is vibrant, flexible, and dynamic. This follows the ideology of the Open Streets, Restaurants, and Retail programs created at the start of the pandemic to reclaim city streets for pedestrian use which we now look to make permanent in the district. Central to the plan is expanding upon an existing movement to restore Paddy’s Market. Open Neighborhoods imagines an HYHK completely revamped by a network of open green spaces, pedestrian-centered streets, pedestrian-friendly avenues, and a revived outdoor market.

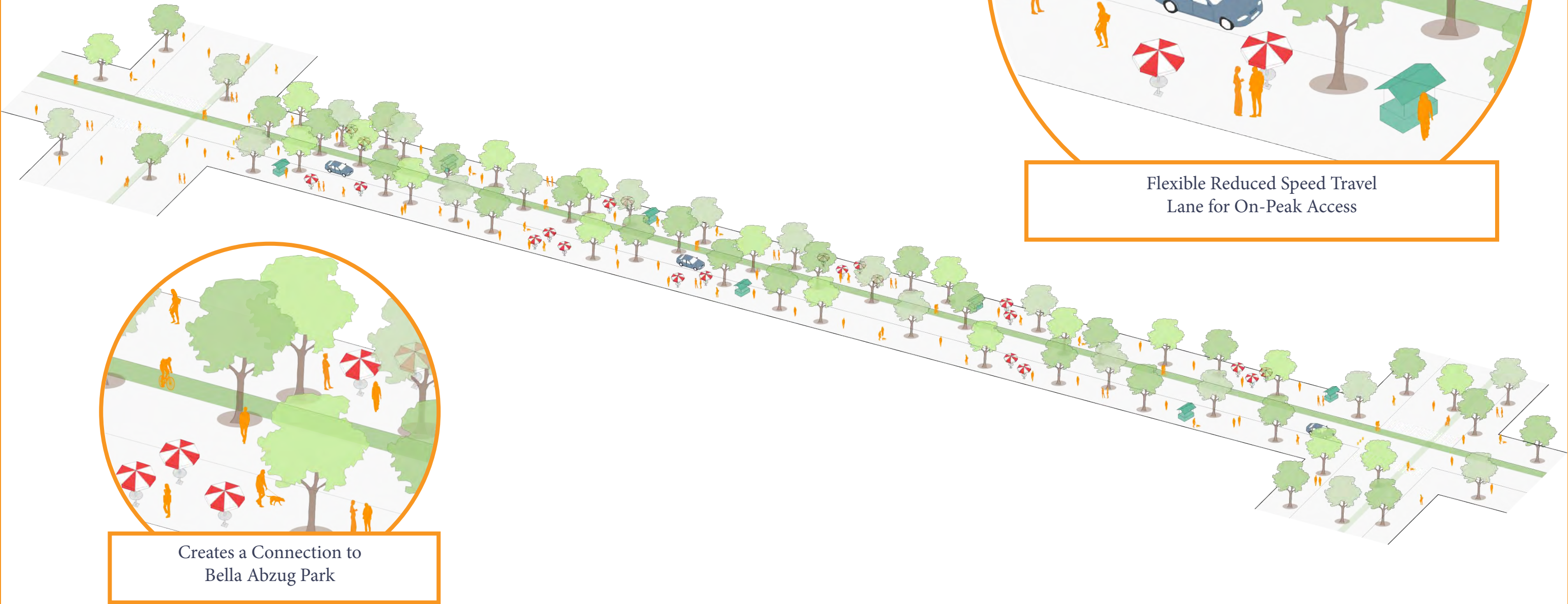


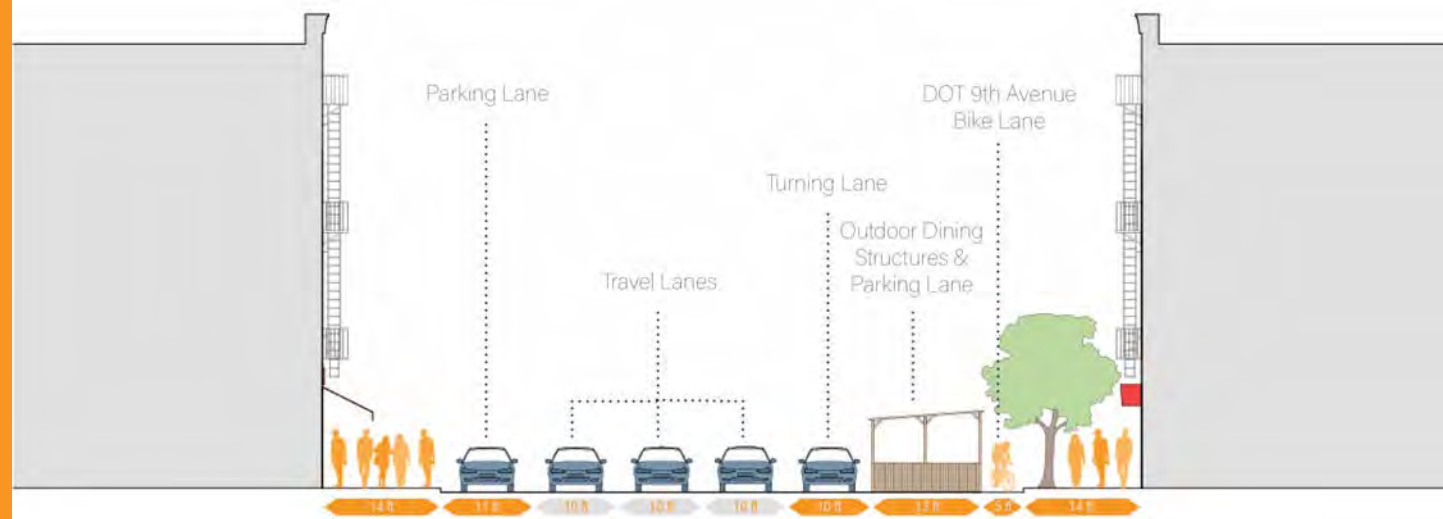
The proposal builds off recently approved PABT renovation plans that will create two large green spaces between 39th and 37th Streets by platforming over the Lincoln Tunnel ramps and looks to elevate BID managed existing public spaces, including Bella Abzug Park, which is the neighborhood’s only park between 10th and 11th Avenues, and small pedestrian plazas like the Triangle between 35th and 36th on Dyer and the Canoe on 36th and 9th Avenue.

Open Streets

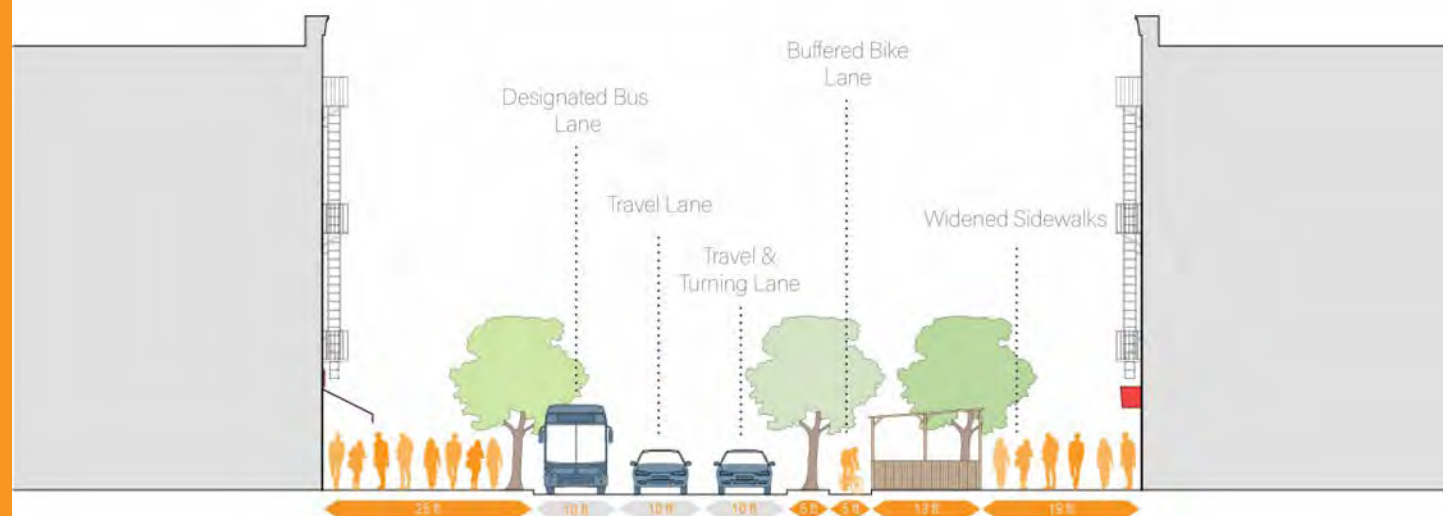
The first stage of the plan looks to create recreational open streets on the district’s cross streets in order to bridge 9th and 10th Avenues. The BID currently does not utilize the city’s Open Streets program, but we believe that making use of the program on 33rd, 37th, 38th, and/or 39th streets would leverage BID managed pedestrian plazas and the Port Authority Bus Terminal proposed green spaces. We also believe that using Open Streets around Bella Abzug Park will allow for incorporating the existing market and BID programming into the rest of the neighborhood plan which should help bridge the gap between Hudson Yards and Hell’s Kitchen.

These streets would be exclusive to pedestrians, but flexible to allow reduced speed traffic as needed during peak commuting hours and for emergency access. On weekends and evenings the street can be closed off to traffic and set up with tables, chairs, and BID informational kiosks and can be a site for BID programming outside of the park.

