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Measure

If you want to understand how to improve public spaces in your city, don't start from scratch. Start with measuring.

When you measure how many and where people choose to spend time in public spaces, as well as what they do based on their current options, you get a better sense of which design or policy changes might best contribute to a city or neighborhood's public life. People-centered metrics enable you to make an evidence-based case for change, creating buzz for projects and persuading skeptics to get on board. Such data can also reveal previously invisible or overlooked patterns to city agencies.

Of course, measuring people tells only part of the story. It should be combined with surveys, various forms of engagement, and collecting quantitative data on the physical makeup of public spaces. It's also important to be ethical about data collection—for example, keeping identities anonymous and making the data available to the public.
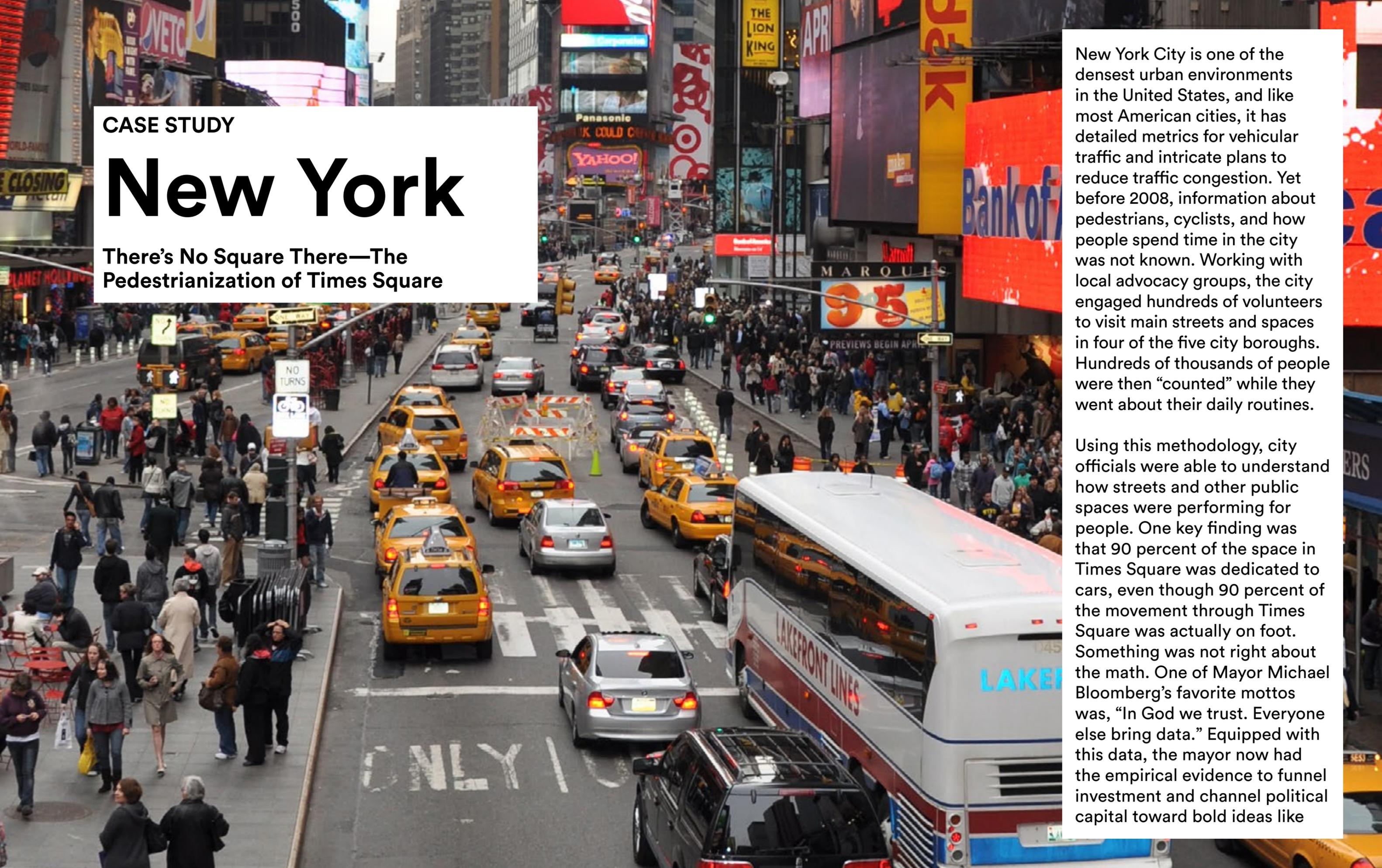
Tactics

Measure what people do—right where they do it

Bringing new people into the city planning process can be tough. The channels through which citizens communicate their needs to city leaders are traditionally limited and often cater to a narrow section of the general populace. To expand and diversify the voices engaging in city-making, leaders need to find new ways of soliciting feedback and incorporating residents into the development process. One option for city leaders is to go to the people, rather than expecting the people to come to them. By meeting people where they are, as part of their everyday routine out in the city, city leaders can better understand how the built environment, policies, and regulations directly affect people's behavior and sense of place.

Define success through people-centered metrics

There is an old business adage that "you measure what you care about." Most cities have detailed data on cars, such as the number of cars on the road, travel time, areas prone to congestion, or the number and types of traffic accidents. Cities have not, however, traditionally collected what we call people-centered metrics, or metrics based on how people use and move through public space. This has resulted in a one-sided understanding about how cities should be planned, often leading to pedestrian-unfriendly urban renewal efforts. To gain a holistic understanding of your city—including the actions, behaviors, and needs of residents—you need to collect people-centered data. Asking "when, where, and who" is the first step in understanding how to prioritize public-realm investments and how they affect people.

New York City is one of the densest urban environments in the United States, and like most American cities, it has detailed metrics for vehicular traffic and intricate plans to reduce traffic congestion. Yet before 2008, information about pedestrians, cyclists, and how people spend time in the city was not known. Working with local advocacy groups, the city engaged hundreds of volunteers to visit main streets and spaces in four of the five city boroughs. Hundreds of thousands of people were then "counted" while they went about their daily routines.

Using this methodology, city officials were able to understand how streets and other public spaces were performing for people. One key finding was that 90 percent of the space in Times Square was dedicated to cars, even though 90 percent of the movement through Times Square was actually on foot. Something was not right about the math. One of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's favorite mottos was, "In God we trust. Everyone else bring data." Equipped with this data, the mayor now had the empirical evidence to funnel investment and channel political capital toward bold ideas like

creating new public spaces along Broadway between 14th and 57th Streets, including in Times Square.

From Times Square to Flushing, Queens, new design outcomes were subsequently developed across the city that dramatically improved public life through simplifying intersections, shortening crosswalks, organizing and defining traffic lanes, and separating conflicting mobility movements (e.g., cars turning and not yielding to pedestrians). Multiple people-centered metrics provided the framework to make bold decisions that improved public spaces and served multiple citizen interests.

The pedestrianization of Times Square—or, stated differently, its transformation into an actual public square—increased the number of people who stayed in the area's public spaces by 84 percent and improved vehicular traffic flows along the avenues in Midtown Manhattan. Additionally, businesses saw improved foot traffic, increased sales, and decreased vacancy rates. In a survey, 42 percent more people said they shopped in the neighborhood and 74 percent said that Times Square had

improved dramatically. In terms of safety, pedestrian injuries fell by 35 percent in part due to 80 percent fewer people walking into the roadways.

Understanding the people-centered metrics in Times Square has set a precedent for cities in how to measure, achieve, and then evaluate changes being made to the built environment to better suit public life.