While understanding the value of public life is crucial, actually implementing design and policy changes that improve public spaces for everyone is easier said than done. In the “Invite” section, we described ways to proactively incorporate the voices of different stakeholders into the city-making process. Here, we describe action-oriented approaches to producing real outcomes in space: starting with temporary interventions that build on what already exists but always working toward long-term, systemic change.

**Tactics**

**Be experimental with low-cost, low-risk test projects**

Use simple, temporary test projects to explore design possibilities and foster public support for more long-term iterations. Such “prototypes” or “pilot projects” can take many forms—a recurring event that momentarily opens up car lanes to pedestrians, quick improvements such as painting a bike lane or widening a crosswalk, or the addition of seating and programming in an otherwise unused public space, for example. It’s important to work closely with community groups on these efforts, ensuring that they will be stewards and champions of the space. But of course, not everyone likes change; small business owners, for example, may fight projects that cater to pedestrians at the expense of parking spaces. Creating a live test of a new idea—as opposed to installing something more costly and permanent—lowers the stakes and can win people over, lead to community empowerment, and ultimately, a shared sense of ownership.

**Build on what already exists in a place**

It’s easy to overlook local assets that exist in your own backyard. Landmarks, access to open space, known institutions, or community centers may not have an immediate relationship to the big vision or project guidelines, but they can be key building blocks. Similarly, people and the activities they already do in public spaces—whether or not they are permitted—can be built upon. Sitting on ledges, cutting across lawns, turning chairs around to face the street, barbecuing, even skateboarding—these are all things that signal personal desires for specific uses of public space. Rather than starting from scratch, identify existing assets and build upon what people are already doing. Welcome people and their ideas.
CASE STUDY

Denver

Fostering Foot Traffic—The 16th Street Mall Pilot Project

The 16th Street Mall is a major commercial street in the heart of Denver’s commercial district. Surrounded by restaurants and shops, the mall was closed to car traffic except for a free bus shuttle that connected Denver Union Station to the Civic Center. For many years, the mall was considered highly innovative and a tourist destination. But, despite being an efficient transit corridor, a lack of foot traffic made it difficult for retailers to stay in business, and safety concerns plagued the street. Ultimately, the 16th Street Mall offered few reasons to spend time there, with the exception of the weekday lunch hour, when the sidewalks were thronged with downtown professionals. Meanwhile, continuous maintenance and repair cost the city millions of dollars a year, with little activity on the street to justify the spending. Available federal funding provided an opportunity for necessary improvements, but negotiating the competing interests of transit operations, historic preservationists, and property owners proved challenging.
To show that the street was worthy of transformation and additional investment, the Downtown Denver Partnership created a temporary pilot program for the 16th Street Mall to bring numerous parties together and move the conversation forward. Some agency leaders were dubious that the 16th Street Mall could ever be a lively place. So, beginning with just two Sundays in 2014, four Sundays in 2015, and finally five weekends in 2016, the bus shuttle on the mall was temporarily moved to other streets. The Downtown Denver Partnership collaborated with the regional transit agency to reallocate the space on 16th Street to be more pedestrian-friendly with seating and a wide range of locally produced art, food, and cultural programs.

The Downtown Denver Partnership and the Office of City Planning measured use, users, and other factors before, during, and after the pilots and found positive benefits. Before the pilots, people tended to go to the mall to catch the free bus shuttle and rarely lingered. During the special event weekends, however, overall activity levels increased by upwards of 62%, with an average of 27 more people per block at any given time. On Saturday evenings, the average number of people increased from 57 to 93 per block. Typically, only 37% of visitors to the mall lingered at outdoor restaurants and cafes. But during the pilot project, the number of people sitting outdoors increased by 194%. Additionally, the changes led to an increase in gender and age diversity: before the pilot, the pedestrian makeup was roughly two-thirds men, and very few children or seniors were visible on the street. During the pilot, the gender demographics became more equally distributed, and there were 65% more children under 12 and 40% more older adults.

Notably, once transit agency leaders and staff experienced the benefits of having more pedestrians in the middle of their downtown, they became less strident about their primary goal of protecting the transit corridor from Denver Union Station to the Civic Center (a connection they had previously considered critical and largely non-negotiable). They saw that rerouting the bus line did not result in failed connections, and became
more open to pedestrian-friendly improvements on the 16th Street Mall.

Competition among different public agencies for limited resources is inevitable in any city, but this pilot project created a shared understanding of potential improvements that could benefit multiple interests simultaneously.
CASE STUDY

Lexington

Testing The Waters—SplashJAM As a Catalyst for Play

Lexington’s population is growing rapidly, but its elected officials and stakeholders have struggled to create a common vision and plan of action for city investments. Mayor Jim Gray understood that to create positive change, initiatives should be designed to achieve multiple goals, including equity, public health, and safety.

A public-space analysis conducted by Gehl (the private urban design practice) in the spring of 2015 revealed such an opportunity. Children were playing in a fountain in Thoroughbred Park, despite rules prohibiting this activity. The park sits at the intersection of major routes into downtown and bisects four neighborhoods of very different socioeconomic compositions. Most of the users were children from a nearby, predominately low-income community who didn’t have other places to play, especially during the sweltering summer months. The city found this behavior, while understandable, both unsanitary and dangerous.

Rather than issue tickets for trespassing, Mayor Gray
embraced this activity as a catalyst for meaningful action. The children’s play in the fountain prompted the city to invest in authentic, local public life and create more plays areas for young people in Lexington. The local Downtown Development Association (DDA) initiated a process to engage a wide range of stakeholders, asking them what type of water-play facilities they would be most interested in seeing. With the support of national and community foundations, local designers, and city officials, the DDA created SplashJAM, a temporary water park near Thoroughbred Park, where the initial play was taking place. The water park included accessibility ramps, picnic tables, and beach umbrellas, as well as on-site changing rooms and restrooms.

To understand how SplashJAM succeeded and how it could be improved, the water park was evaluated using Gehl Institute research tools. The evaluations showed that SplashJAM increased the space’s diversity based on education and income and attracted people of different races and ethnicities from across the city. In this way, action was not only motivated by local culture and need, but it also provided a shared set of experiences for a diversity of stakeholders. The evaluations also found that 80% of the visitors to SplashJAM had never or had rarely visited the park before the pilot, with 71% of the visitors now returning weekly. In fact, before SplashJAM, an average of only eight people were in the park at any point throughout the day; during the pilot, this number increased to over 23 people per hour. Finally, this intervention led to significant increases in walking, with 85% more people walking and spending time in the area.

This formula—of first studying what public life already exists, then taking action to accentuate that activity, and finally evaluating the impact—is an approach that both the city and DDA are now applying to multiple projects large and small across Lexington.