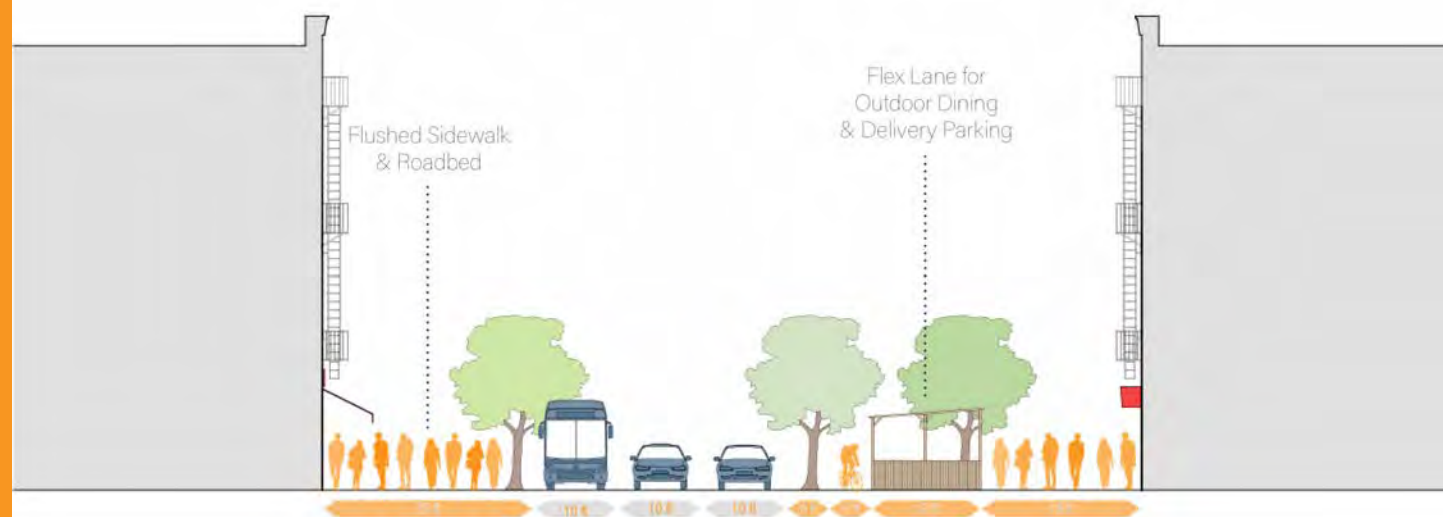




Existing 9th Avenue Streetscape between 39th and 40th Streets



9th Avenue as a Complete Street



9th Avenue as a Shared Street

9th Avenue

The second aspect of the Open Neighborhoods Plan is to renovate 9th Avenue for a better pedestrian experience that emphasizes social interaction, amplifies walkability, and emphasizes existing retail opportunities.

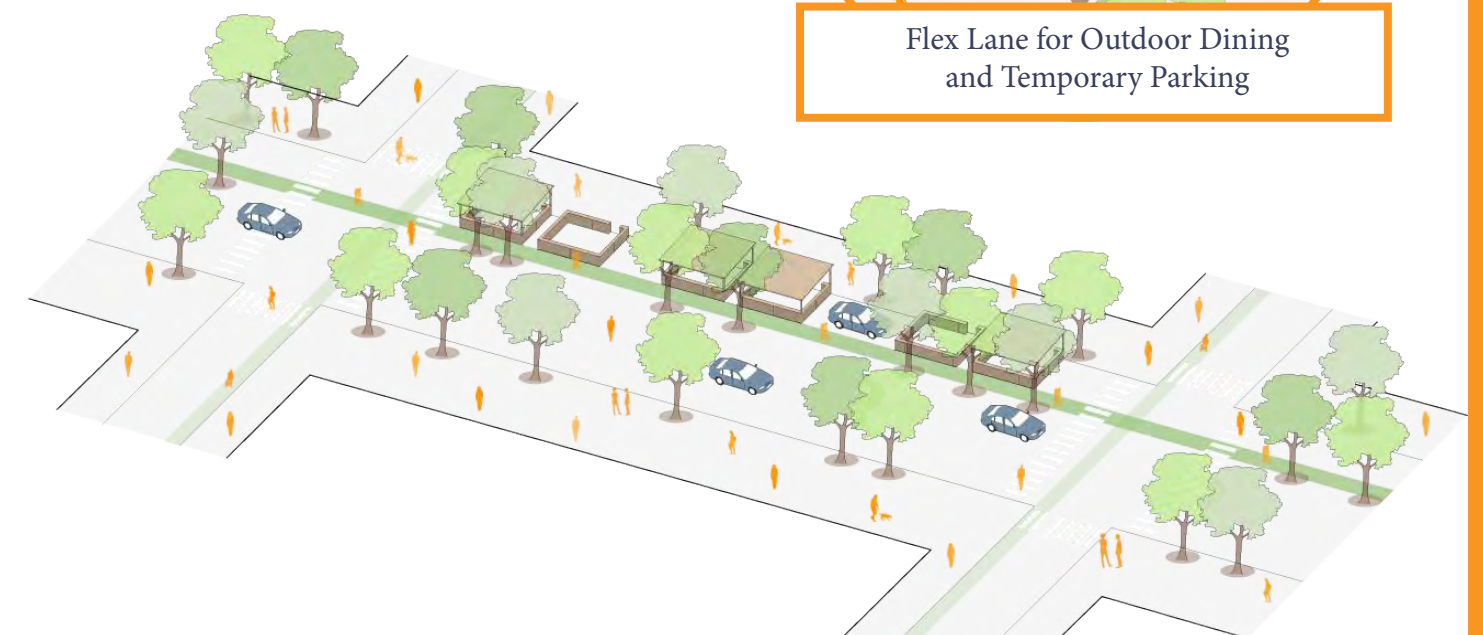
The existing streetscape, created by the Lincoln Tunnel and Bus Terminal ramps, heavily prioritizes car traffic. The 5 lanes and fast speeds make for unsafe conditions for walking and biking, while the new outdoor dining structures allowed by the Open Restaurants Program create a disorganized flow as they are separated from the sidewalk by the DOT's 9th Avenue bike lane.

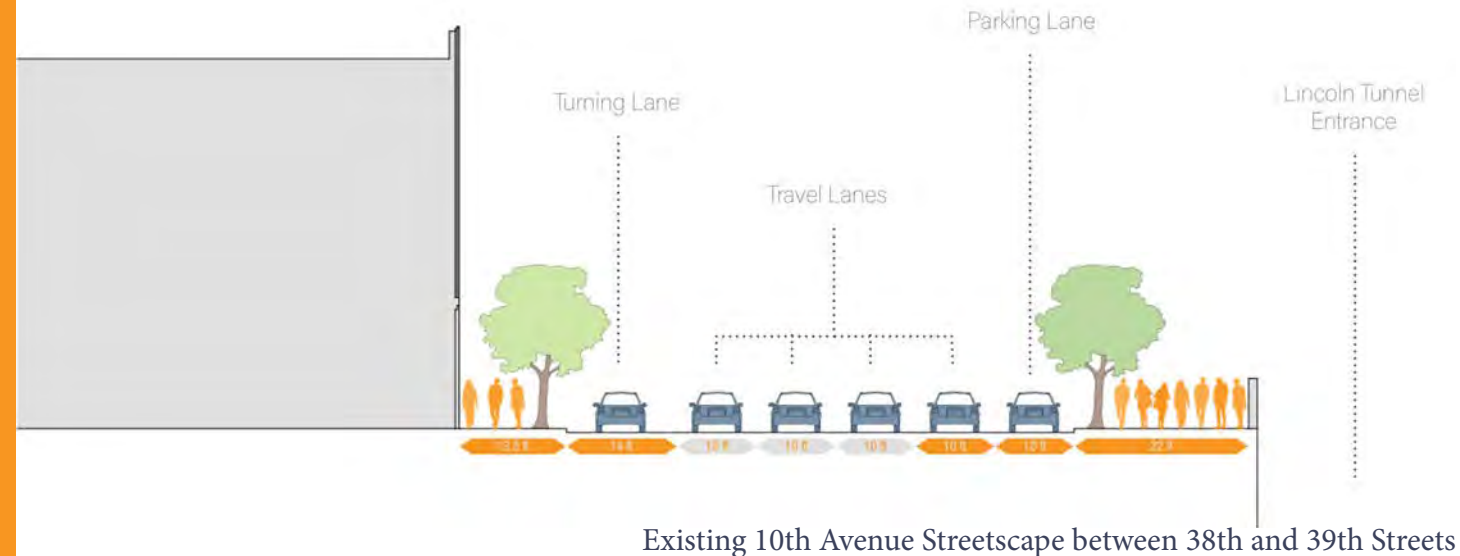
The first phase of the street redesign is to move towards a complete street model. By relocating the bike lane, creating a designated bus lane, and reducing travel lanes, we can make the street safer and improve the pedestrian flow.

Our renovation concludes as a shared street model, in which pedestrians are free to enjoy public space and explore retail storefronts. This design and newly added Pedestrian Safety Managers (PSMs) will divert through-traffic from 9th Avenue and promote a calmer, steadier, and more orderly flow of traffic entering the Lincoln Tunnel. Additionally, the scheme will allow for greater flexibility; where there are no outdoor dining structures the space could be used for temporary delivery parking, pick-ups, and drop-offs.

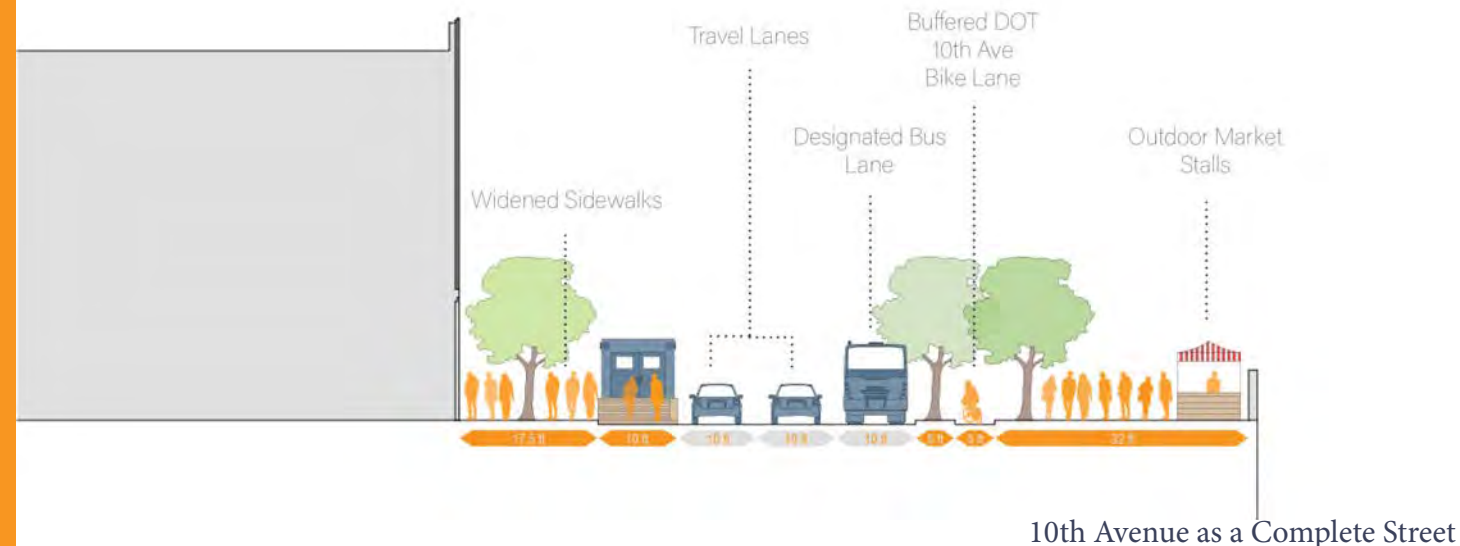


Flex Lane for Outdoor Dining and Temporary Parking

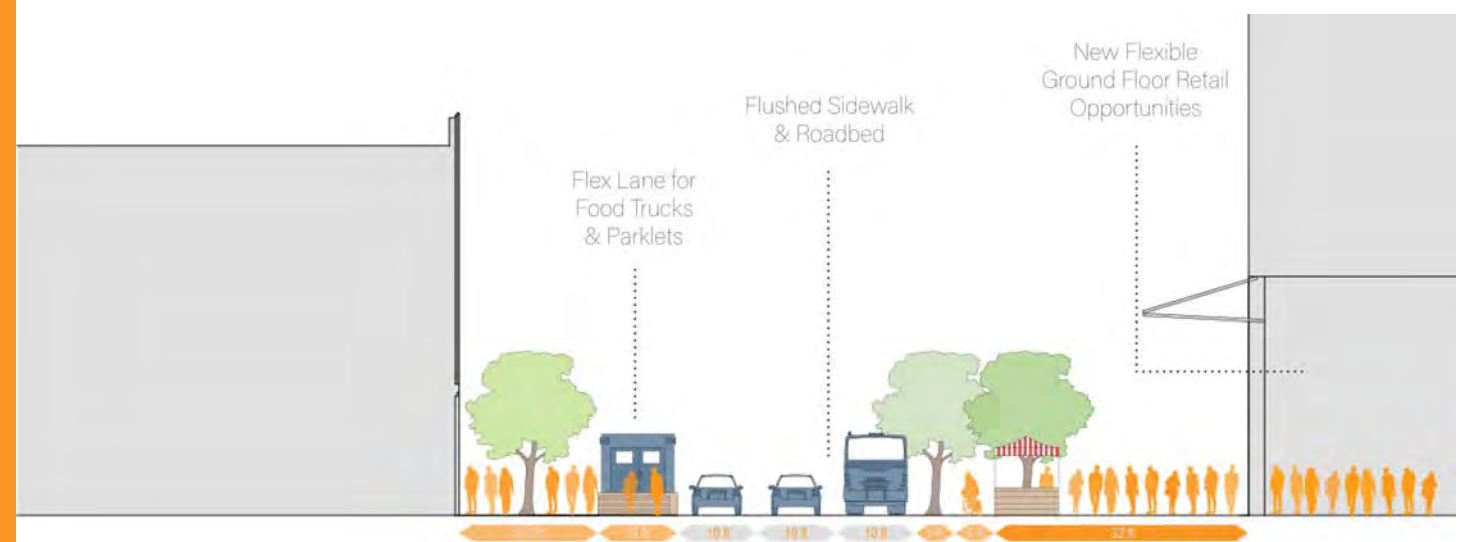




Existing 10th Avenue Streetscape between 38th and 39th Streets



10th Avenue as a Complete Street



10th Avenue as a Shared Street

10th Avenue

Open Neighborhoods also calls for a similar scheme on 10th Avenue, but instead of elevating existing retail, the goal is to create inviting and vibrant public spaces that do not currently exist.

Despite wider sidewalks, the 10th Avenue corridor is not as active as 9th due to wide roadbeds, construction, and little to no ground floor retail which make it unattractive to pedestrians.

The first phase of the redesign, like 9th Avenue, involves widening the sidewalk and reducing the traffic lanes to shorten the crossing distance. We would add a bike lane to be picked up by the DOT that would extend the entire length of 10th Avenue, and the Eastern side of the street would allow for outdoor retail market stalls. We believe that activating the street will help incentivize ground floor retail.

A final shared street model similar to the one proposed on 9th Avenue allows for the creation of flexible solutions that can adapt with the changing needs to the neighborhood. The existing turning lane, for example, is converted into a flex lane for food truck parking that serves the large construction worker population, and would also provide parklet seating, and delivery parking



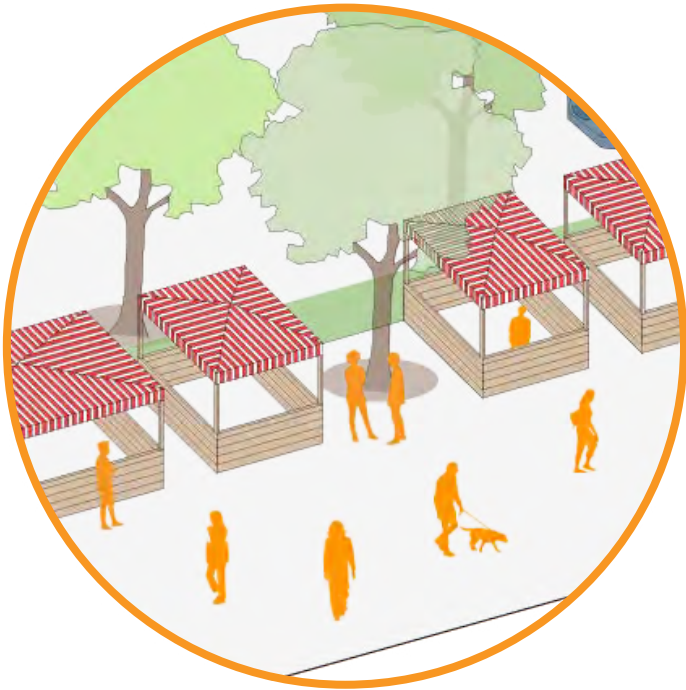
Flex Lane for Food Trucks, Parklets, and Deliveries



Paddy’s Market Revival

The final piece of the Open Neighborhoods Plan is to revive and expand the historic Paddy’s Market to bring back the vibrant outdoor retail experience that Hell’s Kitchen was once famous for.

A recent movement led by local community leader and affordable housing developer, Joe Restuccia to establish a Paddy’s Market historic district on 9th Avenue between 35th and 40th Streets and revive what was once the busiest and best-known pushcart open air markets in New York, has been the backbone for the Open Neighborhoods recommendation. Our plan looks to expand the market further into the neighborhood extending down 9th Avenue to 33rd Street and mirroring itself on 10th Avenue. This will allow for a dynamic retail experience throughout the district, rather than keep it concentrated on 9th Avenue’s already busy street.

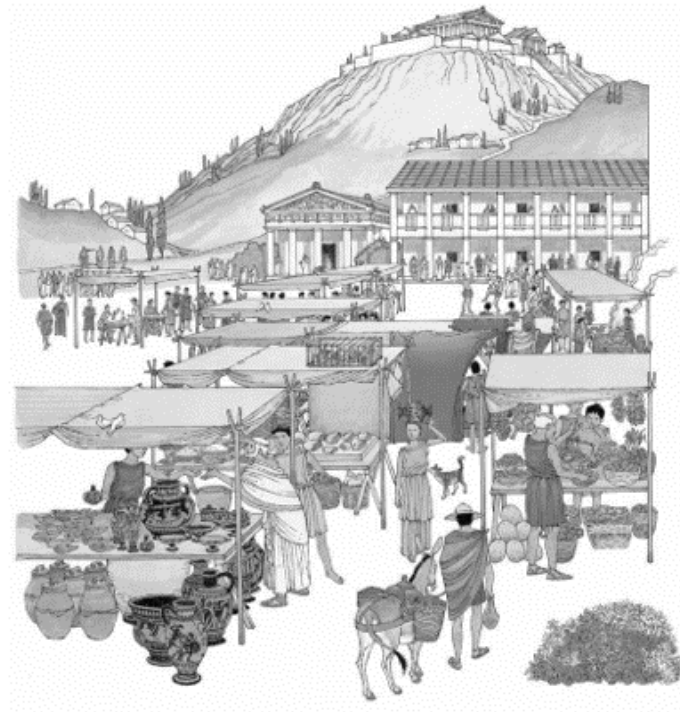




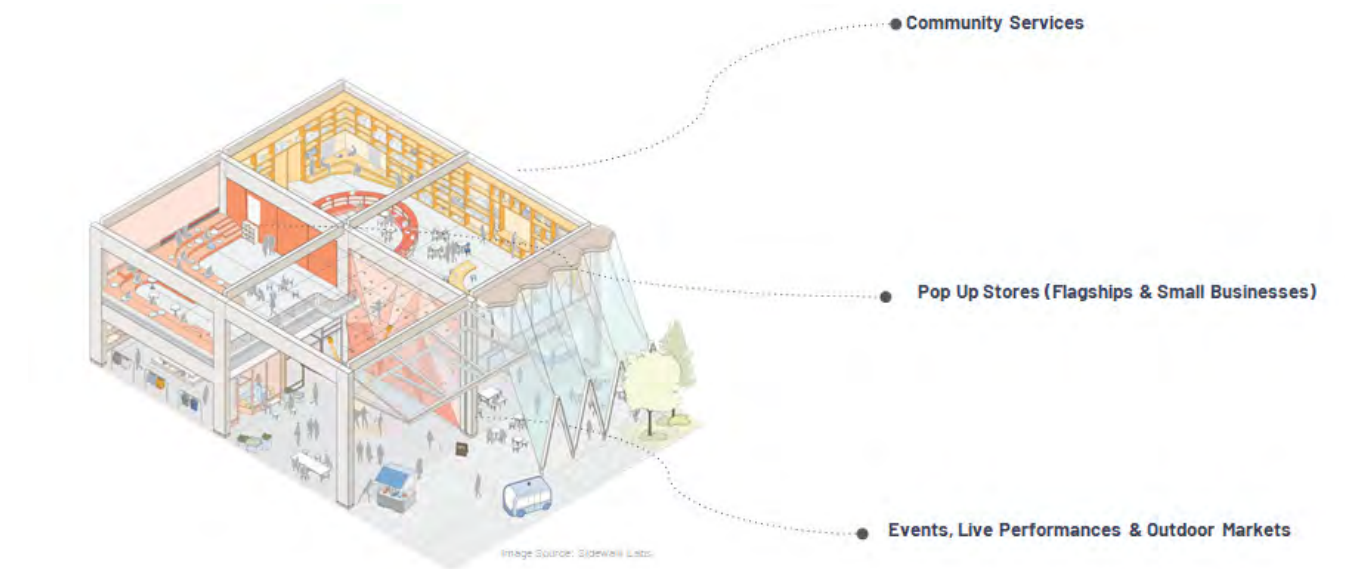
Agora 2021

Retail thrives when it is an integrated social experience, and fails when it is severed from the public realm. The mall is an outdated model of retail that rests upon simulating the public realm of the urban streetscape within a neatly organized and controlled space. To compensate for its lack of organic excitement, the mall must constantly outdo itself in elaborate ploys to capture consumer attention and interest, which transpires as a race to make the mall more of an exceptional destination and less of an integrated part of everyday public life. The model ultimately fails to capture the spontaneity and organic dynamism of the streetscape, and thus fails to retain customers. The Shops at Hudson Yards is a mall that, due to the COVID-19 crisis, is in danger of reaching this fate already.

By contrast, the agora was a model of social space that existed in ancient Greece that integrated all aspects of public life. Commercial, civic, leisure, and religious activities all occurred side by side in the agora, a dynamic space that sat at the very center of the city and the center of Greek culture. Rather than making commerce an exceptional experience, the agora fostered markets by blending them with the everyday.



We propose a new model of retail for HYHK that we title Agora 2021. This model imagines an adaptive floor plate of indoor commerce featuring flexible, short-term, and on-demand leases and that mingles with the outdoor markets and environments of Open Neighborhoods. In addition to mixing indoor and outdoor environments, the model incorporates technology to blend online and in-person commerce. Agora 2021 is a departure from the mall model of retail in that it seeks to reintegrate—rather than simulate—the broader public realm and the spontaneity of the street.

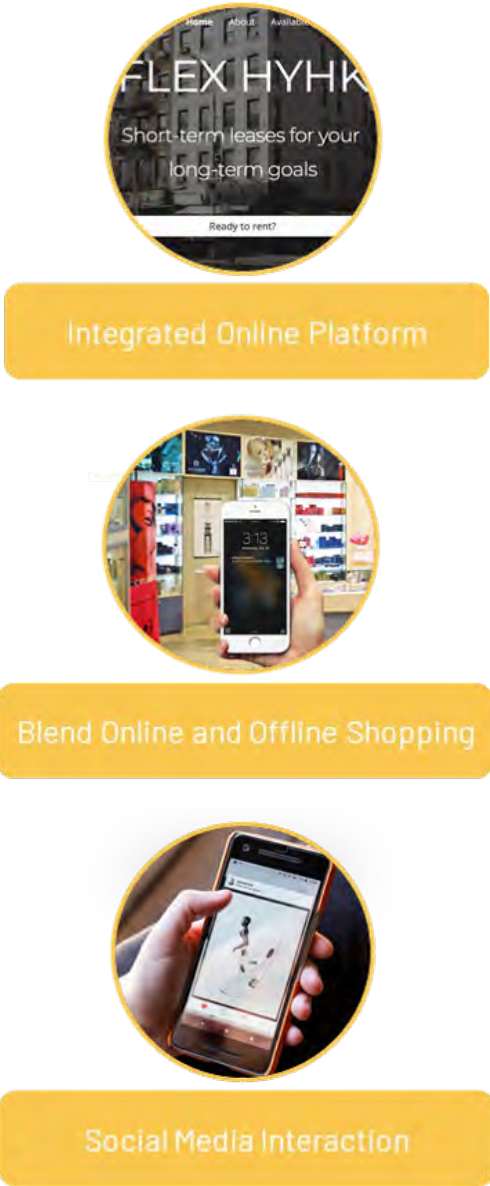


The rigidity of the mall is not only seen in its artificial environment, but in its model of leasing space. Typically, a commercial floor plate will seek one major retail anchor to commit to a twenty-year lease. Smaller tenants are typically expected to sign on to five- to ten-year leases. Agora 2021 remedies the stagnation inherent in such long lease terms by offering flexible ground floor space in short-term increments to retailers, food vendors, artists, performers, and others. Short term leases mean the space is rapidly responsive to changing and dynamic neighborhood needs: an entrepreneur may set up shop to contribute to a weekend festivity, or to meet a niche seasonal demand of a growing demographic. In a given year, Agora 2021 can host hundreds of tenants of different sizes and types to provide a rich, diverse, and engaged commercial and cultural environment.



Agora 2021 incorporates technology to both organize tenancy and further advance a dynamic experience. The model will use an online platform to advertise, price, and lease space, and tenants will be able to view and reserve areas at the click of a button. The platform would be responsive to social media feedback and data on market trends to offer promotions and advertise for particularly in-demand uses. Furthermore, Agora 2021 is amenable to omnichannel retail – commerce that blends online and brick-and-mortar shopping. Tenants may set up shop with only sample products and no physical inventory, then sell products to be shipped to customers’ doors.

Agora 2021 is a powerful model of retail because it optimizes both social benefit and financial viability. It meets a high threshold of equity and inclusion precisely by virtue of its dynamism and responsiveness to community needs. The new floor plate includes pop-up stores for small businesses and flagship retailers, space for community services, live performances and outdoor markets. This mixture of tenants and activities will provide a diverse variety of retail experiences and services that cannot be found online. These same virtues are also exactly what lend greater financial viability to the model, as it is not vulnerable to stagnant and sluggish tenants.





Agora 2021 is only feasible by partnering with many diverse stakeholders. A developer is required to take charge of construction and financing, and city and state agencies are needed to provide programs and policy incentives such as rent subsidies, tax credits, and construction bonuses. Finally, a specialized management company is needed to administer operations at Agora 2021. We suggest that the BID itself could take on a managing role at Agora 2021, as it already has direct connections to developers, city agencies, and business services that would make it a successful champion of this model.



Agora 2021 can be installed in any development with a large floorplate. Several of these sites exist in the district, especially in the Hudson Yards development, and several more will be constructed in the coming years. To more fully integrate this proposal with a cohesive plan for HYHK, we propose that Agora 2021 be included in a new development on 10th Avenue between 38th and 39th Streets as part of the PABT renovations. Here, Agora 2021 will be able to interface with the new open green space, the Open Neighborhoods streetscape, and the revived Paddy’s Market to more fully unlock its dynamic potential.

Agora 2021 is the solution to the stale and failing model of the shopping mall. Whereas the mall provides artificial experiences in simulated environments, Agora 2021 provides rich and authentic experiences by integrating with the dynamics of the public realm and the streetscape. It is an inclusive concept that unites traditional models of community with modern experiences of retail, and a forward-thinking framework that will help propel HYHK into the cutting edge of retail.

-  HYHK BID
-  Green Space
-  Proposed Site
-  Potential Sites





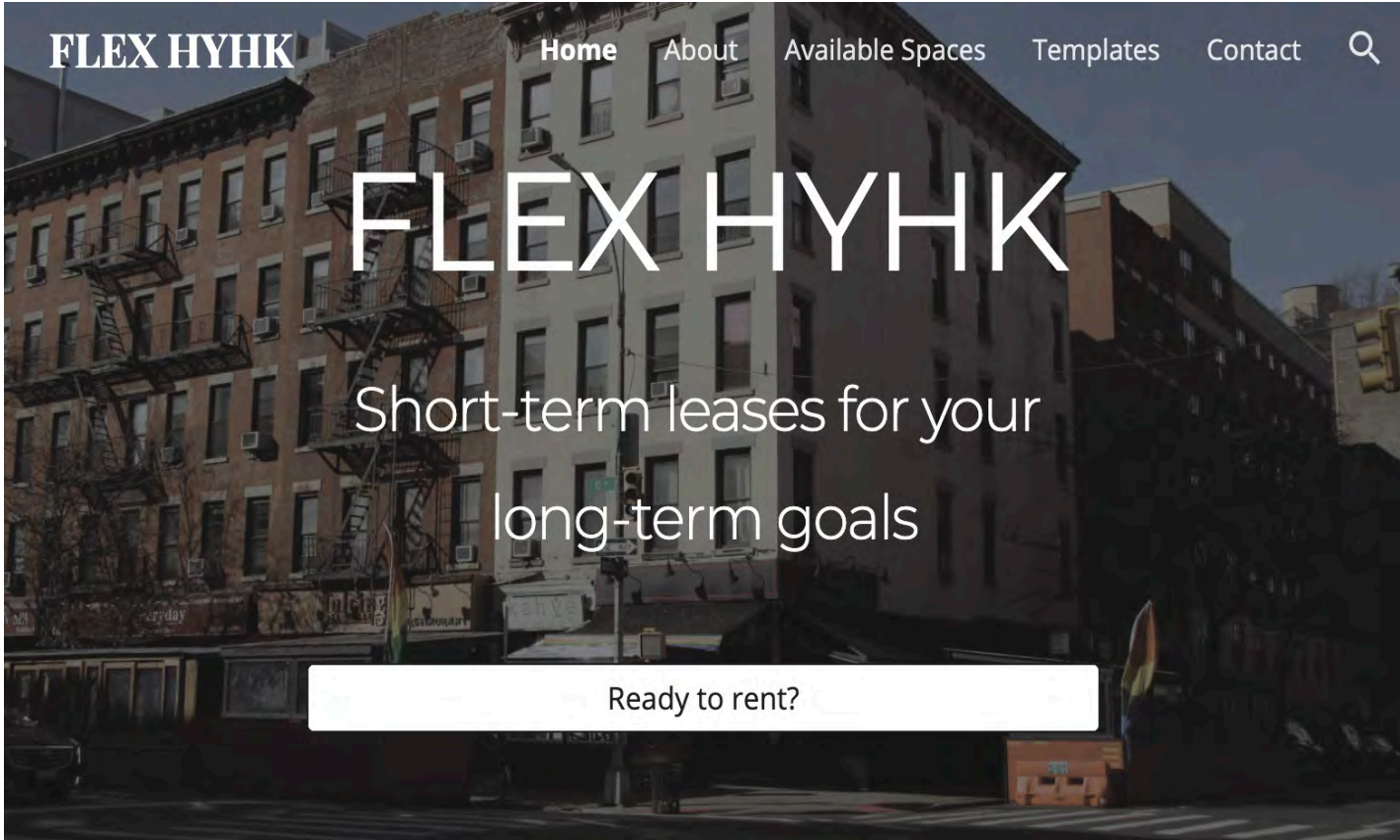
FLEX HYHK

New York was suffering an epidemic of vacant storefronts long before COVID-19. Similar to the failings of the shopping mall, urban storefront vacancy is caused by over-rigidity and lack of dynamic adaptability. High rents make storefronts too risky for potential tenants, and long term leases make potential tenants too risky for landlords. Our interviews with neighborhood stakeholders revealed as much in HYHK: Leslie Thrope of Housing Conservation Coordinators informed us that similarly to residential landlords, retail landlords in the district resort to “warehousing” their storefronts in the absence of better options for optimizing their preferred levels of risk and profitability. This stagnation crashes with COVID-19 to produce a 23% retail vacancy rate on 9th Avenue alone.

To remedy this standstill and further contribute to the active, dynamic neighborhood that we envision, we propose implementing a digital platform for frictionless storefront pop-up rentals which we call FLEX HYHK.

FLEX HYHK is a network that directly links retail landlords to potential tenants, and business owners to potential storefronts. Similar to Agora 2021, FLEX will advertise and directly lease sites to potential tenants for short terms and adaptive uses. For tenants, the platform offers streamlined access to potential sites and an inviting ease of use that makes opening their storefront virtually turnkey. For landlords, the platform offers a low-risk means of making short term cash-flow. Depending on location, a landlord may want to maintain a property in the FLEX HYHK system long term, cycling through several leases and tenants, or only temporarily while the storefront is simultaneously marketed to mainstream traditional tenants.

In addition to streamlined advertising and leasing, FLEX HYHK will provide a system to seamlessly coordinate the labor and materials necessary to launch each pop-up. As part of the leasing process, the tenant will select an interior template directly on the platform based on store type. Once the lease is executed, a team will assemble furnishings at the site in accordance with the purchased template in time for opening day. The tenant will only need to provide inventory, business supplies, and any desired unique decor.



Our four templates are informed by both citywide demands and local needs identified in our community engagement survey.

Art Galleries & Performance Spaces

For art galleries and performance spaces, we envision a place for community-oriented artists and fundraising events to promote a cohesive community and provide funds to promote the financial recovery of the theater and performing arts district.

Restaurants

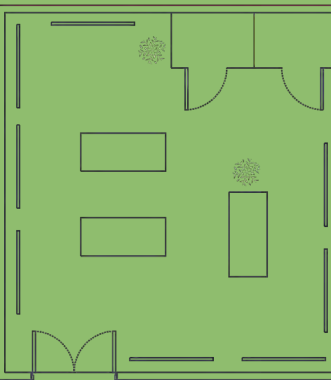
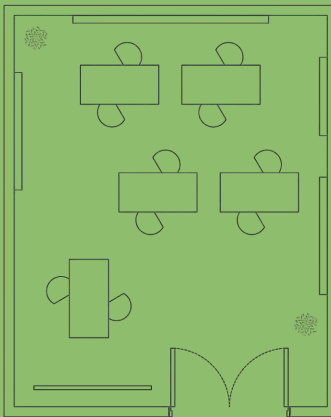
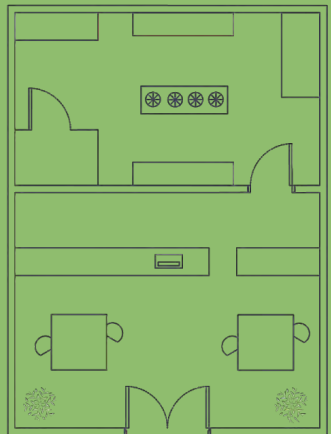
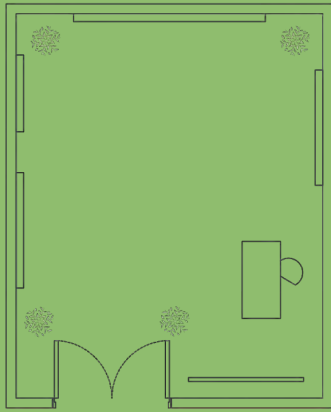
Pop-up restaurants offer the opportunity to revive the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood with innovative approaches to the dining experience and serve the demand for test kitchens and experimental restaurants identified by our community survey results. In this template, we envision restaurant spaces that will allow chefs and business owners to branch out and experiment with new cuisines at a reduced cost which is especially important in New York, which has notoriously high upfront costs for opening a restaurant.

Co-Working Spaces

The template for co-working spaces will provide dynamic, cohesive spaces with all the materials necessary to succeed in a post-pandemic working environment. While there is still uncertainty regarding the return to in-person work, some of the biggest companies like Twitter and Pinterest have signaled plans to halt the expansion of their campuses and plan for office shrinkages. The FLEX HYHK template for co-working spaces will provide flexible options for business owners that may require employees to work in-person or for remote employees that are looking for a more productive working environment.

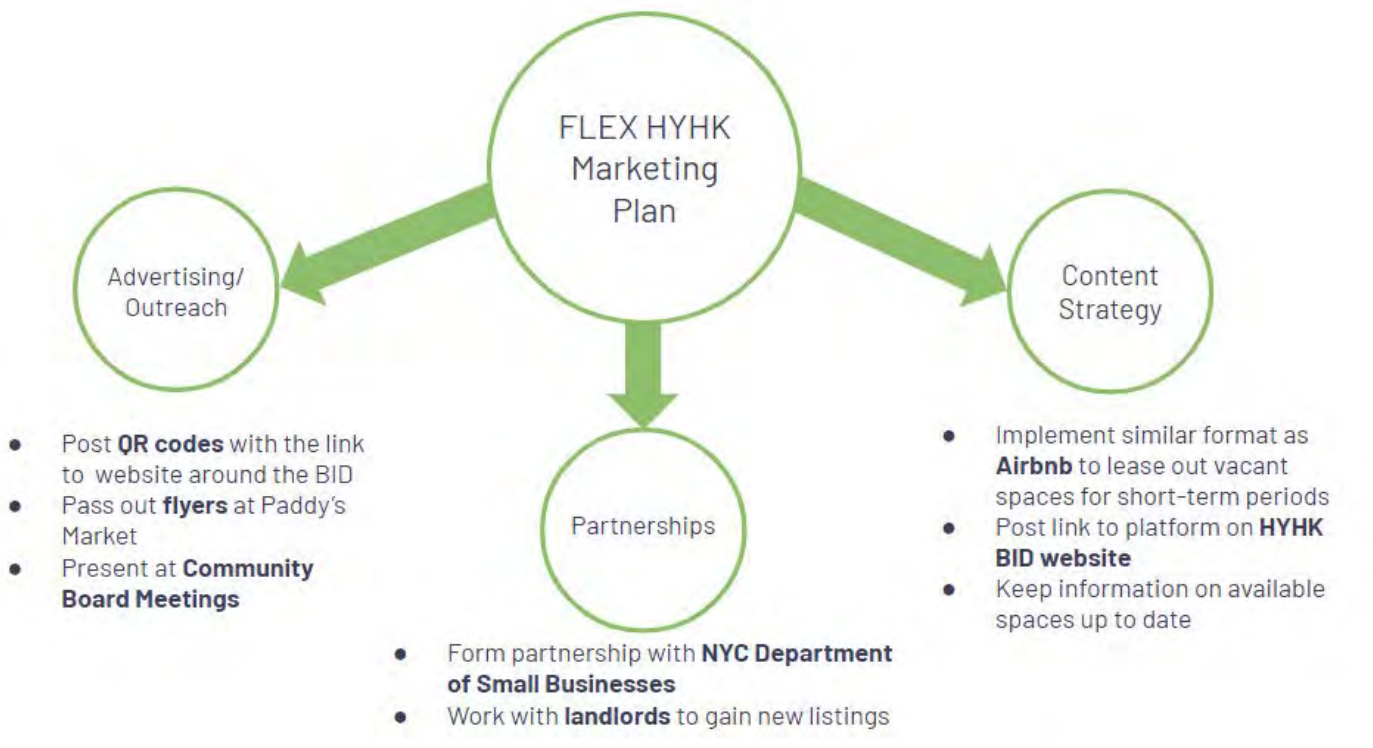
Retail

While pop ups have generally catered to luxury brands like Warby Parker and Boohoo, the FLEX HYHK pop up retail template will serve a variety of retail needs. This template will provide temporary spaces for traditionally online-only retailers like Etsy to showcase their products in-store and gauge public opinion, or for local small business owners to test retail ideas with reduced risk before being locked into a long-term lease. This retail pop up template caters to a broad range of retail needs, from luxury brands to burgeoning small businesses, to accommodate a variety of tenants and shoppers’ needs.

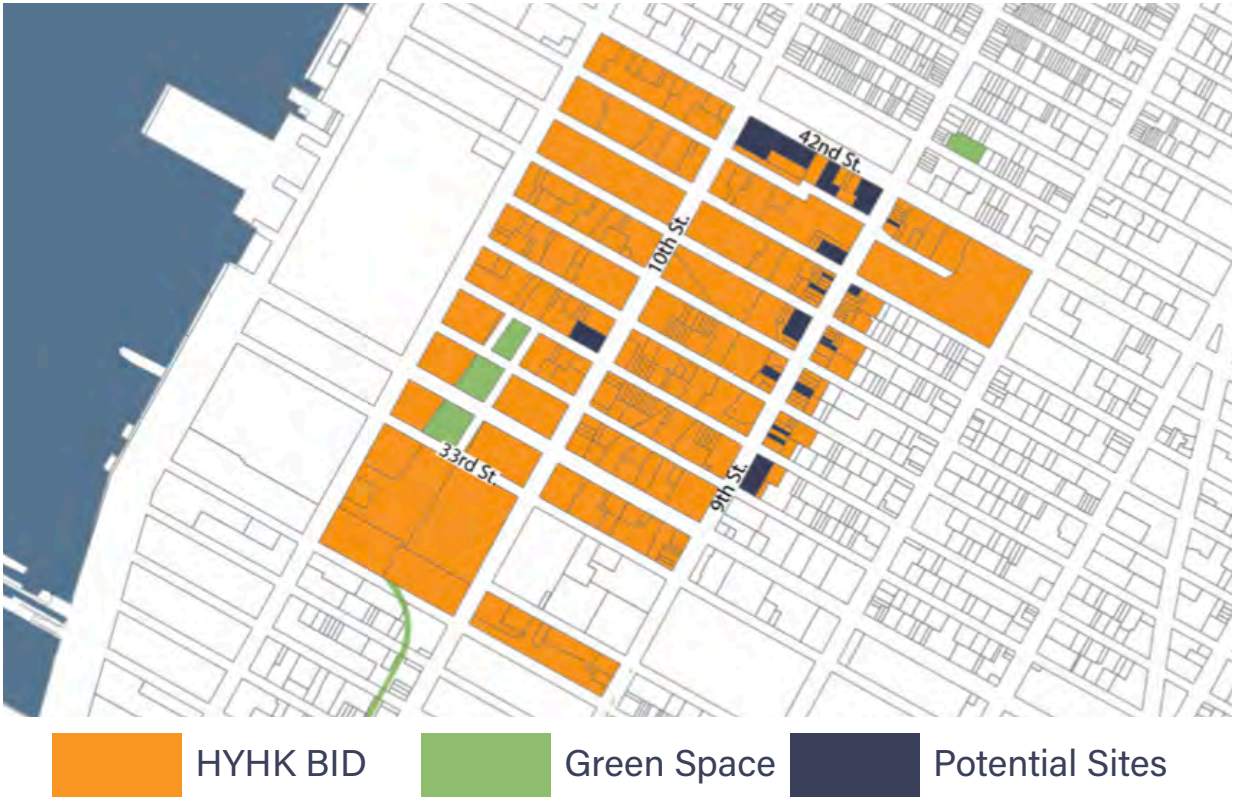


The operation of FLEX HYHK, similar to Agora 2021, will require a manager who is knowledgeable of the district and has close connections with property owners and business owners. This is why we again recommend that the BID incorporate this platform into its own operations and assume the role of manager. The BID also has the advantage of being able to manage the platform at low profit margins.

To generate interest and attract landlords and tenants to the platform, we have created a three pronged marketing plan for FLEX HYHK that merges digital and physical impressions. A link to the website can be posted to the BID’s website and spread through a social media campaign. At the same time, the website can be marketed via QR code fliers posted at participating storefronts. These fliers can also be distributed at Community Board meetings and neighborhood events. Finally, FLEX HYHK will partner with the NYC Department of Small Business Services to recruit both landlords and potential tenants.



Our storefront census identified several currently vacant sites that could be listed on FLEX HYHK. The majority of these sites are located along 9th Avenue, revealing an opportunity for dynamic storefront adaptation to take place alongside the Paddy’s Market revival and our Open Neighborhoods proposal.



FLEX HYHK is a frictionless solution for chronic storefront vacancies and dead retail districts. The all-in-one advertising, leasing, and staging platform removes barriers to entry for tenants and landlords alike. Entrepreneurs wanting to launch experimental ventures can do so without the risk of being stuck in a long, inflexible, and expensive lease. At the same time, landlords can fill vacant properties and make cash-flow on short term uses without the hassle of having to coordinate leases and occupants. However, it is the community that benefits the most, as the neighborhood gains more adaptive, responsive, and activated storefronts and a more vibrant commercial environment



Civic Storefronts

Historically, Hell’s Kitchen has been known as a neighborhood where people from all walks of life mixed. In addition to the historic vibrancy highlighted earlier in this report, in more recent decades Hell’s Kitchen has been home to a community of aspiring actors from around the world due to the neighborhood’s proximity to New York’s theater district. During the daytime, Hell’s Kitchen normally invites office workers from throughout Midtown for affordable lunches.

However, the COVID-19 crisis, paired with continued decline in afford-ability, has defrayed social cohesion in the neighborhood. Throughout our outreach, community members and stakeholders have repeatedly pointed to the growth of the homeless population in HYHK as one of the most alarming results of the pandemic. The inability of the neighborhood to cope with the increase highlights gaps in social services and community assets that are vital to welcome and support all people.

Our final proposal departs from our emphasis on commerce and aims to convert vacant storefronts into social support structures. Civic Storefronts will be a program of three types of community infrastructure that will at once provide needed social support, create new broadly desired community assets, make streets feel safer, and beautify the neighborhood. Based on precedents from around the world, our three proposed uses – Community Living Rooms, Community Affordable Food Expo, and the HYHK Center for Homeless Services – together will provide space, food, and opportunity for all. In this section we will review the precedents that inform these proposals and then offer insight into how they can uniquely meet the needs of HYHK.



Community Living Rooms
indoor community public spaces



Community Affordable Food Expo
low cost, accessible public food hall



The HYHK Center for Homeless Services
point of intervention for those most in need



People at Play in a CultureHouse



Setting up a CultureHouse

Culture House

Boston, Massachusetts

CultureHouse is a non-profit organization in Boston led by Aaron Greiner. Greiner understood that vacant storefronts cause cascading negative effects on a neighborhood that require non-market intervention. His organization aims to improve livability in local communities by transforming unused spaces into vibrant social infrastructure. CultureHouse occupies vacant storefronts in Boston and turns them into pop-up public places, where people can sit and chat, read, eat, see a show, or attend an ever-changing rotation of events including game nights, ping-pong tournaments, or movie screenings. As a non-profit, CultureHouse relies on small grants from various sponsors and charitable donations. Additionally, these spaces frequently include tip jars.

A CultureHouse location is a non-commercial endeavor, but they have proven to be economic assets to their neighborhoods. CultureHouses draw people to the neighborhood they are situated in and also retain incidental foot traffic in the area. Because of this, they stimulate local businesses. In the case of CultureHouse Kendall Square, the project team observed that the number of people who stopped in this area doubled during weekdays and increased eight-fold on weekends.

CultureHouse predominantly attracts students, stay-at-home parents, residents, and office workers in surrounding areas. The social benefits CultureHouses bestow on these communities are manifold. As there are no barriers to entry, CultureHouses are equitable assets that strengthen communal networks.

A great advantage of CultureHouse is that it is a very flexible facility. CultureHouses are able to fully operate in spaces of less than 1,000 square feet. The organization uses cheap, easily workable, and adaptable materials to construct the temporary furnishings used in these spaces. These furnishings can be quickly deconstructed and relocated to a new site when needed.

Community Living Rooms

Our first Civic Storefront responds to a desire identified in our community engagement survey and interviews with stakeholders for non-commercial social space. Community Living Rooms directly draws inspiration from CultureHouse, a non-profit that challenges the purpose of storefront retail space by installing temporary free-to-use rooms for the community.

Our proposal is to bring the concept of CultureHouse to HYHK, re-branding it as Community Living Rooms. A Community Living Room on 9th Avenue will fill vacant space, create new public space, generate foot traffic, and stimulate local businesses. It will fortify a sense of community in HYHK by providing a new meeting place for friends and strangers alike, and promote a sense of security by bringing care, intention, and activity to the streetscape. Community Living Rooms will stay in a storefront for the duration of its vacancy, and with a week’s notice be ready to pack-up and move to another location in the neighborhood.

We believe the BID itself would be the best fit to run Community Living Rooms. Again leveraging connections to property owners, the BID can ask landlords to provide their vacant storefronts short-term and rent-free until they find another tenant. The BID would provide minimal funding for low-cost furniture and play elements, run programming, and recruit volunteers to help with set-up and tear-down.



Innovation Food Concepts

Copenhagen Street Food

Copenhagen Street Food is a food hall that started as a way to fill a vacant warehouse in the Danish city. Since its inception, it has since become one of the city’s premier destinations and moved locations once its original setting was put into different use.

Queens Night Market

The Queens Night Market is held every Saturday night Spring through Fall in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, with a diverse set of vendors selling affordable cuisines from around the world with dishes selling for an average of just \$5.

Apps

Finally, Too Good To Go, Your Local, and Food For All are all smartphone apps that reduce food waste by partnering with restaurants to sell unused ingredients and prepared meals that would otherwise be disposed of at closing time. Users simply reserve orders and typically pay at-cost prices directly through the app, then pick up the food at the restaurant. These apps typically charge a small service fee on each transaction and are thus free for restaurants to use. Restaurants benefit by reducing losses and attracting new potential customers.

By going directly through restaurants, the apps have no overhead or on-site staff which increases their profitability. However, by declining to have a physical presence they limit their customer base to those with access to technology and also fail to connect affordable food provision to greater functions of a community hub like that seen in the Sheffield Foodhall.



Copenhagen Street Food



Queens Night Market



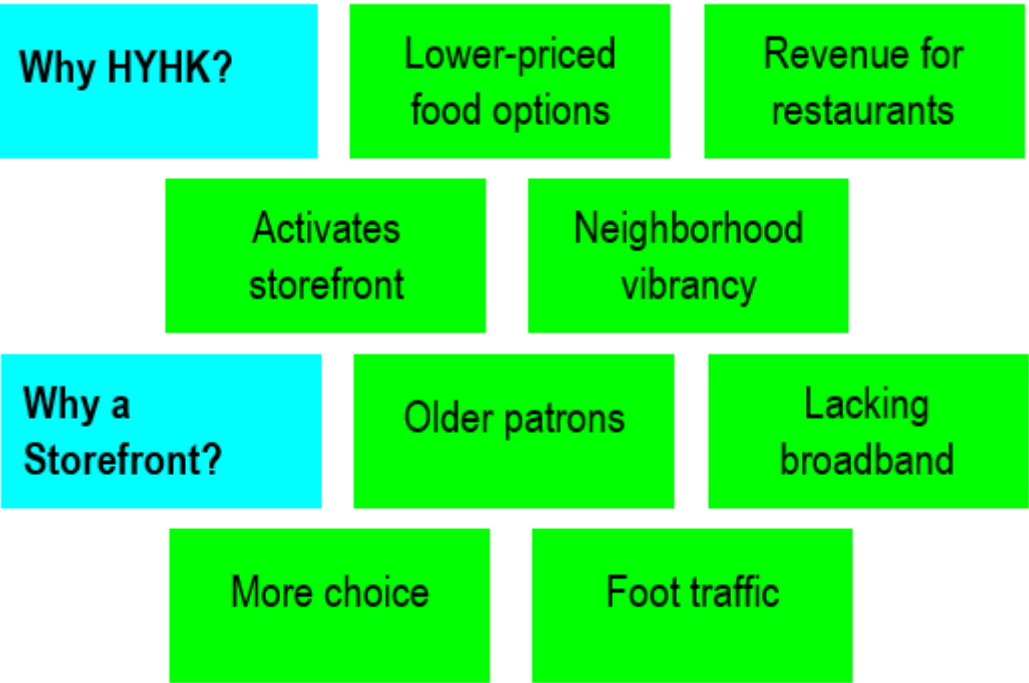
Too Good To Go



C.A.F.E.

The Community Affordable Food Expo, or CAFE, is our proposal to unite the best elements of all of these case studies. The project could fit seamlessly into a currently vacant storefront on 9th Avenue to take advantage of the proximity to many potentially partnering restaurants.

Drawing from the apps in our case studies, CAFE would partner with neighborhood restaurants who would provide otherwise-wasted food at-cost. This food would then be offered to the community as affordable meals. There are numerous social benefits to taking this model into a brick-and-mortar setting: older patrons are more likely to take part in the program, as are those without access to smartphones. Additionally, a physical location would benefit from enticing customers to stop-in incidentally, rather than relying on the premeditated purchases through an app.



In addition to serving donated foods, local chefs and aspiring restaurant-owners would also be invited to set up food stalls at CAFE where they could offer experimental new dishes at low prices. The space would additionally house a food pantry and community fridge for additional resources to protect against food insecurity. Along with greater food resources, our community engagement survey also identified a desire for non-commercialized social space in the neighborhood.

CAFE would strive to be a community hub in the same light as the Sheffield Foodhall. The hallmark of CAFE would be its non-commercial nature – while affordable meals are offered, patrons will not be required to purchase anything in order to spend time at this Civic Storefront. Like Community Living Rooms, the space can offer valuable room to congregate with friends, family, co-workers, and strangers without the pressure to spend money.

The CAFE concept could either be a partnership with an existing food waste app, a new nonprofit, or the CAFE could be housed in the Agora concept we outlined earlier. A potential way the space could cover its rent, would be through a \$1 surcharge on all purchases. Some logistical concerns include management and staff, food acquisition, and food preparation and preservation. At least one employee would be needed at CAFE at all times, food deliveries or pick-ups would need to be negotiated individually with restaurants, and heat lamps and minimal kitchen supplies would be needed at the location. Similar to our other proposals, CAFE would be ready to tear down and move locations once its storefront found a more permanent use.



The Midnight Mission

Los Angeles, California

The Midnight Mission has been serving homeless individuals in Los Angeles' Skid Row since 1914. They believe that restoring the lives of homeless individuals is about repairing their safety net. At Midnight Mission, this means providing shelter, legal assistance, mental healthcare, job training, and education. Their goal is to assist homeless individuals to improve and stabilize their lives through compassionate care and teaching self-sufficiency.

The Midnight Mission Center covers an area of about 60,000 square feet and includes space for sleeping, dining, recreation, sports, classrooms, and even barbers. It is able to offer these services to homeless individuals at no cost to them owing to an extensive network of partners and donors. Additionally, they offer a family shelter in Los Angeles where they reserve a set number of emergency beds for families with children who are accommodated safely in separate family rooms.

HYHK Center for Homeless Services

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration converted a number of hotels throughout the city into temporary homeless shelters, including two in HYHK. Responses to our community engagement survey frequently mentioned homelessness and the issue has been a constant in Community Board 4 meetings over the past year. As part of our holistic approach to improving HYHK for everyone, we propose re-purposing vacant storefronts to bring robust homeless services to the neighborhood that aspire to the same level as Midnight Mission.



The Midnight Mission’s operations occupy a 60,000 square foot lot. Accordingly, the HYHK Center For Homeless Services should expect to fill 60,000 square feet of currently vacant storefront. This can be done by splitting operations across storefronts in the area. Some will be dedicated to shelter, others to hygiene, and others to career and educational services.

The Center could be put in place through a partnership with an existing homeless services provider in the area such as Urban Pathways or Bowery Residents Committee which are financed mostly through city grants supplemented by private fundraising. To entice organizations like Hudson Guild, Urban Pathways or Bowery Residents Committee to expand into these spaces, we propose the BID could offer to hold an annual fundraising event for the new space or foster connections with local companies that might be willing to provide donations.

Storefront vacancies are not merely the result of a failed commercial environment, they reflect a failure of community. Civic Storefronts is premised on the idea that reviving HYHK is about much more than attracting successful businesses: it is about recognizing that what is good for the most vulnerable is good for all. Civic Storefronts is a repair of physical infrastructure by repairing social infrastructure. By providing welcoming communal space for all, food security, and direly needed homeless services, HYHK can build a sense of collective stewardship and care for the entire neighborhood.



Conclusions

The retail apocalypse is the collapse of one paradigm of commercial and social life and the anxiety of waiting for the next to emerge. The old paradigm arose from a retreat from the city and a rejection of urban community. It is potently symbolized by the lonely suburban mall and its decay into harrowing, truly apocalyptic scenes. But this old paradigm reaches absurd extremes right in our own homes, on our screens, and in the cardboard boxes that meet our every need at the click of a mouse.

The mall is a simulation of the city, and e-commerce is a simulation of the mall. How much further can we retreat from the city, the unexpected, and one another? Has a full year of being trapped in digital simulations of work, study, and play during the COVID-19 pandemic been enough to make us want to return?

What we have presented is a plan for HYHK to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic as a model neighborhood on the cutting edge of retail. We will heal its streetscape by making it the most engaging and adventurous pedestrian experience in the city. We will re-integrate commerce with a sense of community. Finally, we will re-invigorate retail by creating a dynamic and inviting indoor-outdoor environment of flexible multi-use spaces for everyone. We will create what comes the day after the retail apocalypse.

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APPENDIX

Community Survey Questions

Which of these best describes you?

- I live in Hell’s Kitchen
- I work in Hell’s Kitchen
- I own a business in Hell’s Kitchen
- I have a real estate investment, or some other investment in Hell’s Kitchen
- I live, work, or do business in Hudson Yards
- I spend a lot of time in Hell’s Kitchen/ Hudson Yards for another reason
- Other

Do you currently own or manage a restaurant?
yes no

Hell’s Kitchen Residents Section

How long have you lived in Hell’s Kitchen?

- <1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- More than 10 years
- All my life

Which of these best describes your housing?

- Market-rate rental
- Affordable housing rental
- Public Housing
- Public-assisted housing (e.g. Section 8)
- I own my own home with a mortgage
- I own my own home free and clear

Hell’s Kitchen Workers and Business Owners Section

In which industry do you work or own a business?

- Entertainment-- Restaurants/Bars/Nightlife
- Media/ Theatre
- Retail
- Real Estate-- Development, Sales/ Leasing Management
- Education
- Non-profit
- Transportation
- Healthcare
- Hotels and Hospitality
- Other

The Neighborhood Now Section

There is plenty to do in the neighborhood without spending too much money

strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree disagree strongly disagree

The neighborhood is too car oriented

strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree disagree strongly disagree

The neighborhood contains stores and facilities to meet all my needs
strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree disagree strongly disagree

There is plenty of easily accessible and pleasant open public space in the neighborhood
strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree disagree strongly disagree

New Non-Commercial Space Section

Would you like to see vacant storefront repurposed as primarily non-commercial social space?

I would not like this at all 1 2 3 4 5 I would like this very much

Imagine the neighborhood contained a space like this. It serves affordable meals and drinks in partnership with local restaurants, but no one has to buy anything in order to spend time here. Would you like to have this in the neighborhood?



I would not like this at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 I would like this very much

Keeping in mind that the space would be free to use, which of these, if any, would make you never want to spend time here?

- If homeless people spent time here
- If the food wasn’t fresh
- If people got drunk and rowdy here
- If it wasn’t near my other favorite neighborhood bars and restaurants
- None of these would permanently turn me away from this space
- Other

Do you have any other comments about this idea?

Restaurant Owners and Managers Section

Would you consider donating your leftover food each night to a program like the one described in the last section?

yes no maybe I already donate leftovers

Do you have any specific feedback about how a program like this could impact you as a restaurant owner or manager?

Pedestrian Centered Streets Section

Would you like to see streets made significantly more pedestrian-friendly in the neighborhood?

I would not like this at all 1 2 3 4 5 I would like this very much

Imagine portions of 9th and 10th Aves looked more like this, with street vendors and robust outdoor dining seating lining the sidewalks. Would you like to see this in the neighborhood?



I would not like this at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 I would like this very much

Would any of the following risks make this plan not worth trying?

- Loss of neighborhood character
- Traffic jams
- Drawing too many tourists
- Increasing the cost of living in the neighborhood
- None of these concerns outweigh the potential benefits
- Other

How could this idea be made better?

Pop-Up Shops Section

Would you like to see more “pop-up” or short-term uses for retail space?

I would not like this at all 1 2 3 4 5 I would like this very much

Which of the following would you most want to see accommodated by new pop-up spaces? Choose up to 3

- High-end retail
- Novelty foods and experimental cuisine
- Educational spaces for children
- Educational spaces for adults
- Fitness
- Technology
- Art galleries
- Experiential recreation (e.g. paint and sip classes)
- Facilities for those in need
- Healthcare
- Live performances
- Fresh produce
- Other

Tell Us More Section

Are there any other needs that should be addresses in the Hell’s Kitchen/ Hudson Yards area?

May we contact you for an interview to hear more of your thoughts on the neighborhood?

yes no

Please enter your best contact info here (email and/or phone number)

What is your sex?

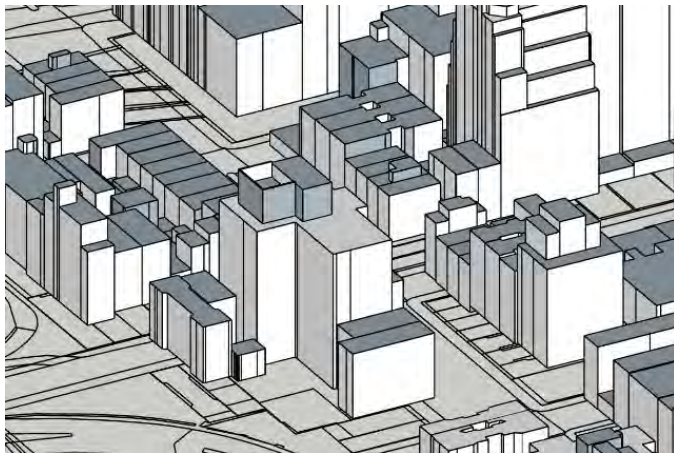
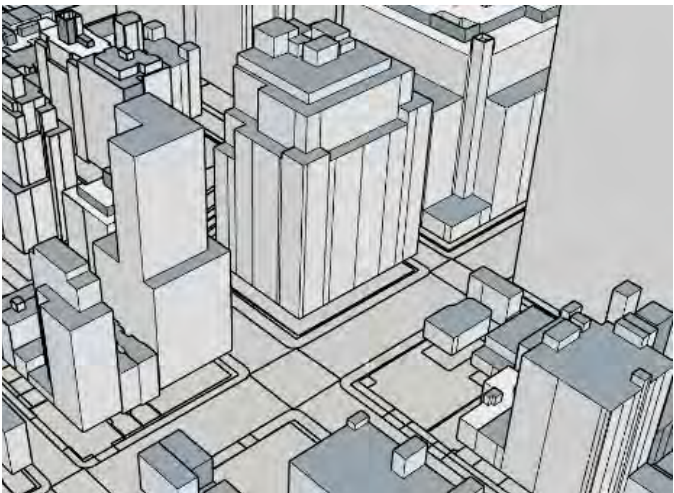
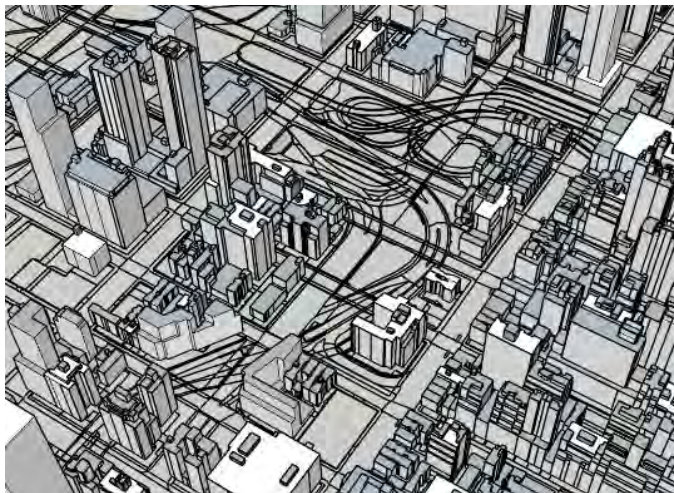
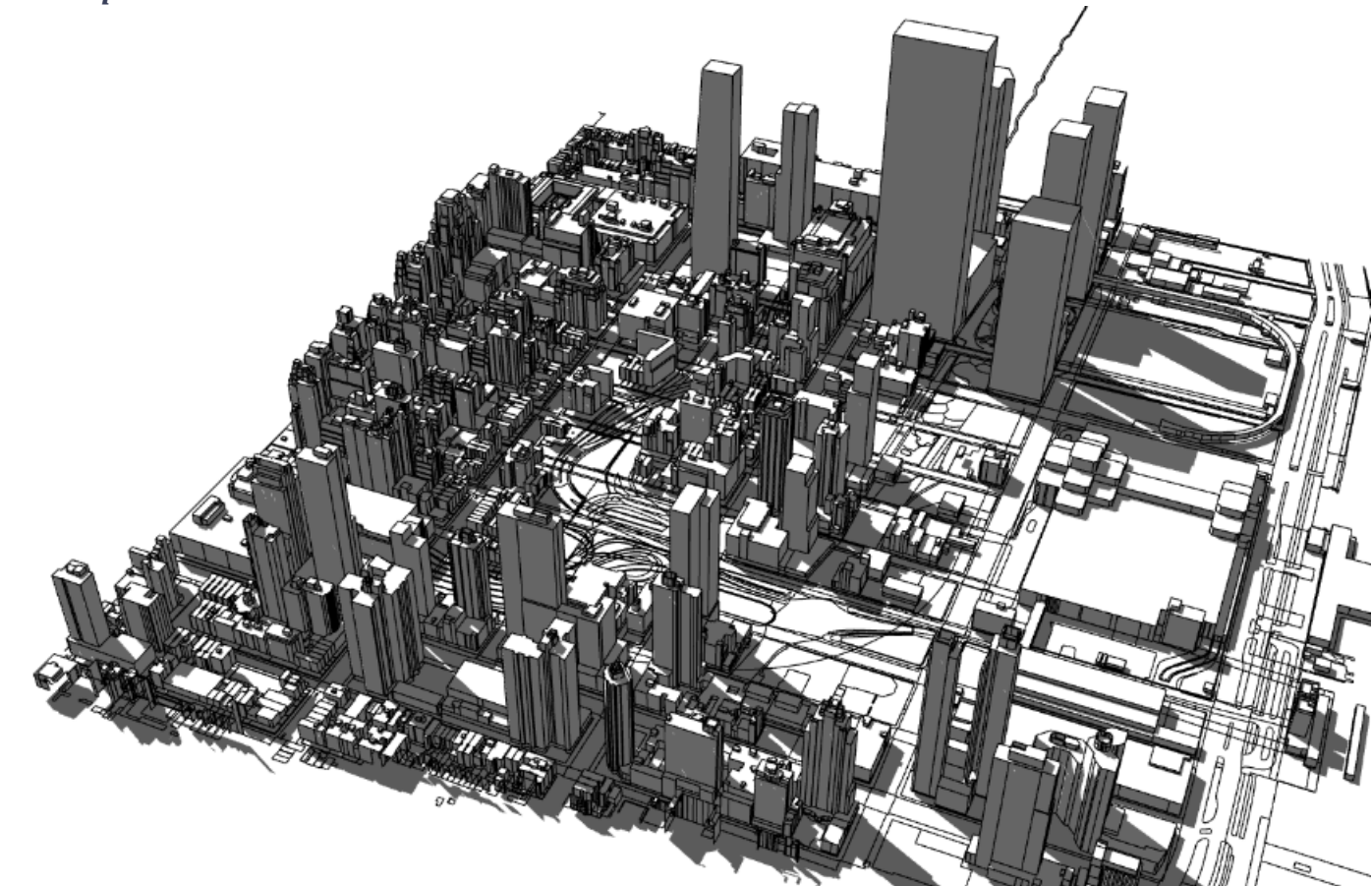
Female Male Prefer not to say Other

What is your age?

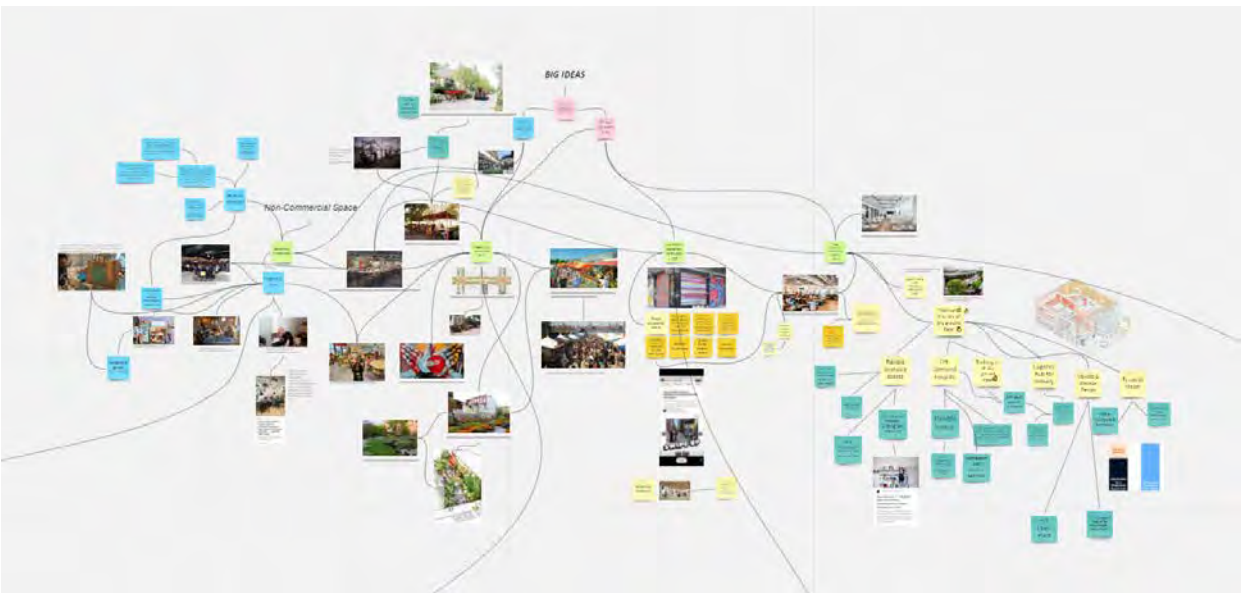
18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-64 65+ Prefer not to say

69

Sketch-Up Model



Miro Work Board



Retail Apocalypse Studio
Urban Planning Studio Report
Columbia GSAPP
Spring 2021